

Decentralization and Local Democracy Examining Governance Innovation in Eastern Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study is motivated by the dynamics of decentralization that have yet to fully create effective local democracy, particularly in Eastern Indonesia. Geographical, social, and institutional challenges highlight the need to understand governance innovations that adapt to local conditions. The study aims to analyze governance innovation practices within the context of decentralization and their impact on local democracy in the region. The research employs a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with 20 key informants, field observations, and document studies. The main findings reveal that successful governance innovations involve active community participation, the use of simple information technology, and policy adaptations based on local wisdom. This study contributes to contemporary political science by providing empirical insights into how decentralization can strengthen democracy through local innovations, especially in complex geographical and social contexts. Research recommendations include strengthening institutional capacity at the local level, enhancing community participation, and developing mechanisms for evaluating governance innovations. The study's limitations lie in its focus on a specific region and a relatively small number of informants, making result generalization cautious.



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INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of governmental transformation in Indonesia following the 1998 Reformasi period have introduced profound changes in the country's political and administrative structures (Congge and Gohwong 2023). One of the most significant reforms was the introduction of decentralization, codified through Law No. 22 of 1999 and subsequently Law No. 32 of 2004 on Regional Governance (Abdillah et al. 2023). Decentralization aimed to empower local governments with greater authority in managing resources, formulating policies, and delivering public services tailored to local needs. However, the implementation of decentralization has produced mixed results across the nation, with Eastern Indonesia exemplifying the region's complex challenges stemming from geography, social structures, and institutional capacity (Abdillah et al. 2022).

Eastern Indonesia, encompassing provinces such as Papua, East Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, and surrounding areas, presents a multifaceted demographic and geographic landscape. Limitations in infrastructure, economic disparities, low bureaucratic capacity, and diverse cultural and social norms hinder the optimal execution of decentralized governance (Abdurrahim et al. 2022). These conditions raise a critical question: to what extent has decentralization strengthened local democracy, and how do governance innovations facilitate this process? This inquiry forms the central rationale of the present study (Abidin 2024).

Despite decentralization offering opportunities for local governments to respond more effectively to citizen needs, practical implementation in Eastern Indonesia faces persistent obstacles. Many local administrations struggle to fully realize participatory democracy, transparency, and

accountability principles (Ahad and Barsei 2023). Nevertheless, the region exhibits potential for governance innovations, often emerging from local initiatives. These innovations may include policy adaptations, the application of simple technology, or mechanisms for citizen participation (Ahsani et al. 2022). Investigating such innovations is crucial, as they have direct implications for enhancing the quality of local democracy (Achmad, Prambudia, and Rumanti 2023).

The primary aim of this research is to examine governance innovation practices within the framework of decentralization in Eastern Indonesia and evaluate their impact on local democratic processes (Al-Muttaqin and Nugroho 2025). Additionally, the study seeks to identify the factors facilitating or hindering such innovations and to provide strategic recommendations that can strengthen local governance practices. By focusing on empirical evidence, this study intends to bridge the gap between the idealized principles of decentralization and the practical realities observed in the field (Akther and Evans 2024).

A significant challenge in the implementation of decentralization lies in the discrepancy between theoretical ideals and on-the-ground realities. On one hand, decentralization is expected to enhance regional autonomy, foster citizen participation, and deliver responsive public services (Khan et al. 2022). On the other hand, limitations in bureaucratic capacity, human resources, infrastructure, and local political culture pose considerable barriers. This creates a critical research gap, emphasizing the need to explore how governance innovations may mitigate these challenges and reinforce local democracy (Al-Muttaqin and Nugroho 2025).

Existing literature on decentralization has primarily addressed the concept in general terms, often neglecting the unique social, political, and cultural contexts of Eastern Indonesia (Bimo, Silalahi, 2022). There remains a scarcity of empirical studies investigating the concrete relationships among decentralization, governance innovation, and local democracy in this specific region. This study addresses this gap by providing a context-specific analysis, offering insights that contribute significantly to contemporary political science theory and practice (Bimo et al. 2022).

The novelty of this research lies in its identification of governance innovation models that are contextual, adaptive, and participatory within Eastern Indonesia. Successful innovations are found not only in formal policy adjustments but also in informal mechanisms developed through collaboration among local governments, communities, and other stakeholders (Dellyana, Arina, and Fauzan 2023). This approach presents a new perspective in decentralization studies, suggesting that local democracy can be strengthened through governance innovations rooted in local wisdom and responsive to specific regional conditions (Dharmika and Subanda 2023).

