

The Legitimacy Responsiveness Gap: Nationalism Rhetoric and Inclusive Development Policies in Maluku

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the gap between nationalism rhetoric articulated by regional leaders and the implementation of inclusive development policies in Maluku, Indonesia. While narratives such as *Pela Gandong*, *Siwalima*, and *Maluku Bersaudara* are frequently invoked to promote unity, solidarity, and collective welfare, questions remain regarding their translation into substantive policy outcomes. Using a qualitative approach, this study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and document analysis of regional leaders' speeches, development planning documents, budget reports, statistical publications, and policy evaluation reports from 2019–2024. The findings reveal that nationalism rhetoric primarily functions as a source of political legitimacy rather than as a substantive guide for policy implementation. Significant inclusiveness deficits persist in regional development, particularly in relation to spatial inequality, indigenous community recognition, gender participation, and disability inclusion. The study further identifies limited bureaucratic capacity, elite dominance, weak civil society participation, and fiscal constraints as key factors contributing to the gap between rhetoric and policy. Theoretically, this article proposes the concept of the legitimacy–responsiveness gap, which explains how political legitimacy can be sustained through symbolic narratives despite limited policy responsiveness. The concept offers a useful framework for understanding governance dynamics in decentralized, multicultural, and geographically fragmented regions.

INTRODUCTION

Maluku occupies a unique position within Indonesia's archipelagic landscape. Comprising more than a thousand islands and characterized by remarkable ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, the province embodies both the opportunities and challenges of governing a geographically fragmented and socially plural society. The legacy of communal conflict, coupled with persistent disparities in infrastructure and public service provision across islands, has made social cohesion and equitable development central concerns in regional governance. In such a context, inclusive development is not merely a normative aspiration but a practical necessity for ensuring that all communities can participate in and benefit from the development process (Indra et al., 2026; Madubun, 2023; Titalessy et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, regional leaders in Maluku frequently employ narratives of nationalism, unity, and collective identity in public speeches and policy discourse. Concepts such as *Pela Gandong*, *Siwalima*, and *Maluku Bersaudara* are repeatedly invoked to symbolize solidarity, coexistence, and a shared commitment to national integration. These narratives are often accompanied by promises of inclusive development, social justice, and equal opportunities for all citizens. As a result, nationalism is presented not only as a political ideal but also as a moral foundation for regional development policies aimed at strengthening social harmony and reducing inequalities among diverse communities (Bazzi, 2025; Dikici, 2021; Redjeki et al., 2025).

Despite the prominence of such rhetoric, significant challenges continue to hinder the realization of genuinely inclusive development in Maluku. Development disparities between urban centers and remote island regions remain substantial, limiting equal access to education, healthcare, transportation, and other essential public services. Indigenous communities frequently encounter inadequate recognition of customary rights and limited participation in development decision-making processes. Likewise, women continue to face barriers to meaningful representation in political and administrative institutions, while persons with disabilities often remain marginalized within policy planning and public service delivery. These conditions raise important questions regarding the extent to which the discourse of nationalism and inclusivity articulated by regional leaders is reflected in actual development policies and governance practices (Abdillah et al., 2025; Annahar et al., 2023; Sanchez-Soriano et al., 2024).

Scholarly discussions on nationalism in decentralized political systems suggest that national identity is not solely constructed by central governments but is continuously negotiated and reproduced through local political processes. Within regional governance settings, political leaders frequently employ nationalist rhetoric to strengthen legitimacy, mobilize public support, and reinforce collective identity. Such narratives are often articulated through local cultural symbols, historical memories, and shared values that connect regional identities with broader national aspirations (Dikici, 2021; Novianti, 2022). In multicultural societies, nationalism therefore functions not only as an ideological framework but also as a political resource through which leaders communicate development priorities and cultivate social cohesion. Recent studies further demonstrate that cultural values and identity-based

narratives can contribute to the revitalization of national identity and social harmony when strategically incorporated into public governance and institutional practices (Redjeki et al., 2025).

Alongside debates on nationalism, inclusive development has emerged as an important framework for assessing the quality of governance and public policy. The concept extends beyond economic growth by emphasizing participation, social justice, accessibility, recognition, and the equitable distribution of development benefits among all members of society. Contemporary studies argue that inclusive development requires governments to address structural barriers that marginalize vulnerable populations, including indigenous peoples, women, persons with disabilities, and geographically isolated communities (Buzinde & Caterina-Knorr, 2022; Nurasa et al., 2024). Within decentralized governance systems, inclusivity is increasingly viewed as a key indicator of democratic accountability because development outcomes are expected to reflect the needs and aspirations of diverse social groups rather than the interests of dominant political actors alone. Recent evidence from Indonesia also highlights the importance of integrating disability perspectives and social resilience into development planning as part of a broader commitment to inclusive governance (Abdillah et al., 2025).

