

Public Participation in the Political Decision-Making Process in North Halmahera: A Village-Level Case Study of MKCM

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Abstract

Public participation is a central element of democratic village governance because it allows citizens to influence priorities, policy choices, and development decisions that directly affect their communities. This study examines the forms and level of public participation in the political decision-making process in MKCM Village, North Halmahera Regency, North Maluku Province, as well as the factors shaping participation and its implications for policy legitimacy and effectiveness. A qualitative case study approach was used. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving village officials, members of the Village Consultative Body, community and religious leaders, women representatives, and residents involved in village deliberations. Data were analyzed interactively through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that participation is relatively active but remains predominantly representative through neighborhood heads, hamlet heads, and community leaders. Participation is visible in hamlet deliberations, village development planning forums, and the submission of community aspirations. Its quality is influenced by access to information, political awareness, communication, trust, and the responsiveness of the village government. Although participatory forums strengthen formal legitimacy and public acceptance of village decisions, substantive participation remains constrained by limited direct involvement, weak follow-up on community proposals, and continued domination by village elites. Strengthening transparency, feedback mechanisms, civic capacity, and inclusive deliberative spaces is therefore essential to improve democratic and responsive village decision-making.

Abstrak

Partisipasi masyarakat merupakan unsur penting dalam tata kelola pemerintahan desa yang demokratis karena memberi ruang bagi warga untuk memengaruhi prioritas, pilihan kebijakan, dan keputusan pembangunan yang berdampak langsung pada kehidupan masyarakat. Penelitian ini menganalisis bentuk dan tingkat partisipasi masyarakat dalam proses pengambilan keputusan politik di Desa MKCM, Kabupaten Halmahera Utara, Provinsi Maluku Utara, faktor-faktor yang

memengaruhi partisipasi, serta implikasinya terhadap legitimasi dan efektivitas kebijakan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi dengan melibatkan aparat desa, anggota Badan Permusyawaratan Desa, tokoh masyarakat dan agama, perwakilan perempuan, serta warga yang mengikuti forum musyawarah desa. Analisis data dilakukan secara interaktif melalui kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa partisipasi masyarakat tergolong cukup aktif, tetapi masih didominasi pola perwakilan melalui ketua RT, ketua RW, kepala dusun, dan tokoh masyarakat. Partisipasi tampak dalam Musyawarah Dusun, Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan Desa, serta penyampaian aspirasi melalui forum desa. Kualitas partisipasi dipengaruhi oleh akses informasi, kesadaran politik, komunikasi, kepercayaan, dan respons pemerintah desa. Meskipun forum partisipatif memperkuat legitimasi formal dan penerimaan masyarakat terhadap keputusan desa, partisipasi substantif masih dibatasi oleh rendahnya keterlibatan langsung, lemahnya tindak lanjut terhadap usulan warga, dan dominasi elite desa. Karena itu, transparansi, mekanisme umpan balik, kapasitas warga, dan ruang deliberasi yang inklusif perlu diperkuat agar pengambilan keputusan desa menjadi lebih demokratis dan responsif.

Introduction

Public participation is a central component of democratic governance because citizens are not merely recipients of public policy but also actors with a legitimate role in shaping decisions that affect collective life. Meaningful participation can improve transparency, accountability, policy responsiveness, and the perceived fairness of government action. Indonesian research on public policy likewise emphasizes that participation becomes stronger when citizens have access to information, opportunities to express preferences, and confidence that their input can influence outcomes (Manganti, 2023; Nelly, 2024). In this sense, participation is not limited to attendance at formal meetings. It also concerns the quality of interaction between citizens and public institutions and the extent to which community aspirations are considered in final decisions.

At the village level, participation has particular importance because village government is the public institution closest to everyday community needs. Village authorities make decisions concerning development priorities, basic services, local infrastructure, community empowerment, and the allocation of village resources. When residents participate in these processes, local knowledge can enter planning and decisions are more likely to correspond with actual community priorities. Previous research on village development planning shows that participation can be weakened when planning remains dominated by top-down procedures or when only a limited number of community proposals are accommodated (Rompas et al., 2023). Similar studies also demonstrate that community involvement in local political decision-making is closely related to whether citizens are given real opportunities to express preferences rather than merely being present in formal forums (Siregar et al., 2024).