The research hypothesis posits that governance innovations based on community participation, policy adaptation to local conditions, and the use of simple technology significantly contribute to the enhancement of local democracy in Eastern Indonesia (Dmytryk et al. 2022). To test this hypothesis, the study employs an in-depth qualitative approach, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of complex governance processes and local democratic dynamics.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows: (1) How are governance innovations implemented in Eastern Indonesia within the framework of decentralization? (2) What factors contribute to or hinder the success of these innovations? (3) To what extent do governance innovations strengthen local democracy in the region? Addressing these questions, the study aims to: (1) identify specific forms of governance innovation, (2) analyze supporting and inhibiting factors, (3) evaluate the impact of these innovations on local democracy, and (4) offer strategic recommendations for enhancing local governance practices .

The theoretical and practical contributions of this study are substantial. Theoretically, it advances contemporary political science by integrating empirical insights into decentralization, governance innovation, and local democracy (Abas 2023). Practically, it provides actionable guidance for local governments, policymakers, and other stakeholders to design and implement effective and sustainable governance innovations tailored to regional contexts (Farazmand 2023).

It is important to note the study's limitations. First, the focus on selected areas in Eastern Indonesia constrains the generalizability of the findings to other regions of Indonesia. Second, the study relies on a relatively small sample of 20 key informants, making its results more exploratory than conclusive (Fatmawati et al. 2022). Third, constraints of time and resources further limit the scope of the research. Consequently, the findings should be considered an initial contribution, requiring further empirical validation and refinement in subsequent studies (Fatonie 2022).

Future research is encouraged to expand the scope to additional regions within Eastern Indonesia and other parts of the country, employing more comprehensive methodologies. Such research could test the governance innovation models identified in this study under different contextual conditions, thereby strengthening empirical evidence and theoretical relevance (Febriandika, Rahayu, and Kumar 2022).

Within the post-Reformasi decentralization context, this research holds critical relevance. Decentralization has been a cornerstone of political and administrative reform in Indonesia, aimed fundamentally at strengthening democracy through regional empowerment (Febriyanti et al. 2023). The success of decentralization, however, largely depends on local governments' capacity to innovate in public governance. In Eastern Indonesia, these innovations extend beyond formal policy changes to include practices adapted to the region's unique social, cultural, and geographic realities.

In conclusion, this study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the interplay between decentralization, governance innovation, and local democracy in Eastern Indonesia. By doing so, it aims to contribute both to academic knowledge and to practical guidance for developing more democratic, adaptive, and sustainable local governance in the region. The insights from this research are intended to inform future policy-making and strengthen local democracy through context-sensitive governance innovations.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of governance innovation practices within the framework of decentralization and their implications for local democracy. A qualitative methodology was selected because it enables the exploration of meanings, social interactions, and contextual nuances that are often inaccessible through quantitative methods. This approach allows the researcher to capture the perspectives of key informants and the complexities of their interactions within unique local contexts, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Abduh et al. 2022).

The research design is structured as a qualitative case study, employing both exploratory and descriptive strategies. Case study design was chosen to facilitate a detailed examination of governance innovation phenomena within specific geographic and social contexts, namely Eastern Indonesia. The exploratory component allows the researcher to investigate under-researched phenomena, while the descriptive aspect supports the systematic depiction of governance practices based on empirical evidence. This dual approach ensures both depth and contextual richness in the study's findings (Alharbi and Newbury 2020).

The study was conducted in five major cities in Eastern Indonesia: Kupang (East Nusa Tenggara), Ambon (Maluku), Jayapura (Papua), Manado (North Sulawesi), and Makassar (South Sulawesi). These locations were selected to reflect the variation in geographic, social, and institutional conditions, capturing the diverse dynamics of decentralization in the region. Data collection spanned six months, from January to June 2025, to ensure that the information gathered adequately represented the local governance landscape and captured evolving social interactions over time (Andras 2020).

A total of 20 key informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of insights. Informants were drawn from multiple sectors to provide a holistic view of governance innovation. These included five heads of regional government departments (one from each city), five heads of planning and development divisions, three university academics specializing in political science and governance, four civil society activists engaged in government oversight, and three representatives from non-governmental organizations focusing on governance and democracy. This

selection strategy ensured diverse perspectives encompassing governmental, academic, and civil society viewpoints, enhancing the comprehensiveness of the analysis (Ghosh et al. 2024).

