

Synergy and Conflict: Examining Central-Regional Relations in Public Policy

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the dynamics of the relationship between the central and regional governments in the formulation and implementation of public policy in Indonesia. Within the context of regional autonomy, the relationship between these two levels of government often exhibits two contrasting sides: synergy and conflict. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, this research analyzes several strategic policies in the fields of education, health, and disaster management that illustrate patterns of interaction between governments. The findings show that the relationship between the central and regional governments in public policy implementation is dynamic, characterized by both synergy and potential conflict. Synergy arises when there is a clear division of authority, effective coordination, and sufficient human and institutional resources at the regional level. On the other hand, conflicts frequently occur due to regulatory inconsistencies, overlapping authorities, political affiliation differences, and high fiscal dependency on the central government. Factors such as public participation, transparency, and effective communication also significantly influence the quality of central-regional relations.

Keywords : Central-Regional Relations, Public Policy, Regional Autonomy, Synergy, Conflict.

Introduction

The relationship between the central and regional governments is a key element in governance within a country that adopts a decentralized system such as Indonesia. Since the enactment of regional autonomy through Law Number 22 of 1999, which was later revised by Law Number 23 of 2014, there has been a significant shift in the distribution of authority between the central and regional governments (Wardhana & Huda, 2022). Decentralization is expected to improve the efficiency of public services, accelerate regional development, and provide more space for local community participation. However, in practice, the relationship between the central and regional governments often displays tension and complex dynamics (Katharina, 2020).

The relationship between the central and regional governments is not only about the distribution of power but also about a clear separation of authority. Autonomous regional governments in Indonesia are regarded as public legal entities separate from the state, with their own assets and administrative structures (Abdullah, 2016). Nonetheless, although separate, regional governments remain part of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Therefore, the authority held by autonomous regions is still limited by that of the central government, and all actions taken by local governments must comply with applicable laws. This reflects the principle of decentralization that

maintains national unity while granting regions the space to manage their own affairs according to local needs—so long as they remain within the boundaries set by the central government (Rochendi & Saleh, 2017).

In the relationship between central and regional governments, four main aspects influence their interaction: authority, institutions, finance, and supervision. The division of authority is a crucial element, as it determines the extent to which regional governments can autonomously manage their affairs without violating the rights or responsibilities of the central government (Said, 2015). This authority must be clearly defined to avoid overlaps that could lead to conflict or confusion in governance. Moreover, the supervision and control exercised by the central government over the regions—despite their differing levels of authority—must operate in harmony (Fatmawati, 2018). The role of the president as head of state and the role of local leaders as regional heads should be seen as part of the broader effort to safeguard the unity and integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), while ensuring that regional autonomy is not misused and remains aligned with national policy (Fadeli, 2024).

The phenomenon of synergy and conflict in the central-regional relationship represents two sides of the decentralization process. On one hand, synergy between the two levels of government can result in effective and contextually relevant policies that meet local needs (Meinarsari & Nursadi, 2022). On the other hand, conflict arises from overlapping authorities, differences in development priorities, and sectoral egos that hinder policy implementation. Such conflicts often lead to poor coordination and reduced effectiveness in public policy implementation (Sipahutar et al., 2023).

Research on the relationship between central and regional governments in public policy has been a major focus in governance studies, particularly since the implementation of decentralization following the 1998 reform era in Indonesia. Most of the literature agrees that decentralization provides greater room for local governments to innovate and respond to local needs more adaptively (Putri et al., 2024; Setiawan & Arti, 2024). However, in practice, the relationship between the central and regional governments is often marked by competing interests, policy disharmony, and overlapping jurisdictions (Nasir & Atmojo, 2022).

Furthermore, contemporary research also shows that the effectiveness of central-regional relations is significantly influenced by factors such as local bureaucratic capacity, the quality of interagency communication, and the presence of clear regulations (Semuel et al., 2022). In the context of public policy in the health and disaster management sectors, for example, poor coordination between central and regional governments can result in a weak response to crisis situations (Saprianto et al., 2023).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the dynamics of the relationship between the central and regional governments in public policy, with a focus on the patterns of synergy and conflict that emerge during the implementation of policies across various sectors. This study aims to explore the factors that influence the emergence of synergy and conflict. The benefit of this research is to provide theoretical contributions to the development of studies on central-regional relations and to offer practical recommendations for policymakers in designing more harmonious and effective policies. The findings of this study are expected to enrich the understanding of decentralized governance and help improve coordination between central and regional governments in the pursuit of sustainable and inclusive development.

Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of providing an in-depth depiction of the dynamics of the relationship between the central and regional governments in public policy, focusing on the synergy and conflicts that arise during policy implementation. Data collection is conducted through in-depth interviews with key informants, such as central and regional government officials, as well as document analysis of regulations, policy reports, and other secondary sources (Sugiyono, 2016). The data collection technique employs purposive sampling, selecting informants who possess knowledge and direct experience related to the policies being analyzed. Data analysis will be conducted thematically by identifying key patterns that emerge from the interviews and documents. The analysis process begins with data collection and reduction, followed by data presentation and conclusion drawing, by comparing findings based on the theoretical framework of central-regional relations and public policy. Triangulation will be used to ensure data validity by

comparing the results of interviews, documents, and field observations (Arikunto, 2013). Data trustworthiness will be maintained through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which will be achieved through expert discussions, thorough documentation, and a well-organized audit trail.

Results and Discussion

Synergy and Conflict in Central-Regional Relations in Public Policy

Synergy and conflict in the relationship between central and regional governments are two inseparable dynamics in the process of public policy implementation. Synergy occurs when there is harmonious collaboration, mutual support, and responsiveness to community needs, enabling policies to be implemented more effectively and accurately. This synergy is usually manifested through the alignment of development visions, inter-agency coordination, and open communication between central and regional governments. In a unitary state like Indonesia, synergy is key to ensuring that the implementation of national policies remains adaptive to local contexts, without ignoring the principles of integration and governmental unity.

In sectors such as infrastructure development and social welfare, central-regional synergy is a crucial foundation to ensure that development projects not only align with national plans but are also relevant to the needs of local communities. The central government can provide strategic direction, regulations, and funding, while regional governments are responsible for technical implementation, supervision, and maintaining public participation. If this relationship functions harmoniously, development will be more equitable, efficient, and sustainable. Conversely, without synergy, development programs are prone to delays, budget inefficiencies, and even public rejection. Therefore, building alignment and cooperation between central and regional governments is a prerequisite for achieving inclusive, impactful, and sustainable policy objectives.

The central and regional governments have significant potential to strengthen each other through mechanisms of resource, information, and experience sharing. Resources such as funding, expert personnel, and technology from the central government can support the implementation capacity at the regional level. In turn, regional governments possess deep contextual knowledge about the social,

economic, and cultural conditions of their local communities, which is essential in formulating relevant and effective policies. Through this collaboration, central and regional governments can create more adaptive, realistic, and targeted solutions to various development challenges.

Sharing information and experience is also key to fostering responsive and innovative governance. Successful best practices in one region can be replicated in others with contextual adjustments and may inspire the central government in formulating more inclusive macro policies. Additionally, the exchange of data and information between the central and regional levels enables more evidence-based policy-making, ensuring that resulting policies are not only normative but also empirical. Thus, synergy through mutual sharing not only strengthens each party's capacity but also reinforces an effectively decentralized system of governance.

A clear example of successful synergy between the central and regional governments can be seen in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this global health crisis, coordination between the two levels of government was crucial in controlling virus transmission and protecting the public. The central government acted as the national policy director, establishing health protocols and providing vaccines and necessary medical equipment. Meanwhile, regional governments became the frontline implementers, such as in distributing vaccines, monitoring protocol enforcement in public spaces, and directly educating the public. This combination of macro policies from the central level and quick responses from the regional level created a more adaptive working mechanism to address the pandemic's dynamics in each area.