Indonesia's village governance framework provides formal space for public participation. Law Number 3 of 2024, which constitutes the second amendment to Law Number 6 of 2014 on Villages, reinforces the position of villages as self-governing communities and maintains the democratic and participatory orientation of village administration and development (Republic of Indonesia, 2024). In practice, participatory democracy is operationalized through forums such as village deliberations, hamlet deliberations, and Village Development Planning Forums (Musrenbang Desa). These forums are intended to provide channels through which residents can obtain information, submit proposals, discuss development priorities, and contribute to decisions. Their democratic value, however, depends on whether participation is inclusive, informed, and followed by a clear governmental response.

Despite the availability of formal participatory mechanisms, community involvement in village political decision-making can remain limited or procedural. Low political awareness, unequal access to information, weak communication, time and economic constraints, and the dominance of local elites may discourage direct participation. When residents repeatedly see that proposals are not followed up, participation can decline because deliberation is perceived as having little practical effect. Research on village planning has found that top-down decision structures and the low realization of community aspirations can produce apathy and reduce willingness to participate (Rompas et al., 2023). More broadly, the quality of public participation depends not only on the existence of forums but also on transparency, reciprocity, and the capacity of public institutions to respond to citizen input (Manganti, 2023; Nelly, 2024).

These dynamics are visible in MKCM Village, North Halmahera Regency, North Maluku Province. Based on the field data in this study, residents participate in village deliberations, especially Hamlet Deliberations and Village Development Planning Forums, but involvement is still largely mediated through representatives such as RT heads, RW heads, hamlet heads, and community leaders. Some residents remain passive in expressing opinions directly and tend to accept decisions formulated by village authorities or influential local actors. Limited dissemination of information on village programs also affects the breadth of direct participation. At the same time, the village government has created channels for residents to submit development needs and priorities. The central issue is therefore not the absence of participation, but the extent to which participatory mechanisms move beyond representation and procedural consultation toward substantive influence over village decisions.

Public participation is also closely related to policy legitimacy and effectiveness. Decisions produced through inclusive deliberation tend to be more readily accepted because citizens can see how priorities were discussed and why specific choices were made. Participation can also strengthen a sense of ownership and encourage community support during implementation. Studies of public policy participation indicate that access to information, responsiveness, and meaningful engagement can strengthen the relationship between government decisions and citizen acceptance (Manganti, 2023; Nelly, 2024). Conversely, if residents are invited to participate but their concerns are not acknowledged, formal participation may coexist with declining trust. Evaluating participation therefore requires attention to both the existence of deliberative forums and the influence those forums have on final political decisions.

Against this background, this study analyzes public participation in the political decision-making process in MKCM Village. It focuses on three questions: how community participation is

expressed in village deliberative forums; which factors encourage or constrain participation; and how participation affects the legitimacy and effectiveness of village political decisions. By examining these dimensions together, the study seeks to provide an empirical picture of participatory democracy at the village level and identify practical improvements that can strengthen communication, responsiveness, and community influence in local governance.

Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore experiences, perceptions, interactions, and institutional practices related to political participation in MKCM Village, North Halmahera Regency, North Maluku Province. A case study design was appropriate because the research examined participation within its actual social and governmental context rather than separating it from the institutional relationships in which it occurs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with the village head, village officials, members of the Village Consultative Body (BPD), community leaders, religious leaders, women representatives, and residents who had participated in village deliberations. Secondary data were drawn from village government documents, Musrenbang Desa reports, village archives, and relevant literature. Data collection combined in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, while informants were selected purposively according to their knowledge and experience of the research focus. Data were analyzed interactively through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, following the qualitative analytical logic described by Miles et al. (2014). The use of multiple sources enabled the study to compare formal participation mechanisms with the experiences and perceptions of actors involved in village decision-making.

