

The Role of Policy Networks in Public Decision-Making in the West Java Provincial Government in the Era of Decentralization

Rizky Ilhami¹
Universitas Padjadjaran

Jovanscha Qisty Adinda FA²
Universitas Padjadjaran

Correspondence : Rizky Ilhami (rizkyilhami@unpad.ac.id)

Abstrack

The era of decentralization has changed the pattern of public decision-making from a hierarchical approach to a more participatory and collaborative pattern. This change has placed policy networks as an important element in the public decision-making process. This study aims to analyze the role of policy networks in public decision-making in the era of decentralization. This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical research type. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies of actors involved in the public decision-making process, then analyzed qualitatively. The results show that policy networks in public decision-making are not yet functioning optimally. The problems found include the dominance of government actors, weak inter-agency coordination, symbolic public participation, unequal access to information and resources, unmanaged differences in interests, low levels of trust between actors, and unequal capacity among local actors. This study concludes that strengthening policy networks through improved coordination, institutionalization of public participation, information transparency, dialogical management of interests, and capacity building of actors are important steps to realize collaborative and responsive public decision-making in the era of decentralization.

Keywords: policy networks, public decision-making, decentralization, governance

Introduction

The era of decentralization in Indonesia has significantly transformed governance and public decision-making by shifting authority from the central government to regional governments. This shift has enabled greater involvement of local actors in public decision-making processes, fostering more responsive governance structures (Aulia, 2025). However, this has also presented challenges, such as the increasing complexity of public issues and the limited capacity of regional governments to address them effectively. Furthermore, the diversity of interests within society complicates the decision-making process, necessitating inclusive participation to ensure that diverse voices are heard (Iqlimah et al., 2024) [3]. Fiscal decentralization plays a crucial role in this context, as it provides regional governments with the financial resources necessary to fulfill their responsibilities, but the allocation of these resources remains a critical challenge (Fajria et al., 2025).

In the contemporary governance context, public decision-making has shifted away from a hierarchical and centralized model, increasingly relying on interactions between diverse actors, including governmental and non-governmental entities. This decentralized approach emphasizes the importance of collaboration and coordination among stakeholders, as no single actor has the authority or resources to make decisions independently (Ilhami, 2023). The policy

network analysis framework is invaluable in this context, as it helps explain the complex relationships and interests of the various actors involved in the policymaking process. This shift underscores the need for effective network governance to facilitate responsiveness and adaptability in public administration (Kozyretska, 2024).

Policy networks represent a crucial framework for understanding the interdependent relationships and interactions between various actors in the public policy process. These networks facilitate public decision-making through mechanisms of coordination, negotiation, and collaboration, moving away from traditional hierarchical structures (Saber & Gomaa, 2020). In the era of decentralization, where authority is increasingly distributed among local actors, the significance of these networks becomes even clearer. Decentralization empowers local entities to actively participate in policy development, thereby enhancing their role in governance. Collaborative governance emerges as a vital aspect of this dynamic, highlighting the importance of collective decision-making across multiple sectors and levels of government (Sukandi, A., 2024). Effective coordination mechanisms within these networks, such as formal agreements and informal norms, are crucial to ensure that actors can collaborate effectively, ultimately contributing to more responsive and innovative public policies.

The implementation of policy networks in public decision-making is often hampered by several challenges, including differing interests among actors, capacity inequalities, poor coordination, and low levels of trust. These factors can significantly undermine the effectiveness of policy networks, which are crucial for addressing complex public problems (Ilhami, 2023). Capacity inequalities, characterized by the unequal distribution of resources and skills among actors, further complicate participation and decision-making within these networks. Furthermore, diverse goals and motivations of actors can lead to conflict, making it crucial to effectively manage these interests to foster collaboration (Ilhami, 2023). Coordination mechanisms, such as regular meetings and information-sharing platforms, are crucial for enhancing collaboration and trust among actors. Finally, implementing trust-building strategies, including transparent communication and mutual respect, is crucial to overcoming barriers to effective collaboration.

