



Justice-Sensitive Poverty Policy Implementation in Rural Indonesia: Administrative, Normative, and Political Constraints in Sikka Regency

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines why poverty alleviation policies in rural Indonesia may remain administratively operational while producing limited justice-sensitive outcomes for the least advantaged. Rather than claiming that justice is absent from implementation research, the article argues that justice is insufficiently operationalized as a standard for assessing who benefits, who is excluded, and how allocation decisions are made. It develops a justice-sensitive implementation framework that integrates administrative implementation analysis with Rawlsian principles of fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle. Using an interpretive qualitative case study in Sikka Regency, Nusa Tenggara Timur, the research draws on interviews, observation, and document analysis. The findings indicate that limited justice-sensitive implementation emerges through the interaction of fragmented coordination, unreliable poverty data, weak institutional follow-through, targeting errors, uneven procedural accessibility, symbolic participation, patronage, and rural territorial constraints. The study contributes by distinguishing administrative activity from justice-sensitive implementation and by showing how technical weaknesses in data, coordination, and participation can become mechanisms through which distributive and procedural injustice is reproduced. The findings should be interpreted analytically rather than statistically, given the single-case qualitative design.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty alleviation remains a significant challenge for public governance, particularly in rural and remote areas where residents experience both economic hardship and limited government support (K. M. Chen et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2023). In these contexts, evaluating anti-poverty policies solely by the number of programs, financial expenditures, or aggregate declines in poverty rates is insufficient. The critical issue is whether these policies effectively improve conditions for the most disadvantaged populations. Recent research contends that evaluation should encompass not only outcomes, but also fairness, recognition, access, and the quality of interactions between citizens and public institutions (Devaney et al., 2024; Zuo & Huang, 2025). This broader perspective is essential because poverty encompasses more than material deprivation; it also reflects unequal opportunities, limited agency, and barriers to institutional access.

Indonesia exemplifies these challenges. Although national poverty declined to 8.47% in March 2025, rural poverty remained substantially higher than urban poverty, at 11.03% compared to 6.73%. The disparity is even more pronounced in eastern Indonesia (BPS, 2022). In Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), the poverty rate reached 18.60% in March 2025, with rural poverty at 22.66% and over one million individuals classified as poor (Frischa Elvira Jehadut & Surya Dewi Rustariyuni, 2025; Holivil, 2024). These figures indicate that, despite national progress, certain regions continue to lag, particularly where government services are less robust. In such decentralized areas, persistent poverty reflects not only developmental deficits but also challenges in governance and equitable policy implementation.

Within this broader context, Sikka Regency represents an analytically significant case. Official statistics show that the poverty rate was 12.56% in 2023, 11.89% in 2024, and 11.25% in 2025, with the number of poor residents remaining at 36.74 thousand in 2025 (BPS Sikka, 2025). The persistence of non-trivial poverty gap and severity indices indicates that deprivation is both enduring and stratified. These data imply that poverty reduction in Sikka has been incremental rather than transformative. Under these circumstances, the central policy issue is not merely the ongoing presence of poverty but its persistence despite repeated interventions, administrative efforts, and formal commitments to reducing it. Sikka thus provides a valuable case for examining not only the implementation of anti-poverty policy, but also whether such implementation genuinely benefits the most disadvantaged.

Recent policy developments in Indonesia further underscore this issue. The government has prioritized the integration of socioeconomic data and unified targeting, demonstrating that effective anti-poverty policy relies on accurate, current, and interconnected data systems (Dartanto & Nurkholis, 2013; Sugiharti, Esquivias, et al., 2023; Sugiharti, Purwono, et al., 2023). This focus is critical because challenges often arise prior to the delivery of assistance, during processes such as enumeration, eligibility determination, and the establishment of household visibility with the state. Thus, poverty data function not only as technical instruments but also as mechanisms for recognition and allocation, determining who receives support. Incomplete or inaccurate data result in administrative and distributive failures, directly influencing access to assistance (Dartanto & Nurkholis, 2013; Hasbullah, 2017; Leow & Tan, 2019; Sihombing & Arsani, 2021). Stream research on policy implementation helps explain

why these gaps happen. Both older and newer studies point to communication, resources, bureaucracy, coordination, and the attitudes of those carrying out policies as key factors.

More recent work shows that the effectiveness of a policy depends on the balance between implementation demands and administrative capacity. For example, Fernández-i-Marín et al. (2024) found that performance drops when the workload is too high for the bureaucracy. This research helps explain why well-designed policies sometimes fail in practice. However, it is better at explaining administrative success or failure than whether policies are fair. A poverty program can follow all the rules and spend its budget, yet still fail to help the people who need it most (Devaney et al., 2024; Saguin, 2018; Zuo & Huang, 2025).

