

The Participation Gap in Indonesian Regional Development and Democracy

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Abstract

Community participation is widely seen as essential to regional development and local democracy in Indonesia, yet its quality stays uneven across the development cycle. This article examines the participation gap, the tendency for citizen involvement to cluster at planning and fade during implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Using a library research method, it thematically analyses Indonesian studies published between 2021 and 2025, read alongside classic participation theory. Participation proves strongest in planning forums such as Musrenbang but often stays symbolic, since citizen input rarely reshapes technical priorities, and it falls sharply at monitoring and evaluation, the stages that lack a forum of their own. The gap is therefore structural rather than a matter of low public awareness. To narrow it, the article recommends publishing the fate of every proposal and building a standing channel for participatory monitoring and evaluation, so that participation carries influence at each stage.

Keywords: Community participation; Regional development; Local democracy; Musrenbang; Governance

1. Introduction

Regional development in Indonesia is meant to raise community welfare by making the best use of available resources. It covers physical infrastructure, but also the quality of human resources, the local economy, and public services. Regional autonomy changed how this work is carried out. Development is no longer a centrally controlled, top-down affair, and citizens are now treated as actors who can voice aspirations, give input, and watch over implementation rather than as passive recipients of its benefits (Fridiyanti & Kurniawan, 2023; Sabrina, 2022). Decentralization gives local governments room to set priorities that fit local needs, and it gives citizens more space to take part in local decisions (Hutabarat et al., 2022).

Community participation has become a central theme in development studies, public administration, and public policy. It usually refers to the active involvement of individuals and groups in decisions that affect the public interest, and it runs across planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation

(Fauzi et al., 2023; Siregar et al., 2023). Many writers also treat participation as a measure of democratic quality, since a healthy democracy rests on continuous civic involvement and not on elections alone (Sepiyah et al., 2022). In Indonesia this involvement is built into formal channels such as the Musrenbang, public consultations, and joint community activities (Purwaningsih, 2022; Saputri & Simbolon, 2023).

The reality is more uneven. Recent studies report that citizen involvement is plentiful, and often required, at the planning stage, yet it frequently turns symbolic, so that attendance does not bring real influence over decisions (Akbar et al., 2020; Arwan S et al., 2025). Involvement also tends to fall away during implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, which leaves citizens active at the start of the development cycle and largely absent at its end (Cahyani & Sukmana, 2023; Martini, 2020; Zainal & Rifdan, 2022). This article calls that pattern the participation gap. The gap matters because it blunts the very benefits, both developmental and democratic

(Yandra, 2017 dan 2023), that participation is supposed to deliver.

Several conditions deepen the gap. For individual citizens, weak political literacy and poor access to public information breed passivity and confusion about how to raise concerns (Alfiyani & Prihatmoko, 2023; Padilah, Fayuni, et al., 2023). At the institutional level, forums are often run as a formality, local elites and officials keep a firm hold on priorities and resources, and weak follow-up means that citizen proposals seldom become funded programs (Arwan S et al., 2025; Pandawa et al., 2025). As these problems pile up, public trust in planning declines, a trend traced by a recent review of twenty years of regional development planning in Indonesia (Wajdy et al., 2025).

Writing on community participation in Indonesia is plentiful, but most of it takes the form of single-site case studies. Few works pull recent evidence together to look at the participation gap itself. The term has been used before. The term has been used before, applied to the unequal distribution of political voice across social strata, asking which groups take part in politics and which do not (Dalton, 2017). The present article uses the term in another sense, namely the unevenness of involvement across planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation within one participatory system. Both meanings concern the question of whose voice counts, but the practical implication differs. A gap based on social status calls for widening access to channels that already exist. A gap based on stages calls for creating channels at points where none are available. Evidence from outside Indonesia suggests the second question receives less attention. A systematic review of 69 studies on public participation in local authority planning found that active participation, the only level at which citizens help shape decisions, was the least studied of the three levels it identified (Abas et al., 2023). This article works toward that synthesis

through a review of mostly recent Indonesian scholarship from 2021 to 2025, read alongside the classic theory of participation. It asks how citizens take part at each stage of regional development and what their involvement contributes, how participation relates to the strength of local democracy, which factors make participation effective or hollow, and why involvement is so uneven across the development cycle, together with what might even it out.