A related strand of scholarship focuses on the relationship between political discourse and policy implementation. Policy narratives play a significant role in framing social problems, legitimizing policy choices, and shaping public expectations regarding government performance. However, studies on decentralized governance frequently identify a persistent gap between policy commitments and actual implementation outcomes. While official policy documents and political speeches often promote principles of equality, participation, and inclusion, institutional constraints, administrative limitations, and political interests may hinder their realization in practice (Annahar et al., 2023; Wijatmoko et al., 2023). Consequently, the discrepancy between political rhetoric and policy implementation remains a critical concern in public administration research, particularly in regions characterized by complex social structures and uneven development conditions.

Despite the growing body of literature on nationalism, inclusive development, and decentralized governance, these themes have generally been examined separately. Existing studies on nationalism primarily emphasize identity formation, social cohesion, and political mobilization, whereas research on inclusive development tends to focus on governance outcomes, participation, and social equity. Similarly, studies of decentralized governance have largely concentrated on institutional effectiveness and implementation challenges without sufficiently examining how political narratives influence policy priorities and development practices. As a result, the interaction between nationalism rhetoric and inclusive development policies remains underexplored within contemporary governance scholarship.

This gap is particularly evident in the context of Maluku, where multiculturalism, archipelagic governance, post-conflict reconciliation, and development challenges intersect in unique ways. Although previous studies have examined aspects of regional development and social cohesion in eastern Indonesia, limited attention has been given to whether the inclusive values articulated in regional leaders' nationalism rhetoric are reflected in actual development

policies and implementation practices. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the relationship between nationalism rhetoric and inclusive development policies in Maluku. By integrating perspectives from nationalism studies, inclusive development theory, and governance research, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how symbolic political commitments translate into, or fail to translate into, substantive policy outcomes.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study seeks to address three interrelated research questions: (1) how is nationalism rhetoric constructed and articulated by regional leaders in Maluku? (2) to what extent are the principles of inclusivity embedded within regional development policies and governance practices? (3) what structural and political factors contribute to the gap between the rhetoric of nationalism and the implementation of inclusive development policies? Addressing these questions is essential for understanding whether political narratives of unity, solidarity, and national identity are translated into substantive policy commitments that benefit marginalized communities across the province.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it advances existing scholarship by connecting three strands of research that are often examined separately, namely nationalism studies, inclusive development, and policy implementation in decentralized governance contexts. Second, rather than treating nationalism merely as a cultural or ideological phenomenon, this study analyzes nationalism rhetoric as a governance instrument that shapes policy legitimacy and public expectations. Third, by focusing on the case of Maluku, the article provides empirical insights into the challenges of translating symbolic political commitments into substantive development outcomes within a multicultural and archipelagic region. Finally, the study contributes to governance research by proposing the concept of a legitimacy responsiveness gap, which captures the discrepancy between the symbolic legitimacy generated through political rhetoric and the substantive responsiveness reflected in policy implementation. This framework offers a useful analytical lens for examining similar dynamics in other decentralized and socially diverse regions.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design that integrated Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with document analysis to examine how nationalism rhetoric constructs political legitimacy and how far inclusive commitments are reflected in development policies in Maluku. Fairclough's framework was operationalized at three interconnected levels: textual analysis, focusing on recurrent vocabulary, identity labels, evaluative expressions, and claims of unity or inclusion; discursive practice analysis, examining how official speeches and policy texts reproduce and circulate these narratives; and social-practice analysis, relating the discourse to power, legitimacy, inequality, and the institutional conditions of regional governance. This combined design was selected because it allows symbolic political claims to be assessed alongside documentary evidence of policy priorities, allocation, and implementation.

The study relied on secondary data selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling. Speeches, public statements, and policy communications were eligible when they

were issued or delivered by regional leaders or official government channels in Maluku between 2019 and 2024, addressed themes of nationalism, unity, *Pela Gandong*, *Siwalima*, *Maluku Bersaudara*, inclusion, development, or governance, and could be traced to an identifiable official source. Policy documents were included when they planned, budgeted, implemented, or evaluated regional development during the same period and contained evidence relevant to spatial equity, indigenous recognition, gender inclusion, disability inclusion, participation, or access to public services. Duplicate materials, purely ceremonial statements without substantive policy content, undated items, and documents whose provenance could not be verified were excluded. Based on the source information that can be reconstructed from the original manuscript, the verifiable documentary corpus included at least nine individually identifiable policy, statistical, and external evaluation documents: one Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) for 2019–2024, four annual Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD) documents for 2020–2023, one Statistics Indonesia (BPS) publication from 2023, one Bappenas report from 2022, one UNDP report from 2022, and one INKLUSI report from 2023. The original manuscript, however, does not state the exact number of leaders' speeches, public statements, or priority-program implementation reports included in the analysis. These materials should therefore be reported separately after verification against the author's source log rather than inferred from the manuscript. Academic publications were used to support interpretation and theoretical comparison rather than being coded as primary documentary evidence.

