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Modern and contemporary Asia has witnessed dynamic transformations in cultures, societies, economies and political institutions, among others. It confronts issues of collective identity formation, ecological crisis, rapid economic change and resurgence of religion and communal identifies while embracing globalization. An analysis of past experiences can help produce a deeper understanding of contemporary change. In particular, the journal is interested in locating contemporary changes within a historical perspective, through the use of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. This way, it hopes to promote comparative studies involving Asia's various regions.

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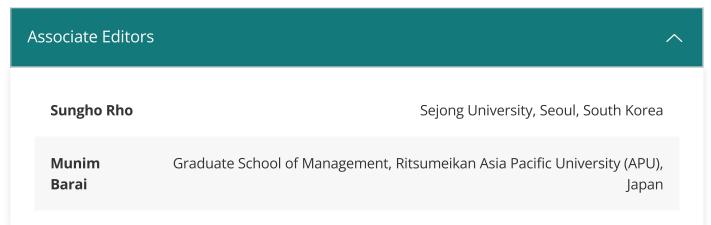
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The Social Embeddedness of Leadership: Unfolding the Trajectories of Individual Policy Capacity in Regional Development in East Java, Indonesia

Falih Suaedi[1], Wildan Taufik Raharja[2] and Ayu Puspita Ningrum[1]

Abstract

Leadership competencies act as a precursor in catalysing bureaucratic reform and propelling long-term development, yet the multitude of political tensions and policy conundrums has called for a deeper examination of the individual capabilities needed to satisfy public expectations. Taking on a comparative case study approach in East Java, Indonesia, we dissect the dynamic relationship between leadership competencies, individual policy capacity and regional development, positioning that these three elements form a symbiotic capability matrix that transcends their individual boundaries. We unveil how autonomous and proactive leaders, while operating within established structures and networks, leverage the power of social embeddedness, thus crystallizing it as an integral pillar for successful regional development. Through the embodiment of interdependence and relational dynamics, we foster a paradigm shift from an individualistic perspective to a context-aware, relation-centred approach within leadership and regional development landscapes.

Keywords

Policy capacity, public leadership, social embeddedness, regional development, developing countries

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I. Introduction

There have been many convincing arguments in favour of transformational leadership as the ideal strategy for tackling the perennial challenge of raising the bar on organizational performance (Asencio & Mujkic, 2016; Megheirkouni, 2017; Thorn, 2012). With leadership theories continuing to be an issue of interest to be studied as far as back to the nineteenth century, the conceptualization of transformational leadership put forth by Burns (1978) has altered the perception of how leadership affects organizations (Bass, 1999; Yukl, 2009). However, the current epoch of heightened globalization and cultural heterogeneity has led to a notable surge in the demands placed on public sector leaders, necessitating a broader range of competencies to manage the burgeoning demands for public services (see, e.g., Passmore, 2010). Public sector leaders, therefore, must not only embody the tenets of transformational leadership but also have a sophisticated set of competencies that allow them to traverse the complex landscape of public service management. Indonesia presents a particularly challenging scenario for public sector leaders due to its multifaceted political and socio-economic landscape marked by a wide range of cultures and ethnicities, which poses significant obstacles for those tasked with managing and delivering public services.

Inspired by contemporary theories of leadership, Indonesia has attracted the attention of global leaders and scholars ever since its devolution of power in the early 2000s and the rapid national development that followed (Firman, 2009; Talitha et al., 2020). While Indonesia's 'big-bang decentralization' has certainly brought about unquestionable benefits for the economy, regional autonomy and territorial integrity (Hill & Vidyattama, 2016), its political leadership tensions and conflicts continue to exert undue influence over the bureaucracy, resulting in a proliferation of unfulfilled promises and sluggish progress (Ahmad & Mansoor, 2002; Maryanov, 2009).

The challenges facing Indonesia's political leadership and their ramifications for the country have become manifest in the past decade, revealing a shortage of leadership abilities and other manpower capacities (see Irawanto et al., 2011). Widespread misconduct by government officials, such as corruption, has further eroded the public's trust in their government, leading to a lack of demand for reform and greater scrutiny of its effectiveness (Hofman et al., 2009). In the event that the public abandons the contemplation of reform, it has the potential to impede the natural flow of progress, erode the welfare of the people and instigate a future crisis in both leadership and citizenship. The relatively new idea of 'policy capacity' (Wu et al., 2015, 2018) has thus arrived to provide an answer to the growing need to equip the policymaking venues with the knowledge and abilities to proactively avert the creation of such problems. The notion focuses on achieving policy objectives, optimizing policy performance and enhancing public leadership (Bajpai & Chong, 2019; Howlett et al., 2015) and has emerged as a distinguishing feature of public leadership and its subsequent public reform on an individual level, often regarded as an internal driver of change within developing bureaucratic cultures, such as Indonesia's decentralized system.

Through our comparative case studies in East Java, Indonesia, we respond to the pressing calls to examine individual policy capacity in public leaders and their impacts on regional development. Our research significantly contributes to the understanding of public leadership processes, practices and the extent of their individual policy capacity that undergird the development of three regions in East Java. Importantly, we also reveal how variations in regional development, even between relatively similar localities and socio-economic characteristics, are primarily driven by the extent to which their leaders possess and process social embeddedness when navigating their policy plans. Although some significant studies have linked concerns such as bureaucratic autonomy (Tan, 2019), human agency (Asmorowati et al., 2022) and political nexus triads (Wong, 2022) to policy capacity, the knowledge gap on the subject of social embeddedness in succeeding regional development has yet to be delved into. Hence, the findings of our article can contribute to the development of the policy capacity typology and attributes of successful public leadership, as well as to the construction of critical evaluations of the most crucial actions for regional development in developing societies.

