

Strengthening Educational Access for Vulnerable Children: A Policy Analysis of Local Government Initiatives in West Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract: *This research analyzes the role of local governments in Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB) in increasing access to education for children from vulnerable families. Drawing on policy reviews, interviews with local officials, and field observations in selected districts, the study finds that while programs such as BOSDA, PIP, and community-based scholarships have improved enrollment rates, structural barriers persist, such as child labor, lack of school transportation, and weak inter-sectoral coordination. The paper recommends targeted interventions through village-based budgeting, data-driven social protection, and strengthening public-private partnerships to ensure inclusive and sustainable access to education.*

Keywords: Education Access; Local Government; Vulnerable Children; Social Policy; NTB.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menganalisis peran pemerintah daerah di Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB) dalam meningkatkan akses pendidikan bagi anak-anak dari keluarga rentan. Berdasarkan tinjauan kebijakan, wawancara dengan pejabat lokal, dan observasi lapangan di beberapa kabupaten, studi ini menemukan bahwa program seperti BOSDA, PIP, dan beasiswa berbasis komunitas memang meningkatkan angka partisipasi sekolah. Namun, hambatan struktural tetap ada, seperti pekerja anak, ketiadaan transportasi sekolah, dan lemahnya koordinasi lintas sektor. Artikel ini merekomendasikan intervensi yang lebih terarah melalui penganggaran berbasis desa, perlindungan sosial berbasis data, dan penguatan kemitraan publik-swasta untuk memastikan akses pendidikan yang inklusif dan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: Akses Pendidikan; Pemerintah Daerah; Anak Rentan; Kebijakan Sosial; NTB.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a powerful driver for sustainable development. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) explicitly calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030 [1]. However, disparities in access and learning outcomes persist globally, especially in developing countries where poverty, geographic isolation, and entrenched social norms hinder educational equity [2].

In Indonesia, the decentralization of the education system has granted local governments greater authority to manage resources, design supplementary programs, and collaborate with community-based organizations [3]. Yet, this shift has also produced uneven results across provinces. Studies show that poverty and infrastructure gaps remain



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key barriers to access, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, which continues to experience higher dropout rates compared to Java-based regions [4].

Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB), a province in Eastern Indonesia, illustrates these challenges vividly. Characterized by high poverty levels, remote rural settlements, and strong cultural norms such as early marriage, NTB faces persistent educational exclusion [5]. Despite the implementation of flagship national programs like BOS and PIP, local disparities remain stark. Recent evaluations highlight that while some districts demonstrate innovation through village-based education initiatives, others remain heavily dependent on central government funding with limited local adaptation [6]. Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need to analyze the extent to which local governments in NTB have been able to interpret, adapt, and operationalize education policies to expand access for vulnerable groups. Such an analysis can offer insights into both the opportunities created by decentralization and the structural barriers that continue to undermine equity.

Research Question: This paper addresses the following question: “How do local governments in Nusa Tenggara Barat expand access to education for vulnerable children, and to what extent are local policies able to overcome structural barriers?” In answering this question, this paper delves into the policies, programs, and practices implemented by district and provincial governments in NTB. The study employs a qualitative approach by reviewing local regulations, interviewing key stakeholders, and conducting field visits in selected areas. Focus is given to rural and peri-urban districts such as Lombok Tengah, Dompu, and Sumbawa Barat, where educational vulnerability is prominent. The paper also explores how local governments collaborate with national agencies, NGOs, and the private sector to widen access. Moreover, it assesses the degree to which these programs align with broader national development goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4: Quality Education.

Previous research has often centered on national education policy or focused on urban Java-based areas, leaving gaps in understanding eastern provinces like NTB. This study seeks to fill that gap by highlighting local agency and innovation in marginalized regions. Education is not merely about building schools or providing textbooks, it requires addressing the interlinked dimensions of poverty, child protection, and community empowerment. Therefore, the research integrates a multi-sectoral lens, acknowledging that solutions for educational inclusion often lie beyond the education sector alone. It draws attention to the voices of school principals, village heads, parents, and the children themselves often missing in top-down policy narratives [7].