Data analysis proceeded through an iterative coding process supported by a structured coding matrix. In the first cycle, relevant passages were coded for recurring discursive indicators and policy claims. In the second cycle, these codes were grouped into analytical categories: (1) nationalism and collective identity; (2) political legitimacy; (3) spatial inclusion and service access; (4) indigenous recognition and participation; (5) gender inclusion; (6) disability inclusion and accessibility; (7) bureaucratic capacity; (8) elite influence; (9) civil society participation; and (10) fiscal constraints. Each coded entry was linked to its source, date, excerpt, analytical category, and corresponding policy evidence. The CDA findings were then compared with planning, budgeting, statistical, and evaluation documents to assess whether rhetorical commitments and policy evidence showed convergence, partial convergence, or divergence. This comparison formed the empirical basis for identifying the legitimacy-responsiveness gap.

Credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness were strengthened through source triangulation and analytical triangulation. Claims identified in leaders' speeches were cross-checked against RPJMD and APBD documents, BPS and Bappenas statistics, implementation or evaluation reports, and relevant external assessments. An audit trail was used to document inclusion and exclusion decisions, coding categories, source-to-code links, and changes made during interpretation. Contradictory or non-confirming evidence was retained rather than removed so that the analysis did not privilege only materials supporting the proposed argument. Researcher reflexivity was addressed by repeatedly comparing culturally resonant narratives with documentary evidence of policy outputs and by explicitly considering the risk of interpreting symbolic language as evidence of substantive inclusion. These procedures were

intended to keep the analysis traceable to the documentary record and to reduce interpretive overreach. The analytical framework of these stages is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Analytical Framework of the Study

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Nationalism Rhetoric as Political Legitimacy

The analysis of official speeches, public statements, and policy narratives produced by regional leaders in Maluku between 2019 and 2024 reveals that nationalism is predominantly articulated through culturally embedded symbols rather than through abstract references to the Indonesian nation-state. Three recurring narratives are particularly prominent: *Pela Gandong*, *Siwalima*, and *Maluku Bersaudara*. These concepts are consistently invoked as representations of solidarity, brotherhood, social harmony, and collective identity among diverse ethnic and religious communities across the archipelago. Within political discourse, these cultural values are positioned not merely as elements of local tradition but as normative foundations for regional development and governance.

The prominence of these narratives reflects a broader tendency among regional leaders to localize nationalism through culturally resonant symbols. Rather than emphasizing nationalism solely as loyalty to the state, political actors in Maluku frequently frame national unity through indigenous concepts that possess strong historical legitimacy within local communities. This finding is consistent with studies suggesting that national identity in plural societies is often strengthened through the integration of local cultural values into broader national narratives (Novianti, 2022; Redjeki et al., 2025). In this regard, *Pela Gandong*, *Siwalima*, and *Maluku Bersaudara* function as symbolic bridges that connect local identity with national belonging, allowing political leaders to present themselves as guardians of both cultural heritage and national cohesion.

The prominence of these narratives reflects a broader tendency among regional leaders to localize nationalism through culturally resonant symbols. Rather than emphasizing nationalism solely as loyalty to the Indonesian state, political actors in Maluku frequently frame national unity through indigenous concepts that possess strong historical legitimacy within local communities. This finding supports Novianti (2022) argument that national identity in Indonesia is often strengthened through the integration of local cultural values into

broader national narratives. Similarly, Redjeki et al. (2025) argue that local wisdom and cultural heritage can serve as important foundations for maintaining national cohesion within plural societies. The Maluku case reinforces these observations, demonstrating that nationalism is not articulated through uniform state-centered narratives but through locally embedded symbols that make national belonging more meaningful and socially acceptable for diverse communities.

More importantly, the findings indicate that *Pela Gandong*, *Siwalima*, and *Maluku Bersaudara* function not only as cultural symbols but also as instruments of political legitimacy. These concepts are repeatedly invoked during development planning forums, public ceremonies, and policy announcements to construct an image of leadership committed to unity, harmony, and inclusiveness. This finding resonates with Dikici's (2021) observation that contemporary nationalism frequently operates as a flexible political discourse capable of accommodating multiple social interests while simultaneously strengthening political authority. In the context of Maluku, cultural narratives become symbolic resources through which regional leaders establish moral credibility and reinforce public trust in governmental institutions.