2. Theoretical Perspective

2.1 The Concept of Community Participation

Community participation refers to the active involvement of individuals and groups in decisions that affect the public interest, running across planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Siregar et al., 2023). The ladder of citizen participation remains the central reference for judging its quality (Arnstein, 1969). The ladder ranges from non-participation, through degrees of tokenism such as informing and consultation, to forms of citizen power such as partnership and citizen control, and it insists that genuine participation gives citizens real influence rather than a merely procedural presence. Read against the ladder, many Indonesian forums sit at the consultation or formality rungs and seldom climb toward partnership (Jocom et al., 2021).

2.2 Participation in Development

Participatory development treats communities as the main subjects of development rather than its passive objects, so that citizens help identify problems, frame solutions, and carry out programmes (Chambers, 1997). Because residents usually understand local social, economic, and environmental conditions best, their involvement helps target real needs (Fauzi et al., 2023). Beyond improving the fit of policy, participation builds a sense of ownership: when residents contribute labour and ideas,

costs fall and people are readier to maintain what has been built (Ahmad & Taryono, 2021; Dulkiah et al., 2023).

Recent work has shifted the discussion from whether communities should be involved toward the question of where in the process involvement actually occurs. A review of 69 studies from 39 countries grouped public participation into three levels, namely access to information, consultation, and active participation (Abas et al., 2023). Access to information dominated at 57%, consultation accounted for 23%, and active participation, the only level at which citizens help shape decisions, appeared in 20% of the studies. The same review notes that local planning consists of five stages, namely input, planning, implementation, monitoring, and response, and that fair participation calls for involvement across most of those stages rather than at the beginning alone. Participatory development theory therefore leaves a question unanswered. The theory establishes that communities should be treated as subjects of development rather than objects, but it says little about how that position is maintained once a plan has been approved.

2.3 Local Democracy and Governance

At the local level, participation is also read as a measure of democratic quality, since a healthy democracy rests on continuous civic involvement and not on elections alone (Damanik et al., 2024; Sepiyah et al., 2022). It is closely tied to good governance: by opening decisions to citizens, it pushes government toward transparency and accountability and makes the misuse of public budgets harder (Padilah, Alamri, et al., 2023; Syam et al., 2021). In this sense participation functions as a form of social control that strengthens, rather than merely accompanies, local democratic practice.

3. Method

This study uses a library research method, also called a literature review, as its

main way of gathering and analyzing material. Library research examines and compares the literature relevant to a topic in order to build a full picture of the concepts, theories, and earlier findings that bear on it (Hartaman et al., 2023; Sabrina, 2022). The method suits the aim here, which is to gather scattered empirical findings into a single account of community participation in Indonesian regional development and local democracy, and it is a recognized approach for review articles.

The material is secondary and comes from credible sources: peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government policy documents, and reports from research institutions. Three criteria guided the selection. The first was relevance to community participation, regional development, and local democracy. The second was academic credibility, with priority given to peer-reviewed and indexed outlets. The third was recency, with a focus on work published between 2021 and 2025 and only a few older sources kept where the theory called for them.

Analysis was qualitative and thematic. Each source was read and coded, its findings sorted into recurring themes, and convergent and divergent results compared across studies (Draci & Velçani, 2023). Special attention went to the point in the development cycle where participation was said to be strong or weak, and to the personal and institutional factors tied to those patterns. The review does not add up the various quantitative figures, since the underlying studies measure them in different ways. It works instead from the qualitative direction of the evidence and ties each finding back to the study that produced it. This reading brings out the patterns, tensions, and gaps in the literature and shapes them into one interpretation of the participation gap.