Administrative Decentralization, Governance Terrains and Participatory Democracy in Indonesia

Decentralization in Indonesia commenced after the Soeharto administration collapsed in 1998, shifting the transformation of the country from one of the most centralized to one of the most decentralized (Turner, 2005). Two landmark pieces of legislation that marked its new era in decentralization were Law No. 22/1999 on local government and Law No. 25/1999 on finance balance between the central and local governments. Law No. 22/1999, in particular, grants considerable autonomy to provincial, city and district governments regarding the transfer of power from the central government to their respective jurisdictions, which details the current system of decentralization in the administrative function.

Indonesia divides its territory and delegates authority through five layers of governance, following a descending order of hierarchy: (a) central, (b) provincial, (c) district (*kabupaten* in rural area) and city (*kotamadya* in urban area), (d) sub-district and sub-city (*kecamatan*) and (e) village (*kelurahan* [suburb] in urban areas and *desa* [village] in rural areas). There are also further administrative subdivisions of both the suburb and the village, the hamlets (*rukun warga* [RW]) and the neighbourhood units (*rukun tetangga* [RT]), albeit they are not formally recognized as such and are established through village discussions and community services.

Within this administrative structure, a variety of leadership styles with individualized structures and competencies naturally emerge, often surpassing traditional expectations, particularly in the context of the growing emphasis on participatory democratic models of governance. The decentralization process has indeed expanded local spaces for participatory democracy, fostering a more inclusive political arena that welcomes marginalized or neglected voices and signifies the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes within their communities (Pateman, 2012; Ribot, 2002). In Indonesia, the inclusion of a wide array of voices through

participatory democracy enhances the democratic process by incorporating a range of perspectives, ideas and experiences, leading to more equitable outcomes and fostering social cohesion (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Through the expansion of participatory spaces during the decentralization process, local communities have witnessed increased opportunities for citizen engagement and involvement in decision-making processes, providing marginalized or neglected groups with a platform to voice their concerns and participate in shaping their communities' future (Openjuru et al., 2015; Tandon, 2008). Participatory democracy has also improved the quality of local decisions by integrating citizen perspectives and expertise, resulting in more informed and context-specific decision-making that addresses the unique needs and aspirations of the community (Fung, 2006).

However, the effectiveness of participatory democracy in fostering a truly inclusive and empowering environment relies on various factors, including well-designed institutional structures, active citizen engagement capacity and responsive leadership that goes beyond traditional managerial skills, encompassing competencies such as facilitating dialogue, managing conflict and harnessing collective intelligence (see Crosby & Bryson, 2005). In fact, governance existing in diverse terrains and contexts necessitates region-specific leadership with specific structures and competencies, some of which may require critical capabilities beyond what is traditionally expected in other areas. Therefore, in the context of decentralized governance, such as in Indonesia, it is relevant to understand the ins and outs between leadership competencies, policy capacity and participatory democracy, as this understanding will inform the development of strategies to leverage participatory democracy for more effective local governance and regional development.

In the next section, we examine theoretical and empirical works on leadership competencies and policy capacity, inviting the investigation of a conceptual framework that integrates these two facets and allows for a broader understanding of these contexts.

Leadership Competencies and Policy Capacity: An Individual-Level Perspective

While the definition of competence may be elusive due to its dynamic nature, there is no denying that it pertains to the traits of individuals who consistently surpass their peers in workplace performance (Pynes, 2008) and exemplify positive conduct in their professional endeavours (Sanghi, 2016), making it a key factor in effective leadership among public administrators (Gupta et al., 2018). Globally, leadership competencies are a must for the success of organizations (Gentry & Sparks, 2012), but much more so in the public sector, which is notoriously resistant to change. Although public and private sector leaders share some similarities, public sector leaders are required to possess a specialized set of skills to navigate the political intersections and fulfil their ethical responsibilities in advancing social justice and the common good (Khan & Islam, 2014). From this perspective, competence-based management arises as a fundamental tool for

bridging gaps between disparate forms of governance by replacing rigid job descriptions with flexible personnel policies and formal credentials with competency assessments (Brans & Hondeghem, 2005).

To the surprise of many, however, serious debates regarding the competencies among government leaders persist even as so many government agencies adopt competency framework for their human resource development (Ejimabo, 2013; Raffel et al., 2009). It is at the junction of rapid globalization and the ever-increasing need for public leadership that goes beyond just competence that Wu et al. (2015, p. 4) argue that 'policy successes demand high levels of capacities in multiple dimensions', leading to the emergence of the discourse of policy capacity. According to Wu et al. (2015, p. 2), policy capacity is understood as 'the set of skills and resources–or competences and capabilities–necessary to perform policy functions'. It is subdivided into three sub-categories (analytical, operational and political) and includes resources or abilities at three distinct levels (individual, organizational and systemic). Importantly, although all elements of the policy capacity framework are interdependent and indispensable to the policymaking process, not all of them are necessitated for the success of a particular policy, and some may be more crucial than others (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016), offering significant advantages when putting the concept into practice.

In this article, the individual level of the policy capacity framework (analytical, operational and political) rests as the main focus through which it focuses on understanding how strengthening an individual's leadership competencies is tied to that of individual policy capacity. Understanding the causes for public administrators' varying levels of performance requires zeroing in on the individual policy capacity, which opens the door to probing the connections between a wide range of leadership competencies and their application in different circumstances. In a context fraught with complexity and tension, there is much to be gained by focusing more on exploring the individual policy capacity for navigating policy challenges within their leadership competencies. Thus, this article draws on case-by-case comparisons of the analytical, operational and political capacities of public leaders and their impact on regional development in three regions of East Java, Indonesia.