Based on this description, this study aims to analyze the role of policy networks in public decision-making in the era of decentralization. This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of policy network studies as well as practical contributions to the implementation of a more participatory, collaborative, and responsive government to public needs.

Literature Review

Policy Network

Policy networks are an approach used to understand the public policy process as a result of the interactions of various interdependent actors. Rhodes (1997) defines a policy network as a relatively stable pattern of relationships between governmental and non-governmental actors involved in policymaking and possessing different interests and resources. Marsh and Rhodes (1992) classify policy networks based on their level of openness, the intensity of interaction, and the distribution of resources between actors. They emphasize that policy networks influence how policy agendas are formed, decisions are made, and policies are implemented. Closed networks tend to result in elitist decisions, while open networks enable more participatory policy processes.

Public Decision Making

Public decision-making is the process of determining policy choices by government actors to resolve public problems. Dunn (2018) explains that public decision-making is not only technocratic but also influenced by political, social, and institutional factors. Public decisions are often the result of compromises between various interacting interests. However, in the development of modern governance, public decision-making is increasingly collaborative. Head (2008) emphasizes that the involvement of non-governmental actors in public decision-making can improve policy quality through the exchange of knowledge, resources, and diverse perspectives.

Decentralization and Public Governance

Decentralization is the delegation of authority from the central government to regional governments to regulate and manage government affairs. Rondinelli, Nellis, and Cheema (1983) stated that decentralization aims to increase efficiency, responsiveness, and public participation in governance. In the Indonesian context, decentralization strengthens the role of regional governments in public decision-making. However, decentralization also increases the complexity of governance. Distributed authority leads to the emergence of various local actors with different interests and capacities. Pierre and Peters (2000) explain that in a decentralized government system, public governance tends to move toward governance, where decision-making is carried out through networks and partnerships.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical approach. The qualitative approach was chosen to deeply understand the role of policy networks in the public decision-making process in the era of decentralization, particularly regarding the interactions, interests, and dynamics between actors involved in the policy process. The study was conducted at the local government level as a representation of public decision-making practices in the context of decentralization. The focus of the research is directed at the role of policy networks in the public decision-making process, which includes patterns of relationships between actors, coordination and collaboration mechanisms, and factors that influence the effectiveness of policy networks.

Results and Discussion

The findings in the field showed that there were still problems that occurred, including :

1. Although decentralization has opened up broader participation, public decision-making on the ground is still dominated by local government actors. Non-governmental actors such as civil society organizations, academics, and interest groups are often only formally involved, resulting in policy networks not functioning equally and collaboratively.
2. Public decision-making involves various institutions and sectors, but coordination between government organizations and between government and non-governmental actors remains suboptimal. Sectoral egos and overlapping authority lead to a fragmented and poorly integrated decision-making process.
3. On the ground, public participation mechanisms are often purely administrative, such as deliberations or consultation forums that do not have significant influence on final decisions. This situation prevents policy networks from effectively channeling public aspirations into the public decision-making process.
4. There is an imbalance in access to information and resources among actors within the policy network. Government actors have greater access to data, budgets, and formal authority, while non-governmental actors have limited ability to influence the decision-making process. This imbalance weakens the bargaining power of non-governmental actors within the policy network.
5. Decentralization gives rise to diverse local interests in the public decision-making process. However, these differing interests are often not managed through effective

dialogue and negotiation mechanisms. As a result, public decision-making is vulnerable to conflicts of interest and short-term political compromises.

6. Trust is a key prerequisite for the success of policy networks. In the field, relationships between actors are often characterized by suspicion and a lack of trust, both between the government and the public and between government institutions themselves. This low level of trust hinders collaboration in public decision-making.
7. Not all local actors have sufficient capacity to engage effectively in public decision-making. Limited policy knowledge, technical skills, and advocacy experience lead to imbalanced and less productive policy networks.

