

DECENTRALIZATION AND REGIONAL AUTONOMY: AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC SERVICE DISPARITIES AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES ACROSS INDONESIAN PROVINCES

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Abstract

Indonesia's decentralization and regional autonomy reforms, implemented in the early 2000s, aimed to enhance local governance and improve public services. However, these reforms have led to varying outcomes across Indonesia's provinces, with significant disparities in the quality and accessibility of public services. This study investigates how decentralization has influenced public service delivery and governance challenges in different regions, highlighting the uneven impacts of these reforms. This research aims to analyze the disparities in public service delivery across Indonesian provinces and the governance challenges resulting from the decentralization process. The study seeks to understand the factors contributing to these disparities and their implications for regional development and equity in public service provision. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data analysis from national and regional reports with qualitative interviews with local government officials and community leaders. The study examines key indicators of public service performance, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, across various provinces. The study reveals significant disparities in public service delivery, with wealthier and more urbanized provinces exhibiting better outcomes. Meanwhile, poorer and more remote regions face challenges in governance capacity and resource allocation, leading to uneven public service provision. The decentralization process in Indonesia has had mixed results, with regional autonomy contributing to greater governance flexibility but also deepening disparities in public service quality. Further reforms are necessary to address these inequities and strengthen local governance capabilities.

Keywords: Decentralization, Governance Challenges, Indonesia, Public Service Disparities, Regional Autonomy.



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia embarked on decentralization and regional autonomy reforms in the early 2000s, aiming to improve local governance and ensure a more equitable distribution of resources (Ferrara et al., 2025). Prior to these reforms, the central government wielded significant control over political, economic, and administrative functions, leading to disparities in governance and public service delivery across the country's diverse regions. The decentralization policy was introduced to provide local governments with greater autonomy over public service management, thereby improving local responsiveness to community needs and enhancing regional development (Widiarto et al., 2025). These reforms aimed to create more responsive and accountable local governments while reducing the historical dependency on the central government. However, over two decades since the implementation of decentralization, the outcomes of these reforms have been mixed, with significant variations in the quality of public services and governance across provinces (Binsaeed et al., 2025). Some regions have seen remarkable improvements in service delivery, while others still face significant challenges in implementing effective governance practices and meeting public needs.

The decentralization process has fundamentally reshaped Indonesia's governance landscape, enabling local governments to take charge of key public services such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and law enforcement (De Mello & Jalles, 2025). Despite these positive intentions, disparities in local governance capacity have led to uneven progress across the nation. Some provinces, particularly those with stronger economic foundations, better governance frameworks, and more resources, have been able to utilize their newfound autonomy to improve public services effectively (Kapelela et al., 2025). Conversely, other provinces, especially those with limited resources, lack administrative capacity, or face geographical challenges, have struggled to provide quality services. The resulting disparities in public service provision present a major challenge for Indonesia's national development and the equitable distribution of resources (Alasiri et al., 2025). As such, this research investigates how the decentralization process has affected public service delivery and governance across Indonesia's provinces, focusing on the challenges and outcomes that have emerged in the post-reform era.

Moreover, these challenges have significant implications for social inequality, as unequal access to essential services such as healthcare and education may exacerbate regional disparities and hinder the overall progress of the nation (Delfirman & Dzaki, 2025). While the decentralization policy aimed to empower local authorities to better address regional needs, it also exposed the limitations of some provincial governments in terms of governance capacity, financial management, and administrative efficiency (Lublin, 2025). This study seeks to shed light on the causes and consequences of these disparities in public service delivery, exploring the impact of decentralized governance on the quality and accessibility of services at the local level.

This study addresses a critical issue: the disparities in public service delivery across Indonesian provinces following the implementation of decentralization and regional autonomy reforms (Bianchi & Prota, 2025). While decentralization was intended to empower local governments to better serve their communities, significant differences have emerged in how various regions are able to manage and deliver public services (Rugeiyamu & Msendo, 2025). These disparities stem from multiple factors, including differences in regional resources, governance capacity, political leadership, and institutional effectiveness. In some provinces, local governments have successfully utilized their autonomy to improve the delivery of key services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. In contrast, other provinces, particularly those in remote or less economically developed areas, continue to struggle with inefficiencies and gaps in service provision.