In Section I, the article has discussed the background on decentralisation, governance contexts and participatory democracy in Indonesia and has presented a theoretical review of leadership competencies and policy capacity. Next, the research methods are outlined in Section II. The findings are organised into narratives exploring public leadership and individual policy capacity in the case regions in Sections III and IV. Finally, in Section V, we conclude by discussing the implications of social embeddedness and areas for further research.

II. Research Methods

As part of a wider research project into public leadership trajectories across varying levels of development tiers in Indonesia, we explore the individual policy capacity of public leaders in three village administrations within East Java using

a comparative case study approach. This methodology allows the identification of comparable and dissimilar cases across contexts, so revealing patterns that can either confirm or refute a theoretical proposition (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016). Prior to commencing the research, we engaged in extensive conversations and conducted site visits to gain a better understanding of the practical realities of regional development at each site, and theoretical considerations were then accorded due weight in the theoretical interests and feasibility of data collection.

East Java was selected as the province of interest due to its high ranking as a performing province in Indonesia (see the Village Development Index by The Ministry of Villages' Development of Disadvantaged Regions and Transmigration, 2019), along with several socio-economic metrics that surpass the national average (see Table 1). Using a variety of case studies (Ragin & Byrne, 2009) with the intention of capturing the full scope of individual policy capacity variance, three different regions of East Java (two villages and one suburb), each representing a different status level according to the Ministry's index, guided the research: Bangkalan Regency (least developed), Blitar Regency (middle developed) and Batu City (most developed).

It is important to note that in selecting regions with different development levels, we sought to investigate how current leaders, with their individual policy capacity, navigate the distinctive challenges posed by their regions' respective historical and socio-economic contexts, rather than attributing the variations solely to the present leadership. Through the comparison of regions with different development statuses, our objective was to shed light on the varying challenges encountered by leaders and gain insights into the ways in which their leadership competencies and individual policy capacity contribute to addressing these challenges. This approach affords a better understanding of the interplay between individual leadership competencies, policymaking capacities and the broader socio-economic and historical factors that shape regional development.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Socio-economic Development Indicators.

	National	East Java Province	Bangkalan Regency	Blitar Regency	Batu City
Total population	269,603,400	41,416,407	1,101,556	1,249,497	218,802
Human Development Index	72.91	72.75	65.05	71.86	77.22
Village Development Index	0.6724	0.7517	0.6879	0.7723	0.9063
Average monthly expenditure per capita (Rp)	11,479,000	11,992,000	8,971,000	11,001,000	13,094,00
Life expectancy	71.61	69.43	70.54	73.98	72.97
Life expectancy at birth	71.85	71.74	70.54	73.98	72.97
Expected years of schooling	13.10	13.37	11.91	12.64	14.40
Mean years of schooling	8.69	8.03	5.97	7.82	9.63

Table 2. Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants.

No.	Place of Service	Participant	Position	Years of Service
1	Bangkalan	Participant 1	Sub-District Head	4
2	Regency	Participant 2	Village Head	7
3		Participant 3	Hamlet Head	3
4		Participant 4	Village Secretary	5
5		Participant 5	Member of the Village Consultative Body	3
6		Participant 6	Citizen	–
7	Blitar Regency	Participant 7	Sub-District Head	3
8		Participant 8	Village Head	3
9		Participant 9	Village Secretary	15
10		Participant 10	Member of the Village Consultative Body	7
11		Participant 11	Village Staff	5
12		Participant 12	Citizen	–
13		Participant 13	Citizen	–
14	Batu City	Participant 14	Acting Sub-city Head	1
15		Participant 15	Suburb Head	8
16		Participant 16	Head of a Division in the Batu City Government	12
17		Participant 17	Head of the Village Consultative Body	3
18		Participant 18	Citizen	–

With an in-depth interviewing method lasting between 45 min and an hour, we carried out 18 qualitative interviews with community leaders, managers and grassroots-level actors from different levels of government (including the city, sub-district and village), as well as informal administration bodies such as the Village Consultative Body, and members of the community (see Table 2). While our overarching objective is to explore the practices of public leadership and the individual policy capacity of leaders and to what extent it enables regional development, we acknowledge the values in drawing insights from those working at lower levels of government and administration to paint a fuller picture of the system. Accordingly, in addition to locating 10 actors with leadership and managerial positions, we also interviewed four low-level bureaucrats and four local residents who participated in the village administration.

Although the sample size may be modest, it is imperative to recognize that qualitative research goes beyond statistical significance and instead aims for theoretical saturation—a point at which gathering more data no longer yields fresh themes or insights (Guest et al., 2006). Moreover, the deliberate inclusion of an assortment of stakeholders, encompassing community leaders, managers grassroots-level actors and members of the community, engenders a panoramic understanding of the complexities and challenges faced in public leadership and policy capacity across various levels of governance. Therefore, despite the inclusion of a focused sample, the integration of a wide range of perspectives and the

attainment of theoretical saturation establish a solid foundation for the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

The interviews followed a protocol consisting of semi-structured questions that probed relevant and significant dimensions of the participants' elicited perspectives and narratives regarding the effects of public leadership and individual policy capacity on regional development, as well as instances of conflicts, obstacles and challenges. Of note, considering the sensitive nature of the questions asked and the information that might be disclosed in response, careful consideration was taken in recruiting study participants. Participants' confidentiality and the researchers' neutrality were both protected through the use of verbal informed consent, and researchers established a rapport with potential interviewees beforehand to minimize any concerns they may have had about opening up. Particular attention was taken to gain the trust of low-level bureaucrats and citizens, who feared reprisal from their superiors and leaders if they spoke critically or expressed concerns. However, upon being assured that their involvement in the research would be kept confidential, and that the research findings would solely be utilized for the research and shared only within the research teams, they became more willing to take part.