The approach taken in this paper is both analytical and solution-oriented, aimed at producing policy-relevant insights for practitioners and decision-makers. At the core of this inquiry is the belief that local governments, when properly resourced and engaged, can serve as effective engines of educational transformation. The paper contributes to a growing body of literature that recognizes the role of subnational governance in achieving educational equity. It also advocates for adaptive and context-based policymaking in regions that have long been on the margins of development discourse [8]. Ultimately, this



paper underscores the importance of localized educational interventions as a strategy for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty in NTB.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Access to education is globally recognized as both a right and a critical lever for achieving long-term social and economic development. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. In developing nations such as Indonesia, meeting this target requires structural reforms, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. Numerous studies indicate that poverty is a major barrier to educational access, especially for children from vulnerable families [7]. Children living in poverty are more likely to drop out of school, miss classes, or never enroll at all.

Global evidence shows that financial constraints strongly influence educational participation. Banerjee and Duflo [8] argue that household poverty interacts with social norms to discourage school attendance. In Indonesia, however, education governance is decentralized, allowing local governments to manage school affairs while the central government continues to provide essential funding and policy guidance [1]. While decentralization creates opportunities for context-specific solutions, it also produces disparities in service delivery across districts [9].

Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB) has consistently been categorized as one of the provinces with relatively high dropout rates and low education outcomes [10]. Local initiatives such as BOSDA (Regional School Operational Aid) complement national programs like PIP (Indonesia Smart Program), yet their coverage and efficiency remain inconsistent [2]. This illustrates how global findings on the importance of financial resources resonate in the Indonesian context, though implementation challenges persist at the local level.

Conditional cash transfers and scholarship schemes have been shown to increase short-term enrollment but not necessarily lead to sustained learning outcomes [11]. Non-financial barriers—including transportation availability, school infrastructure quality, and sanitation facilities—also significantly affect access [3]. In NTB, geographic isolation and poor infrastructure intensify these obstacles, with many students commuting several kilometers daily without safe transportation [12].

Beyond economic and infrastructural factors, cultural and gender norms play a decisive role in shaping education access. Early marriage for girls remains prevalent, reducing their chances of completing school [5]. Boys, on the other hand, often leave education early to support household livelihoods, especially in agriculture and fisheries [4]. Thus, while global literature emphasizes financial factors, the NTB case reveals that cultural and social dimensions may exert an even stronger influence on educational outcomes.

Theoretical frameworks such as Amartya Sen's Capability Approach highlight how freedom to achieve educational outcomes is often restricted by contextual limitations [13]. Local governance plays a vital role in either amplifying or mitigating these structural



constraints. Proactive local governments that prioritize education in regional budgets and policy agendas tend to have better school outcomes. However, local capacity varies widely, and districts with limited technical expertise or weak data systems often struggle to design effective interventions [1]. Another challenge is intersectoral coordination; social welfare offices, education departments, and civil registration services rarely share data or collaborate strategically [14]. Literature also highlights the potential of community-based interventions. NGOs and grassroots organizations have played critical roles in mobilizing support for marginalized children [15]. For example, the Rumah Baca movement in Sumbawa and Lombok has been instrumental in providing informal learning spaces and literacy support for out-of-school children.

Additionally, innovations like mobile classrooms and digital learning initiatives have emerged as alternative models, particularly in disaster-prone or geographically isolated regions [16]. These models, however, require sustained funding, training, and institutional support to be scalable. International experience also suggests that strong local leadership and data-driven decision-making significantly improve education outcomes [17]. Despite the abundance of national and global education programs, the literature converges on the need for localized, adaptive, and equity-driven education policy frameworks. Therefore, assessing the local government's role in improving access for vulnerable children in NTB not only contributes to academic discourse but also informs practical policy development for other regions facing similar challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the role of local governments in expanding educational access for children from vulnerable families in Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB), Indonesia. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for policy research involving context-specific issues and multi-stakeholder dynamics. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of policies, practices, perceptions, and barriers that may not be captured through quantitative data alone [9]. The research design combines document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observations in three selected districts: Lombok Tengah, Dompu, and Sumbawa Barat.

The districts were chosen purposively to reflect distinct local contexts. Dompu represents one of the highest poverty areas in NTB, where geographic isolation and limited infrastructure significantly constrain access to education. Lombok Tengah illustrates challenges typical of semi-urban districts, where pressures from population density and urban-rural disparities intersect with cultural norms affecting school participation. Meanwhile, Sumbawa Barat was selected as a district with emerging local innovations in education governance, providing useful contrasts in terms of policy experimentation and program implementation. Together, these districts capture a spectrum of conditions across NTB, illustrating how structural, cultural, and institutional factors interact to shape educational access.