However, the findings also extend existing scholarship by revealing the limits of symbolic nationalism in the governance process. While previous studies have primarily emphasized the integrative function of nationalism and cultural identity (Novianti, 2022; Redjeki et al., 2025), the Maluku case suggests that the political deployment of these narratives may also obscure tensions between symbolic commitments and substantive policy outcomes. References to inclusiveness, social justice, and collective welfare are consistently present in political discourse, yet these commitments are not always accompanied by corresponding policy interventions. In this regard, nationalism rhetoric performs a dual function: it promotes social cohesion while simultaneously legitimizing existing governance arrangements.

This finding is particularly relevant when viewed through the lens of governance and public policy literature. Ningrum et al. (2025) argue that policy narratives frequently shape public perceptions of government responsiveness even when implementation outcomes remain uneven. The evidence from Maluku supports this argument by demonstrating how narratives of unity and brotherhood generate symbolic legitimacy despite persistent development disparities affecting indigenous communities, women, persons with disabilities, and residents of remote islands. Consequently, the effectiveness of nationalism rhetoric should not be evaluated solely based on its capacity to foster social cohesion but also on its ability to translate symbolic commitments into tangible policy outcomes. The findings therefore suggest that nationalism rhetoric in Maluku functions as a mechanism of political legitimacy whose success depends not only on discursive acceptance but also on the extent to which it is reflected in inclusive development practices.

The Inclusiveness Deficit in Regional Development Policies

The analysis of development planning documents, budget allocation reports, and secondary policy evaluations indicates a persistent gap between the inclusive commitments

articulated in political discourse and the substantive outcomes reflected in regional development policies. Although regional leaders consistently emphasize equality, social justice, and development for all citizens, the evidence suggests that inclusiveness remains unevenly institutionalized across multiple dimensions of governance. The findings reveal four major areas in which inclusivity deficits continue to be observed, namely regional development disparities, indigenous community recognition, gender inclusion, and disability inclusion, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusiveness Deficits in Regional Development Policies in Maluku

Dimension	Rhetorical Commitment	Policy Reality	Inclusiveness Deficit
Regional Development	Equitable development across islands	Unequal access to infrastructure, education, healthcare, and transportation between urban and remote islands	Spatial inequality
Indigenous Communities	Recognition of local identity and cultural heritage	Limited participation and insufficient protection of customary rights in development planning	Recognition deficit
Gender Inclusion	Women as development partners	Limited representation in decision-making processes and strategic public positions	Participation deficit
Disability Inclusion	Development for all citizens	Limited accessibility measures and insufficient disability-responsive programs	Accessibility deficit

Source: Analyzed Findings, 2026

The findings suggest that the most visible manifestation of policy exclusion occurs in the spatial dimension of development. Despite repeated commitments to equitable development, significant disparities continue to characterize the relationship between urban centers and remote island communities. Access to transportation networks, public services, educational facilities, and healthcare infrastructure remains uneven across the archipelago. This finding supports Madubun's (2023) argument that governance in island regions requires geographically sensitive policy approaches because conventional administrative frameworks often fail to address the unique challenges faced by dispersed communities. Similarly, Indra et al. (2026) emphasize that regional justice cannot be achieved without addressing asymmetric development patterns that systematically disadvantage peripheral regions. The Maluku case demonstrates that geographical fragmentation continues to shape unequal development outcomes despite the prevalence of inclusive rhetoric.

The analysis also reveals a substantial recognition deficit affecting indigenous communities. Although cultural concepts such as *Pela Gandong* and *Siwalima* occupy a central position in political discourse, the institutional recognition of indigenous interests within development policies remains limited. Indigenous communities are frequently represented symbolically as part of regional identity, yet their participation in decision-making processes and the protection of customary rights remain insufficiently integrated into policy frameworks. This finding partially challenges the optimism found in studies highlighting the positive role of local cultural values in strengthening social cohesion (Redjeki et al., 2025). While cultural narratives may indeed foster collective identity, the evidence from Maluku

suggests that symbolic recognition does not automatically translate into substantive policy inclusion.

A similar pattern emerges in relation to gender inclusion. Political discourse commonly portrays women as important contributors to development, family welfare, and community resilience; however, their representation within strategic decision-making structures remains limited. The findings indicate that gender inclusion is frequently framed in terms of women's social and economic contributions rather than their political agency and influence over development priorities. This pattern is consistent with Firdaus et al. (2024), who found that formal commitments to women's participation in local governance do not necessarily translate into meaningful representation within decision-making institutions. Likewise, Amandaria et al. (2026) argue that sustainable community development requires not only the involvement of women in local activities but also their active participation in governance processes and institutional leadership.