The interviews, which were recorded with the participants' consent, were then transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed, allowing us to integrate qualitative interview data with the government reports and information, official government websites, news releases and other data relating to the research objectives. To further identify themes, we coded the transcript data according to the research objective, which is to determine the extent to which individual policy capacity affects and influences the leadership processes and practices for enabling regional development. In evaluating the themes, we considered both the extent to which data meaningfully coalesced within each category and the clarity with which distinctions across categories were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Subsequently, the narratives of the participants were combined with the literature review and policy papers to provide contextualization for the empirical findings presented below.

III. Results

The structure of governance, democracy and participatory spaces across Bangkalan Regency, Blitar Regency and Batu City in East Java embodies the subtle interconnection of historical legacies, cultural dynamics and socio-economic realities that shape the distinctiveness of each region.

In the case of Bangkalan, characterized as a region with relatively low development, governance practices are deeply embedded within traditional village structures known as *desa*, where elected village heads, or *kepala desa*, seek guidance from advisory bodies called '*bayan desa*'. These village councils serve as pivotal participatory spaces for citizens to express their concerns, desires and recommendations, with the overarching goal of integrating democratic inputs into the comprehensive regional development planning process. Despite this structure, citizen participation in Bangkalan is somewhat constrained due to factors such as

limited awareness and empowerment, highlighting the need for improvement in these areas.

Shifting the focus to Blitar, categorized as a middle-developed region, the governance system demonstrates a more complex landscape characterized by governance at the sub-district or *kecamatan* level, overseen by appointed *camat* who operates under the supervision of the district head. A prominent avenue for citizen participation in this region lies in the sub-district development planning meetings or *musrenbang kecamatan*, where citizens, community leaders and civil society organizations engage in dialogues to identify and prioritize development needs and aspirations. Nonetheless, ensuring equitable representation and inclusive participation for all societal segments during these meetings presents a notable challenge that needs to be addressed.

In contrast, Batu, classified as the most developed among the three regions, embodies a sophisticated governance structure that aligns with the dynamics of urban settings. Administrative responsibilities are distributed across multiple levels, encompassing the city, sub-city and neighbourhood units, with an elected mayor serving as the leader of the city administration. Batu has established institutionalized participatory spaces, including neighbourhood meetings, city development forums and public consultations on specific issues. However, effectively managing the wide spectrum of interests and striking a delicate balance between development and sustainability pose considerable challenges for Batu's governance, requiring continuous efforts to navigate and address the complexities inherent in such a context.

Considering these variations, there is a need to explore the dynamic peculiarities of local governance practices, as well as the role of leadership and individual policy capacity in driving regional development. In what follows, we present these findings, providing insights into the contextual factors influencing governance, democracy and regional development in Bangkalan Regency, Blitar Regency and Batu City.

Bangkalan Regency

The lack of understanding of development as a holistic idea, despite the presence of various initiatives aimed at promoting development, became unmistakable during a series of in-depth interactions with participants from Bangkalan. The village head's narrow perspective on development, which focused solely on healthcare and education initiatives and placed undue emphasis on the central government's programmes, such as the Family's Hope Programme, resulted in the neglect of other equally important initiatives. This, in turn, contributed to a state of ambiguity due to the lack of consensus between the village head and the Village Consultative Body regarding the definition of development, causing unclear guidelines and directives for action. However, the severe tensions between the two parties, which arose from the asymmetrical power dynamic between the village head and the Village Consultative Body, also contributed to the precarious situation. The authority of members of the Village Consultative Body was affected

by complaints that the village head's hegemonic control over the government and administration had rendered their role ineffective, leaving them feeling restrained and powerless.

The participants' dissatisfaction with the lack of precise information and specific instructions about development and local programmes points out the necessity for a more inclusive and participatory approach to governance. This discontent was especially pronounced among individuals with lesser authority and influence who viewed government-led growth and development as being 'just on a typical level'. It implies that leadership should promote a broader and better understanding of development while accentuating community engagement and information dissemination to ensure the effective implementation of development initiatives.

> Our village government is working hard to provide quality education and healthcare, but there have not been any specific initiatives to promote greater social resilience in the near future. Despite repeated assurances from our village head about better healthcare and education, the national index from the Ministry seems to support several complaints about slow progress worsened by the lack of specific initiatives. (Participant 4, Village Secretary)

Upon closer examination, the village administration had strived to make concerted efforts to leverage the village's educational resources, including its two preschools, two public elementary schools, one Islamic elementary school and one Islamic middle school, to ensure a high-quality education for its students. Additionally, the village government had taken proactive steps to protect the health and well-being of its residents by providing a monthly integrated service post and employing a midwife. However, despite the village head's consistent campaigns for social development and the promises of improved healthcare and educational infrastructure, the lack of definitive plans still left the local residents dissatisfied. The need for more efficient processes was brought to light when a local resident expressed their disappointment with the subpar healthcare services that were marred by a cumbersome paper-based administration system.

> My wife and I took our sick baby girl to the community health centre recently, but we were very unhappy with the care she received. The documentation was confusing, and our concerns were not addressed when we raised them in a community meeting. The village head's response was particularly disappointing as he just nodded and assured us that his subordinates would take care of it, but I doubt that will be enough. (Participant 6, Citizen)

The prioritization of healthcare access and compulsory 12-year education by leaders, while neglecting other pressing social development issues, draws attention to the need for a more balanced approach to regional development. This indicates that the village administration heavily relied on programmes and training provided by national or provincial levels, rather than taking autonomous initiatives. As a consequence, leaders were more likely to wait for guidance from higher-ups before acting, with lower level officials carrying out directives from the national and provincial governments and reporting back to the villagers. While some officials

defended their village administration, naming the leader's focus on improving education and healthcare, many others expressed frustration over the lack of structured opportunities for civil servants to enhance their skills and knowledge.