This problem is especially clear in how poverty programs are run. Studies on poverty targeting and social assistance show that outcomes depend not only on policy design but also on the challenges people face in qualifying, applying, and remaining eligible. In reality, getting support can be harder for poorer people if the process is complicated, information is hard to get, or there are too many steps. Zuo and Huang (2025) found that people judge fairness in rural poverty programs not just by what they get, but by whether the process seems fair and open. This shows that procedural justice matters even in policies for distributing resources: people care about both the outcome and the process by which decisions are made. Devaney et al. (2024) also point out that support for vulnerable groups should be judged by recognition, access, and real help, not just by how many people are covered.

A comparable issue arises in participatory development initiatives. Saguin (2018) demonstrates that community-driven projects do not consistently benefit the poor, as local power imbalances, elite dominance, and unequal participation can distort outcomes. Consequently, participation may appear robust in official documentation, yet remain ineffective in practice. This has significant implications for anti-poverty policy, as governments frequently cite participation and local involvement as indicators of fairness, even when the most disadvantaged have minimal influence over decision-making. In such cases, poverty policy may fail not only by withholding assistance, but also by distributing it inequitably. Thus, implementation is not merely a technical phase between planning and outcomes; it is the arena where inequality may be perpetuated or mitigated.

This article addresses this gap by contending that justice remains underexplored in research on the implementation of poverty policies. While numerous studies detail the transition from policy formulation to practice, they often insufficiently interrogate who benefits and under what conditions the process is genuinely fair. This oversight is particularly problematic in anti-poverty policy, where programs may exist in official records yet suffer from targeting errors, tokenistic participation, inadequate coordination, and inequitable benefit distribution. The principal challenge is not merely to determine whether poverty policy is implemented, but to analyze why it may function operationally while failing to assist those most in need. Sikka provides a pertinent case for this analysis, illustrating these dynamics in a rural, decentralized, and resource-constrained context.

Although justice is not entirely absent from policy implementation research, it is rarely clearly defined or systematically applied in most studies. This article seeks to refine and extend existing theoretical frameworks, rather than to construct an entirely new paradigm.

To advance this argument, the article adopts a Rawlsian perspective (Buchanan, 1972; Faiz, 2017; Jamnik, 2022). Rawls's theory is utilized not as an abstract philosophical construct, but as a normative framework for assessing whether policy arrangements safeguard equal standing, broaden fair opportunities, and benefit the least advantaged. This perspective is especially relevant to anti-poverty policy, as it shifts evaluation from administrative completion to a more rigorous standard: whether implementation substantively improves the condition of those worst off. In practical terms, this necessitates evaluating poverty policy not only by benefit disbursement, but also by the fairness of targeting, the meaningfulness of participation, the accessibility of procedures, and the structuring of allocation to prioritize disadvantaged citizens. This approach reinforces the link between implementation analysis and justice-sensitive evaluation.

Rawls's framework is selected because the study focuses on public institutions, allocation mechanisms, and the prioritization of citizens in the most vulnerable social positions. While Sen's capability approach, Fraser's theory of recognition and redistribution, Young's account of structural domination, and Nussbaum's capabilities approach offer valuable alternatives, Rawls provides the most explicit institutional standard for evaluating whether implementation ensures fair access and maximizes benefits for the least advantaged (Sen, 1973a, 1973b; Sugden et al., 2014).

Building on this perspective, the study introduces a justice-oriented framework for poverty policy implementation comprising three interrelated dimensions: administrative, justice, and contextual-political. The administrative dimension encompasses communication, resources, coordination, bureaucratic structure, and implementer capacity, all of which influence implementation performance (Asmorowati et al., 2022; Crook, 2003; Illien & Bieri, 2024). The justice dimension addresses targeting accuracy, equitable distribution, procedural fairness, meaningful participation, and prioritization of the least advantaged, recognizing that poverty programs often fail when exclusion, opacity, or weak participation persist (Robertson et al., 2014; Stoeffler et al., 2016; Zuo & Huang, 2025). The contextual-political dimension includes political commitment, patronage, data governance, and rural institutional constraints, which may undermine pro-poor outcomes through elite capture, clientelism, or resource leakage (Fritzen, 2007; Mookherjee, 2006; Suryadarma & Yamauchi, 2013). Justice-sensitive implementation, therefore, arises only when administrative capacity is integrated with fair procedures and a distributive emphasis on disadvantaged groups.

The three dimensions are analytically distinct. The administrative dimension explains the machinery of delivery; the justice-sensitive dimension evaluates the fairness of delivery; and the contextual-political dimension explains the conditions that reproduce or constrain both administrative and justice deficits. Data governance is administrative when it concerns technical synchronization, but contextual-political when it concerns authority, recognition, and power over classification.