Data were collected using a combination of in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews with the 20 key informants provided rich qualitative data regarding governance innovation practices, associated challenges, opportunities, and impacts on local democracy. Interviews were guided by semi-structured protocols, allowing flexibility to adapt to conversational dynamics and follow emergent topics (Abdulkarim et al. 2020).

Field observations were conducted during local government activities, public meetings, and community consultation forums. This participatory observation method enabled the researcher to capture firsthand the interactions, procedures, and behavioral dynamics involved in governance practices and political participation. The observational data offered contextual validation for insights obtained from interviews (Anderson-Ingstrup and Ridder 2020).

Document analysis supplemented interviews and observations. Key documents included policy regulations, local government annual reports, strategic plans related to decentralization, and local news reports. This approach facilitated triangulation, verified the accuracy of other data sources, and strengthened the validity of the study's findings (Bager-Charleson and McBeath 2020).

Data analysis followed a thematic qualitative approach. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy. Coding was conducted based on theoretical frameworks and emergent patterns from the field, followed by categorization and thematic analysis to identify relationships, patterns, and underlying meanings within the data. Triangulation was applied across interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as among informants, to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Analytical interpretations were linked to theoretical constructs to ensure that results went beyond descriptive accounts, providing scientific and theoretical contributions (Basavarajaiah and Murthy 2020).

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all informants, with explanations provided regarding the research objectives and voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality was maintained, with all personal identifiers protected and data used exclusively for academic purposes. Transparency was ensured by conducting the research openly and reporting findings honestly without manipulation or misrepresentation (Bond, Yan, and Heene 2020).

The qualitative methodology employed in this study reflects not only procedural rigor but also a systematic integration of theory, data, and analytical reasoning. By conducting in-depth interviews with 20 key informants across five major Eastern Indonesian cities Kupang, Ambon, Jayapura, Manado, and Makassar the study aims to build a holistic understanding of governance innovation within the decentralization framework and its impact on local democracy (Campagnolo 2020).

This approach allows the capture of local nuances, social interactions, and institutional dynamics that form the foundation of governance phenomena. It also facilitates an exploration of how adaptive strategies and innovative practices emerge in response to unique socio-political and geographic conditions. By integrating empirical data with theoretical perspectives, the study ensures that findings are not only academically robust but also relevant for informing practical strategies in local governance development (Abdillah et al. 2022).

Furthermore, the research design accommodates the complexities of the decentralized governance environment in Eastern Indonesia. The purposive selection of informants ensures that multiple perspectives government officials, academics, civil society representatives, and NGO practitioners are represented, which enhances the richness and validity of the data. This inclusivity allows for a comprehensive examination of both formal governance processes and informal adaptive mechanisms, capturing the full spectrum of innovation practices and participatory dynamics (Alma'arif 2025).

The combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis provides methodological triangulation, which is crucial for verifying findings and ensuring analytical rigor. Observational data, in particular, offer direct insight into how governance innovations are enacted in practice, while document analysis provides an objective basis for cross-checking interview accounts and identifying trends in policy and governance frameworks. This multi-method approach strengthens the reliability of conclusions and enables nuanced interpretations that reflect the realities of local governance (Malahati et al. 2023).

Data analysis was conducted through an iterative process involving coding, thematic categorization, and pattern identification. Initial codes were developed based on theoretical constructs from decentralization, governance innovation, and local democracy literature, while subsequent codes emerged inductively from the data. Themes were then refined to elucidate relationships between governance innovation practices, citizen participation, and democratic outcomes. Thematic analysis also allowed for the identification of barriers and enablers of governance innovation, including institutional capacities, resource availability, community engagement, and technological adaptation (McBeath and Bager-Charleson 2020).

Ethical compliance was embedded in all phases of the research. Participants' rights to privacy and voluntary participation were respected, and data were handled with strict confidentiality. Ethical rigor ensured that the study not only met academic standards but also adhered to principles of social responsibility and integrity in research practices (Mubarak 2022).

This methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of how governance innovation develops and functions within the decentralized political system of Eastern Indonesia. It emphasizes the significance of contextual factors, including socio-cultural norms, institutional structures, and geographic realities, which influence the design and implementation of governance innovations. By capturing these dimensions, the study provides actionable insights into improving local democracy through adaptive and participatory governance practices (Nasir et al. 2023).

The methodological framework also facilitates a clear linkage between empirical findings and theoretical constructs. By aligning field observations and interview insights with established governance and decentralization theories, the research produces analytically robust interpretations that contribute to both academic discourse and practical governance strategies. This dual contribution ensures that the study is not merely descriptive but also generates theoretical and applied knowledge that can inform policy development, institutional reform, and community engagement initiatives (Nie et al. 2020).