Results and Discussion

Forms and Levels of Public Participation in the Political Decision-Making Process

Community Participation in Village Deliberations

Interviews with the MKCM Village Head indicate that residents have a clear interest in participating in village development, but involvement is primarily organized through a representative system. Village meetings typically invite approximately 30 participants, including 14 RT heads, four RW heads, two hamlet heads, village officials, and several community leaders who are expected to represent the aspirations of residents in their respective areas. Actual attendance does not always reach the number invited, although deliberations generally proceed because each area remains represented. This arrangement demonstrates that participation exists institutionally, yet the level of direct citizen involvement remains limited. Representation can make deliberation more manageable, but it also creates a risk that diverse community preferences are filtered through a relatively small number of intermediaries. The finding is consistent with research showing that village participation can remain weak when citizens have limited direct access to planning forums or when representative structures become the main channel for political input (Rompas et al., 2023).

Mechanisms for Conveying Community Aspirations

The mechanism for conveying community aspirations in MKCM Village proceeds through several stages. Before the Hamlet Deliberation, the village government prepares an initial list of

proposals covering needs such as infrastructure development, public facilities, and community-empowerment programs. The proposals are conveyed through hamlet, RW, and RT leaders, after which residents are given opportunities to express preferences and add suggestions concerning local priorities. These aspirations are then brought into village deliberative forums by community representatives. The mechanism allows residents to remain involved even when they do not attend meetings directly. However, because the initial proposal framework is generally prepared by the village government, the agenda-setting process still contains a strong top-down element. Participation therefore operates mainly through consultation and representation rather than through full community control over the formulation of alternatives. This pattern highlights the importance of opening earlier stages of agenda formulation to citizen input so that participation begins before priorities have already been framed by the village administration.

Participation in Hamlet Deliberations and Village Development Planning Forums

Community participation in political decision-making is most visible in Hamlet Deliberations (Musdus) and Village Development Planning Forums (Musrenbang Desa). In these forums, proposals collected from residents are discussed jointly by the village government and community representatives. RT and RW heads communicate the results of local discussions and explain priority needs from their respective areas. The meeting then considers urgency, potential benefits, and the availability of village resources before establishing development priorities. This process gives village decisions a degree of social legitimacy because proposals are discussed in a collective forum rather than determined entirely through administrative channels. Nevertheless, participation remains predominantly indirect. The quality of the process therefore depends heavily on communication between residents and their representatives and on the representatives' ability to convey community preferences accurately. Comparative research on local decision-making likewise shows that formal opportunities to participate are most meaningful when community input is actually considered in the final prioritization of programs (Siregar et al., 2024).

Factors Influencing Public Participation in Political Decision-Making

Role of the Village Government in Shaping Participation

The village government plays a dominant role in determining the direction and form of participation. Draft proposals and decision alternatives are often prepared by the village administration before they are distributed through hamlet, RW, and RT leaders for public input. Residents are then invited to comment on, support, or modify proposals in deliberative forums. Several informants reported that community aspirations are not always followed up clearly, which causes some representatives to question whether their involvement has substantive influence. This situation places participation closer to consultation than shared decision-making. The continued dominance of government in agenda setting also creates an imbalance between the formal opportunity to speak and the actual ability to shape outcomes. Similar findings have been reported in village development planning, where top-down procedures and the limited realization of citizen proposals can weaken motivation to remain involved (Rompas et al., 2023).

Access to and Availability of Information

Access to information is another important factor affecting participation. Hamlet, RT, and RW leaders function as intermediaries who distribute information on deliberation schedules, proposed programs, and community priorities. The effectiveness of this information flow, however, is influenced by past interaction with the village government. Some representatives reported becoming less active in encouraging community attendance when earlier proposals received little or no visible follow-up. This illustrates that information access is not merely a technical matter of delivering invitations. It also depends on whether communication is reciprocal and whether citizens receive feedback on what happened to their proposals. Public participation literature similarly emphasizes that transparency and accessible information are important conditions for sustained citizen involvement in public policy (Manganti, 2023; Nelly, 2024).

Community Awareness, Trust, and Concern

Field observations show that attendance and interest tend to increase when deliberations address issues that residents consider directly relevant to their daily needs. Participation, however, is not always consistent. Dissatisfaction with proposals that are repeatedly not accommodated can reduce willingness to attend future meetings. This suggests that participation is shaped by both issue relevance and accumulated experience with the decision-making process. Trust becomes important because citizens are more likely to invest time in deliberation when they believe their involvement can produce a meaningful response. Conversely, weak follow-up can transform initial enthusiasm into apathy. The finding indicates that strengthening public participation requires village authorities to communicate decisions clearly, explain why certain proposals cannot be implemented, and demonstrate how citizen input is incorporated into planning.