Beyond health, central-regional synergy was also evident in efforts to address the economic impacts caused by the pandemic. The central government allocated various forms of social assistance and economic stimulus—such as cash transfers (BLT), the National Economic Recovery (PEN) program, and incentives for micro-business actors. Regional governments then distributed this aid directly to affected communities, adjusting local data to ensure accurate targeting. This collaboration shows that when communication, coordination, and role clarity are consistently maintained, central-regional relations can produce effective, efficient public policies that comprehensively address societal needs, even in emergencies.

On the other hand, conflict arises when there are differences in interests, overlapping authorities, disproportionate budget distribution, or weak oversight and accountability mechanisms. These conflicts can slow policy implementation, create bureaucratic confusion, and even lead to failure of government programs at the regional level. Structural factors such as institutional design, budgeting systems, and low public participation also contribute to tensions in this relationship.

Conflicts between central and regional governments often stem from differing perspectives in establishing or implementing specific public policies. These may be due to differing priorities, political viewpoints, or even the unique socio-economic conditions of each region. For instance, central government policies, which are general and national in scope, may not be relevant when uniformly applied across all regions with unique characteristics. This mismatch can trigger rejection from regional governments that feel such policies do not reflect local needs or ignore their autonomy.

Furthermore, conflicts can be worsened by a lack of communication and coordination between institutions at the central and regional levels. When decisions are made in a top-down manner without active participation from regional governments, policy implementation is at risk of facing administrative obstacles or local rejection. In some cases, this can result in program delays, budget waste, and even political tensions between regional heads and the central government. Therefore, it is essential to establish open and inclusive dialogue mechanisms so that resulting policies truly reflect a spirit of synergy and avoid counterproductive conflicts.

Unclear authority between the central and regional governments is one of the main sources of disputes in Indonesia's governance. In a decentralized system, division of authority should be clearly and explicitly formulated to avoid overlaps or vacuums in the execution of governmental functions. However, in practice, regulations governing the division of affairs are often ambiguous—whether in education, health, business licensing, or environmental management. When authority is not clearly regulated or is open to multiple interpretations, each party tends to either claim or reject responsibility, ultimately slowing policy implementation and reducing bureaucratic efficiency.

The impact of unclear authority is not only administrative but also political and social. Regional governments often feel their scope of action is restricted by central intervention, while the central

government may view regions as underperforming in fulfilling their mandates. This tension can erode public trust in governmental institutions and hinder development. Therefore, there is a need to reformulate or harmonize regulations governing central-regional authority relations to ensure role clarity, strong coordination mechanisms, and fair, proportional oversight systems. In doing so, integrated and synergistic governance can be realized without sacrificing the principles of regional autonomy or national interests.

A concrete example of conflict in central-regional relations can be seen in infrastructure development, especially concerning funding and the execution of national strategic projects. The central government often sets large-scale projects like toll roads, airports, or dams to accelerate connectivity and national economic growth. However, implementation frequently faces resistance or obstacles from regional governments who feel inadequately involved in the planning process or believe the project offers little direct benefit to local communities. Such conflicts can cause project delays, cost overruns, and even social resistance, especially regarding land acquisition or relocation of residents. Communication and coordination imbalances are the main triggers that can undermine potential synergy between central and regional levels.

Moreover, natural resource management is also a frequent source of conflict in central-regional relations. Regions rich in natural resources—such as mining, forests, or marine products—often feel that the central government is too dominant in regulating and profiting from these sectors, while they receive only a small portion of the economic benefits. Tensions also arise in the licensing process, exploitation oversight, and handling of environmental and social impacts. On the other hand, at the local level, conflicts may occur between regional heads and their deputies or between the executive and legislative branches, especially when there are disagreements over authority or budget management. These internal conflicts show that beyond vertical relations, horizontal dynamics in local governance also have the potential to hinder the overall effectiveness of public policy implementation.

Factors Influencing Synergy and Conflict in Central-Regional Relations in Public Policy

1. Clarity of Authority Distribution

Clear delineation of authority between the central and regional governments is a fundamental foundation for establishing synergistic relations in public policy implementation. When the responsibilities and powers are precisely defined through consistent and understandable regulations, each party will have a clear reference for taking action. This allows for collaboration in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development programs to occur harmoniously without overlapping functions. This clarity also provides space for regional governments to innovate according to local conditions and needs while still adhering to the agreed-upon national policy framework. Furthermore, a shared understanding of authority distribution strengthens mutual trust and reduces the potential for administrative or political friction.

