

Participation in Early Childhood Education Toward Global Targets of Sustainable Development

Nur Listiawati, National Research and Innovation Agency, Indonesia
Etty Sofyatiningrum, National Research and Innovation Agency, Indonesia
Simon Sili Sabon, National Research and Innovation Agency, Indonesia
Siswantari, National Research and Innovation Agency, Indonesia
Yendri Wirda, National Research and Innovation Agency, Indonesia

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Abstract

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals ensure that all girls and boys have access to early childhood development, care, and quality pre-primary education by 2030, enabling them to be prepared for primary education. The Indonesian government has implemented policies to attain these targets in line with these objectives. However, the national Gross and Net Enrolment Rate in Early Childhood Education, and School Readiness Rate have not met the expectations. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated early childhood student enrolment decline, posing additional challenges to pre-primary early childhood education participation. This study endeavors to analyse the factors influencing early childhood education participation and examine the efforts made to increase it. Adopting a mixed-method approach, the research was conducted in five districts/cities on the island of Java, which have regional policies on one-year pre-elementary early childhood education. The study involved early childhood education institutions, teachers, and parents as respondents. The findings revealed several factors affecting the level of participation, including inadequate socialization of local regulations regarding one-year pre-primary early childhood education, children attending supplementary courses, more than fifty per cent of parents with low income, suboptimal implementation of early childhood minimum educational standard assistance policy, and limited access to early childhood education in certain villages due to isolation and a lack of qualified teachers. Although early childhood education institutions have made serious efforts to encourage public enrolment, significant obstacles, and challenges remain that need to be addressed and resolved.

Keywords: Participation, Early Childhood Education, Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction

The 1945 Constitution of Indonesia, in Chapter XA on Human Rights, Article 28B (2) states, "Every child has the right to survival, growth, and development, as well as the right to protection from violence and discrimination." Article 28C further mentions, "Every person has the right to develop themselves through the fulfilment of their basic needs, has the right to education, and to benefit from science and technology, arts and culture, for the purpose of improving the quality of their life and the well-being of humanity." Article 31 (2) states, "Every citizen has the right to education" (The 1945 Constitution of Indonesia, 1945). The constitution reflects that since Indonesia's independence, the rights of children to optimal growth and development, as well as access to education, are guaranteed by the law. Indonesia has long upheld equality and justice while preventing any form of discrimination. The opportunity for children to receive an education is made widely available.

The government also enacted a 'nine-year compulsory education' policy from primary school (age 7) to junior high school (age 15) under Government Regulation No. 47 (2008), as an implementation of the Education System Law No. 20 (2003). It means that the government has an obligation to finance basic education without charging fees (OECD/Asian Development Bank, 2015). However, there is no compulsory education regulation targeting preschool children.

Data shows that the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in Early Childhood Education (ECE) was 37.52% in 2020 decreased to 35.59% in 2021, and further decreased to 35.28% in 2022 (BPS, 2023b) and the Net Enrolment Rate in early childhood education remain very low from year to year. The data shows a decrease in the Net Enrolment Rate (NER) of ECE in 2021, followed by another decline in 2022. However, from 2019 to 2022, there has been a narrowing disparity in NER between rural and urban areas, with the NER in urban areas eventually approaching that of rural areas (Fig 1). The School Readiness Rate (SRR) also exhibits a similar pattern, with a decline in the figures in 2021 followed by a further decrease in 2022. Additionally, the SRR has remained around 74% from 2016 to 2022, making it appear challenging to surpass this figure. These conditions are very interesting and need to be analyzed. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation, with a decrease in students enrolling in early childhood education and students dropping out. This is based on data from the Ministry of Education and Culture (Hakim et al., 2020, and Mediana 2021).