Discussion

1. The dominance of government actors in public decision-making indicates that decision-making patterns remain hierarchical, despite the context of decentralization. The established policy networks do not yet reflect equal relationships between actors, as Rhodes argued, suggesting that policy networks should be based on interdependence. This situation results in non-governmental actors playing only a complementary role and lacking significant influence over public decisions. Regional governments need to shift decision-making patterns from a hierarchical approach to a collaborative approach by substantively involving non-governmental actors from the early stages of policy formulation.
2. Weak coordination between government institutions and between government and non-governmental actors demonstrates the persistence of sectoral egos in regional governance. From a policy network perspective, weak coordination hinders the exchange of resources and information necessary to produce comprehensive public decisions that are responsive to community needs. The institutionalization of cross-sectoral coordination forums involving various actors in the policy network is needed. These forums serve as a space for information exchange, interest alignment, and joint decision-making.
3. The symbolic nature of public participation indicates that participatory mechanisms have not yet become a substantive part of the decision-making process. This situation contradicts the principles of collaborative governance, which emphasize dialogue and meaningful engagement between stakeholders. As a result, public decisions are less reflective of community aspirations and needs. Public participation needs to be directed

beyond mere formality and become an integral part of the decision-making process. Local governments need to ensure that public aspirations have a real impact on the decisions they make.

4. Unequal access to information and resources creates unequal power relations within policy networks. Government actors hold a dominant position due to their control of data and formal authority, while non-government actors have limited ability to influence the decision-making process. This inequality weakens the effectiveness of policy networks as collaborative arenas. Strengthening transparency and open data is a crucial step in reducing unequal access to information between actors. The availability of open data enables non-government actors to participate more effectively in public decision-making.
5. Differing interests are integral to public decision-making in the era of decentralization. However, the absence of effective conflict management and negotiation mechanisms means these differing interests have the potential to lead to conflict and decisions that are short-term compromises rather than long-term solutions. Local governments need to facilitate ongoing dialogue and negotiation mechanisms to manage differing interests between actors. This approach can prevent conflict and encourage the achievement of mutual agreements.
6. Low levels of trust between actors reflect weak social ties within policy networks. Trust is a crucial social capital that determines the success of collaboration. Without trust, actors tend to be defensive and reluctant to share information and resources in the public decision-making process. Trust-building can be achieved through ongoing interactions, transparency in decision-making processes, and facilitative leadership. Strong trust will strengthen collaborative commitment within policy networks.

Capacity differences between local actors lead to an imbalance in roles within policy networks. Actors with higher capacity tend to be more dominant, while those with limited capacity struggle to participate effectively. This situation hinders the formation of inclusive and productive policy networks. Increasing the capacity of local actors through training, mentoring, and institutional strengthening is crucial for creating balanced and inclusive policy networks. Actors with adequate capacity are better able to contribute to public decision-making.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that policy networks play a crucial role in public decision-making in the era of decentralization. Decentralization encourages the involvement of various actors, both governmental and non-governmental, in the decision-making process. However, the research findings indicate that the policy networks formed in the field have not yet been fully effective and collaborative.

Various problems were identified in public decision-making practices, including the dominance of government actors, weak cross-agency coordination, symbolic public participation, unequal access to information and resources, poorly managed conflicting interests, low levels of trust between actors, and unequal capacity among local actors. These problems indicate that public decision-making still tends to be hierarchical and has not fully utilized the potential of policy networks.

Based on these findings, this research emphasizes that strengthening policy networks is an urgent need in public decision-making in the era of decentralization. This strengthening can be achieved through increased cross-sectoral coordination, institutionalizing meaningful public participation, equalizing access to information, managing conflicting interests through dialogue, increasing actor capacity, and building trust between actors. By strengthening policy networks, it is hoped that public decision-making can take place in a more participatory, collaborative and responsive manner to community needs.

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