Of the sources meeting these criteria, four report community participation separately for

each stage of the development cycle and therefore permit direct stage-by-stage comparison; these are presented in Table 1. The remaining sources inform the thematic discussion but do not disaggregate participation by stage.

4. Result and Discussion

The literature suggests that community participation does a great deal to shape the success of regional development and the strength of local democracy, though its contribution depends on where and how citizens are involved. Since this is a library study, the findings below synthesize earlier work rather than report new data. The discussion follows the four questions raised above: the forms and role of participation, its link with local democracy, the factors behind it, and its unevenness across the stages of development.

4.1 Forms and Role of Community Participation in Regional Development

The literature usually sorts participation into four forms that match the stages of development: planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Fauzi et al., 2023). The point of the typology is that citizens are actors throughout the process and not only its beneficiaries. In planning, the Musrenbang is the main channel through which communities raise aspirations and shape priorities from the village up to the district (Purwaningsih, 2022; Saputri & Simbolon, 2023). Case work supports this. A study of community participation in the Blangsinga tourism village found involvement concentrated in the planning and implementation stages, sustained by the village government and outside partners (Martini, 2020).

Attending a planning forum, however, is not the same as shaping its outcome. A 2025 study of data-based planning at the Sidoarjo planning agency found wide variation in the quality of participation. Much of what citizens

contribute amounts to requests for physical projects with little analysis of need, the more strategic ideas rarely surface, and public input does not always shift the technical priorities (Arwan S et al., 2025). During implementation, participation usually shows up as mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) and direct work on public facilities. This lowers costs and, just as important, builds a sense of ownership over what is created (Ahmad & Taryono, 2021; Dulkiah et al., 2023; Pertiwi, 2023).

4.2 Community Participation and the Strengthening of Local Democracy

Judged against the ladder of citizen participation, the Indonesian evidence clusters at the lower rungs (Arnstein, 1969). Attendance at Musrenbang satisfies the requirement to consult, but consultation is the rung classed as tokenism precisely because it confers voice without power, and studies of local forums find few that climb toward partnership or citizen control (Jocom et al., 2021). The Sidoarjo case makes the distinction concrete: residents attend, submit proposals, and are recorded as participants, yet the technical priorities that emerge are set elsewhere (Arwan S et al., 2025). This is participation as procedure rather than as influence.

The democratic cost follows directly. Where participation carries real weight, it operates as social control, pressing local government toward transparency and making the misuse of public budgets harder (Padilah, Alamri, et al., 2023; Syam et al., 2021). Where it is symbolic, that pressure disappears while its appearance remains, and citizens revert to being objects of development rather than its subjects (Chambers, 1997). Several studies therefore read the substantive level of participation, not the mere existence of forums, as the better indicator of local democratic quality (Damanik et al., 2024; Sepiyah et al., 2022).

4.3 Factors Influencing Community Participation

The literature points repeatedly to two kinds of factors, one personal and one institutional. On the personal side, weak political literacy leaves many citizens unsure of their rights and roles, which feeds passivity, while limited access to information about programs and forums makes things worse (Alfiyani & Prihatmoko, 2023; Padilah, Fayuni, et al., 2023). On the institutional side, how open a forum is, whether local leaders support it, and how far citizens trust the government all shape who takes part and how willingly (Zein & Septiani, 2021).

Recent case work fills in the picture of what holds participation back. A 2025 study of community-based development in Malinau Regency found participation fairly strong overall, yet hemmed in by several forces working together: social ones such as citizen capacity and awareness, cultural ones, economic ones such as poverty and thin funding, and political ones such as inconsistent government commitment, all set against the hard geography of frontier and underdeveloped areas (Pandawa et al., 2025). Participation, in other words, grows out of the meeting between what citizens can do and a system that either opens space for them or closes it.