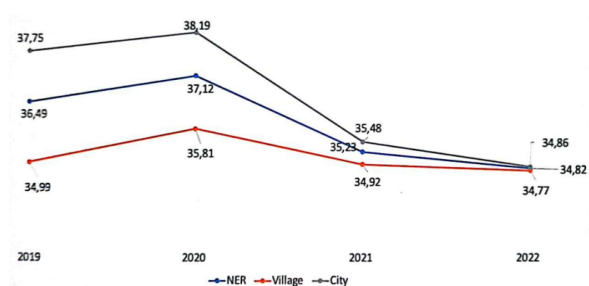


Figure 1: NER from 2019 to 2022
Source: BPS (Agustina et al., 2022)

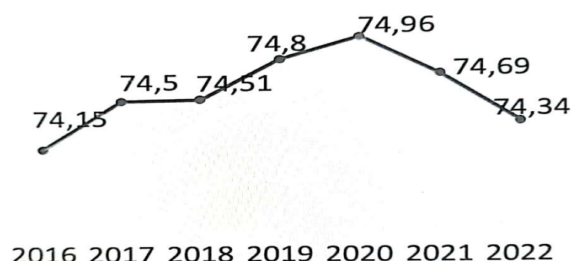


Figure 2: SRR from 2016 to 2022
Source: BPS (Agustina et al., 2022)

Several studies have approached children's participation in early childhood education (ECE) from various angles. Delijeva & Ozola (2023) explored the perspectives of teachers concerning children's participation in ECE practices. Leinonen & Venninen (2012) delved

into children's opportunities to take part in shaping the learning processes within Finnish day-care groups, while Wong et al. (2023) investigated the challenges linked to children's participation in ECE in regional and remote areas of Australia that their findings highlighted the complexity of the issue, underscoring the need for a nuanced and comprehensive policy approach operating at multiple levels, including the family, service, community, and socio-political spheres. Whereas Stevens et al. (2023) discussed the characteristics of ECE provision in low-and middle-income countries that are crucial to support refugee children with limited resources. In contrast to these studies, this research is based on the low Gross Enrolment Rate (GER), Net Enrolment Rate (NER), and School Readiness Rate (SRR) data. Our objective is to analyze the factors that influence participation in early childhood education and assess the initiatives aimed at enhancing it.

Research Methods

This research adopts a mixed-method approach. It is conducted in five districts/cities on the island of Java, which have regional policies on one-year pre-elementary early childhood education (Serang City, Pekalongan City, Banyumas Regency, Batu City, and Purworejo Regency) in 2021. The research involved ECE principals, teachers, and parents as respondents. Data was collected using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with principals and teachers in the 5 locations, an online questionnaire through 2 types of Google Forms for ECE institutions and parents of ECE students, and a document study. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data cannot be precisely quantified and need to be understood and categorized by themes or groups (Soiferman, 2010). Qualitative data can be analysed using the inductive reasoning approach to describe the problems based on the facts. This approach analyses specific information to broader generalizations and theories. Inductive research is essential for progressing our understanding and formulating new theories (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018).

Results and Discussion

1. Characteristics of Parents as Participants

There are 1251 ECE institutions and 7419 parents as Google Forms participants in this research. They came from almost every province but mostly from Central Java Province. The characteristics of parents as participants can be seen in the following table.

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Highest educational attainment		
Primary school	964	13%
Junior high school	1822	24.6%
Senior high school	3075	41.4%
Higher education	1490	20.08%
Profession		
Non-working housewives	3036	40.9%
Merchant	80	1.08%
Government and Private employee	1166	15.72%
Farmer	262	3.5%
Teacher	112	1.51%
Village official	17	0.2%
State-owned enterprise employee	20	0.27%
Odds jobs or miscellaneous	1551	20.91%
Entrepreneur	961	12.95%

Table 1: Characteristics of parents as participants

2. Factors Influencing Participation in Early Childhood Education and Solutions

The decrease in participation in early childhood education during the pandemic primarily due to parents postponing their child's enrolment during the COVID-19 pandemic (72.10%) is seen as a common occurrence. However, sending children to courses during the pandemic (16%) with the risk of them getting infected and forcing them to continue their literacy development has become a long-standing issue. We highlight this as one of the crucial factors that reduce children's participation in early childhood education regarding the understanding of the community and educational institutions educators on early childhood development and their learning needs (Fig. 3).

a. Synergy in Learning

Parents prefer their children to engage in in-person learning because they may lack the time or expertise to assist their children in remote learning. Their decision is influenced by their eagerness for their child to acquire reading skills promptly, driven by the prerequisites of certain elementary schools that expect students to possess reading abilities before admission. This fosters a belief among parents that children should master reading as part of their early childhood education. While in ECE children are introduced to early literacy, introducing them with numbers and letters and learning early literacy through play. Providing them with a foundation for mastering reading skills, and the mastering reading continues in elementary school. This is related to the readiness of children to learn in elementary school.