The data collection phase occurred between June – July 2025. Document analysis included the review of regional development plans (RPJMD), education budget allocations, regulations, and technical guidelines related to local education programs [9]. Policy documents from both provincial and district governments were collected and coded to identify commitments, goals, and implementation mechanisms related to inclusive education. National-level regulations and frameworks such as Permendikbud, UU Nomor 23 Tahun 2014 on Local Governance, and the SDG 4 Roadmap Indonesia were also consulted for comparison.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 28 key informants, representing local government officials, school principals, teachers, social workers, NGO representatives, village leaders, and parents. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, beginning with government education offices and expanding through community referrals. Interviews were designed to explore stakeholder perceptions on the barriers to education, local initiatives, and coordination between actors. Ethical clearance was obtained from a university research ethics committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and Sasak or Bima dialects when necessary, then transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

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To supplement interviews, direct observations were carried out in five schools, three village education centers, and two mobile learning programs across the study districts. Field notes focused on infrastructure conditions, learning environments, child participation, and community involvement in education delivery [10]. The triangulation of interviews, documents, and observations enabled cross-validation of findings and enhanced the



credibility of the data. Thematic coding was applied using NVivo software to organize data into major categories: local policy design, program implementation, barriers, innovations, and collaboration mechanisms. Sub-codes included gender disparities, transportation access, education funding, dropout cases, and inter-agency coordination.

The analysis aimed to identify both enabling and limiting factors in the local policy environment that affect education access for vulnerable groups. A comparative case study logic was employed to highlight similarities and contrasts between the three districts. Lombok Tengah represented a peri-urban district with medium infrastructure, Dompu exemplified a more remote and resource-limited district, while Sumbawa Barat illustrated proactive local education governance. This diversity allowed the study to account for geographical and cultural variables affecting educational inclusion. In analyzing education financing, regional budget (APBD) data were assessed to measure the share allocated to education programs specifically targeting vulnerable populations.

The role of community-based budgeting Musrenbangdes and village funds (Dana Desa) in supporting local education initiatives was also examined. A policy coherence framework was used to assess alignment between local policies and national education priorities, especially regarding SDG 4 indicators [2]. Limitations of the methodology include possible bias in self-reported data, restricted access to internal government reports, and time constraints for longitudinal observation. Nonetheless, the methodological triangulation and multi-perspective approach enhance the trustworthiness, transferability, and contextual relevance of the findings. Overall, this methodology is designed to generate rich, grounded insights into how local governments in NTB interpret, implement, and innovate around educational access for vulnerable children [5].

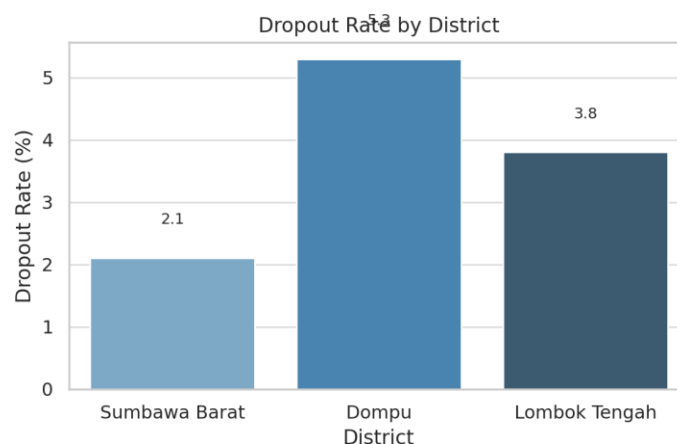
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Capability Approach Theory

Field research revealed that access to education for vulnerable children in NTB has improved incrementally in recent years due to localized initiatives. However, progress remains uneven and constrained by systemic and contextual challenges. A key finding is the differentiated performance among districts in policy responsiveness. Sumbawa Barat district demonstrated a more proactive stance through its Gerakan Pendidikan Inklusif Berbasis Desa (Inclusive Education Movement at the Village Level). This program integrates village funds to support school uniforms, transportation, and dropout prevention activities, thus expanding the range of real opportunities available for children. From the perspective of the Capability Approach, such initiatives enhance children's substantive freedoms to attend and remain in school, not only by providing resources but also by addressing conversion factors (e.g., transport and social support).