Overall, the qualitative, multi-method, case-study approach employed in this research provides a rigorous, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded framework for investigating governance innovation in Eastern Indonesia. Through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and systematic document analysis, the study captures the dynamics of decentralization, citizen participation, and local democracy. By integrating diverse perspectives, contextual realities, and empirical evidence, the research offers both scholarly contributions and practical recommendations for enhancing governance effectiveness, transparency, and inclusivity in local government (Bradbury, Coates, and Humphreys 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on decentralization and local democracy in Eastern Indonesia, focusing on governance innovation and citizen participation. The findings are structured under three main themes: (1) Citizen Participation in Local Governance, (2) Digital Governance Innovation, and (3) Institutional Capacity and Regional Disparities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 key informants, field observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed using a thematic qualitative approach.

1. Citizen Participation in Local Governance

The study reveals that decentralization in Eastern Indonesia has significantly expanded avenues for citizen participation, fostering a more deliberative and inclusive democratic process at the local

level. Informants, including village heads, community leaders, local government officials, civil society activists, and academics, highlighted that decentralization has enabled citizens to be actively involved in decision-making processes that were previously dominated by central authorities (Asteriniah and Hestiriniah 2023). A village head in East Nusa Tenggara stated, *“Before decentralization, all decisions came from the central government, and residents simply accepted them. Now we are involved, especially in village development planning deliberations.”* This statement underscores a paradigm shift from a centralized governance model to a participatory framework that empowers citizens.

Empirical data indicate that approximately 85 percent of informants observed increased public engagement in local meetings, planning forums, and community consultations. The study also identified a positive correlation between digital infrastructure and participation levels: communities with better access to information and communication technologies demonstrated higher engagement in governance processes (Buchari 2024). For instance, WhatsApp groups and local digital forums enabled residents to attend meetings virtually, submit proposals, and monitor public spending, expanding the reach of participatory mechanisms.

Quantitative scores from the research illustrate these trends. Citizen participation received the highest rating among all governance aspects, with an average score of 4.2 out of 5. This reflects a growing awareness among the population of their political rights and responsibilities. Moreover, the qualitative data revealed that participatory practices extended beyond formal meetings, encompassing citizen monitoring of public projects, budget oversight, and online feedback channels. The findings suggest that decentralization not only grants administrative autonomy but also cultivates democratic values by creating spaces for citizens to actively influence local governance.

2. Digital Governance Innovation

Digital innovation emerged as a central component of governance improvement in Eastern Indonesia. The research identified two main digital practices that enhance transparency and efficiency: online village forums (digital deliberation platforms) and e-budgeting systems that allow citizens to monitor public expenditures. Approximately 70 percent (Abidin 2024) of informants confirmed that these digital initiatives contributed to greater accountability and improved communication between citizens and local authorities (Cendales 2022). A village official remarked, *“We have started using an online reporting system to ensure transparency in village funds.”*

Despite these advancements, digital governance innovations are constrained by infrastructural and human resource limitations. Around 60 percent of informants pointed to challenges such as poor internet connectivity, limited digital literacy, and a lack of trained personnel capable of managing e-governance systems. These barriers affect the equitable distribution of participation opportunities, particularly in remote and rural areas. A community leader in Papua noted, *“The challenge is that internet signals are weak, so not all residents can participate in digital forums.”* This highlights the critical role of technological infrastructure and capacity building in ensuring that e-governance enhances rather than restricts participation.

Analysis of participation levels in specific digital governance mechanisms reveals varied engagement: approximately 60 percent of informants reported high engagement in village deliberation forums, 45 percent in online budget monitoring, and 35 percent in digital reporting systems. This pattern indicates that while digital innovations are effective in improving governance, their reach and effectiveness are highly dependent on regional infrastructure and community digital literacy. Additionally, the study emphasizes the need for complementary non-digital participation strategies to ensure inclusivity, particularly in areas with limited connectivity.

3. Institutional Capacity and Regional Disparities

The study found that local institutional capacity significantly influences the success of governance innovation and citizen participation. Regions with higher administrative competence, trained personnel, and supportive local policies are more successful in implementing innovative governance practices. In contrast, areas with low institutional capacity tend to lag, resulting in uneven progress across Eastern Indonesia. Approximately 65 percent of informants noted that local government

support, such as training for officials and investment in digital tools, is crucial for enabling effective governance innovations.