The evidence from Maluku further suggests that women continue to occupy a peripheral position in policy formulation despite being regularly acknowledged in development rhetoric. This finding resonates with Hajad et al. (2025), who demonstrate that gender exclusion often reflects broader governance failures rather than merely cultural barriers. Similar observations are reported by Mohammed et al. (2025), who emphasize that meaningful participation requires institutional mechanisms capable of transforming women from policy beneficiaries into policy actors. In post-conflict and socially diverse contexts, the inclusion of women in decision-making processes becomes particularly important because their participation contributes not only to representation but also to social cohesion and democratic legitimacy (Niner et al., 2021).

Moreover, the findings indicate that recognition alone is insufficient to achieve gender-inclusive governance. As observed by Valerio et al. (2024), women are frequently celebrated as key contributors to local development while remaining underrepresented in the allocation of resources and strategic decision-making. This dynamic is also evident in Maluku, where narratives of inclusivity coexist with limited opportunities for women to influence policy outcomes. From the perspective of inclusive governance, genuine inclusiveness requires not only acknowledgment of women's social roles but also equitable access to political authority, public resources, and institutional decision-making processes (Sanchez-Soriano et al., 2024). Consequently, gender inclusion in Maluku appears to remain largely symbolic and participatory in form rather than transformative in substance.

The most pronounced discrepancy between rhetoric and implementation can be observed in disability inclusion. While policy narratives frequently emphasize development for all citizens, disability-responsive programs and accessibility measures remain relatively underdeveloped. This finding aligns with Abdillah et al. (2025), who argue that disability issues continue to receive limited attention within inclusive development frameworks in Indonesia despite increasing policy commitments. Likewise, Nurasa et al. (2024) highlight that inclusive development requires institutional ecosystems capable of integrating vulnerable groups into planning and implementation processes. The evidence from Maluku indicates that such

institutional arrangements remain insufficient, resulting in the continued marginalization of persons with disabilities.

Taken together, these findings reveal that the inclusiveness deficit in Maluku is not confined to a single sector or social group but reflects a broader governance challenge. The persistence of spatial inequality, limited indigenous recognition, restricted gender participation, and inadequate disability inclusion suggests that inclusive development remains more visible at the level of political commitment than in substantive policy outcomes. Consistent with Ningrum et al. (2025), the findings indicate a recurring pattern in which policy narratives promote inclusiveness while implementation outcomes remain uneven. This discrepancy provides further evidence that the legitimacy generated through nationalism rhetoric is not always accompanied by corresponding levels of policy responsiveness, thereby reinforcing the existence of a legitimacy responsiveness gap within regional governance.

The findings presented indicate that the gap between nationalism rhetoric and inclusive development outcomes cannot be explained solely by inconsistencies in political communication. Rather, the evidence suggests that this discrepancy is rooted in a combination of institutional, political, participatory, and fiscal constraints that shape policy formulation and implementation processes. As illustrated in Figure 2, the legitimacy generated through narratives of unity, brotherhood, and inclusiveness encounters multiple structural barriers before being translated into substantive policy outcomes.

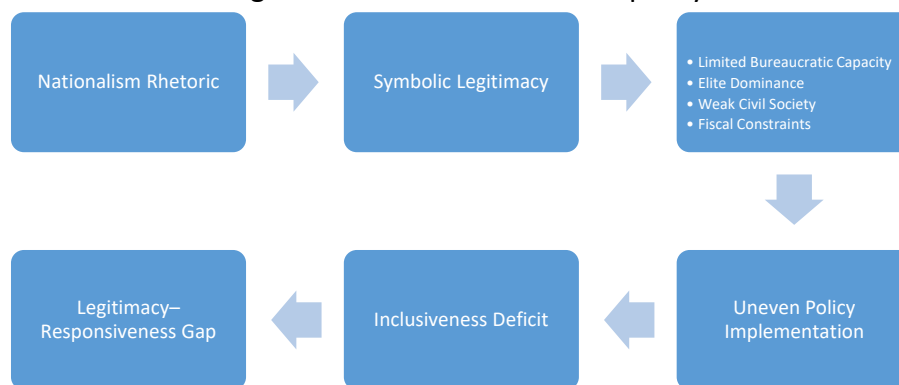


Figure 2. Drivers of the Rhetoric–Policy Gap in Maluku

Source: Analyzed Findings, 2026

One of the most significant factors is limited bureaucratic capacity. The implementation of inclusive development policies requires administrative institutions capable of integrating the needs of geographically dispersed and socially diverse communities into planning, budgeting, and service delivery mechanisms. However, governance in archipelagic regions such as Maluku presents unique administrative challenges that frequently exceed the capacity of conventional bureaucratic arrangements. Madubun (2023) argues that public administration systems designed for mainland territories often struggle to respond effectively to the realities of island governance, where distance, transportation costs, and service accessibility create additional layers of complexity. Consequently, even when inclusive commitments are incorporated into policy documents, administrative limitations may hinder their effective implementation across remote island communities.