Accordingly, this study asks why poverty policy may function administratively yet fail to benefit the least advantaged, how administrative and justice deficits interact in rural Indonesia, and under what conditions anti-poverty policy becomes justice-sensitive rather than merely routine delivery. The article contributes in three ways. First, it links classical implementation analysis with a Rawlsian justice perspective. Second, it provides

empirical evidence from eastern Indonesia, a setting still underrepresented in international implementation research despite persistent poverty (Asmorowati et al., 2022; Illien & Bieri, 2024; Suryadarma & Yamauchi, 2013). Third, it distinguishes between administrative implementation and justice-sensitive implementation, showing that a policy can be operationally active yet normatively weak (Crook, 2003; Robertson et al., 2014). In this way, the study reframes poverty policy implementation as a question of public justice rather than merely administrative performance.

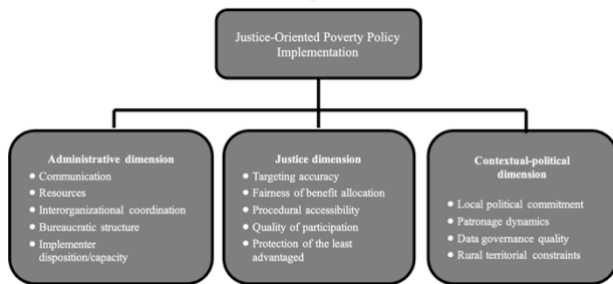


Figure 1. Research Framework

Source: Authors' construct, 2026

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study to examine why poverty alleviation policy in Sikka Regency, Indonesia, may function administratively yet fail to benefit the least advantaged (Cresswell, 2018). A case study design was used because it allows close analysis of how policy implementation is practiced, experienced, and negotiated across administrative, social, and political settings (Yin, 2014). Sikka Regency was selected because poverty remains persistent despite repeated interventions and formal policy commitments, and it also reflects common challenges in rural and peripheral areas, including weak coordination, limited administrative capacity, constrained fiscal resources, and unequal access to public services.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. Interviews served as the primary source of evidence, supported by observation of implementation practices and review of relevant documents, including development plans, regulations, official reports, poverty records, and village administrative documents (Gill et al., 2008; Groenland & Dana, 2019). Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in poverty policy planning, implementation, coordination, supervision, and monitoring (Campbell et al., 2020). To capture diverse institutional and social perspectives, the study involved 40 informants consisting of officials from the Regional Development Planning Agency (3), Social Affairs Office (4), Community and Village Empowerment Office (3), Health Office (2), Education and Culture Office (2), Population and Civil Registration Office (2), and Regional Financial and Asset Management Agency (2); village officials (4); frontline implementers or facilitators (4); poor households or beneficiaries (5); excluded eligible households or non-beneficiaries (4); community leaders (2); civil society organizations (2); and local journalists or media actors (1).

Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and supported by local explanations when needed. The interview guide covered poverty data, targeting, coordination, allocation, participation, complaint mechanisms, implementation constraints, local power

relations, and perceptions of fairness. Interviews were recorded when permission was granted; otherwise, detailed field notes were written during and immediately after the interview..

Table 1. Research Informants

Setting	Department/Actor Group	Number of Informants
Sikka Regency Government	Regional Development Planning Agency	3
	Social Affairs Office	4
	Community and Village Empowerment Office	3
	Health Office	2
	Education and Culture Office	2
	Population and Civil Registration Office	2
	Regional Financial and Asset Management Agency	2
	Village officials	4
	Frontline implementers/facilitators	4
	Poor households/beneficiaries	5
Field actors	Excluded eligible households/non-beneficiaries	4
	Community leaders	2
	Civil society organizations	2
Supporting actors	Local journalists/media actors	1
	Total	40

Source: Primary data, 2025

The data were analyzed thematically through repeated reading, coding, categorization, and interpretation (Burhan, 2019). Analysis was guided by the study's justice-oriented framework, focusing on three dimensions: administrative, justice, and contextual-political. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, as well as comparison across actor groups (Fusch et al., 2018). Ethical principles were upheld through voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage.

Thematic analysis followed a hybrid deductive-inductive logic. Deductive coding used the three analytical dimensions, while inductive coding identified field-based mechanisms such as weak verification, symbolic participation, procedural burden, patronage, and territorial constraint. Saturation was assessed across actor categories; trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation, cross-actor comparison, reflexive memoing, and peer discussion.