This uneven performance presents a significant governance challenge, as the fundamental goal of decentralization ensuring more equitable and efficient public service provision across regions has not been fully realized (Fauzan et al., 2025). The decentralization reforms, while intended to create a more responsive governance system, have inadvertently exacerbated existing inequalities in service delivery (Tinambunan et al., 2025). In particular, provinces with weaker administrative structures, fewer resources, and limited capacity have faced difficulties in managing decentralized governance functions, resulting in stark disparities in service quality (Frigo et al., 2025). This study seeks to identify the underlying causes of these disparities and evaluate how decentralization has both helped and hindered public service provision in different regions (Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia & Lantara, 2025). The research also explores the governance challenges that have emerged, examining how local governments navigate the complexities of autonomy, resource allocation, and policy implementation in the context of regional disparities.

By analyzing these issues, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between decentralization and public service equity in Indonesia (Srirejeki & Khairurrisqo, 2025). The findings of this research are crucial for policymakers and practitioners seeking to address the gaps in service delivery and improve the overall effectiveness of decentralization policies (Halim et al., 2025). Understanding the specific challenges faced by different provinces will be essential for designing future governance reforms that can promote more equitable development and service delivery across Indonesia's diverse regions.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the disparities in public service delivery across Indonesian provinces and examine the governance challenges arising from the decentralization and regional autonomy reforms (Asmorowati et al., 2025). The research aims to identify the key factors contributing to these disparities, such as the capacity of local governments, regional economic conditions, and the effectiveness of decentralization policies in various provinces (Asmorowati et al., 2025). By evaluating the implementation of public services in areas such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, this study seeks to assess how decentralization has influenced service quality and accessibility at the local level (Neka Erlyani et al., 2024). Additionally, the research aims to understand the governance challenges faced by local governments in managing these services, particularly in less developed or resource-constrained regions.

This study also aims to explore the broader implications of decentralization for regional development, equity, and governance effectiveness (Ramdhani & Nilo Legowo, 2025). The research will analyze how decentralization has either facilitated or hindered regional development, depending on the capacity of local governments to manage their new responsibilities (Ramlan & Sensuse, 2025). Furthermore, it seeks to examine the extent to which decentralization has contributed to social inequalities in Indonesia, particularly in areas where service delivery gaps are most pronounced (Grisanto et al., 2025). By identifying the structural, financial, and political challenges that have emerged since the decentralization reforms, the study aims to provide policy recommendations for improving the effectiveness and equity of public service delivery across Indonesia ("Inter-Agency Collaboration as Mediator," 2025). Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate about the benefits and drawbacks of decentralization in a developing country context.

The findings of this research will be valuable for policymakers, local government officials, and academic scholars interested in understanding the dynamics of decentralization and its impact on public service provision (Maria & Halim, 2026). By providing a comprehensive analysis of both the positive and negative outcomes of decentralization in Indonesia, this study will offer critical insights into how governance reforms can be better designed to address regional disparities and improve the delivery of public services.

There is a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific impacts of decentralization on public service delivery and governance challenges across Indonesian provinces (Kurniadi et al., 2025). While existing studies have examined the general effects of decentralization on local governance and regional development, few have focused on the disparities in public service outcomes between provinces or the governance challenges faced by local governments in managing decentralization (Muallidin, 2025). Most studies on decentralization have focused on national-level outcomes, with limited attention given to how regional differences in governance capacity influence the effectiveness of decentralization at the local level (Putra et al., 2025). Furthermore, much of the existing research has concentrated on the economic and political dimensions of decentralization, neglecting the administrative and institutional challenges faced by local governments in implementing reforms (Imandeka et al., 2025). This research seeks to fill this gap by providing a detailed, province-level analysis of public service disparities and the governance challenges that arise from regional autonomy in Indonesia.