4.4 The Participation Gap Across Development Stages

Table 1. Stage-by-Stage Patterns of Community Participation in Recent Indonesian Studies

Study	Setting	Method	Planning	Implementation	Monitoring & Evaluation	Utilization of Results
Merry et al. (2025)	Kampung Mandiri Jaya, Mimika	Quantitative, Likert scale (n=83)	84.3%	86%	74.4%	89.6%
Maira & Yulianti (2025)	Nagari Muara Kiawai, West Pasaman	Qualitative	Weak in decision-making	Fairly active	Weak, single year-end review, not open to all	Residents use and maintain results
Hombing & Nur R. (2025)	Kelurahan Parhorasan Nauli, Pematangsiantar	Document analysis	138 proposals submitted, 91 accommodated	Dominated by physical works	47 proposals unaccommodated, no tracking mechanism	Not assessed

Study	Setting	Method	Planning	Implementation	Monitoring & Evaluation	Utilization of Results
Cahyani & Sukmana (2023)	Sidoarjo	Qualitative	Highest involvement	Moderate	Lowest involvement	Not reported

The studies gathered in Table 1 measure participation in different ways, and their figures cannot be added together or averaged. What they share is a direction. Where involvement is measured in numbers, the monitoring and evaluation stage scores lowest among the stages assessed. Where it is described in words, the same stage is the one reported as thin, closed, or absent. The exact emphasis shifts from place to place, but the monitoring and evaluation stage is consistently the weakest link. The pattern holds even in settings where participation is high overall, which suggests the gap is not simply a symptom of weak involvement but something built into the process itself.

Problems in how the forums themselves are run make the gap worse. An SDG-based evaluation of Musrenbang at the village level found the forum dominated by local elites who shaped both who was invited and what was decided, leaving ordinary citizens with limited deliberative space and producing a mismatch between community needs and the priorities that emerged (Akbar et al., 2020). On a wider canvas, a systematic review of twenty years of regional development planning pointed to overlapping administrative procedures and falling public trust in the process (Wajdy et al., 2025). The irony is that monitoring and evaluation are the stages that decide whether development goes to plan and delivers, so neglecting them strips participation of its oversight role.

4.5 Explaining the Participation Gap

The preceding sections describe the gap. This section asks why it takes the shape it does. Read across the studies reviewed, the pattern is not a steady decline from the beginning of the development cycle to its end. It is more specific than that. Where participation has been measured stage by

stage, involvement stays high wherever a formal channel exists and drops only where such a channel is missing.

The clearest illustration comes from the case in Kampung Mandiri Jaya, where participation was scored for each stage. The scores do not fall in a straight line toward the end of the cycle. Planning reached 84.3 percent and implementation 86 percent, both very high, and the use of results scored highest of all at 89.6 percent, while monitoring and evaluation trailed at 74.4 percent (Merry et al., 2025). The lowest score is not the final stage. Enjoying the results scored higher than planning did. What sets monitoring and evaluation apart is not its position in the cycle but its lack of a forum of its own. Planning has the *Musrenbang*. Implementation has *gotong royong*. Enjoying the results requires no organised occasion at all. Monitoring and evaluation, by contrast, depend on a mechanism that is rarely provided, and participation falls exactly there.

This reading also fits the qualitative studies. In Nagari Muara Kiawai, evaluation happened once a year, at the close of the budget cycle, and was not opened to the wider community (Maira & Yuliarti, 2025). In the *Musrenbang* of Kelurahan Parhorasan Nauli, most proposals were accommodated, but no mechanism existed to track what happened to them afterward, and citizens were left without feedback on those that were set aside (Hombing & Nur R, 2025). In Kecamatan Siantar Martoba, communication ran one way and technocratic language kept ordinary residents at a distance, so that attendance did not translate into influence (Fajrina et al., 2025). Across these settings the mechanism is the same. Participation appears where an institution asks for it and thins out where no institution does.