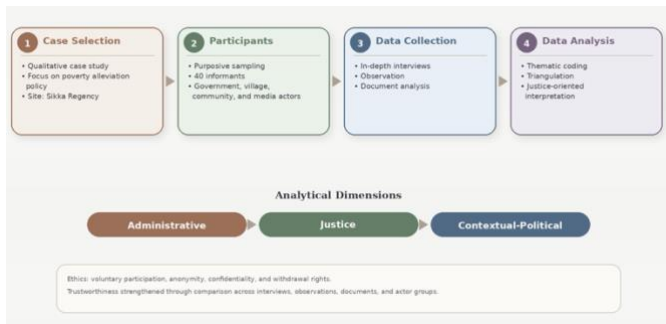


Figure 2. Research Methodology Visualization

Source: Author's construct, 2025

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the principal findings on poverty policy implementation in Sikka Regency, with particular attention to the reasons why administrative functioning does not necessarily translate into benefits for the least advantaged. Employing a justice-oriented analytical framework, the discussion is structured around three dimensions: administrative, justice-sensitive, and contextual-political. The evidence indicates that while poverty programmes are formally implemented, their outcomes are partial and only weakly aligned with principles of justice. Across all three dimensions, implementation is characterized by fragility. Administratively, policy delivery is hindered by fragmented communication, weak coordination, limited institutional capacity, inadequate data integration, and inconsistent commitment. Within the justice-sensitive dimension, targeting errors, procedural exclusion, symbolic participation, uneven procedural accessibility, and insufficient prioritization of the least advantaged undermine fairness. In the contextual-political dimension, patronage, inconsistent political commitment, politically embedded data challenges, and rural institutional constraints persistently shape outcomes. Collectively, these factors confine poverty policy to routine administrative delivery rather than justice-sensitive implementation. Consequently, interventions persist, but benefits remain uneven, legitimacy is fragile, and the impact on structurally disadvantaged groups is limited (see Figure 3).

The analysis uses cautious terminology. The study does not claim absolute policy collapse or deny that some households benefit from existing programmes. It explains limited justice-sensitive implementation: formally active programmes may still reproduce exclusion when weak data, fragmented coordination, symbolic participation, and contextual-political constraints interact.

Dimension of administrative implementation

The administrative dimension is the first major explanation for the weakness in the implementation of poverty alleviation policy in Sikka Regency. This dimension concerns the institutional and operational conditions through which policy is translated into delivery, including communication, coordination, data management, organizational integration, commitment among implementers, and responsiveness to local conditions. This research shows that poverty programmes in Sikka are administratively active, but the foundations required for coherent and effective implementation remain weak. Delivery is fragmented, sectoral coordination is partial, data systems are not fully integrated, and institutional follow-through is uneven. Consequently, poverty policy often functions as an ongoing

bureaucratic routine rather than a coherent intervention aimed at sustained poverty reduction.

A first administrative weakness concerns coordination and communication. More than ten local government agencies are involved in poverty reduction, yet implementation remains fragmented across sectors. Communication occurs, but it is not always translated into integrated action. The existence of multiple programmes and actors does not automatically produce policy coherence, especially when coordination remains partial and responsibilities are dispersed. In such circumstances, poverty alleviation becomes a collection of parallel administrative activities rather than a unified strategy. This weakens problem-solving capacity and makes it difficult to align programmes across social protection, health, education, livelihoods, and basic services. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship on policy integration, which argues that effective cross-sector implementation depends not only on the presence of multiple institutions but also on integrative capacity, namely the ability of public agencies to build coordination mechanisms, align institutional architecture, and sustain integration across policy domains (Vince et al., 2024). From this perspective, the weakness in Sikka is not simply that many agencies are involved, but that the administrative system has not yet developed the capacity to transform routine communication into coordinated collective action.

A second weakness concerns administrative commitment and institutional follow-through. The district government formally recognizes poverty reduction as a policy concern. Senior informants noted that the Sikka Regency Poverty Reduction Coordination Team (TKPK) for 2024 has been established, with responsibilities that include providing technical and administrative support, supplying poverty data, and preparing regional poverty reduction planning documents (Informant 1, 2, 3 and 4). Another senior official emphasized that the local government had introduced various programmes and activities to accelerate poverty reduction across the district (Informant 6, 10, and 12). These statements indicate that anti-poverty policy has institutional recognition and formal administrative support. However, this research also shows that the existence of formal teams and programmes does not automatically generate effective implementation. Coordination remains incomplete, cross-sector integration is limited, and operational continuity is uneven. Administrative activation is therefore present, but it is not yet matched by sufficiently strong institutional integration. This finding supports more recent implementation scholarship showing that formal organizational arrangements are often insufficient unless accompanied by collaborative routines, relational coordination, and workable implementation architectures that connect actors across levels of government and non-state institutions (Ashrafal Alam & Mahmudul Hoque, 2022; Vince et al., 2024). In Sikka, the gap between institutional recognition and administrative follow-through helps explain why poverty policy persists in bureaucratic form without consistently becoming effective in practice.