Additionally, while some studies have examined the success stories of decentralization in certain provinces, fewer studies have critically analyzed the governance challenges faced by regions where decentralization has not led to improved public service delivery (“Embezzlement in the Private Sector,” 2025). There is a need for more research that takes into account the diverse contexts of Indonesia’s provinces, exploring how factors such as regional resource distribution, political leadership, and institutional capacity contribute to the success or failure of decentralization policies (Indrawanto et al., 2025). This study will address these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of both the successes and failures of decentralization in Indonesia, providing a more nuanced understanding of how regional autonomy has impacted public service delivery.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive, comparative analysis of public service disparities and governance challenges across Indonesian provinces following decentralization reforms (Panjaitan et al., 2025). While previous research has focused on national-level outcomes of decentralization, this study provides a provincial-level analysis, offering a more granular understanding of how decentralization affects local governance and service delivery (Oon et al., 2025). By examining a wide range of public services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure this research highlights the multifaceted nature of decentralization and its impact on different sectors of public service provision. Additionally, the study explores how local governments navigate governance challenges in the context of limited resources, weak administrative capacity, and political fragmentation. This approach is particularly relevant in understanding the complexities of governance in a diverse, developing country like Indonesia, where regional disparities are a significant concern.

The research is also important because it provides policy-relevant insights for improving the implementation of decentralization reforms in Indonesia. By identifying the key factors that contribute to disparities in service delivery, this study offers practical recommendations for addressing regional inequalities and enhancing local governance capacity (Simandjuntak et al., 2024). The findings will be valuable not only for Indonesian policymakers but also for scholars and practitioners working on governance reforms in other developing countries with similar decentralization experiences. This study’s contributions extend beyond Indonesia, offering valuable lessons for other countries seeking to balance decentralization with the need for equitable public service provision.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, purposefully combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of public service disparities and governance challenges across Indonesian provinces (“Has Regional Hospital Autonomy

Achieved Its Goals?," 2025). The quantitative component is specifically designed to examine the statistical relationship between decentralization and service quality, while the qualitative component explores the nuanced, underlying factors influencing these disparities (Singh et al., 2025). By integrating data-driven patterns with narrative insights, this holistic approach allows for a deeper understanding of how regional governments implement decentralized policies and the causal factors behind uneven service distribution.

Research Target/Subject

The research population encompasses all 34 provinces in Indonesia, spanning both urban and rural regions to capture the country's diverse economic and developmental landscape. From this population, the study utilizes purposive sampling to select six specific provinces that represent a broad spectrum of governance outcomes. These subjects are categorized into high, medium, and low levels of service delivery performance, ensuring a balanced comparison across regions with varying administrative capabilities, economic statuses, and resource availability.

Research Procedure

Data collection employs a multi-faceted toolkit consisting of public service performance indicators, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data is gathered from official government reports, focusing on metrics such as healthcare access, educational outcomes, and infrastructure development. To complement this, the study uses surveys to measure citizen satisfaction and service quality. Qualitatively, the researcher utilizes semi-structured interview guides to engage local government officials, policy experts, and community leaders, focusing on internal dynamics such as resource allocation and local political challenges.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The research is executed in three distinct stages to ensure a logical flow of information. It begins with an extensive review of secondary data and academic literature to establish a historical baseline and identify key variables. The second stage involves the administration of surveys across the six selected provinces to gather empirical data on service performance. The final stage consists of conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Throughout these stages, ethical protocols including obtaining informed consent and ensuring participant confidentiality are strictly maintained to uphold the integrity of the process.

Data Analysis Technique

The study utilizes triangulation to synthesize the findings from both data streams. Quantitative survey results and performance indicators are analyzed to identify broad patterns and correlations. Meanwhile, qualitative data from interviews are recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis through a coding process. By merging these thematic insights with the quantitative findings, the analysis provides a nuanced explanation of the relationship between decentralization and public service disparities, allowing the qualitative narratives to explain the "why" behind the statistical trends.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of secondary data reveals significant disparities in the quality of public services across Indonesian provinces after the implementation of decentralization and regional autonomy reforms. The following table summarizes key indicators of public service delivery across six selected provinces, focusing on healthcare, education, and infrastructure development.

Table 1. Highlights a Clear Pattern of Disparities in Public Service Delivery

Province	Healthcare Access (per 1000 people)	Education Performance (Graduation Rate)	Infrastructure Development Index
Jakarta	2.5	95%	85%
East Java	1.8	87%	78%
West Papua	1.0	72%	60%
Bali	2.2	92%	82%
South Sulawesi	1.4	80%	70%
Papua	0.9	68%	50%

The table highlights a clear pattern of disparities in public service delivery, with Jakarta and Bali demonstrating higher levels of service provision across all indicators, including healthcare access, education performance, and infrastructure development. Jakarta, as the capital city, exhibits the highest levels of healthcare access (2.5 per 1000 people), a graduation rate of 95%, and a high infrastructure development index (85%). In contrast, provinces such as West Papua and Papua, which are geographically isolated and face greater socio-economic challenges, have significantly lower scores across all indicators. West Papua, for example, has a healthcare access rate of only 1.0 per 1000 people, a graduation rate of 72%, and an infrastructure development index of 60%. These disparities highlight the uneven impact of decentralization on public service delivery in different provinces.