> So far, all the training we have received has been established either at the central or sub-district level, and our involvement has been limited to following those protocols and sending representatives to report back. Without any village-specific development initiatives, we feel like we are not fully equipped to serve our community, and that can be disheartening. (Participant 3, Hamlet Head)

Likewise, officials in middle and lower positions of governance had expressed doubts about their superiors' effectiveness and the reliance on subordinates to handle basic tasks, such as organizing community forums to discuss policy recommendations or seeking consultants to facilitate village development. Even when the village head presided over and guided public meetings with the community, discernible progress towards development remained elusive, as discussions tended to meander without clear-cut guidance on decision-making. The predominant view was that the village head did not articulate any sustainable strategies or goals that went beyond the basic welfare of the community and allocated resources towards advancing the educational opportunities of its residents. Despite the attempts of the village head to justify the actions by claiming compliance with directives and putting forth the best efforts, these explanations did not assuage the concerns of the subordinates.

> I am confident in my leadership, and although some may not be satisfied with it, I do not consider conflicts as a failure on my part. I believe that I have served my people well. It is just the way it is. (Participant 2, Village Head)

Undoubtedly, the village head's singular emphasis on healthcare and education has generated significant discontent and public opposition, as such leadership aspirations were perceived as limited to normative indicators without any broader goals. Furthermore, the repeated reliance on directives from superiors and the actions of subordinates without substantial progress towards development indicates indecisiveness and overconfidence, contributing to the lack of advancement in Bangkalan's development.

Blitar Regency

The village government's policy acumen was the first and most striking characteristic of Blitar's leadership, proving to be an effective tool in winning the support and trust of the local public towards policy initiatives. An example of this was the village administration's participation in a nationwide government-endorsed contest for rural development, resulting in notable commendation and acknowledgement at both the district and sub-district levels. This achievement carried immense significance for the people of Blitar, not only as a testament to their leader's competence but also as a means to boost the village's revenue without

imposing additional taxes. Consequently, the administration had surpassed other regions in the province by implementing initiatives such as training locals in agriculture and animal husbandry, as well as launching poverty reduction measures such as offering low-cost housing, death benefits and work-for-pay programmes.

It was also the consensus among the Village Consultative Body and other influential members of the community that the leader's agility in policy matters and oversight was instrumental for the development and strengthening of community networks. This consensus reflected the view that their village head had successfully dispelled the prevalent misconception that most voluntarily appointed village heads in the region lacked the necessary knowledge and skills for rural development due to the absence of formal government training and possessing only minimal educational qualifications, such as a secondary school degree. In this, the Village Consultative Body had endorsed the governance style of the village head, lauding the openness to alternative perspectives, the commitment to regular consultations *(musyawarah)* and the close collaboration with the body to establish the long-term goals of the village.

Yet while there were indications of successful leadership in the village, there were also signs of tension and conflict among lower-level employees, along with accusations that the village head was delegating responsibilities instead of taking personal ownership of them. Despite attempts to frame these issues in diplomatic language, it was apparent that both government workers and citizens were dissatisfied and resentful. One participant, who was enrolled in a government-sponsored technical training programme, expressed frustration at receiving directives from the leader to undertake tasks for which he felt ill-prepared.

> Although our community has made progress and achieved a lot to be proud of, the pressure to exceed expectations can sometimes be overwhelming. Knowing that our work is being closely watched by the village head can be intimidating, particularly when we are unsure of what to do. For instance, in the last training session, I was tasked with leading the session even though my qualifications only qualified me to do so at the staff level. In situations like that where I have to take responsibility, even though it is part of the job, can make me feel like I have failed. (Participant 11, Village Staff)

Another source of discontentment in the village was the perceived exclusivity of frequent meetings for ongoing programmes, which often left lower-level actors, such as heads of neighbourhood units, out of the conversation but still held them responsible with only cursory briefings. While there was widespread approval of the leader's governance, some expressed dissatisfaction with the concentration of power in the hands of a small group.

> It is true that he owes a lot of his success as the new village head to the public support he has received, and his charisma has certainly played a significant role in the success of the village's initiatives. But I still find it frustrating to be excluded from meetings yet still expected to complete the same tasks as everyone else. (Participant 13, Citizen)

In the lower tiers of government in the village, a marked deference to the authority of the village head was observed, which created hesitancy among officials to decline assigned tasks, and some officials felt obligated to comply with directives

due to concern about possible retaliation from the leader. These dynamics were particularly evident in the case of a village-operated sand mine, which faced close scrutiny from the village head's subordinates amid allegations of non-compliance with government regulations.

> Although his ability to engage with external stakeholders was likely a key factor in his appointment as the village head, having power can both be beneficial and dangerous if not used appropriately. For instance, some locals are running a sand mine, even though these operations fall under national jurisdiction and are therefore unethical. Despite our concerns, we are hesitant to speak up as he has not addressed this issue. (Participant 10, Member of the Village Consultative Body)

Under the governance of the current leadership, Blitar's development trajectory was not guided by the collective welfare of its residents, but rather by the subjective ideals of the village head. In effect, the leader's personal assessment took precedence over other considerations when determining the development priorities. Notwithstanding the recognition of Blitar's development achievements, the benefits of this progress were disproportionately concentrated in tourist villages, while village-owned enterprises were comparatively neglected.