A third weakness lies in data governance. Administrative implementation depends heavily on accurate, integrated, and regularly updated data, yet this research finds that poverty data remain inconsistent and inadequately synchronized across institutions. Verification and validation of P3KE data have not been carried out optimally, and the absence of a definitive regent decree on the classification of poor households has weakened programme targeting and administrative consistency. Poor data

quality does not merely reduce technical accuracy; it weakens the entire implementation chain by undermining coordination, reducing trust, and creating uncertainty about who should receive support. In this sense, weak data governance is not a peripheral defect but a central administrative limitation. This interpretation is supported by recent studies emphasizing that data governance is a foundational element of organizational coordination and decision-making, as fragmented data systems create silos, unclear responsibilities, duplication, and weak accountability (Janssen et al., 2020; Janssen & van der Voort, 2020; Purwanto et al., 2020). In the context of poverty policy, such informational weakness is particularly consequential because beneficiary classification, programme alignment, and monitoring all depend on a stable and trusted data infrastructure. In Sikka, the weakness in data governance therefore indicates that poverty policy is being implemented without a sufficiently reliable information base for integrated action.

A fourth weakness concerns implementer responsiveness. Administrative systems in Sikka are formally active, but responsiveness to changing local realities remains limited. Programmes often operate through standardized procedures that do not always fit village-level conditions. One policy informant observed that coordination among the central government, local government, NGOs, and the private sector “has not been effective,” and that centrally designed programmes “do not necessarily fit the specific conditions of villages” (Informant 3, 4 and 5). This indicates that administrative weakness is not simply a matter of insufficient effort, but also of limited institutional adaptability. When implementation relies on rigid, top-down procedures, administrative activity may continue without adequately responding to the differentiated needs of poor households. This finding aligns with more recent developments in street-level bureaucracy scholarship, which show that implementation in developing contexts is shaped by uneven institutional capacity, contextual variation, and the practical constraints faced by frontline actors and local organizations (Lotta et al., 2022). It also resonates with administrative burden research, which demonstrates that bureaucratic procedures and access requirements are not experienced equally across social groups and often disadvantage citizens with weaker institutional resources (Martin et al., 2024). In Sikka, the limited fit between centralized programme design and village realities suggests that poverty policy remains procedurally active while substantively under-responsive to local conditions.

Dimension of justice-sensitive implementation

The justice-sensitive dimension is the second major explanation for the weak implementation of poverty alleviation policy in Sikka Regency. It is central because it clarifies why policy may function administratively while still failing normatively to benefit the least advantaged. In this research, justice-sensitive implementation refers to the extent to which poverty policy is organized and practiced in ways that ensure accurate targeting, fair allocation of benefits, meaningful participation, procedural accessibility, and explicit orientation toward disadvantaged groups. The findings show weaknesses across all five elements. Targeting remains vulnerable to inclusion and exclusion errors, benefit allocation is often perceived as insufficiently fair, participation is largely symbolic, access to procedures is uneven, and the least advantaged are not consistently prioritized. Poverty policy in Sikka therefore faces not only implementation problems, but also a clear justice deficit.

The first weakness concerns targeting accuracy. This research finds persistent discrepancies between administrative beneficiary lists and local realities. Some households recorded as eligible were no longer in severe deprivation, while other households facing clear hardship remained excluded from assistance. These discrepancies are not minor technical anomalies. They directly shape who receives support, who is left out, and how public judges institutions. In a policy domain intended to benefit those with the greatest need, inaccurate targeting produces both distributive inefficiency and normative unfairness. The issue is therefore not simply whether the state maintains a list of poor households, but whether that list accurately reflects current deprivation in ways that justify public action. This finding is consistent with international scholarship showing that targeting systems are never purely technical; they entail distributive trade-offs and normative consequences, as they determine who becomes visible to the state and who receives protection (Beuermann et al., 2025; Henderson & Follett, 2022; Zuo & Huang, 2025). In Sikka, targeting errors also undermine legitimacy by generating resentment among excluded households and weakening trust in local authorities.

This research also shows that the diversity of poverty is insufficiently reflected in the policy apparatus. Poor and vulnerable groups include not only households with low income, but also older persons, persons with disabilities, residents without identity documents, and near-poor households exposed to downward mobility. Under such conditions, outdated and inconsistent data undermine both the fairness and the accuracy of benefit distribution. As participants explained, “*Outdated or inaccurate data result in many aid recipients no longer matching current conditions, so that some who are entitled do not receive assistance, while others who are no longer eligible continue to benefit*” (Informant 4, 8 dan 10). Another participant noted, “*The injustice produced by outdated beneficiary data generates social jealousy and community fragmentation, thereby reducing trust in public policy*” (Informant 9, 10 and 12). These findings reinforce the argument that justice in implementation depends not only on administrative delivery, but also on whether policy institutions can recognize differentiated forms of vulnerability and respond accordingly (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Dragoman, 2018; Taylor, 2017).