A second factor concerns the continuing influence of political and elite interests within regional governance. Development priorities are not determined solely by public needs but are also shaped by political incentives, resource allocation strategies, and competing interests among influential actors. While nationalism rhetoric promotes collective welfare and social cohesion, policy implementation often reflects selective priorities that favor politically visible or strategically important programs. This finding resonates with Bazzi's (2025) observation that nation-building narratives can strengthen political integration, yet their practical impact depends on the institutional arrangements through which public resources are distributed. In the Maluku context, symbolic commitments to inclusiveness do not necessarily eliminate the influence of elite-driven decision-making processes that shape development outcomes.

The findings further highlight the limited role of civil society participation in narrowing the gap between rhetoric and policy. Although participatory mechanisms formally exist within decentralized governance structures, meaningful participation by marginalized groups remains constrained. Indigenous communities, women, persons with disabilities, and residents of remote islands frequently possess limited access to decision-making arenas where development priorities are negotiated. This finding supports Annahar et al. (2023), who argue that inclusive decentralization requires more than procedural participation; it requires institutional arrangements that enable vulnerable groups to influence governance outcomes. The Maluku case demonstrates that participation often remains consultative rather than transformative, reducing the capacity of civil society to hold political actors accountable for inclusive policy commitments.

Fiscal constraints constitute an additional structural barrier. Inclusive development in archipelagic regions requires substantial investments in transportation infrastructure, public service delivery, accessibility programs, and community empowerment initiatives. However, the high cost of governing geographically fragmented territories often limits the extent to which development resources can be distributed equitably. This finding is consistent with Buzinde & Caterina-Knorr (2022), who emphasize that inclusive development is highly dependent on the availability of institutional and financial resources capable of reaching marginalized populations. In Maluku, fiscal limitations contribute to the persistence of uneven development outcomes despite repeated commitments to equitable and inclusive growth.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the rhetoric policy gap is not merely a communication problem but a broader governance problem rooted in institutional, political, and structural conditions. Bureaucratic limitations, elite influence, weak participatory mechanisms, and fiscal constraints collectively reduce the capacity of public institutions to transform symbolic commitments into substantive policy outcomes. This finding supports Madubun (2023) argument that governance in archipelagic regions requires context-sensitive institutional arrangements capable of addressing geographical fragmentation and unequal service accessibility. It also resonates with Suaedi et al. (2023), who emphasize that policy effectiveness is closely linked to the capacity of regional leadership and administrative institutions to translate political visions into operational programs.

The findings further reinforce Annahar et al.'s (2023) observation that decentralized governance does not automatically guarantee inclusive participation. Although participatory

mechanisms formally exist, marginalized groups often remain excluded from meaningful decision-making processes. Likewise, Nurasa et al. (2024) argue that inclusive development depends on the existence of a supportive institutional ecosystem capable of integrating vulnerable groups into governance and development processes. The evidence from Maluku indicates that such institutional integration remains uneven, contributing to persistent inclusiveness deficits.

From a policy perspective, the findings extend the growing literature on policy alignment and implementation. Wijatmoko et al. (2023) demonstrate that policy commitments frequently encounter dissonance during implementation due to competing institutional priorities and governance fragmentation. Similarly, Ningrum et al. (2025) highlight the persistent challenge of bridging the gap between policy intentions and practical outcomes within decentralized governance settings. The Maluku case confirms these observations by showing that nationalism rhetoric may successfully generate symbolic legitimacy while failing to ensure corresponding levels of policy responsiveness.

Finally, the findings support Indra et al.'s (2026) argument that regional justice requires more than formal commitments to equality; it requires institutional arrangements capable of addressing structural disparities across diverse territorial and social contexts. The evidence from Maluku demonstrates that the persistence of social and spatial inequalities cannot be understood solely as a consequence of resource limitations but must also be viewed as a governance challenge involving institutional capacity, participation, and accountability. This observation is consistent with Hunjra et al. (2023), who emphasize that the quality of institutions plays a decisive role in determining whether development objectives are translated into sustainable and equitable outcomes.

The findings further suggest that legitimacy derived from narratives of unity and inclusiveness may become fragile when it is not accompanied by substantive improvements in social justice. Jongen & Scholte (2022) argue that perceptions of legitimacy are closely linked to the extent to which governance systems are able to address inequalities affecting different social groups. Similarly, Bisani et al. (2024) demonstrate that claims of inclusivity gain legitimacy only when symbolic representations are supported by tangible forms of participation and equitable access to development benefits. In the Maluku context, the continued presence of development disparities despite highly visible narratives of solidarity indicates that symbolic legitimacy alone is insufficient to sustain inclusive governance.