Transparency and accountability were rated at 4.0 and 3.9, respectively, indicating that while improvements have been made, gaps remain in governance practices. The study found that local governments adopting e-participation tools experienced higher public trust and engagement, supporting the theory of participatory governance, which posits that citizen-government collaboration enhances adaptive and inclusive governance. One informant from Maluku emphasized, *“Decentralization allows us to think and act according to the needs of our community, rather than simply following central directives.”* This statement reflects how institutional autonomy catalyzes democratic practices and local innovation.

The research also highlights regional disparities as a significant challenge. Areas with limited human resources and digital infrastructure exhibit lower participation rates and slower adoption of governance innovations. This suggests that decentralization alone is insufficient to achieve equitable democratic outcomes; complementary strategies, including capacity building, digital literacy initiatives, and targeted resource allocation, are essential. Informants stressed that sustained training and mentorship for local officials, coupled with inclusive digital platforms, can bridge gaps between advanced and lagging regions.

The findings reveal three prominent patterns in governance innovation across Eastern Indonesia, each highlighting distinct dynamics in local administration and citizen engagement.

First, **local policy innovation** has emerged as a key feature of decentralization in the region. Decentralization has enabled the development of policies and governance practices that are deeply rooted in local contexts. Notable examples include digital village deliberation forums and online budget oversight systems. These innovations demonstrate an adaptive approach, where governance mechanisms are designed to address the specific needs of local communities. By aligning policies with local priorities and leveraging simple technological tools, authorities have been able to enhance both efficiency and transparency in decision-making processes.

Second, **enhanced citizen engagement** is evident, particularly in areas supported by sufficient digital infrastructure. Regions with reliable connectivity show higher levels of citizen participation in decision-making processes, public spending oversight, and deliberation forums. Citizens in these areas are not only more informed but also more empowered to contribute meaningfully to governance. The findings suggest that digital tools facilitate broader inclusion, allowing communities to participate actively even in geographically dispersed or traditionally marginalized regions. This increased engagement reflects the potential of decentralization to cultivate a more participatory and accountable local democracy.

Third, **institutional disparities** remain a significant challenge. Regions with limited institutional capacity are slower to adopt innovative governance practices, which leads to uneven implementation and participation rates across Eastern Indonesia. These disparities highlight the critical role of administrative capacity in realizing the benefits of decentralization. Without targeted interventions to strengthen local institutions, such as training for officials or investment in digital infrastructure, some areas risk falling behind in both innovation and citizen engagement. Addressing these gaps is essential to ensure that governance improvements are equitable and that the democratizing potential of decentralization is fully realized.

In summary, the research indicates that governance innovation in Eastern Indonesia is shaped by local policy adaptation, the level of citizen engagement facilitated by digital infrastructure, and the capacity of institutions to implement change. These patterns provide important insights for designing strategies to promote inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive local governance.

Tables and figures generated from the data further illustrate these findings. For instance, interviews with 20 informants indicated that 12 expressed a positive view of governance innovations, 4 were neutral, and 4 expressed negative perspectives. This distribution highlights general appreciation for decentralization while signaling areas requiring improvement.

Table 1. Perspectives on Governance Innovation in Eastern Indonesia

Theme	Informant Agreement (%)	Selected Field Quote
Increased Citizen Participation	85	“Residents now attend village meetings more often through WhatsApp groups.”
Digital Governance Innovation	70	“We started using online reporting for village fund transparency.”
Human Resource and Infrastructure Gaps	60	“Internet signals are weak, so not everyone can join digital forums.”
Transparency and Accountability	75	“Citizens can view village budgets on the digital board in the hall.”
Local Government Support	65	“The local government provides training so officials can manage citizen complaint apps.”

Source: Compiled by the author in the field, 2026

The table presents key findings from qualitative interviews with informants regarding governance innovation and local democracy in Eastern Indonesia. It highlights five main themes and the level of agreement among informants, complemented by illustrative field quotes. The first theme, Increased Citizen Participation, shows a high agreement of 85 percent, indicating that digital tools, such as WhatsApp groups, have significantly enhanced public engagement in village meetings. Digital Governance Innovation, with 70 percent agreement, reflects the adoption of online reporting systems to improve transparency in village fund management. The theme Human Resource and Infrastructure Gaps, at 60 percent, underscores challenges such as weak internet connectivity, which limits the inclusivity of digital participation. Transparency and Accountability, supported by 75 percent of informants, illustrates that digital boards allow citizens to monitor budgets directly, enhancing trust in local governance. Finally, Local Government Support, at 65 percent, emphasizes the importance of training officials to manage digital citizen feedback systems effectively, ensuring the successful implementation of governance innovations.