A second weakness concerns the fairness of benefit allocation. This research indicates that the distribution of assistance is often experienced as inconsistent, insufficiently transparent, and weakly linked to criteria that citizens clearly understand. Some community actors perceived that allocation decisions were influenced not only by need but also by administrative convenience, incomplete data, or unequal influence in local processes. Even when systematic abuse is not evident in every case, the perception of unfair allocation remains analytically important because the legitimacy of anti-poverty policy depends not only on output, but also on whether citizens view distribution as justifiable. In conditions of scarcity, perceived unfairness can be as consequential as actual exclusion because it affects trust, compliance, and willingness to engage with the state. This confirms wider findings that distributive fairness depends not only on material outcomes, but also on whether the allocation process is seen as deliberative, transparent, and legitimate (Devaney et al., 2024; Hickey, 2009; Stoeffler et al., 2016; Uddin & Lawson, 2025).

A third weakness lies in participation. This research finds that participation in poverty policy processes exists. Still, it is often limited to consultation, information delivery, or

administrative verification rather than substantive involvement in problem definition, targeting review, or programme adjustment. Poor households are more often positioned as recipients of decisions than as actors capable of shaping them. Participants stated, “Every policy is decided from above. The central government determines beneficiary data through the DTKS without field verification; the names come from the centre and cannot be changed. Community participation is minimal, and there is no deliberative process for determining aid recipients” (Informant 7, 8 and 15). Another participant similarly explained, “The programme is designed in a top-down manner. For example, PKH was terminated by the central government without field verification. Communities are not involved in programme design, and there is no public deliberation. Beneficiaries are determined through technical criteria such as electricity capacity or the employment status of children” (Informant 5, 19 and 20). These accounts show that participation functions more as procedural inclusion than as meaningful co-shaping of implementation. International research supports this interpretation. Scholars found that participatory arrangements often remain shallow when voice is not converted into influence and when local knowledge is filtered through dominant actors (Gentry et al., 1984; Hall & Arrighi, 1996; Thompson & Cannon, 2023).

A fourth weakness concerns procedural accessibility. This research finds that poor households do not always experience poverty policy as institutionally accessible. Access is shaped not only by formal eligibility but also by administrative literacy, documentation requirements, proximity to officials, knowledge of procedures, and the ability to navigate bureaucratic processes. Households with weaker social connections, lower education, or less confidence in dealing with institutions are more likely to face difficulties in registration, verification, complaint submission, and follow-up. This matters because anti-poverty policy may formally target disadvantaged groups while still privileging those who are better able to navigate bureaucracy. Under such conditions, implementation becomes selectively accessible and therefore reproduces rather than reduces inequality. This finding is closely aligned with research on administrative burden, which shows that learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs fall unevenly across social groups and systematically disadvantage those with weaker institutional capacity (Fernández-I-Marín et al., 2024; Ilea & Ilea, 2024; Moynihan et al., 2015). In Sikka, territorial distance, weak information flows, and limited bureaucratic responsiveness intensify these burdens.

A fifth weakness concerns orientation toward the least advantaged. From this research's perspective, this is the most important issue because it directly engages the Rawlsian framework. The findings indicate that poverty policy in Sikka is not consistently organized around the explicit prioritization of those in the most disadvantaged positions. In practice, implementation often focuses on programme delivery, beneficiary administration, and sectoral compliance rather than on ensuring that interventions produce the greatest benefit for those worst off. This is visible in the persistence of severely deprived households who remain excluded, the fragmented handling of multidimensional poverty, and the weak integration of programmes across education, health, livelihoods, and basic services. As a result, the policy system may recognize poverty without clearly privileging the least advantaged as its primary moral and operational concern. One policy informant also noted that coordination among central government, local government, NGOs, and the private sector “has not been effective,” and that

centrally designed programmes “do not necessarily fit the specific conditions of villages,” which delays policy goals and weakens effectiveness (Informant 3, 5, 7, 9, and 10). This matters because short-term, standardized delivery can remain active without producing substantive improvements for structurally vulnerable groups. The wider literature similarly argues that social policy should be judged by whether institutions secure substantive recognition, fair access, and meaningful improvement for those in weaker structural positions (Devaney et al., 2024; Midgley et al., 2019; White, 2017; Zuo & Huang, 2025).

Dimension of contextual-political implementation

The contextual-political dimension is the third major explanation for the weak implementation of poverty alleviation policy in Sikka Regency. While the administrative dimension explains how policy is delivered and the justice-sensitive dimension explains whether delivery is fair, the contextual-political dimension explains why both administrative and justice-related weaknesses persist over time. In this research, that dimension refers to the wider political and institutional environment within which poverty policy operates, including political commitment, patronage dynamics, data governance, and rural institutional constraints. The findings show that poverty policy in Sikka is shaped not only by technical and organizational limitations, but also by a governance environment in which political incentives, institutional fragility, and territorial constraints reduce the consistency and integrity of implementation. Policy, therefore, does not operate in a politically neutral space; it is embedded in local power relations that shape how poverty is identified, prioritized, and governed.

