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Policy Formulation for the Empowerment of Indigenous Communities in Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi Province

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the formulation of empowerment policies for Indigenous Peoples in Tana Toraja by examining how policies are designed, whose interests are represented, and what ideal model is expected by indigenous communities. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with key customary actors representing different positions in the Toraja social structure. The results show that current policy formulation remains dominated by a top-down bureaucratic logic, resulting in participation that is administrative rather than substantive. Indigenous communities articulated four major interests—recognition, meaningful involvement, cultural protection, and regulatory clarity—reflecting the need for alignment between state law and customary law. The findings also reveal that economic empowerment cannot be separated from Toraja cultural continuity, as cultural norms shape social relations and resource management. Based on these findings, this study proposes the Pajala Indigenous Model (PIM), a co-productive policy framework that integrates state and customary authority across all stages of the policy cycle. The model emphasizes cultural alignment, equality in dialogue, and the central role of customary leadership as the basis of policy legitimacy. This study contributes a contextualized framework for indigenous policy formulation and offers practical direction for strengthening empowerment programs in Tana Toraja.

Keywords: *Indigenous Peoples, Policy Formulation, Empowerment Policy, Co-Production, Pajala Indigenous Model.*

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of indigenous peoples has re-emerged as a strategic topic in policy studies, administration, and governance, particularly in Indonesia where pluralistic cultural foundations intersect with modern state structures. Indigenous communities such as the Toraja possess a deeply rooted socio-cultural system, including the tongkonan institution, customary councils, and living customary law, long before the emergence of the modern Indonesian state. Yet, despite their longstanding governance structures, indigenous communities continue to experience vulnerability in policy processes due to the dominance

of bureaucratic and technocratic logic in government decision-making (Izudin et al., 2025). This situation has created a persistent asymmetry between state authority and customary authority, resulting in policy outcomes that are often misaligned with the lived realities of indigenous people.

At the national level, recognition of customary communities is constitutionally guaranteed through Article 18B(2) of the 1945 Constitution. However, the implementation of this mandate remains inconsistent. Kusuma and Hermawan (2025) argue that the recognition mechanism for indigenous communities lacks clear indicators and verification pathways, resulting in uncertain legal status and fragmented policy execution. This inconsistency is reflected in regional governance, including in Tana Toraja, where the existence of a regional regulation on indigenous recognition does not automatically translate into effective empowerment programs. Instead, recognition tends to be administrative rather than substantive, failing to grant indigenous communities meaningful roles in policy formulation.

The gap becomes clearer when examining land governance issues such as tongkonan land tenure. As Hodding et al. (2023) identify, certification of communal land based on national legal frameworks often undermines the collective nature of Toraja customary land. Similarly, the institutional role of Kombongan—Toraja's traditional deliberation forum—continues to weaken in the presence of formal-state judicial instruments (Wiludjeng et al., 2022). These cases demonstrate that indigenous governance systems face structural challenges in interfacing with state-led policy formulation, thereby limiting the effectiveness of empowerment efforts.

Global studies further show that indigenous empowerment cannot be separated from knowledge co-production and equitable participation. Hill et al. (2020) highlight that effective indigenous policies require articulation complexes, where states and indigenous authorities co-create knowledge and policy frameworks through trust, recognition, and equal engagement. Evidence from the Saami communities in the Arctic demonstrates that when indigenous knowledge is integrated into policy cycles, decision-making becomes more adaptive, legitimate, and culturally aligned (Saami Council, 2025). These insights offer important lessons for Tana Toraja, where customary norms and cultural continuity shape all aspects of social and economic life.

From the perspective of public policy theory, Harold D. Lasswell emphasizes that policy processes must integrate value, context, and participation to achieve democratic legitimacy (Eulau & Zlomke, 1999). Policy formulation that excludes cultural values and local stakeholders tends to produce ineffective policies with weak social acceptance. Contemporary literature also shows that indigenous-related policymaking in Indonesia often remains elite-driven and top-down, limiting opportunities for substantive deliberation (Farr et al., 2006). In Tana Toraja, such tendencies can be observed in the formulation of programs related to cultural preservation, economic empowerment, and land governance, where indigenous perspectives are insufficiently integrated into policy content.

However, the Toraja case presents a unique context because customary leaders maintain close relationships with regional elites, including those in executive and legislative

institutions in Tana Toraja. Theoretically, such proximity could facilitate more responsive policies. Yet, empirical observations reveal that these relationships have not successfully translated into participatory policy design. This indicates a missing link between social closeness and institutional mechanisms for co-production—a governance gap that directly impacts the formulation, implementation, and effectiveness of empowerment policies.

Consequently, this study is designed to address three major gaps. First, the need to understand how the current policy formulation process in Tana Toraja operates and whether it fulfills principles of substantive participation and recognition. Second, the importance of identifying the interests prioritized by indigenous communities—ranging from recognition, cultural protection, participation, to regulatory clarity. Third, the urgency to develop a policy model that aligns with both customary values and modern administrative principles. Addressing these gaps contributes not only to local empowerment initiatives in Tana Toraja but also to broader national debates on pluralism, indigenous rights, and democratic governance.