The reason for this pattern is easier to see through the civic voluntarism model. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady hold that people take part when they are able to, when they want to,

and when someone asks them (Verba et al., 1995, as cited in Dalton, 2017). The first two conditions concern the citizen. The third concerns the system. Planning forums issue that invitation. Monitoring and evaluation, in most Indonesian localities, do not. When no one asks, involvement does not follow, however capable or willing residents may be. The gap at the downstream stages is therefore not mainly a matter of low political literacy or weak public awareness, the factors named in Section 4.3. Those factors matter, but they cannot be the whole story, because the same residents who are said to lack awareness turn out in force wherever a forum is held. What is missing downstream is not the citizen but the channel.

Seen this way, the gap is structural rather than attitudinal. It is built into the design of the participatory system, which concentrates its formal occasions at the front of the development cycle and provides almost nothing at the back. Narrowing it therefore depends less on changing citizens than on changing the design. Adding another planning forum does little, because planning is already the stage that works. What is missing is an equivalent occasion downstream, a standing channel through which citizens can follow a proposal from approval to delivery and register what they find. The absence of that channel, more than any deficit in the community, is what keeps monitoring and evaluation the weakest link in the cycle.

4.6 Implications for Regional Development

Pulling the threads together, stronger participation brings three gains. It improves the quality of policy, because decisions track what citizens actually need (De Nisa, 2024; Kusmayadi et al., 2024). It shores up the legitimacy and durability of programs, since people who feel heard are readier to accept and maintain what gets built (Dulkiah et al., 2023). And it makes governance more transparent and accountable (Damanik et al., 2024). A recent Scopus-indexed study of participatory

development in environmentally conscious villages draws a similar link between steady community involvement and more sustainable results (Syamsiyah et al., 2025).

The real task, then, is not to multiply forums but to make them count, giving citizens genuine influence at every stage and not least in the monitoring and evaluation that have been left aside. Narrowing the gap means treating attendance as a starting point rather than the goal, and backing it with better political literacy, open public information, stronger community institutions, and clear follow-up that turns citizen input into action.

4.7 Limitations

This review carries three limitations. First, it relies on secondary material, so its findings are bounded by what the underlying studies chose to measure and report. Second, only four of the reviewed studies disaggregate participation by stage, and only one of these is quantitative, so the stage-by-stage pattern described here rests on a narrow evidentiary base and should be treated as a hypothesis for testing rather than an established regularity. Third, the studies come from diverse settings and use incompatible instruments, which rules out any pooled estimate of participation levels. Future work could address these limits through multi-site studies applying a common instrument across all stages of the development cycle.

5. Conclusions

This review has argued that community participation lies at the heart of successful regional development and a stronger local democracy in Indonesia, yet a persistent participation gap keeps that promise from being met. Four findings emerge from the studies examined. First, participation takes different shapes across the stages of development, and its contribution depends on where and how citizens are involved. Second, how substantive the participation is tracks closely with the quality of local democracy, so that forums resting at the rungs of tokenism

produce attendance without influence. Third, personal factors such as political literacy and institutional factors such as elite dominance work together to shape involvement, but neither alone accounts for the pattern. Fourth, involvement concentrates at the stages that have a formal channel and falls away at monitoring and evaluation, which in most localities have none. The problem named at the outset, the symbolic and uneven character of participation, holds up as the main barrier to participatory development.

What matters most is the quality of participation, not its sheer quantity. Forums like the Musrenbang are common, but attendance rarely becomes real influence over priorities, and citizen involvement falls away at the very stage where oversight matters most. Where participation is substantive and lasts through the whole cycle, the literature ties it to better policy, firmer legitimacy, more open and accountable governance, and more durable results.

Because the gap is built into the design of the participatory system rather than into the community, narrowing it calls for changes to that design. Three steps follow from the findings. In the short term, local governments could require that the fate of each Musrenbang proposal be published and returned to the community as feedback, so that attendance carries a visible consequence. In the medium term, a standing channel for participatory monitoring and evaluation could be established, giving the downstream stages the kind of forum that planning already enjoys. As a direction for further research, comparative studies over time would help show how the gap narrows in particular settings, and the design and testing of practical tools would help keep participation substantive at every stage of regional development.

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