> Our village head has been strongly advocating for the utilization of our locally-generated revenue to develop a tourist village. Unfortunately, some of our village-owned businesses have failed and declared bankruptcy, but we still believe that promoting our village as a tourism destination can significantly contribute to our community's development. (Participant 9, Village Secretary)

The case of Blitar's leadership is a double-edged sword, capable of either confirming exceptional leadership and earning respect and admiration from the villagers or being seen as evidence of the negative impact of the leadership style on the village administration, with lower level officials submitting unquestionably to the leader's will. While being recognized for certain praiseworthy qualities, the leadership is clearly experiencing tensions and conflicts as evidenced by dissatisfactions and disagreements among subordinates regarding issues such as unilateral task assignments and exclusion from mandatory meetings. As a result, the inadequacies displayed by the leadership in essential areas can be attributed to the unequal and fragmented development of the Blitar Regency.

Batu City

The leadership and management of Batu City appeared to have arrived at a mutual understanding on a set of developmental metrics, which involved assessing the modernity level of the community and formulating effective strategies for constructing attractive tourist destinations. The tourist area maintained a particular interest, as it was under the direction of the suburb head, who was developing rest areas to bolster suburban incomes and differentiate hamlets based on their distinctive features, such as the 'painting hamlet', which showcased murals that feature the work of local artists. Furthermore, the leadership of Batu was committed to the promotion of local

micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) through training and other forms of economic expansion, with the goal of fully realizing the community's economic potential. While there may be some differences in understanding among the supervisory staff, most of the group exhibited a solid grasp of the leader's stated objectives and development indicators, including the importance of the tourist area, MSME training and rest areas for village incomes.

The suburb head had earned broad recognition and commendation from both residents and subordinates for the collaborative leadership style, which prioritized information sharing and teamwork, leading to the establishment of an authoritative presence in the community and garnering the respect of residents who valued this leader's competence and active participation in community meetings to address pressing issues. The leader's remarkable success in gaining power could be attributed to a well-crafted and executed campaign that strategically emphasized the development of the suburb's tourism industry, as well as the cultivation of positive relationships with the local community. Additionally, it was worth noting that participants often commended the leader's amiable demeanour when interacting with residents and providing updates on ongoing programmes, which further reinforced their high regard within the community. The Village Consultative Body, in unanimous agreement, lauded the leader's proficiency in guiding the community towards progress while prioritizing transparent communication.

> *Bapak* [an honorific for older men] is truly exceptional at what he does, particularly in his habit of reaching out to neighbours every afternoon across the street from his house to ask for feedback on how to improve his programs. When an infectious disease broke out in our community, I remember the Village Consultative Body and *Bapak* engaging in a policy dialogue to address residents' concerns. We had initially faced resistance from some who opposed the idea of isolating the infected person at home, preferring a designated facility. However, we were eventually able to reach an agreement to use a hotel as a self-isolation centre. What was most impressive about our conversation was how *Bapak* brought up reassuring ideas and expressed his commitment to taking care of everything. (Participant 17, Head of the Village Consultative Body)

The overwhelming consensus among participants was that the success of the leader could be attributed, at least in part, to the invaluable role played as 'a conduit in each programme' and 'the frontline guard' in communicating sensitive policies such as increased taxation. In addition, the ability of the leader to influence others had been lauded as a crucial asset in conflict management, exemplified by deft mediation in a dispute between citizens and government workers regarding the distribution of internet packages, a national social safety net for students studying online, which some registered residents had not received due to errors in the system documentation. Similarly, the measure of a leader's reputation among those who regularly participate in community activities and policy dialogues was often evaluated based on adeptness in communicating information to residents in an approachable manner, a sentiment succinctly captured by one participant's perceptive statement.

> In my community, we have frequent *musrenbang* [policy meetings], and I feel that our suburb head is exceptional at guiding and communicating with me and the other

residents. We all gather at the *joglo* [a local social gathering place] every night, drink coffee, and discuss the challenges facing our community. It is our way to connect with others and address important issues while having a good time. (Participant 18, Citizen)

The Batu City administration had shown a strong commitment to various causes, particularly the professional development of its officials and the well-being of its youth. Of particular note were the initiatives designed for the benefit of the city's children and adolescents, which included offering the Suburb Meeting Hall, equipped with Wi-Fi, as a venue for elementary students to engage in self-directed learning, as well as implementing new programmes that cater to the aspirations of young individuals below the age of 17. The dedication of the suburb head to advancing regional growth and development, as well as proactive interventions to effect changes, were mentioned in the training sessions provided to the suburb's civil servants, which garnered widespread acclaim. Some senior participants expressed their confidence in the current leadership in comparison to previous administrations, opining that the targeted training they received under the present administration was more advantageous than the training they underwent in previous governments. A division head in the city government, who continued to enhance the training programmes, attributed the efficacy of the training to the current public leadership when asked what contributed most to the success of the programme.

As a representative of the Batu City Government and the program's overseeing agency, I have noticed that he motivates his staff to join the activities instead of obligating them to participate. This has resulted in a more positive and motivated workforce, which is reflected in the Ministry's index indicating an increase in the suburb's capacity and development. I think his leadership style has contributed positively to our progress, and I hope he can continue leading this endeavour. (Participant 16, Division Head in the Batu City Government)

What can be inferred from Batu's public leadership and its development efforts is how the suburb head has set the goal of becoming a *suri tauladan* (role model) by embedding on an even footing with followers and exhibiting the kind of behaviour that encourages subordinates to follow directives. Through frequent meetings with locals to discuss the programme's performance and solicit suggestions for future enhancements, the suburb head's leadership has not only earned commendations but also empowered the community to have a louder voice in policy discussions and propelled them forward with ease. Consequently, residents and subordinates express unanimity of support for the suburb head's programme orientation and interventions, such as the tourist area and those that aim to boost the local economy and the suburb budget. This is especially the case when the leader prioritizes the development of interpersonal bonds among their followers over attaining arbitrary goals imposed by a higher authority. Importantly, the leader's behaviour of high confidence in making decisions based on exceptional judgment, which has been accompanied by interactions with local residents, has played a central role in the success of the implemented programmes and how it affects regional development and local citizenship.