The first weakness concerns political commitment. This research finds that poverty reduction is formally recognized as a policy priority, but this commitment is not always translated into sustained, integrated, and problem-oriented implementation. Several senior government informants stated that “the Sikka Regency Poverty Reduction Coordination Team (TKPK) for 2024 has been established, with responsibilities that include providing technical and administrative support, supplying poverty data, and preparing regional poverty reduction planning documents” (INF-01, Informant 1, 2, 3 and 5). Another policy informant emphasized that the local government had introduced “various programmes and activities” to accelerate poverty reduction across the district (Informant 2, 6, 8, 9 and 10). These statements indicate that poverty reduction has formal political recognition and institutional expression. However, this research also shows that such commitment often remains general rather than operationally decisive. More than ten local government agencies are involved, yet coordination remains partial, cross-sector integration is weak, and follow-through is uneven. In practice, this produces a gap between rhetorical commitment and implementation commitment. This pattern is consistent with scholarship showing that political commitment in decentralized governance often remains symbolic unless supported by institutional follow-through, integrative leadership, and stable implementation incentives (X. Chen & Sullivan, 2023; García-Vidal et al., 2025; Kim & Sullivan, 2023; Lavell et al., 2023).

A second weakness lies in patronage and informal influence. This research indicates that implementation is vulnerable to unequal proximity to decision-making, relational advantage, and socially uneven access to recognition and follow-up. The problem is not always expressed as overt political exchange; rather, it often appears through subtler forms of

selective responsiveness, tolerated bias, and the greater influence of actors with stronger social networks. This matters because poverty policy depends heavily on judgments about recognition, eligibility, and prioritization. In such settings, implementation risks are shaped not only by need but also by social position.

The field findings also show that in some communities, poverty is reproduced through asymmetric dependence relations. This research notes that in Wuring and Nangahale, patron-client relations narrowed the bargaining space of poor fishing households, especially during the west monsoon season, when debt and irregular assistance became the principal means of survival. In Rubit, customary obligations and ritual expenses compelled households to sell agricultural output or borrow from high-interest weekly cooperatives, thereby reproducing cycles of deficit. These patterns matter because they show that poverty governance operates in a context where informal dependence and local hierarchy shape households' vulnerability before policy even reaches them. This interpretation aligns with international research showing that local implementation is often mediated by informal institutions, relational power, and politically structured discretion (Samboteng et al., 2022; Siddiki & Ambrose, 2023).

A third weakness concerns data governance as both a political and an administrative issue. Earlier sections already established that data problems undermine targeting and coordination. This section shows that data governance also has a contextual-political dimension because decisions about which data are trusted, who can correct them, and how local knowledge is incorporated into official records are shaped by institutional authority and weak accountability. This research finds that verification and validation of the P3KE data from villages and urban wards were not carried out optimally, which contributed to the absence of a definitive regent decree on the classification of poor households in Sikka and weakened overall programme targeting. Informants further observed that coordination among the central government, local government, NGOs, and the private sector *"has not been effective,"* and that centrally designed programmes *"do not necessarily fit the specific conditions of villages"* (Informant 3, 4, 12, 15 and 17). This point is crucial: when data correction depends on fragmented authority, and local feedback cannot be translated into authoritative revision, inaccurate data persist even when many actors know they are problematic. Research on governance data similarly shows that data systems are inseparable from institutional trust, coordination, and power over classification and visibility (Fitriyani et al., 2025; Hasbullah, 2017; Megawati et al., 2021; Waardenburg et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023). In Sikka, poor data governance is therefore not a simple technical deficiency. It is a politically embedded implementation problem with direct distributive consequences.

A fourth weakness is found in rural institutional constraints. Sikka is not only decentralized; it is also rural, geographically dispersed, and marked by uneven infrastructure and service access. This research finds that territorial conditions affect how often officials interact with households, how quickly information is updated, how easily complaints can be submitted, and how consistently support can be monitored. One important field finding is that monetary approaches alone often fail to capture the social and economic realities of difficult geographic settings such as Sikka, where isolation, infrastructure gaps, and environmental vulnerability shape poverty. The findings from Tanarawa, for example, show that limited water and irrigation reduce productivity on dry land, while standardized agricultural

programmes do not fit local biophysical conditions. Wolomarang faces a different mix of coastal pressures, uncertain catches, operational costs, and insecure informal work. These cases demonstrate that rurality is not merely a background feature. It is an active implementation condition that results in poverty policy being experienced unevenly across communities. This finding is supported by wider research on rural governance and territorial inequality, which shows that distance, infrastructure, and uneven institutional reach directly shape service delivery and policy effectiveness (Breunig & Majeed, 2020; Leow & Tan, 2019; Venal et al., 2026; Wiranatakusuma & Primambudi, 2021).