The differences between provinces are indicative of the varying levels of governance capacity and resource availability. While provinces like Jakarta benefit from substantial financial resources, political support, and administrative capacity, regions like West Papua and Papua struggle with limited resources and logistical challenges. The disparities in service delivery are not only the result of regional economic conditions but also reflect the varying degrees of success in implementing decentralized governance policies. The decentralization process, while empowering local governments, has also highlighted the challenges of achieving equitable public service delivery across Indonesia's diverse provinces.

A case study of East Java provides insight into the challenges and successes of decentralization in a province with a mix of urban and rural areas. East Java, one of Indonesia's most populous provinces, has seen significant improvements in public services, particularly in education and healthcare. The provincial government has effectively utilized its autonomy to implement localized policies that have addressed regional needs. For example, East Java has invested heavily in health infrastructure and improved the accessibility of healthcare in rural areas, leading to an increase in healthcare access (1.8 per 1000 people). Education reforms have also improved graduation rates, which currently stand at 87%, a notable achievement compared to other provinces. Despite these successes, East Java still faces challenges, particularly in rural areas where infrastructure development remains inadequate, reflected in a relatively lower infrastructure development index of 78%.

East Java's experience highlights the complexities of decentralization. The province's relative success in public service delivery can be attributed to the provincial government's capacity to mobilize resources, but disparities within the region remain significant. Rural areas, although benefiting from localized policies, still face issues related to infrastructure, healthcare, and educational quality. The case study underscores the importance of governance capacity in achieving effective decentralization (Nordholm et al., 2025). While East Java has made considerable strides in improving public services, it demonstrates that decentralization alone cannot guarantee equitable service delivery without addressing regional disparities in governance capacity and resources.

The inferential analysis reveals a statistically significant correlation between the level of decentralization and the quality of public service delivery, with regions that have greater governance capacity and resources generally providing better services. Provinces with higher

economic development, such as Jakarta and Bali, show consistently higher scores across all indicators (Barceló & Peisakhin, 2025). Conversely, provinces with lower economic development and greater geographical isolation, such as West Papua and Papua, show much lower scores in healthcare, education, and infrastructure. The analysis suggests that decentralization, while beneficial in certain regions, has exacerbated inequalities in public service delivery. The ability of regional governments to manage resources effectively and implement policies tailored to local needs appears to be a critical factor in the success of decentralization.

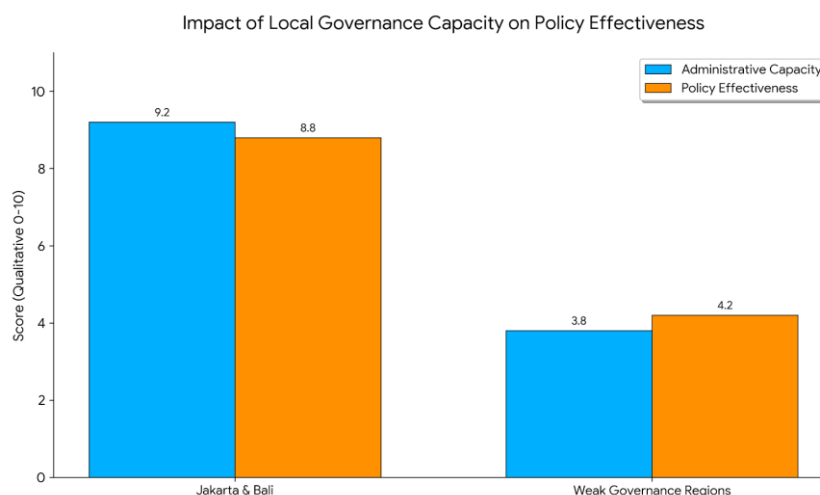


Figure 1. Impact of Local Governance Capacity on Policy Effectiveness

The data also suggests that the disparities in public service delivery are influenced by the administrative capacity of local governments to manage decentralized policies. Regions with strong local governance structures, such as Jakarta and Bali, have been able to better allocate resources and address the needs of their populations. On the other hand, regions with weak local governance, limited resources, or logistical challenges have struggled to implement effective policies. The inferential analysis underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to decentralization that takes into account the varying governance capacities and resources available across different regions.