Figure 1. Dropout Rate by District



Source: 2025 data processing result.

In contrast, Dompu relies heavily on central government funding with minimal innovation at the district level. Interviews with local education officials revealed limited capacity for program design and evaluation. One official admitted that most education planning is “template-based” and lacks evidence-based targeting. Nevertheless, Dompu has experimented with mobile learning units (Mobi Pintar) for remote communities, providing an alternative pathway for out-of-school children. While this initiative reflects adaptive use of technology, its sustainability depends on ongoing resource allocation and community ownership. Using the Capability Approach, Mobi Pintar can be seen as expanding functionings (the ability to access learning), though its reach is constrained by institutional weaknesses.

In Lombok Tengah, the integration of formal and religious education through partnerships with Islamic boarding schools reflects sensitivity to local cultural norms. This hybrid model demonstrates that cultural legitimacy is crucial for sustaining community trust and participation. However, the success of such initiatives is highly contingent on leadership charisma and NGO support, raising concerns about long-term institutionalization. From a capability perspective, cultural legitimacy operates as a key conversion factor that can either enable or restrict the realization of children’s educational potential.

Across all three districts, persistent challenges include child labor and early marriage. Girls are disproportionately affected, often withdrawn from school due to family pressures or being directed into agricultural and fishing labor markets. These findings align with UNICEF, which emphasizes how social and gender norms act as structural barriers to education. By situating these barriers within the Capability Approach, it becomes evident that even when financial and infrastructural resources are provided, unequal gender norms



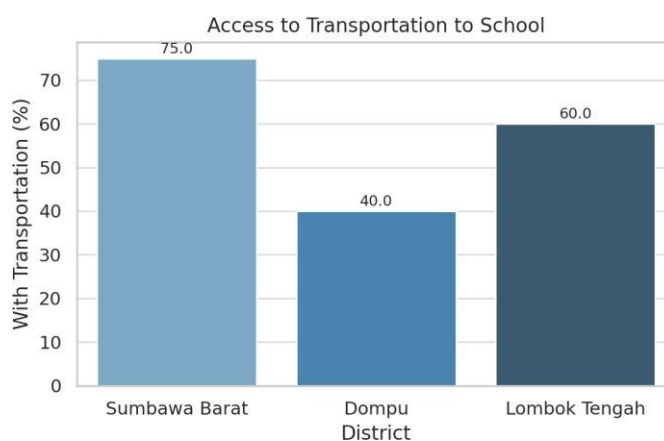
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significantly constrain the capabilities of girls to achieve valued functionings such as completing secondary school.

Most districts also lack integrated child protection databases, which hinders the identification of at-risk students and the targeting of interventions. Another critical finding is the underutilization of Dana Desa (Village Funds) for education. Although legally flexible, village authorities often prioritize infrastructure projects over social investments. This demonstrates how institutional priorities and governance practices mediate the translation of financial resources into expanded educational capabilities. As one village leader in Dompu stated, “we build roads, not education,” highlighting the tension between physical infrastructure and human capital development.

Overall, the findings suggest that while localized initiatives in NTB have created important entry points for expanding education access, systemic issues—such as weak institutional capacity, entrenched cultural norms, and competing development priorities—continue to constrain progress. Strengthening educational access, therefore, requires not only financial inputs but also governance reforms and cultural change, ensuring that resources are effectively converted into genuine opportunities for children to learn and thrive. Exemplary villages in Sumbawa Barat allocate over 10% of village funds to education, showing what is possible with leadership.

Figure 2. Access to Transportation to School



Source: 2025 data processing result.