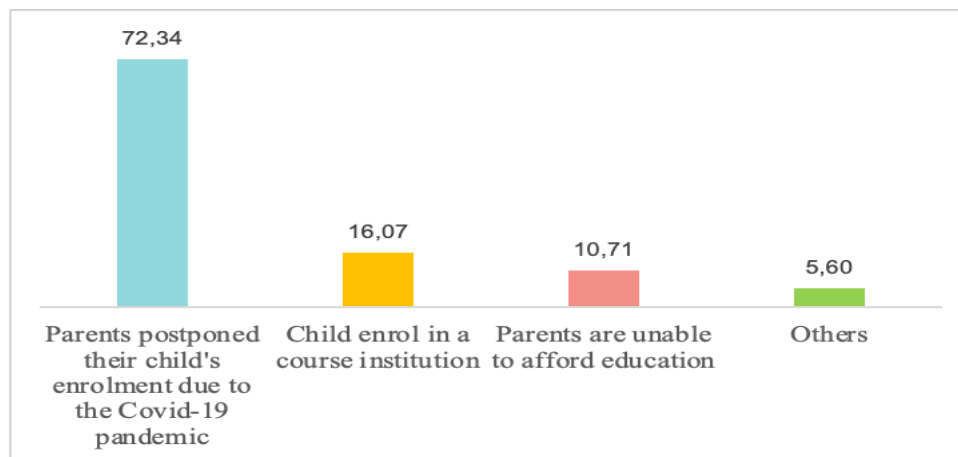


Figure 3: Factors influencing participation in ECE

The notion of school readiness has a broader scope. Pangestuti et al. (2019) referred to some previous researchers who concluded that school readiness can be achieved through transition programs involving children, families, and schools, it is crucial for ensuring that children feel comfortable when they start school. The 2002 mission statement of the United Nations World Fit for Children (WFFC) provides a compelling illustration of contemporary notions of school readiness. It underscores the significance of ensuring that children have a strong foundation in life, supported by a nurturing and secure environment that allows them to not only survive but also thrive, both physically and mentally. This entails ensuring their physical well-being, mental alertness, emotional security, social competence, and capacity for learning (Britto, 2012). The goals set by the WFFC emphasize the essential role of a caring, safe, and stimulating atmosphere in fostering the comprehensive development of young children not only for the capacity of academic competency such as reading. Developing an atmosphere that is comfortable for children to learn is a must and needs collaboration between family, school, and community.

There are regulations in place that prohibit conducting tests prior to the admission of new students (Government Regulation No. 17 Year 2010 on the Management and Implementation of Education, 2010 and Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No.1 on Admission of New Students in Kindergarten, Elementary School, Junior High School, Senior High School, and Vocational High School, 2021). Article 25 of the second regulation stipulates that in the selection process for New Student Admissions, written exams or academic ability tests should not be used. Although this regulation has been in place for a long time, it has not been consistently followed. Because of the problem, in 2021 the government launched a coordination program between Early Childhood Education (ECE) and elementary schools to create synergy in learning, with the hope that elementary schools would not administer reading tests to children entering primary school.

b. Financial Constraints

In Figure 3 we can also see that more than 10% of parents have financial constraints to educate their children, as Early Childhood Education (ECE) is not compulsory, and as a result, parents must fund their children's education. Only a limited number of ECE institutions are government-owned, with the majority being privately or community-owned and self-financed. We distributed a Google Form survey randomly to various Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions for parents or guardians of students to fill out. Of the total participants of parents in the survey, more than 50% indicated that their income was less

than one million, which means they are well below the minimum income threshold for their region. The regional minimum wage in the province where most respondents (94,11%) live ranges from 1,805,000 rupiahs to 2,810,025 rupiahs (BPS, 2023a) in 2021. It refers to the legally mandated minimum wage that is set at a regional or local level, considering the cost of living and economic conditions specific to that region.