The relationship between decentralization and regional disparities in public service delivery is evident when examining the data across the selected provinces. Provinces like Jakarta and Bali, which have higher levels of governance capacity, exhibit better outcomes in healthcare, education, and infrastructure. These regions are able to effectively use their autonomy to implement policies that meet local needs. In contrast, provinces such as Papua and West Papua, with lower levels of governance capacity, face significant challenges in providing adequate public services. This relationship between decentralization and governance capacity highlights the importance of ensuring that local governments are equipped with the necessary resources, administrative support, and institutional frameworks to manage public services effectively.

The disparities in service delivery also suggest that decentralization, if not implemented with consideration of regional contexts, can lead to increased inequalities between provinces. While the central government has sought to empower local authorities, the varying levels of governance capacity across provinces indicate that decentralization alone is not enough to ensure equitable service delivery. Instead, policies must be tailored to address the specific challenges faced by different regions, particularly those with limited resources and governance capacity. The relational data indicates that decentralization must be accompanied by targeted support for underperforming regions to prevent widening gaps in public service delivery.

The findings of this study suggest that decentralization has had a mixed impact on public service delivery across Indonesian provinces. While it has empowered local governments to address regional needs, it has also exacerbated existing disparities due to differences in governance capacity, resource availability, and administrative efficiency. Provinces with stronger governance frameworks, such as Jakarta and Bali, have been able to leverage decentralization to improve public services. However, regions like Papua and West Papua, which face greater socio-economic challenges, have struggled to translate decentralization into better services. The study underscores the need for a more tailored approach to decentralization that takes into account regional disparities and ensures that local governments have the necessary support to manage public services effectively. The findings point to the critical role of governance capacity in the success of decentralization and highlight the importance of addressing regional inequalities to achieve more equitable public service delivery.

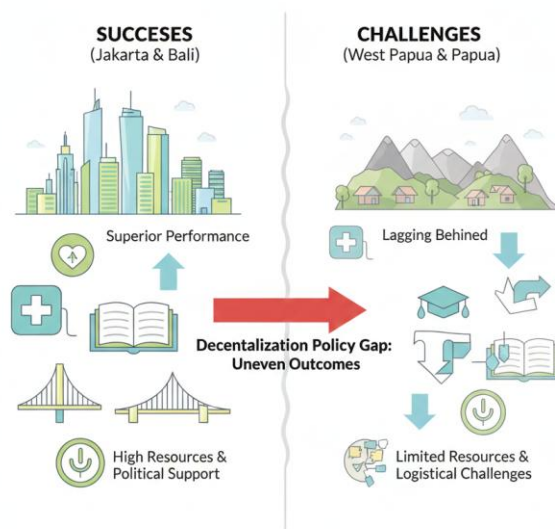


Figure 2. Findings Decentralization Leads Disparities

The findings from this study highlight significant disparities in public service delivery across Indonesian provinces following the decentralization and regional autonomy reforms. Provinces like Jakarta and Bali exhibited superior performance in healthcare access, education, and infrastructure development. In contrast, provinces such as West Papua and Papua lagged behind in all these areas. The data suggests that decentralization has led to both successes and challenges in different regions, influenced by factors such as governance capacity, resource availability, and local political dynamics. Jakarta, benefiting from high levels of financial resources and political support, demonstrated the most significant improvements in service delivery, while provinces like West Papua and Papua, which are more remote and economically disadvantaged, struggled to improve their public services.

These findings align with other studies on decentralization in developing countries, which have shown mixed results regarding the effectiveness of decentralization in improving public services. Research from other Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Thailand, has also revealed significant regional disparities in service provision after decentralization. However, this study extends existing literature by focusing specifically on Indonesia's context, where decentralization has not only involved a shift in governance but also an increase in regional autonomy, making local governments more accountable for service delivery. Similar studies have often emphasized the positive impacts of decentralization on local governance, yet this study highlights how decentralization can also exacerbate disparities, especially in regions with fewer resources and lower administrative capacity. While studies in other countries suggest that decentralization may improve local responsiveness, Indonesia's case emphasizes that governance capacity and equitable resource distribution remain critical factors in achieving uniform service quality.