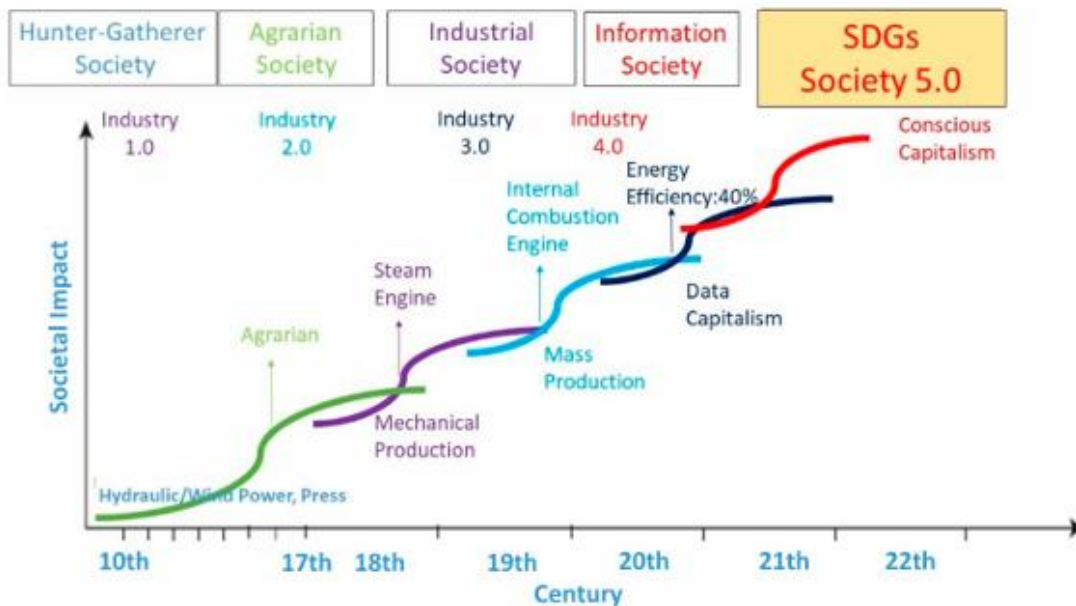
Teachers and principals expressed concern about burnout, lack of training, and insufficient transportation allowances. One school in Lombok Tengah reported teachers walking over 3 kilometers to reach the school daily. Parental involvement remains low in many poor households, as education is not seen as an immediate economic priority. Yet, when community learning centers (e.g., Rumah Belajar) are supported by local



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governments, parental engagement improves. These centers offer after-school tutoring, literacy sessions, and sometimes meals, serving as informal safety nets.

Gambar 3. The relationship between innovations based on science and technologies



Source: 2025 data processing result.

Data from the NTB education office show that dropout rates decreased by 4.2% in districts with active local initiatives. However, these gains are vulnerable to funding cuts, political turnover, and lack of monitoring mechanisms. The study reveals that where there is leadership commitment, stakeholder collaboration, and community ownership, access improves. Conversely, where governance is bureaucratic and passive, even well-funded programs fail to reach their potential. Thus, policy effectiveness in expanding educational access for vulnerable children is closely linked to governance quality, local innovation, and social accountability

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of local governments in improving educational access for vulnerable children in NTB. The findings confirm that while national programs such as PIP and BOS provide a foundation, the decisive factor lies in the extent to which local governments can adapt these resources to community needs. Thus, the research question—how local governance shapes access for vulnerable groups—is answered by



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showing that leadership commitment, stakeholder collaboration, and alignment of village-level budgeting with education goals are the key determinants of progress.

District variation illustrates that local government action makes a critical difference: Sumbawa Barat demonstrates tangible gains when education is prioritized in village funds; Dompu shows the risks of relying solely on central government templates without innovation; and Lombok Tengah highlights the role of cultural legitimacy through partnerships with Islamic boarding schools. These findings underscore that governance quality, institutional coordination, and cultural adaptation directly shape outcomes for vulnerable children.

Several barriers persist. Weak integration of child protection databases leaves many children invisible to interventions. Education continues to be deprioritized against physical infrastructure in many villages, reducing the effective use of Dana Desa. Deep-rooted cultural norms, particularly early marriage and child labor, further constrain access, especially for girls. Without addressing these systemic and social barriers, financial inputs alone cannot translate into equitable educational opportunities.

Recommendations

To strengthen educational access, local governments should (1) institutionalize the integration of education into village-level planning and budgeting, (2) establish child protection databases to better target interventions, (3) enhance cross-sectoral coordination between education and social agencies, and (4) engage cultural and religious institutions to shift norms that constrain girls' education. At the same time, central government support should prioritize capacity-building for district-level education offices, ensuring that programs are not only funded but also contextually adapted and sustainable.

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