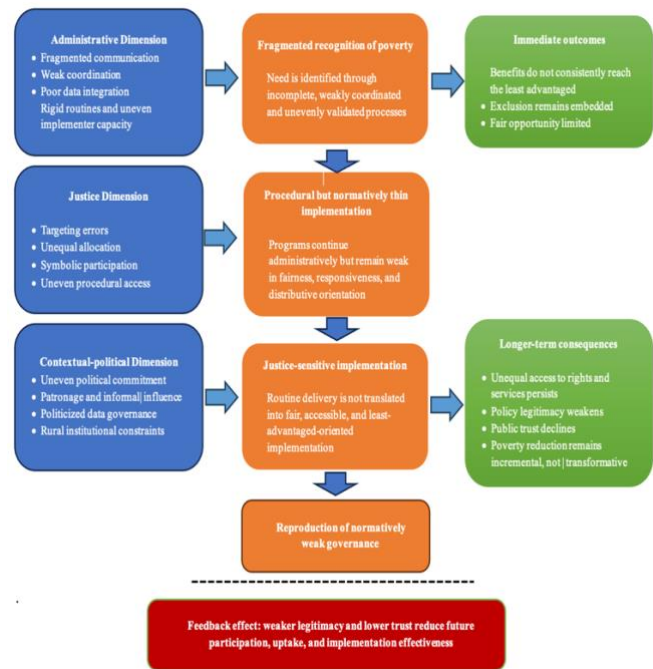


Figure 3. Integrated theoretical model of justice-sensitive poverty policy implementation failure
Source: Authors' construct, 2026

Figure 3 should be read as an explanatory model. Administrative fragility weakens the capacity to identify and serve poor households; justice deficits transform administrative weakness into unfair allocation; and contextual-political constraints reproduce both weaknesses over time. The model also implies a feedback loop in which perceived unfairness reduces trust, weakens participation, and undermines future data correction.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates why poverty alleviation policy implementation in Sikka Regency, Indonesia, may operate effectively from an administrative perspective yet fail normatively to benefit the least advantaged. Utilizing a justice-oriented implementation framework that integrates administrative, justice, and contextual-political dimensions, the research examines whether persistent poverty should be understood not only as a problem of policy delivery but also as an issue of public justice.

The primary finding is that poverty policy implementation in Sikka fails not due to the absence of policy, but because implementation remains procedural rather than justice-sensitive. Although programs are formally implemented, weaknesses persist across all three dimensions. The administrative dimension is limited by fragmented communication, weak interagency

coordination, unreliable poverty data, procedural rigidity, and inconsistent implementer capacity and commitment. The justice dimension is compromised by targeting errors, unequal allocation of benefits, symbolic participation, uneven procedural accessibility, and insufficient prioritization of the least advantaged. The contextual-political dimension further undermines implementation through inconsistent political commitment, patronage and informal influence, politically embedded data governance, and rural institutional constraints. As a result, poverty policy continues to operate administratively but does not consistently ensure fair access, equitable distribution of benefits, or meaningful improvement for those in the most disadvantaged positions.

This study contributes to the literature in three key ways. It extends policy implementation analysis by incorporating a Rawlsian justice perspective into the examination of poverty policy. It demonstrates that local poverty governance constitutes both an administrative and a justice problem. Additionally, it offers a more institutionally grounded explanation of how administrative weaknesses, justice deficits, and contextual-political constraints sustain normatively weak implementation even when formal poverty reduction commitments are present.

The policy implication is that local governments should institutionalize justice-sensitive implementation through routine data verification, accessible complaint mechanisms, cross-sector integration, protection of allocation decisions from informal influence, and explicit monitoring of whether programmes improve the condition of the least advantaged rather than merely reporting beneficiary numbers or budget absorption.

This study is limited by its single-case design, which offers analytical depth but limits broader generalization. Future research should compare multiple local governments, examine other poverty policy sectors and instruments, and assess whether procedural implementation and justice deficits are recurring patterns in decentralized poverty governance beyond Sikka.

Future research should compare Rawlsian justice-sensitive implementation with capability-based, recognition-based, and participatory justice frameworks to clarify whether exclusion arises mainly from unequal access, limited capabilities, misrecognition, or weak representation in decision-making.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Margaretha Movaldes Da Maga Bapa: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – original draft. Aloysius Liliweri: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Ajis Salim Adang Djaha: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Nursalam: Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Laurensius Petrus Sayrani: Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing financial or non-financial interests that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

Ethical Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for qualitative social research. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Identifying information was removed or anonymised in the reporting of findings.

Data Availability

The interview transcripts, field notes, and supporting documents contain potentially identifying and context-sensitive information and are therefore not publicly available. De-identified data may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During manuscript preparation, the authors used Grammarly solely for language editing, grammar checking, and readability improvement. These tools were not used to generate the research data, conduct the analysis, formulate the findings, or make substantive intellectual decisions. All outputs were critically reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the integrity, originality, and final content of the article.

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