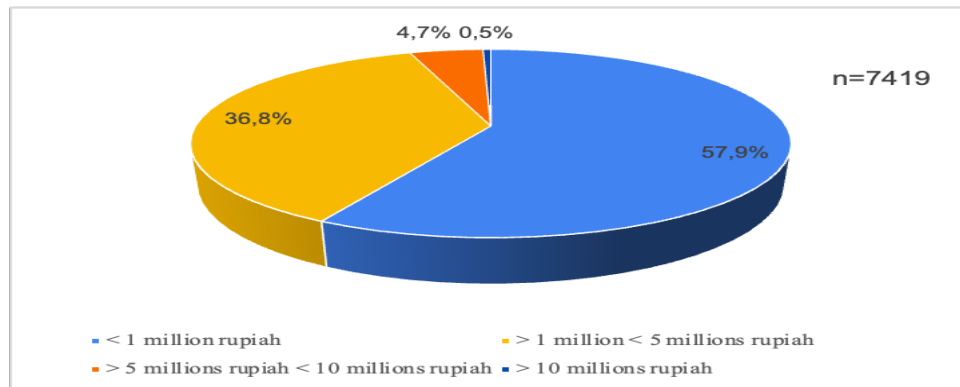


Figure 4: Parents' income

The government launched the policy for providing minimum education standards for helping children from financially disadvantaged families. The minimum educational standard (SPM) is the basic service quality. It is a measure of the quantity and quality of essential goods and services, as well as their minimal provision within the realm of basic education services. In this context, the measurement is conducted regarding the assistance provided to meet minimal service standards. Each student is provided with 6 brand-new drawing books and a new set of coloring materials containing at least 12 colors per semester (stated in Education and Culture Minister Regulation No 32 of 2018, Article 9 verse 2).

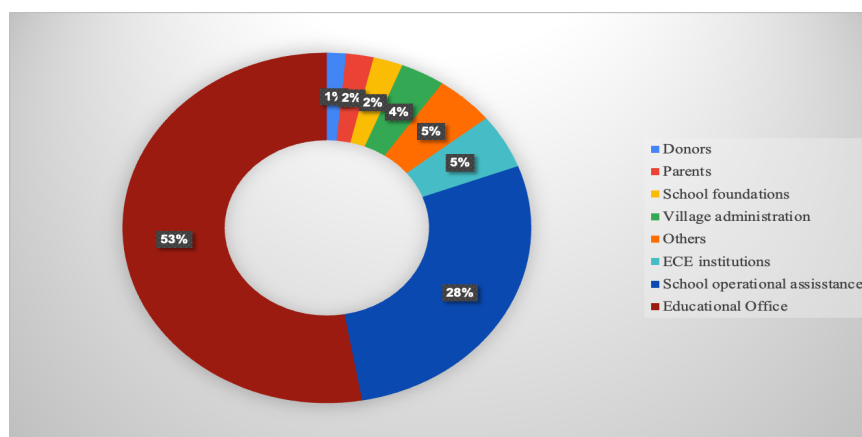


Figure 5: Percentage of aid provided by SPM in the form of coloring tools and drawing books

The local government provides minimal education assistance to students whose parents are financially disadvantaged, and 57.4% of ECE institutions where the children enrolled do not receive it. On the right side (Figure 5), we can see that various parties have contributed to meeting children's needs for these minimal educational standards. This means various parties are committed to ensuring the continuity of early childhood education. The meeting percentage of SPM underscores the local government's commitment to early childhood education, which is primarily their responsibility.

In 2022 the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 32 of 2018 concerning Minimum Service Technical Standards for Education is deemed no longer in line with the legal requirements of the community regarding minimum service technical standards, and it is replaced with a more comprehensive regulation (Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation Number 32 of 2022 on Minimum Technical Standards for Education Services, 2022). Besides the fulfilment of student participation and equality by collecting data on children aged 5-6 years old children who are not yet enrolled in school and raising awareness about the importance of one-year preschool education, paragraph 3 of article 18 outlines various activities aimed at ensuring student participation and equal distribution. These activities include providing financial aid to economically disadvantaged students.

c. Limited Access to ECE Institutions in Rural Areas

Another issue that contributed to the low participation in ECE was in Purworejo, one of the regencies that has been studied, there are 5.54% villages from a total of 469 villages that haven't established ECE institutions. These villages, located in remote areas, don't have qualified ECE teachers with bachelor's degrees (as the qualification of ECE teachers). This situation has also affected the progress of the 1-year pre-primary education program. Regarding this, the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Regulation No. 32 (2022) in Paragraph 3 Article 18 stated to expand Early Childhood Education services in villages, offering educational services in areas with capacity shortages, and extending education to regions classified as remote, outermost, and underdeveloped. However, this regulation has just been issued and requires a considerable amount of time and appropriate resources to implement it.