This dynamic is particularly evident in relation to indigenous communities and geographically marginalized populations. As noted by Che (2023), social justice requires the incorporation of local knowledge systems and indigenous perspectives into policy processes rather than merely celebrating them as cultural symbols. Likewise, Gustafsson & Schilling-Vacaflor (2022) emphasize that meaningful inclusion requires indigenous communities to possess genuine influence within governance structures rather than remaining passive recipients of policy decisions. The findings of this study suggest that although indigenous values such as *Pela Gandong* and *Siwalima* occupy a central place in political discourse, their translation into substantive mechanisms of participation and recognition remains limited.

Moreover, the findings reinforce arguments advanced by Sanchez-Soriano et al. (2024) and Akther & Evans (2024), who contend that inclusive and adaptive governance depends on continuous interaction between institutional capacity, citizen participation, and equitable resource allocation. Where these conditions are weak, policy commitments are likely to remain symbolic rather than transformative. Consequently, the coexistence of strong narratives of unity and persistent inclusiveness deficits in Maluku provides important evidence that political legitimacy and policy responsiveness do not necessarily develop in parallel. This tension constitutes the empirical foundation for the legitimacy–responsiveness gap proposed in this study.

Legitimacy–Responsiveness Gap

The findings presented in the previous sections suggest that the relationship between nationalism rhetoric and inclusive development in Maluku cannot be adequately explained through conventional implementation-gap perspectives alone. While existing studies generally attribute policy shortcomings to administrative, institutional, or fiscal constraints, the evidence from this study indicates a deeper disconnect between the production of political legitimacy and the delivery of substantive policy responsiveness. To conceptualize this phenomenon, this article proposes the notion of a legitimacy–responsiveness gap, referring to a condition in which political actors successfully generate public legitimacy through symbolic narratives of unity, inclusion, and collective identity, while their policy outputs remain insufficiently responsive to the needs of marginalized groups. This conceptual relationship is further illustrated in Table 2, which outlines the dimensions of the gap between symbolic legitimacy and substantive policy responsiveness observed in Maluku.

Table 2. Conceptualization of the Legitimacy–Responsiveness Gap in Maluku

Dimension	Symbolic Level	Substantive Level	Observed Gap
Nationalism	<i>Pela Gandong, Siwalima, Maluku Bersaudara</i>	Limited policy inclusion of marginalized groups	Symbolic–substantive disconnect
Governance	Inclusive political commitments	Uneven implementation of inclusive policies	Responsiveness deficit
Participation	Narratives of collective representation	Restricted influence of vulnerable groups in decision-making	Participation gap
Development	“Development for all” discourse	Persistent spatial and social inequalities	Inclusion gap
Legitimacy	High symbolic acceptance	Limited policy responsiveness	Legitimacy–responsiveness gap

Source: Analyzed Findings, 2026

The concept of legitimacy responsiveness gap extends existing discussions on governance legitimacy by emphasizing that legitimacy and responsiveness do not necessarily evolve in parallel. Studies on political legitimacy generally assume that governments maintain public support by responding effectively to societal needs (Lakin & Kane, 2023; Schmidt, 2021). However, the Maluku case demonstrates that legitimacy may also be sustained through symbolic narratives that resonate with collective identities and cultural values, even when

policy outcomes remain uneven. The repeated invocation of *Pela Gandong*, *Siwalima*, and *Maluku Bersaudara* illustrates how culturally embedded narratives can generate acceptance and trust independently from measurable policy performance.

This finding also provides a useful lens for understanding the operation of symbolic power within regional governance. Drawing on the concept of symbolic violence, the study suggests that political rhetoric may shape public perceptions in ways that normalize existing inequalities without requiring overt coercion. Symbolic violence does not operate through direct exclusion but through the production of meanings that make unequal conditions appear natural, legitimate, or unavoidable (Ferreira & Maschietto, 2024; Harris et al., 2021). In the context of Maluku, narratives of unity and collective identity contribute positively to social cohesion; however, they may simultaneously obscure persistent disparities affecting remote island communities, indigenous groups, women, and persons with disabilities. As a result, symbolic inclusion can coexist with substantive exclusion.