Therefore, this research positions itself at the intersection of public policy, customary governance, and indigenous empowerment. It offers an empirically grounded and theoretically robust examination of how indigenous empowerment policies are formulated, what shapes community aspirations, and how a culturally aligned co-productive policy model can be constructed. Through this approach, the study aims to enrich academic discourse and provide practical recommendations for strengthening indigenous policy formulation grounded in cultural legitimacy and participatory governance.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the formulation of empowerment policies for Indigenous Peoples in Tana Toraja. A qualitative approach was chosen because policy formulation within indigenous contexts requires deep exploration of values, meanings, motivations, and the interactions between customary authority and state bureaucracy. The descriptive orientation enabled the researcher to systematically portray the actual dynamics of policy design, participation processes, and indigenous aspirations without manipulating study variables. This approach aligns with the view that qualitative inquiry is most appropriate for understanding complex governance structures embedded within cultural systems (Creswell, 2018).

The research subjects consisted of indigenous actors occupying different positions in the Toraja customary structure, representing both traditional leadership and community-level perspectives. Rather than involving a large population, qualitative studies emphasize depth over breadth; therefore, the selection of participants focused on their relevance to customary governance and policy processes. Two key informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their status, roles, and knowledge about policy formulation and customary norms. These informants represented distinct social strata within the Toraja indigenous hierarchy, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between customary institutions and government authorities.

Data collection procedures involved three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, and document review. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the key informants to explore insights regarding indigenous aspirations, past policy experiences, preferred models of empowerment, and perceptions of the current bureaucratic processes. The semi-structured format provided flexibility to probe emerging themes while maintaining coherence with the study's objectives. Second, observations were undertaken to gain contextual understanding of customary deliberation practices, social interactions, and cultural norms that influence policy preferences. These observations enriched the analysis by revealing the implicit cultural logic embedded in customary governance. Third, relevant documents such as local regulations, policy drafts, customary manuscripts, and previous empowerment program reports were reviewed to trace the formal and informal trajectories of policy formulation in Tana Toraja.

The data analysis process followed an iterative and thematic approach. The steps began with organizing and transcribing interview data, followed by initial coding to identify recurring patterns across narratives. Codes were then grouped into broader categories related to policy formulation processes, indigenous interests, and ideal policy characteristics. Constant comparison was used to ensure consistency and accuracy in theme development. Observational notes and documentary evidence were integrated with interview findings to strengthen the validity of interpretations. Finally, the synthesized themes were arranged to reflect the three major analytical pillars of the study: the existing formulation process, the core interests of indigenous communities, and the development of the Pajala Indigenous Model (PIM). Through this systematic analysis, the study was able to produce a grounded and culturally aligned conceptual model that captures the relationship between state authority and customary authority across the policy cycle.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH RESULT

The findings of this study reveal three major results that correspond to the research objectives: (1) the nature of the existing policy formulation process in Tana Toraja; (2) the key interests articulated by indigenous communities; and (3) the characteristics of the ideal policy model expected by indigenous actors.

First, analysis shows that the formulation of empowerment policies for Indigenous Peoples in Tana Toraja remains dominated by bureaucratic logic and state-centric decision-making. Although a regional regulation formally recognizes the existence of indigenous communities, participation during policy design is largely administrative rather than deliberative. Input from indigenous actors tends to be solicited for compliance purposes rather than as substantive contributions. As a result, the policy cycle—agenda setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation—operates with minimal integration of customary governance principles. This finding indicates a persistent top-down pattern that does not fully acknowledge customary norms and authority structures .

Second, the study identifies four core interests consistently expressed by indigenous informants: recognition, participation, cultural protection, and regulatory

clarity. Recognition refers to the need for the state to acknowledge customary institutions such as tongkonan, lembang, and Kombongan as legitimate sources of authority. Participation concerns their aspiration for meaningful involvement in policy formulation, not merely being present in ceremonial consultations. Cultural protection emphasizes that empowerment must preserve, rather than erode, the cultural and ritual foundation of Toraja society. Finally, regulatory clarity is desired to prevent contradictions between state law and customary law, particularly in land governance and resource management. These interests demonstrate that indigenous empowerment is inseparable from maintaining the cultural and normative structures that define Toraja identity.

Third, the study reveals that indigenous communities expect an ideal policy model grounded in culturally aligned processes. Informants stressed the need for a balanced relationship between state authority and customary authority. They prefer a policy model that incorporates customary deliberation (musyawarah adat), recognizes leadership structures, and integrates indigenous knowledge into policy design. Based on these insights, the Pajala Indigenous Model (PIM) was constructed as an ideal framework capable of bridging bureaucratic requirements with customary governance values. The model incorporates co-production principles that unite the state and indigenous actors across all stages of the policy cycle.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reinforce the argument that policy formulation for indigenous communities cannot rely solely on bureaucratic structures. The dominance of top-down design in Tana Toraja mirrors national studies showing that recognition and empowerment programs are often implemented without meaningful participation (Kusuma & Hermawan, 2025). Without substantive dialogue, policies may appear administratively complete but lack cultural legitimacy. Lasswell's policy science framework also emphasizes that policies must incorporate values, context, and participation to produce outcomes that are socially acceptable and democratically valid (Eulau & Zlomke, 1999). The current formulation practices in Toraja fall short of these standards, highlighting a need to shift from consultation-as-formality toward deliberation-as-substance.