A Leadership Analysis of Individual Policy Capacity Across Localities

Findings from a cross-case analysis of public leaders' individual policy capacity in the three regions in East Java reveal important narratives as well as commonalities and distinctions in the ways in which they dealt with the challenge of implementing and realizing regional development at varied levels of success.

The examination of the three cases draws attention to a significant disparity in leadership and governance proficiency in understanding policy processes and challenges. In Bangkalan, a deficiency in expertise pertaining to the holistic nature of development has resulted in an imbalanced emphasis on conventional developmental areas. This analytical limitation impedes progress and intensifies tensions among internal stakeholders, showed by the reliance of leaders on higher-ups for directives and lower-level bureaucrats for implementation. Yet, in Blitar, the remarkable analytical ability of the leadership is obvious through the promotion of the village administration and community, along with significant investments in social initiatives. Although this manifestation of aptitude by the leader has the capacity to stimulate advancement and growth, it may not provide a sustainable solution to the region's challenges. The pinnacle of development and analytical acumen is observed in Batu, where the community and leader share a strong sense of unity in formulating and executing development strategies. This collective understanding fosters a more effective and efficient village administration, elevates the leader's status and promotes rapid economic growth and prosperity for the community.

Within the realm of regional development, the three examined cases reveal an array of operational competencies and challenges. While Bangkalan boasts a wealth of educational and healthcare facilities, the management and coordination of development efforts is plagued by inefficiencies, resulting in a slow response to public complaints. On the other hand, in Blitar, the successful implementation of long-term development goals by the village leadership stands as a testament to their notable management and coordination abilities, challenging the common belief that village heads lack the expertise and education necessary to lead effectively. The leadership approach in Batu stands out from the other cases due to its emphasis on building strong relationships and promoting warmth, which enables them to effectively mediate between the state and the people when dealing with complaints related to inadequate public services. The presence of highly capable leaders both within and outside the government in Batu is indicative of its robust operational capacity, which is further enhanced by their proactive approach to personnel management.

Relative to political capacity, the investigation of the three cases demonstrates a significant discrepancy in leadership and governance competence in effectively handling the complexities of policy processes and challenges. While each case presents its own unique set of circumstances, the analysis reveals that the leadership in Bangkalan lacks the necessary expertise to fully comprehend the complex nature of development, resulting in an inability to manage internal stakeholder tensions and difficulties as well as hindering the region's development progress. In the case of Blitar, despite exhibiting impressive analytical and operational capabilities and

possessing a high level of political capacity, ongoing disputes and tensions among lower-level actors undermine its potential, which can be attributed to the leadership's inclination towards arbitrary decision-making and centralization of power. Irrespective of the leadership's proficiency in engaging with external stakeholders and garnering public support, its approach creates power struggles that have the potential to impede and fragment the development process. In contrast, Batu demonstrates exceptional policy capacity, marked by its ability to forge close-knit relationships and engage effectively with the community, resulting in a harmonious environment with minimal internal conflicts. In this way, Batu outperforms Bangkalan and Blitar in governance as its decision-making processes align with the interests of the community, leading to improved communication and a more constructive and optimistic approach towards conflict resolution.

IV. Discussion

Through the lens of individual policy capacity, we have conducted a comparative analysis of public leadership in East Java, Indonesia, revealing different levels of regional development that are deeply intertwined with the rich historical tapestry of the country, infusing the roles and impacts of leaders with profound meaning and contextual significance. As our analysis delves deeper, a significant realization emerges: regional development in East Java, Indonesia is not solely shaped by contemporary factors, but rather stems from a complex interplay between historical influences and the ongoing evolution of policies aimed at reducing economic disparities and promoting the welfare of the population.

Indonesia's firm commitment to promoting regional development is a manifestation of its recognition of the significance of reducing economic disparities between various parts of the country. As the Asian Development Bank (ADB) notes in its report, Indonesia remains plagued by significant inequalities in terms of income, poverty and human development, with the country's most impoverished provinces significantly trailing the most affluent ones (ADB, 2020). In response to the increasing gaps, the government has initiated a series of policies to mitigate the situation, with decentralization emerging as a crucial approach to address this issue. The decentralization policy has bestowed regional administrations with greater decision-making autonomy, enabling them to cater to local demands and improve regional development and the welfare of the population (The World Bank, 2002). This decentralization process, itself influenced by the ebb and flow of historical circumstances, has given rise to a new generation of regional governments, each confronting distinctive developmental opportunities and challenges.

The shift towards decentralization has also led to changes in the leadership structures and competencies required for effective governance at the regional level, enabling local leaders to wield a transformative influence and leading to the optimization of local resources, increased government accountability and greater responsiveness to citizens (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006; Ribot, 2021). The diversification of leadership styles across regions has yielded a multitude of policy approaches, further

shaped the development trajectory of each region and highlighted the importance of adopting a thoughtful approach when evaluating policy outcomes (Fleurke & Willemse, 2004; Holtzappel & Ramstedt, 2009; Isufaj, 2014). While effective governance and capable leadership are essential for success, their mere implementation does not ensure the adequate policies and resources required to achieve community goals (Neo & Chen, 2007), which are subject to an array of factors that transcend standardized strategies. These factors entail a deep comprehension of the local context (Fukuyama, 2013), the capacity to engage with diverse stakeholder groups (King & Cruickshank, 2012) and an unyielding dedication to ongoing learning and growth (Leeuw, 2020). In the case of Indonesia, the process of decentralization and the resulting expansion of regional autonomy necessitates that local leaders remain attentive to the requirements of various stakeholders and demonstrate a deep understanding of the resources required to achieve their policy objectives, thereby highlighting the differences in policy capacities among public leaders and the levels of regional development.