Conversely, ambiguity or overlap in authority creates opportunities for conflict between levels of government. This is often evident in the implementation of programs involving budget management, licensing, or strategic decision-making. When a national policy is implemented without accommodating specific regional conditions or without involving local governments from the planning stage, the regions may feel their policies are being ignored. This can lead to rejection of the program, even escalating to litigation or political tensions. Similar conflicts can arise when regional governments make decisions deemed to exceed their authority by the central government. Therefore, regulatory harmonization and firm delineation of authority are key to establishing an effective and low-conflict governance system.

2. Coordination and Communication

Effective coordination between ministries/agencies at the central level and offices or institutions at the regional level is a critical pillar in realizing harmonious and targeted public policies. Through good coordination, information can be conveyed clearly and consistently, allowing planning and implementation of development programs to align with regional needs and characteristics. This coordination also opens space for two-way dialogue and consultation, where regional governments can provide constructive input on central policies, while the central government can ensure the national policy direction is maintained. In emergency situations such as disasters or pandemics, good coordination has proven to expedite decision-making and improve the effectiveness of responses.

In contrast, poor communication between levels of government can result in miscommunication and differing perceptions that hinder policy implementation. For instance, top-down central policies that fail to consider regional conditions are often perceived as irrelevant or burdensome, leading to resistance or even rejection. Such policy misalignment not only delays program implementation but can also erode public trust in government. Therefore, regular, open, and data-driven communication between the central and regional governments is crucial for maintaining a unified development vision and avoiding counterproductive policy conflicts.

3. Capacity of Regional Governments

Regions that have high-quality human resources, strong financial support, and well-established institutions are generally better prepared to build productive synergy with the central government. The availability of competent regional officials enables them to understand, interpret, and effectively implement central policies in local contexts. Adequate budget support facilitates smooth program execution, while efficient institutional structures serve as vital tools for ensuring program continuity and accountability. In such conditions, regional governments are not merely implementers of policy but also strategic partners in formulating and refining national policies.

On the other hand, regions with limited capacity often struggle to keep pace with the complexity of national policies. Lack of preparedness in human resources, insufficient budgets, and weak local institutions lead to suboptimal or failed program implementation. As a result, the central government may need to intervene more heavily, which can upset the balance of relations and increase regional dependence on central intervention. This disparity ultimately creates development gaps between regions and undermines the principle of regional autonomy, which is intended to foster independence and active participation in national development. Therefore, enhancing regional capacity must be a strategic agenda to ensure central-regional relations operate within a fair and mutually reinforcing partnership.

4. Political Interests

Differences in political affiliation between regional leaders and the central government frequently influence the dynamics of cooperation in governance. When regional heads come from

political parties that are different from or even in opposition to the central government, the likelihood of divergent policy perspectives and approaches increases. In such contexts, central policies may be perceived as serving particular political agendas rather than national interests, leading regional leaders to be skeptical or reluctant to support them—especially if they are seen as conflicting with the vision and mission of their supporting party. This can hinder coordination and create potential conflict between levels of government.

Political conflict becomes even more complex when regional decisions openly contradict national policies. For example, during the pandemic, regional leaders who disagreed with the central government's policies on restricting public activity issued local regulations that directly contradicted them. This created confusion among the public and disrupted the alignment of public policy implementation. Moreover, such political conflict not only affects policy effectiveness but can also inflame democratic tensions and weaken national integration. Therefore, although political differences are natural in a democratic system, it is important for both central and regional leaders to prioritize public interest above political agendas and foster communication focused on cooperation and solution-seeking.

5. Public Participation and Transparency

Public support is a key element in strengthening synergy between the central and regional governments in implementing public policy. When the community feels involved and understands the benefits of programs implemented collaboratively by both levels of government, they tend to provide active support—both through direct participation and by granting social legitimacy to the policy. This support not only facilitates implementation but also fosters a sense of ownership of the policy at the grassroots level. In other words, public trust in the synergy between central and regional governments largely depends on the degree of transparency and openness demonstrated throughout each stage of planning and program execution.