Another reason mentioned by the chairman of HIMPAUDI (Association of Early Childhood Educators and Professionals in Indonesia) is the rapid turnover of officials in their province. This turnover has led to situations where ECE initiatives initiated by local Early Childhood Education and Care providers have not had the opportunity to fully develop, as new officials frequently replace them.

3. Initiatives Enhancing Participation in ECE

Local government leaders have taken significant steps to increase participation in ECE, especially one year before elementary school. They have issued official decrees emphasizing the importance of ECE one year before primary education based on central government policy (Government Regulation No. 2 of 2018 on Minimum Service Standards, 2019; Iswahyuningsih et al., 2018). The Department of Education in the city and regency has established a dedicated team for the dissemination of these decrees, outlining specific targets for the dissemination process and collaborating with various partners. Additionally, local governments have allocated funds to support ECE initiatives including promoting the importance of ECE, enhancing the skills of educators, and providing resources to ECE institutions. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the socialization efforts, and budget reallocation to address pandemic-related challenges. This resulted in inadequate socialization for the decrees.

There were 93.37% of ECE institutions have socialization programs or activities aimed at encouraging the community to enroll their children in ECE one year before elementary school as well. The ECE institutions conduct socialization in various ways (Figure 6) with

each ECE typically employs more than one method. A teacher in the city of Serang stated that they collect data on households with children aged 5-6 who are not yet attending school, and then carry out socialization about the importance of early childhood education and care for their children who are in their golden ages (0-6 years old) by visiting homes. Parents cannot guide their children due to their limited competencies and time. Some parents with low economic conditions have expressed their inability to enroll their children in ECE due to financial constraints. They opt to directly enroll their children in elementary school because it does not impose monthly fees.

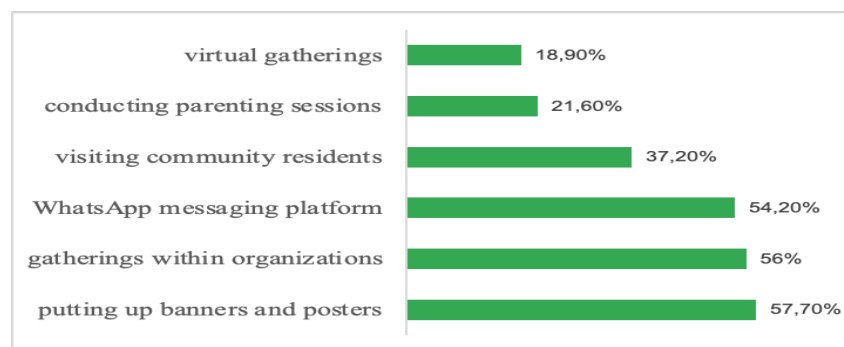


Figure 6: Various ways of socialization by ECE institutions on the importance of ECE

Meanwhile, the completion of one year of compulsory preschool education has been advocated by the UN through the Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to ensure that by 2030, all children, both boys and girls, have access to quality early childhood development and care, as well as quality pre-primary education, so that they are ready for further education. The indicator for this is the level of participation in organized learning measures by the Adjusted Net Attendance Rate or ANAR (Kementerian PPN/Bappenas et al., 2020). The ANAR which is measured by the number of 6-year-old children enrolled in early childhood education during a specific period added by the number of 6-year-old children enrolled in elementary school during a specific period divided by the total population of 6-year-old children during the same period, shows a different pattern compared to other measurement methods (GER, NER, and SRR). During the pandemic year 2020, participation declined, as it did in 2021. However, in 2022, following the pandemic, participation increased significantly. With this very positive trend, Indonesia is optimistic about achieving the SDG target by 2030 both for boys and girls aged 6 (Figure 7).