The contrasting regional development brings into focus a significant realization that even the most proficient policy capacity in leadership may fall short in addressing the complexities and constant flux in regional requirements and conditions; that is, it unfolds that leadership success is more than a checklist of competencies. Moreover, merely excelling in all three capacity components does not equate to guaranteed success in leadership; hence, to grasp the essence of being a public leader and the potential impact on policy, a deeper analysis is required. It is essential to move beyond the superficial level considerations of competence and capacity and expand the lens to include contextual factors such as trust in the process of forming close social ties, relational norms of maintaining a positive reputation and interpersonal connections within social networks. Leaders who embed themselves in relational ways, drawing influence from the thoughts and actions of others, epitomize the essence of cultivating strong social bonds with the communities they serve, ultimately enabling them to achieve regional development despite challenging governance circumstances. Through prioritizing a flow of interactions and shifting relations with their community, leaders move away from being automatized actors whose choices are dictated by individual reasoning and beliefs, thus bringing to the forefront the concept of social embeddedness as the decisive success factor for regional development.

The conventional perspective on the confluence of leadership competencies and individual policy capacity often centres around an individualistic outlook that views outcomes and consequences as a product of agency-focused interplay between the actor and the community. Such a perspective, however, disregards the fluid and heterogeneous nature of social bonds, such as friendship and kinship, which are embedded within the context of personal relations that unfold. As it continues, it reveals that leadership competencies and individual policy capacity are not merely the result of the actions of individuals, but rather they are socially embedded within the organizational structures and networks that shape their behaviours, actions and decision-making. Leaders are not solitary actors operating independently; they are instead embedded in complex systems of relationships, norms and networks. Therefore, by acknowledging the interdependence of individuals and the impact

that social relationships can have on leadership competencies and individual policy capacity, leaders can create positive impacts for their communities by capitalizing on broader contexts. After all, individual predispositions such as autonomy and agency centre not only on one's own internalization but also on the amount to which interpersonal and reciprocal social relationships, such as leadership that takes its relational environments into account, are manifested.

V. Conclusion

In our pursuit to deepen understanding, we have explored the dynamics between public leadership and individual policy capacity, bringing attention to the central role of social embeddedness in driving successful regional development. Through an in-depth exploration and comparison of public leadership and individual policy capacity in East Java, Indonesia, our article offers nuanced insights into the inherent constellations of regional development and the many factors that influence its success.

An overarching realization stemming from our analysis is the kaleidoscopic nature of regional development, shaped by a combination of historical influences, evolving policies and contemporary factors, pointing out the necessity of moving beyond a narrow conception and considering the broader context in which it unfolds. Indeed, our findings touch upon the inadequacy of decentralization policies alone in guaranteeing successful regional development, distinguishing the pivotal role of individual policy capacity and the social embeddedness of local leaders. That is, it is through the strength of their social networks, interpersonal relationships and community engagement that collaborative and inclusive approaches to regional development are fostered, so shaping its effectiveness and impact.

Consequently, our research sheds light on the compelling demands for a paradigm shift towards a holistic and synergistic approach to regional development, amplifying the meshing between leadership competencies, individual policy capacity and the very essence of social embeddedness. Embracing and leveraging the interconnectedness among these factors, policymakers and practitioners can chart a new trajectory in crafting and implementing transformative development initiatives that not only yield tangible and sustainable outcomes but also address and tackle the multidimensional needs and ever-evolving challenges distinctive to each region. Importantly, by placing social embeddedness at the core of this endeavour, a dynamic fabric of active participation and inclusive collaboration is woven, empowering local communities and nurturing a lasting legacy of significant impacts.

Undoubtedly, the strengths and limitations of this article have far-reaching implications for both research and practice. The article's capacity to offer perspectives to policymakers and practitioners operating in decentralized regions and communities, while acknowledging the impacts of individual policy capacity and social embeddedness as leadership success factors, empowers them to design and implement more effective and sustainable development initiatives tailored to the particular needs and challenges of their respective regions. Furthermore, the article's emphasis on social embeddedness as an integral element in regional

development fosters a more organic and holistic approach, urging policymakers and practitioners to embrace the entanglements of social networks and interpersonal relationships within local communities.

However, the research's limited sample size, which only covers East Java in Indonesia, raises questions about its generalizability and the potential that it may have overlooked significant external factors, such as social and cultural norms, infrastructure and resources and economic and political conditions that can impact regional development outcomes. Notwithstanding its limitations, this article provides a foundation for future research to address and explore the influence of external factors, offering more refined insights into the complexities of regional development and, in turn, guiding more effective policy and practice.

To advance the knowledge at the intersections of social embeddedness, individual policy capacity and regional development outcomes, future research could consider replicating the methods and findings of this article on a larger scale and in diverse sociopolitical and economic contexts. Moreover, gaining a deeper understanding of the factors that shape regional development requires a better consideration of exogenous variables, including fluctuations in economic conditions and other disruptive events and their potential impacts on regional development. In light of this, further exploration is necessary to appraise the impact of various external elements, including social and cultural norms, infrastructure and resources and institutional frameworks, on regional development. Advanced methodological techniques, such as econometric or spatial analysis, can offer additional insight into the causal relationships between social embeddedness, individual policy capacity and the trajectory of regional development. The resulting understanding of these factors can inform the design and implementation of development interventions that are effective, efficient and sustainable in promoting positive regional development outcomes.

Taking cues from the findings of this article on social embeddedness, individual policy capacity and leadership competencies, policymakers and practitioners can drive equitable and inclusive regional development by designing customized policies and interventions that prioritize community participation and inclusivity. In the end, it is through such intentional efforts that sustainable and thriving outcomes can be achieved not only for local regions, but also for the broader global community.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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