The four interests identified in this study—recognition, participation, cultural protection, and clarity of regulation—demonstrate that indigenous aspirations are multidimensional. These interests align with global studies on indigenous governance which argue that policy legitimacy depends on respecting indigenous knowledge systems and authority structures (Hill et al., 2020). In the Arctic Saami case, co-production between customary and state authority produces stronger ecological governance and more durable policy outcomes (Saami Council, 2025). Likewise, Toraja communities highlight that economic empowerment cannot be separated from cultural continuity because culture is the normative foundation that governs social relations and resource distribution. This confirms the perspective that indigenous empowerment must be embedded within cultural values rather than imposed externally.

The weaknesses of current policy formulation in Tana Toraja also reflect broader structural challenges in Indonesia, where indigenous law often conflicts with bureaucratic procedures. Studies on tongkonan land governance show that national land certification programs unintentionally erode communal land systems and weaken customary institutions (Hodding et al., 2023). These conflicts indicate that policy formulation must strive for legal pluralism that harmonizes rather than overrides customary law. The uncertainties described by Kusuma and Hermawan (2025) further illustrate that unclear recognition mechanisms exacerbate community distrust toward state-led policy processes.

The Pajala Indigenous Model (PIM) developed in this study provides a constructive response to these challenges. By integrating state and customary authority through co-production principles, PIM aligns with international best practices in indigenous policy design and supports the theory that effective policy formulation requires institutional partnerships based on equality, trust, and cultural alignment. The model strengthens the role of customary deliberation (Kombongan) within the policy cycle, ensuring that decisions are not only technically valid but culturally grounded. In doing so, PIM offers a practical roadmap for local governments to redesign policy processes that are inclusive, context-sensitive, and institutionally coherent.

Overall, the discussion highlights that empowerment policies for indigenous communities cannot succeed through administrative compliance alone. They must be built through dialogical, culturally informed, and participatory mechanisms that respect the authority and knowledge embedded within customary governance. The case of Tana Toraja demonstrates the necessity of shifting from a hierarchical, state-centered policy logic toward a co-productive framework that recognizes indigenous agency as a foundational component of policy legitimacy and effectiveness..

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the formulation of empowerment policies for Indigenous Peoples in Tana Toraja remains constrained by a top-down bureaucratic structure that limits the participation and influence of customary institutions. Although formal recognition of indigenous communities exists through regional regulations, the policy formulation process does not yet reflect substantive engagement with customary authorities. Participation tends to be procedural and administrative rather than dialogical, resulting in policy products that are not fully aligned with Toraja cultural norms. These findings affirm that state-led mechanisms still dominate the agenda-setting, drafting, and decision-making processes, leaving indigenous voices insufficiently integrated into the core of policy design.

The research also concludes that indigenous communities in Tana Toraja articulate four key interests that form the foundation of their expectations: recognition, meaningful participation, cultural protection, and regulatory clarity. These interests underscore that empowerment is not limited to economic interventions but is deeply intertwined with the preservation of cultural structures such as tongkonan, lembang, and Kombongan. For Toraja communities, cultural continuity is a prerequisite to any form of empowerment, as it shapes social relations, authority patterns, and resource management. Therefore, any policy that

neglects cultural foundations risks weakening the social fabric that sustains indigenous identity.

A further conclusion is that the current challenges in policy formulation stem from the absence of a coherent institutional model that integrates customary governance and state bureaucracy. The findings show that social proximity between customary leaders and government elites does not automatically ensure responsive policies. What is lacking is a structured mechanism of co-production that allows indigenous perspectives to influence the policy cycle in a systematic and institutionalized manner. Without such mechanisms, policies remain vulnerable to misalignment, conflict, and low acceptance among indigenous communities.

As a theoretical and practical contribution, this research proposes the Pajala Indigenous Model (PIM) as an integrative framework for indigenous policy formulation. PIM brings together state and customary authority across all stages of the policy cycle—agenda setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. The model emphasizes cultural alignment, equitable dialogue, and recognition of customary law as a source of legitimacy. By embedding customary deliberation processes within policy design, PIM offers a culturally grounded and administratively feasible pathway for strengthening indigenous empowerment in Tana Toraja.

Overall, the conclusions of this study underscore that effective empowerment of indigenous peoples requires more than administrative recognition. It requires a transformation in the way governments design and formulate policies—shifting from hierarchical approaches toward collaborative, culturally rooted, and co-productive governance. The Toraja case illustrates that when policy formulation respects indigenous authority, integrates cultural values, and fosters meaningful participation, it not only enhances policy legitimacy but also contributes to long-term sustainability and social justice for indigenous communities.

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