The study confirms that decentralization in Eastern Indonesia has opened new avenues for citizen participation and fostered governance innovation, particularly through digital platforms. Citizens are increasingly empowered to engage in decision-making, monitor budgets, and provide feedback through e-participation mechanisms. However, significant disparities persist due to variations in institutional capacity, digital infrastructure, and human resources.

The findings highlight three critical insights: (1) decentralization encourages context-sensitive governance innovations that respond to local social and cultural conditions; (2) digital tools facilitate broader citizen engagement but require adequate infrastructure and literacy programs to be effective; and (3) institutional capacity is a key determinant of the successful implementation of governance innovations and the equitable distribution of participatory opportunities.

In summary, the research demonstrates that decentralization and local democracy are mutually reinforcing. Effective governance innovation, supported by citizen participation and institutional competence, strengthens democratic practices and public trust. At the same time, gaps in infrastructure and administrative capacity can limit the potential of decentralization to create inclusive, responsive, and sustainable local governance. These findings provide both theoretical and practical insights for policymakers, local governments, and civil society actors seeking to enhance governance and democracy in Eastern Indonesia.

This section discusses the findings of the study on decentralization and local democracy in Eastern Indonesia, interpreting the results in relation to political participation theory, public policy theory, and governance frameworks. The discussion is organized under three primary themes: (1) Enhanced Citizen Participation and Local Democracy, (2) Governance Innovation and Adaptive Local Policies, and (3) Theoretical and Practical Implications for Decentralization.

1. Enhanced Citizen Participation and Local Democracy

The findings indicate a robust link between decentralization and increased citizen engagement in local governance. Drawing on Huntington and Nelson's (1976) theory of political participation, the research confirms that active involvement of citizens in decision-making processes strengthens democratic legitimacy and fosters collective responsibility. In Eastern Indonesia, citizens are now actively participating in village deliberation forums, budget oversight, and local development planning processes. One village head in East Nusa Tenggara remarked, *"Before decentralization, decisions were dictated from the center, and residents had no role. Today, we are consulted in planning and development discussions."* This reflects a substantive shift from passive recipient roles toward active civic engagement.

The data indicate that citizen participation increased in 85 percent of cases observed, highlighting that decentralization has effectively expanded political space for local communities. Digital tools, such as WhatsApp groups and e-deliberation forums, have further facilitated this engagement, allowing citizens to provide input, monitor spending, and contribute to policy discussions regardless of physical constraints. The research thus confirms that decentralization serves as a catalyst for participatory democracy, particularly in geographically and socially diverse regions (Hakiman 2025).

Moreover, the findings corroborate international studies on decentralization, such as those by Faguet, who emphasized that participatory channels and inter-local competition can enhance governance quality. However, challenges remain. Consistent with Ribot et al.'s caution regarding "recentralizing while decentralizing," formal authority does not always translate into genuine citizen power, especially in areas with limited institutional capacity. In Eastern Indonesia, participation is sometimes symbolic where administrative capacity is low, highlighting the importance of complementary capacity-building measures (Hadinatha 2025).

2. Governance Innovation and Adaptive Local Policies

The study further demonstrates that decentralization has fostered governance innovation, particularly through mechanisms that integrate technology and local wisdom. From a public policy perspective, Dunn (2018) emphasizes that effective policy is both responsive to citizen needs and participatory in its development (Ferrazzi 2022). The research shows that local governments in Eastern Indonesia have begun implementing citizen-driven policy mechanisms, including digital village planning (e-musrenbang) and online consultation forums. A local government officer noted, *"We use online reporting and forums to allow residents to provide continuous feedback on development priorities."*

These innovations are particularly significant because they emerge from adaptive responses to local conditions rather than top-down directives (Ansell and Torfing 2022). While classical public policy theory often assumes rational bureaucratic processes, the empirical evidence from this study suggests that bottom-up initiatives, community participation, and context-specific adaptations are crucial drivers of innovation. Local adaptations combine simple digital tools with traditional community consultation practices to expand participation and enhance transparency.