Conversely, if the decision-making process is closed and lacks public participation, the potential for social conflict and resistance to policy becomes high. When people are unaware of the background of a policy, feel that their aspirations have been ignored, or believe the program does not

address local needs, dissatisfaction and rejection are likely. This weakens the synergy between central and regional governments because programs that should be implemented jointly become obstructed by social pressure. Therefore, participatory mechanisms, transparency of information, and effective public communication must be prioritized in every cooperation between central and regional governments to create policies that are not only top-down but also responsive to community needs.

6. Fiscal Asymmetry

Regional fiscal dependence on transfers from the central government—such as the General Allocation Fund (DAU) and the Special Allocation Fund (DAK)—is one of the significant dynamics in central-regional relations. On the one hand, these transfers play a vital role in supporting the implementation of governmental functions and public services at the local level, especially for regions with low fiscal capacity. On the other hand, this dependence can create tension when the funds come with binding conditions that require regions to follow central directives strictly. When flexibility in budget usage is limited, opportunities for innovation and adaptation to local-specific needs are constrained.

Furthermore, if the central policies tied to fiscal transfers fail to consider each region's social, economic, and geographical conditions, it can create the perception that regional autonomy is merely administrative. Regions may feel that their independence as autonomous entities is not substantively respected, especially when they are not given room to adapt programs according to local characteristics and community aspirations. This situation can provoke resistance to central policies and further strain the relationship between the two parties. Therefore, the design of fiscal transfers should be based on the principle of fiscal equity and consider the diversity of regional needs so that central-regional relations are not merely hierarchical but also participatory and mutually reinforcing.

7. Regulatory and Legal Framework

The existence of overlapping, ambiguous, or inconsistent regulations between the central and regional governments is one of the main causes of conflict in public policy implementation. When there is a mismatch between central regulations and local bylaws—in terms of substance, scope, or implementation—it creates confusion among implementers and the public. This not only slows down

governmental processes but also sparks tension between government institutions, each of which believes it has a legitimate legal basis. In practice, this often leads to power struggles and mutual blame when policies fail or provoke public protests.

Therefore, regulatory harmonization is essential for building sustainable synergy between the central and regional governments. Harmonization means not only aligning legal norms but also fostering intensive, collaborative, and participatory communication between policymakers at all levels. This process must be systematic and continuous, including in the drafting of new regulations and the evaluation of existing ones. With harmonized and consistent regulations, legal certainty improves, coordination becomes more effective, and the potential for conflict is minimized. Ultimately, this will encourage the creation of public policies that are more responsive, inclusive, and adaptive to both local and national dynamics.

Conclusion

The relationship between the central and regional governments in implementing public policy reflects two interrelated aspects: synergy and conflict. Synergy emerges when there is good coordination, a clear division of authority, effective communication, and adequate institutional and resource support. Under such conditions, public policies can be implemented more effectively and efficiently because both central and regional governments are able to collaborate toward shared goals. A successful example of this synergy can be seen in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where collaboration in vaccine provision, regulation of health protocols, and management of socio-economic impacts was relatively well-coordinated.

However, real-world conditions also reveal various potentials and instances of conflict between the central and regional governments. These conflicts are often triggered by unclear authority, differences in regulatory interpretation, regional fiscal dependency on the central government, and political affiliation differences that affect cooperative relations. Additionally, overlapping or ambiguous regulations increase the potential for friction between government levels. When regional governments feel that central policies do not consider local contexts, resistance may arise, leading to

policy implementation failures. Therefore, strengthening communication, aligning regulations, and empowering regional governments are essential to maintaining the stability of this relationship.

The relationship between the central and regional governments is not linear but rather a dynamic interaction that requires strategic planning, inclusive governance, and a flexible system. In the context of decentralization, it is necessary to strengthen regional capacity and develop a more equitable fiscal system so that regional governments are not merely executors of central policies but can also formulate local solutions independently. Regulatory harmonization and public participation must also be key priorities to ensure that public policies truly reflect the needs of society and uphold the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia through synergistic cooperation at all levels of government.

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