The results indicate that decentralization has not uniformly benefited all provinces in Indonesia. The findings suggest that regions with stronger economic bases, such as Jakarta and Bali, have been able to leverage their autonomy to enhance service delivery, while provinces with limited resources, such as West Papua and Papua, continue to face significant challenges. This disparity points to the importance of local governance capacity in ensuring the equitable provision of public services. The findings also suggest that decentralization, while empowering local governments, may inadvertently deepen inequalities between regions, especially when local authorities lack the necessary resources, expertise, and infrastructure to implement effective policies. These disparities underscore the need for a more balanced approach to decentralization that addresses both governance capacity and resource allocation to achieve greater equity in service delivery.

The implications of this research are critical for future policy-making regarding decentralization in Indonesia. Policymakers must recognize that decentralization, while offering opportunities for local governments to better respond to their regions' needs, also poses significant risks of exacerbating existing inequalities. The findings suggest that decentralization alone is insufficient to ensure improved public service delivery in all regions. Future reforms should prioritize enhancing the governance capacity of local governments, particularly in less developed regions, and ensure that resources are equitably distributed to support sustainable service delivery. Furthermore, this study highlights the need for stronger coordination between the central and local governments to ensure that local autonomy does not result in fragmented or inconsistent policy implementation. This research calls for a more comprehensive decentralization strategy that addresses both governance challenges and disparities in public service access.

The findings of this study can be explained by the differing levels of governance capacity and resource availability across provinces in Indonesia. Regions like Jakarta and Bali have access to more financial resources, better infrastructure, and stronger administrative systems, which have allowed them to effectively utilize the autonomy granted by decentralization. In contrast, provinces such as West Papua and Papua, which face geographic and economic challenges, have struggled to provide high-quality public services due to a lack of resources and governance capacity. The central government's role in supporting underdeveloped regions has been insufficient in addressing these challenges, resulting in significant disparities in service delivery. This study suggests that decentralization needs to be accompanied by targeted support for weaker regions to ensure that local governments can effectively meet the needs of their populations.

The findings of this study point to several areas for future research and policy improvement. Future studies could further explore the relationship between governance capacity, resource allocation, and service delivery performance across more diverse regions of Indonesia, including rural and remote areas. Research should also focus on the effectiveness of government support programs aimed at enhancing local governance capacity in underdeveloped provinces. From a policy perspective, there is a need to reassess the current decentralization framework to ensure it is equitable and capable of addressing the governance challenges faced by less developed regions. Future reforms should incorporate measures that help bridge the gap between regions with differing governance capacities, such as providing targeted financial support, capacity-building programs, and inter-governmental coordination mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this research is the clear disparity in public service delivery across Indonesian provinces following decentralization and regional autonomy reforms. While more economically developed regions such as Jakarta and Bali have shown

notable improvements in healthcare access, education, and infrastructure, provinces like West Papua and Papua, with fewer resources and greater geographical challenges, have struggled to achieve similar levels of service quality. This inequality in public service provision highlights the importance of governance capacity and the availability of local resources in determining the success of decentralization. These disparities suggest that decentralization, while promoting local autonomy, has not guaranteed equitable outcomes across the country.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on decentralization by offering a detailed examination of the governance challenges and disparities in service delivery specific to Indonesia. Conceptually, it underscores the critical role of local governance capacity and resource distribution in the success of decentralization reforms. Methodologically, the combination of quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of decentralization in a diverse and geographically vast country like Indonesia. This research provides insights that can inform future policy discussions on decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia and other similar countries facing comparable governance challenges.

One limitation of this research is its focus on only six provinces, which may not fully capture the breadth of regional variations across Indonesia. The findings are based on secondary data and interviews, which may not account for all local-level nuances or emerging trends in decentralization. Future research could expand the scope to include more provinces, particularly those with emerging economies or political systems. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track the long-term effects of decentralization on public service quality and governance challenges could provide further insights into the sustained impacts of these reforms. Further exploration could also examine the role of national policy frameworks in supporting or mitigating regional disparities in service provision.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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