The research also highlights that innovation is unevenly distributed, with regions possessing stronger institutional capacity more likely to implement effective governance practices. This finding aligns with global studies on decentralization, which emphasize that innovation is context-dependent. Unlike the competitive inter-municipal innovation model often described in the literature, Eastern Indonesia demonstrates an adaptive, context-driven approach where technological tools and cultural norms are synchronized to facilitate participatory governance. For example, simple digital reporting systems, when combined with local deliberative customs, enable inclusive participation even in areas with limited resources.

3. Theoretical and Practical Implications for Decentralization

The empirical evidence from this study provides both theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of decentralization and local governance. The findings support the political participation framework proposed by Huntington and Nelson (1976), demonstrating that citizen

engagement strengthens democratic legitimacy and deepens local democracy. When citizens are given opportunities to contribute to planning, oversight, and policy-making, they not only participate more actively but also develop a collective sense of responsibility toward public policy outcomes.

At the same time, the results challenge conventional top-down models of public policy, which emphasize rationalized, centralized decision-making. In Eastern Indonesia, governance innovation largely emerges from local initiatives and citizen input rather than centrally designed policies. This supports the theoretical model of bottom-up policy-making and underscores the role of local knowledge, cultural practices, and adaptive strategies in shaping public administration (Dewi 2019).

From a governance perspective, the study demonstrates that decentralization combined with local democracy promotes transparency, accountability, and innovative management practices. The integration of e-participation platforms and community consultation channels reflects the principles of good governance by increasing citizen oversight and encouraging responsive administrative action. One community leader in Papua observed, *“Citizens now have avenues to express opinions, monitor projects, and participate in planning, which builds trust in local governance.”*

Practically, these findings highlight the necessity of capacity-oriented decentralization. Autonomy without adequate institutional resources may exacerbate regional disparities, leaving weaker local governments unable to capitalize on participatory opportunities. Policies aimed at strengthening local capacity through training, resource allocation, and performance-based evaluation are essential to ensure that decentralization achieves its democratic objectives. Simultaneously, regulatory frameworks should accommodate context-driven innovation that blends technological tools with local traditions to maximize participation and inclusivity.

The research also contributes scientifically by introducing the concept of **“contextual participatory decentralization”**, an integrative model linking normative theories of governance with empirical realities. This model emphasizes that innovation in local governance is not solely dependent on institutional capacity or financial resources but also on the adaptive interplay of local actors, social norms, and digital tools. By contextualizing decentralization within Eastern Indonesia’s unique geographical and social landscape, the study provides a framework for understanding how democracy and governance innovation can be sustained in non-metropolitan regions.

Furthermore, the study underscores that decentralization is both a mechanism for administrative autonomy and a tool for democratization. Evidence shows that as local governments gain decision-making authority, citizens’ capacity to influence policy grows, resulting in enhanced public trust, accountability, and improved governance quality. This interplay between autonomy and participation reinforces the notion that decentralization and local democracy are mutually reinforcing.

Finally, the research offers practical policy implications. First, local participatory mechanisms and governance innovations should be institutionalized through policies supporting collaboration among government, civil society, and private sectors. Second, capacity-building initiatives, digital literacy programs, and infrastructure development are crucial for ensuring that citizen participation is substantive rather than symbolic. Third, adaptive governance approaches that integrate technology and local wisdom should be formally recognized in national regulations to prevent bureaucratic obstacles from stifling innovation.

The discussion confirms that decentralization in Eastern Indonesia strengthens local democracy by increasing citizen participation, fostering governance innovation, and enhancing transparency and accountability. The study validates and extends the theoretical frameworks of political participation, public policy, and good governance, demonstrating that decentralization operates as both an administrative and democratic instrument.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, linking theoretical constructs with empirical evidence across diverse local contexts. The study introduces the **“contextual participatory decentralization”** model, highlighting how local adaptations, simple digital tools, and community wisdom combine to create inclusive, innovative, and sustainable governance practices. This model

enriches political science and public policy discourse by demonstrating that participatory democracy can thrive even in resource-constrained and geographically remote areas.

For future research, comparative studies across other Indonesian regions or Southeast Asian contexts are recommended to assess the replicability of this participatory model. Longitudinal studies could also examine the sustainability of governance innovations and their long-term impact on social welfare and democratic consolidation at the local level.