Available Participation Mechanisms

The village government has established several participation channels, including village deliberations, Hamlet Deliberations, Village Development Planning Forums, and the transmission of aspirations through RT, RW, and hamlet leaders. Formally, these mechanisms create multiple entry points for community input. The research, however, indicates that they do not always operate as substantive channels of influence because many aspirations do not become a primary basis for final decisions and feedback is often limited. As a result, some representatives perceive their participation as having little practical effect. This condition can reduce future participation even when formal forums remain available. The distinction between procedural and substantive participation is therefore important. Democratic quality depends not only on inviting people to meetings but also on ensuring that participation can influence priorities and that government provides transparent explanations about the treatment of community proposals (Nelly, 2024).

Village Government Dominance in Decision-Making

Observation of village deliberations indicates that the village government continues to exercise substantial control over discussion direction and final decisions. Although community representatives attend and are given opportunities to speak, the agenda, available alternatives, and final prioritization remain strongly influenced by village officials. Some RT and RW leaders

consequently become less active when they perceive that their contributions rarely affect outcomes. This does not mean that participation is absent, but it shows that the relationship between government and community actors is not yet fully collaborative. A stronger participatory model would require greater openness in agenda setting, clearer criteria for selecting proposals, and documented feedback explaining why particular community priorities are accepted, postponed, or rejected. Such measures would help shift participation from formal consultation toward more substantive shared problem solving.

Implications of Public Participation for the Legitimacy and Effectiveness of Political Decisions

Participation and Policy Legitimacy

Participation through representative deliberation provides formal legitimacy to village political decisions because community elements are present in the decision-making process. In MKCM Village, however, formal legitimacy does not always translate into strong social legitimacy. Several community aspirations receive no clear response, creating dissatisfaction and weakening confidence in whether deliberation can influence outcomes. When representatives repeatedly experience limited follow-up, their motivation to participate can decline. This finding supports the broader argument that participation strengthens legitimacy only when citizens perceive the process as meaningful and responsive rather than merely procedural (Manganti, 2023; Nelly, 2024). The village government therefore needs not only to invite community actors into forums but also to provide visible feedback and demonstrate how public input contributes to decisions.

Participation and Policy Effectiveness

Public participation also influences the effectiveness of village political decisions. When community involvement is limited, policies may not fully reflect local priorities because the knowledge and preferences of residents are only partially represented. Weak responsiveness to community aspirations can also reduce a sense of ownership and decrease public support during implementation. Conversely, decisions that respond to clearly articulated needs are more likely to receive cooperation from the community. Evidence from other village-level studies indicates that active participation can strengthen the connection between local needs and development decisions, while top-down arrangements can limit the value of participatory planning (Rompas et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2024). For MKCM Village, policy effectiveness therefore depends on improving both the breadth of participation and the responsiveness of the village government to the input generated through deliberative forums.

Conclusion

This study concludes that public participation in the political decision-making process in MKCM Village is institutionally present but remains predominantly indirect and representative. Community aspirations are generally conveyed through RT heads, RW heads, hamlet heads, and community leaders in Hamlet Deliberations and Village Development Planning Forums. Although these mechanisms provide formal opportunities for participation, direct involvement by a broader range of residents remains limited and the initial formulation of proposals is still strongly influenced by the village government. Participation is shaped by access to information, communication quality,

political awareness, trust, the responsiveness of village authorities, and the perceived value of previous involvement. The study also finds that participation contributes to the formal legitimacy of village decisions because decisions are discussed through deliberative forums. However, social legitimacy and policy effectiveness are weakened when community proposals receive little follow-up or when local elites and village officials continue to dominate agenda setting and final prioritization. Public participation in MKCM Village should therefore be strengthened through greater transparency, earlier community involvement in agenda formulation, accessible information, clear feedback on proposals, and more inclusive deliberative spaces. These measures can help move village participation from a primarily procedural form toward substantive participation in which community input has a clearer influence on political decisions and development priorities.

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