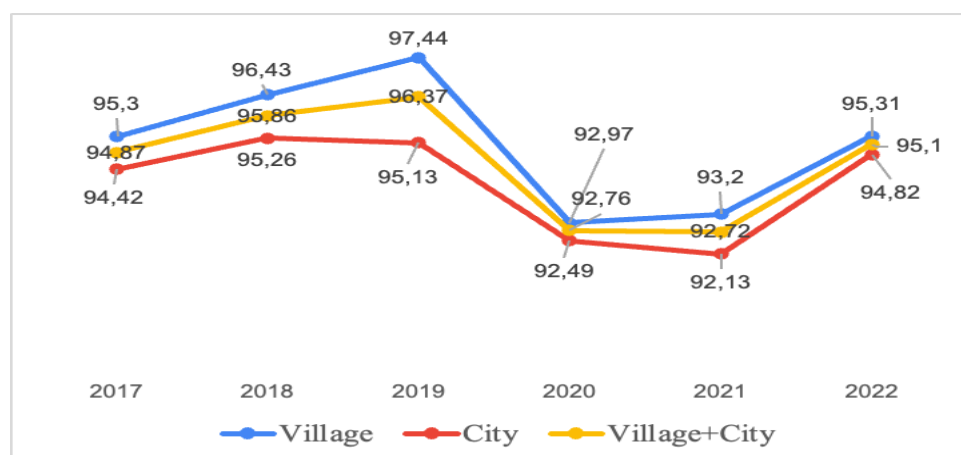


Figure 7: Children's participation in organized learning
Source: BPS (2020)

With a high ANAR achievement, the government cannot be complacent because the calculation of ANAR is significantly different from the calculation of GER or NER, making the task for the government to increase community participation in ECE quite challenging and complex. Especially when it is associated with poverty, which can increase the prevalence of stunting in Indonesia.

Conclusions

The main factors affecting participation rates in one-year pre-primary education due to parents delaying enrolment in pre-primary education because of the pandemic; opting to send their children to tutoring centers that relate to educators, especially in primary school, and community understanding of school readiness and early childhood development and learning needs; facing financial constraints that make it challenging to support their children's education; the policy for providing minimum education standards to young children is not being implemented effectively; limited access to early childhood education in certain villages due to isolation and a lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate socialization because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In response to the challenges related to ECE participation, the government has initiated a series of strategic actions. These measures encompass provincial policies mandating the prioritization of early childhood education one year before primary education, the transition of ECE to primary school programs, the expansion of ECE services in rural areas, the provision of educational services in regions facing resource limitations, and the extension of education to remote, underserved, and underdeveloped areas. Additionally, they include the introduction of support programs for economically disadvantaged families. Nevertheless, it is essential to closely oversee and assess the implementation of these regulations.

The Participation Rate in Organized Learning saw a substantial increase in 2022. This development instils optimism and assures the government of Indonesia that the SDG's 2030 target, ensuring access to quality early childhood development and pre-primary education for all girls and boys to prepare them for primary education, will be met. It's essential to emphasize that this progress should not overshadow the need for significant improvements in GER, NER, and SRR, not only in terms of quantity but also quality.

Some implications from this research include: (1) Assess the achievements and challenges associated with the transition movement from ECE to elementary school, specifically the elimination of readiness test on reading, to gauge the effectiveness of the implementation of the policy, (2) Develop strategies for monitoring the overall effectiveness of the program aimed at ensuring a successful transition from ECE to elementary school, focusing on identifying key performance indicators and data collection methods, (3) Investigate the challenges faced by local governments in meeting the minimum service standard of ECE for economically disadvantage communities, as per the minister of education, culture, research and technology No. 32 of 2022, and propose potential solutions for establishing high-quality ECE services, (4) Explore methods to ensure an equitable distribution of teachers, especially in remote areas with limited resources, and outline the measures that village administrations and the government can take to facilitate this distribution, and (5) Examine educational and resource-based initiatives that empower communities to harness their region's potential and become self-sufficient in addressing poverty, and outline strategies for effective implementation of these initiatives.

While most respondents originate from a single province, this situation presents both strengths and limitations. On the positive side, it enables us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of cases within that specific provincial context. However, a drawback is that this focus constrains our ability to delve into cases in other locations in greater depth, primarily due to the limited availability of respondent data in those areas.

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Contact email: nurl012@brin.go.id