CONCLUSION

The study contributes a novel integrative approach by connecting political participation theory, public policy frameworks, and governance principles with the contextual realities of local communities. The main findings reveal that decentralization in Eastern Indonesia not only strengthens local democracy but also stimulates governance innovations that are grounded in citizen participation and local wisdom. These innovations are exemplified through practices such as e-participation platforms, village digital forums, and enhanced public monitoring mechanisms that increase transparency. The findings underscore that local capacity, participatory culture, and the adoption of simple technological solutions can act as key drivers of effective democratic practices, even in regions with limited resources. Consequently, this research introduces the conceptual model of “contextual participatory decentralization,” offering a fresh theoretical and practical framework for developing inclusive, responsive, and innovative local governance systems.

From a practical perspective, the study’s results carry significant implications for public policy formulation at the local level. The effectiveness of decentralization and local democracy appears strongly contingent upon the ability of local governments to foster citizen engagement and manage governance innovations sustainably. Therefore, local administrations must prioritize capacity-building initiatives, including systematic training for government officials, expanding digital access for citizens, and establishing regulations that support transparency and collaborative governance. Permanent integration of e-participation systems and digital village forums is recommended to ensure broad and meaningful citizen engagement. Additionally, incorporating local wisdom into policy design can enhance legitimacy and governance effectiveness. Overall, the findings emphasize that capacity- and participation-based decentralization should form the foundation of public policies that are inclusive, accountable, and adaptive to local socio-cultural contexts.

The empirical evidence further highlights that decentralization can catalyze bottom-up governance, where citizens actively shape policy and contribute to decision-making processes. This reinforces the notion that local democracy thrives when decentralization empowers citizens with real participatory opportunities, rather than merely transferring administrative authority. Local governments that combine technological tools with culturally embedded participatory practices can create governance ecosystems that are both innovative and resilient. Such an approach ensures that governance remains adaptive to regional diversity, addressing local needs effectively while promoting equitable participation.

In conclusion, the novelty of this study lies in its integrative methodology, which contextualizes established governance and participation theories within the socio-cultural and geographical realities of Eastern Indonesia. By demonstrating the link between decentralization, citizen participation, and governance innovation, this research provides a conceptual framework and empirical evidence that can guide both academic discourse and practical policymaking. The study confirms that decentralization, when implemented with attention to local capacities and citizen engagement, becomes a powerful mechanism to foster sustainable democracy and adaptive governance practices in regions facing developmental and resource challenges.

The recommendations emerge to enhance the effectiveness of decentralization and the quality of local democracy in Eastern Indonesia. First, both central and local governments should strengthen institutional capacities through comprehensive training programs, technical assistance, and human resource development focused on participatory and transparent governance practices. Enhancing bureaucratic competence ensures that decentralization is accompanied by the skills necessary to manage citizen engagement and local innovation effectively.

Second, public policies should actively support the use of accessible digital technologies to expand citizen participation and information access. Initiatives such as e-participation platforms, community-based online complaint systems, and digital budget monitoring should be institutionalized to facilitate inclusive participation and reduce barriers related to geographical isolation or infrastructural limitations. Third, local wisdom and social values inherent to Eastern Indonesian communities should be integrated into governance policies. This contextualization ensures that governance innovations are not standardized but instead reflect the unique socio-cultural and environmental conditions of each locality, thus enhancing policy legitimacy and effectiveness.

Fourth, continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential to assess the implementation of decentralization and the impact on democratic processes. Evaluations should focus on substantive citizen engagement, transparency, and accountability, rather than merely administrative compliance. By tracking progress and identifying gaps, local governments can adapt strategies to ensure that decentralization translates into meaningful democratic outcomes.

Moreover, future research should adopt a comparative approach across provinces in Eastern Indonesia to understand variations in governance innovations under diverse socio-cultural conditions. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine the long-term impact of governance innovations on local political participation, public accountability, and social welfare. Such studies will provide insights into the sustainability of governance reforms and inform policy adjustments over time.

Research directions can also expand to explore the role of digital technologies and social media in enhancing participatory democracy at the local level. Investigating how technology mediates citizen engagement, accountability, and policy responsiveness can yield actionable insights for both scholars and practitioners. Additionally, comparative studies across Southeast Asia could evaluate the replicability of the contextual participatory decentralization model in other regional contexts, further contributing to the global discourse on decentralization, innovation, and local democracy.

In summary, the study recommends an integrated approach to strengthening local democracy that combines capacity building, technological facilitation, institutional reform, and cultural contextualization. By operationalizing these recommendations, policymakers can enhance the effectiveness of decentralization, ensure inclusive citizen participation, and promote sustainable innovations in local governance. These strategies will help local governments in Eastern Indonesia evolve into participatory, accountable, and adaptive institutions that respond effectively to the needs and aspirations of their communities.

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