The findings further point to the emergence of what may be described as pseudo-legitimacy. Unlike democratic legitimacy grounded in effective responsiveness and equitable policy outcomes, pseudo-legitimacy refers to a condition in which political authority derives its acceptance primarily from symbolic representations rather than from substantive performance. The concept does not imply that political narratives are inherently deceptive. Rather, it highlights how legitimacy can be maintained through cultural symbolism, emotional attachment, and identity-based appeals despite persistent implementation deficits. This interpretation resonates with Dellmuth et al. (2021), who identify the existence of legitimacy gaps between institutional claims and citizen experiences, suggesting that perceptions of legitimacy are not always aligned with actual governance outcomes.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature by linking nationalism, inclusive development, and governance legitimacy within a single analytical framework. While previous studies have examined these themes separately (Annahar et al., 2023; Bazzi, 2025; Sanchez-Soriano et al., 2024), the present findings demonstrate that nationalism rhetoric can function as a mechanism for generating symbolic legitimacy even when policy responsiveness remains limited. Consequently, the legitimacy–responsiveness gap provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding why narratives of unity and inclusiveness often remain politically effective despite the persistence of social and developmental inequalities. The concept may therefore offer broader analytical value for examining governance dynamics in other decentralized, multicultural, and geographically fragmented regions beyond Maluku.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations that define the scope of its claims. First, the analysis relies on secondary documentary data, so it primarily captures officially recorded discourse, policy representations, and documented implementation rather than the direct experiences of policy actors and affected communities. Second, the absence of interviews, focus groups, or participant observation limits the study's ability to examine how regional leaders, bureaucrats, indigenous communities, women, persons with disabilities, and residents of

remote islands interpret the relationship between political rhetoric and policy implementation. Third, the analysis is bounded by the 2019–2024 period and by Maluku's distinctive archipelagic, multicultural, and post-conflict governance context. The findings should therefore be understood as context-sensitive rather than statistically generalizable.

Accordingly, the transferability of the legitimacy-responsiveness gap to other regions depends on similarities in institutional structure, cultural politics, territorial fragmentation, and patterns of social exclusion. Future research should test the framework through comparative regional studies and mixed-source designs that combine documentary analysis with interviews, community-based inquiry, and direct observation. Such work would make it possible to assess whether the gap identified here is reproduced in citizens' lived experiences and to distinguish more precisely between discursive legitimacy, administrative capacity, and measurable policy responsiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between nationalism rhetoric and inclusive development policies in Maluku. The findings reveal that nationalism is predominantly articulated through culturally embedded narratives such as *Pela Gandong*, *Siwalima*, and *Maluku Bersaudara*, which function as important sources of political legitimacy within a multicultural and archipelagic context. While these narratives successfully promote ideals of unity, solidarity, and collective identity, their translation into substantive development outcomes remains limited. Evidence from regional development policies indicates persistent inclusiveness deficits reflected in spatial inequalities, insufficient recognition of indigenous communities, limited gender participation, and inadequate disability inclusion. These findings suggest that nationalism rhetoric operates more effectively as a mechanism for generating symbolic legitimacy than as a substantive orientation guiding inclusive policy implementation.

The study further identifies several interconnected factors that contribute to the gap between rhetoric and policy. Limited bureaucratic capacity constrains the implementation of inclusive programs across geographically dispersed communities, while elite influence continues to shape development priorities and resource allocation. In addition, weak participation by marginalized groups reduces public accountability and limits the ability of vulnerable communities to influence policy outcomes. These challenges are further intensified by fiscal constraints associated with governing an archipelagic region, where the cost of providing equitable public services remains considerably higher than in more territorially integrated regions. Together, these institutional, political, participatory, and fiscal factors help explain why inclusive commitments frequently remain symbolic rather than substantive.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the development of the concept of the legitimacy-responsiveness gap as an analytical framework for understanding the disconnect between symbolic political legitimacy and substantive policy responsiveness. The findings demonstrate that political legitimacy can be sustained through culturally resonant narratives even when policy outcomes fail to adequately address the needs of marginalized groups. By linking nationalism rhetoric, inclusive development, and governance legitimacy within a single framework, this study extends existing scholarship on decentralized governance and provides

a conceptual lens for examining similar dynamics in other multicultural and geographically fragmented regions. Future research may further test and refine this framework through comparative studies across different regional governance contexts.

In practical terms, narrowing the legitimacy-responsiveness gap requires moving from symbolic inclusion to institutionalized participation and measurable accountability. Participatory governance should provide indigenous communities, women, persons with disabilities, and residents of remote islands with formal opportunities to influence planning, budgeting, implementation, and evaluation rather than limiting participation to consultation. Institutional reform should clarify cross-agency responsibilities for inclusive policy delivery and connect them to public performance reporting. Indigenous participation can be strengthened through formally recognized customary representation and transparent consultation mechanisms. Gender-responsive budgeting should link gender analysis to budget allocation, program outputs, and outcome indicators, while disability-inclusive planning should require accessibility audits, disaggregated data, universal-access standards, and clearly identified budget lines. Finally, provincial and local governments should adopt monitoring indicators that track spatial equity, representation of marginalized groups, accessibility of public services, realization of inclusive budgets, and resolution of public grievances. These measures would make culturally resonant nationalism accountable to tangible improvements in inclusion, rather than allowing legitimacy to remain primarily symbolic.

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