

The Politics of Population Control: Family Planning and Poverty Alleviation in West Aceh, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT - This study investigates the political dynamics of population control in West Aceh Regency and their influence on local poverty reduction efforts. Using a qualitative case study approach in the Johan Pahlawan and Meureubo sub-districts, the research collected primary data through in-depth interviews with 24 purposively selected informants—including health officials, family planning cadres, community leaders, and couples of reproductive age—alongside field observations and document analysis. Thematic content analysis was employed to identify patterns related to service access, actor influence, and community engagement. Theoretically, the study draws on structural poverty theory, responsive public policy theory, local political theory, and program effectiveness theory. Findings indicate that high levels of education, access to information, and community-based cadre strategies contribute to strong program participation in urban areas. In contrast, semi-rural regions face compounded barriers due to weak infrastructure, policy fragmentation, and cultural opposition. Local politics critically shape program outcomes; actors such as religious leaders and village elites mediate acceptance through moral and ideological framing. Additionally, the lack of male involvement undermines the program's transformative potential. The study concludes that population control should not be treated as a standalone administrative effort but must be embedded within a decentralized, inclusive welfare policy tailored to local realities. Policy implications include the need for cross-sectoral program integration, culturally sensitive outreach, male-targeted reproductive education, and flexible budgeting frameworks that allow sub-district-level policy adaptation. These measures are essential to position family planning as a viable instrument for equitable poverty reduction in West Aceh.

Keywords: *Population Control; Alleviate Poverty; Politics and Population; West Aceh.*

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Introduction

Population growth is a multifarious problem affecting social, economic, and environmental aspects and has major political ramifications for local government governance (Gu et al., 2021; Hull, 2016; Sanchez-Rivera, 2023). High population growth rates and issues including increased poverty levels, social inequality, and limited access to basic services are clearly linked in many developing nations, including Indonesia. Experiences from Iran further reinforce that addressing fertility challenges requires not only health interventions but integrated social policies that improve the economic viability of smaller families (Hosseini-Chavoshi et al., 2016). The difficulties presented can start a cycle that prevents social advancement as well as economic growth. Thus, addressing these issues is crucial for raising living standards and advancing local sustainable development (de Silva & Tenreyro, 2017; Widayastari & Isarabhakdi, 2016). The problem in West Aceh Regency is structural poverty and high unemployment rates, brought on by population growth faster than employment creation. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency, the poverty rate in West Aceh in 2023 was 17.60%, surpassing the Aceh provincial average of 14.23%.

To date, the policy of regulating population increase via the Family Planning Program has emerged as a strategic tool utilized by municipal governments. Prior research has demonstrated that the KB program at the Johan Pahlawan Health Center (Regional Technical Implementation Unit) is notably effective in enhancing public awareness and decreasing birth rates. Nonetheless, the program's technical efficacy has not promptly yielded a substantial influence on diminishing poverty rates. This allows for a more in-depth examination of the management of population policy within the context of local government politics (Harjanto, 2021; HM Syamsuddin., 2013).

Within the framework of local politics, power dynamics, development priorities, and budgetary biases created by area political elites have a major impact on population control programs in addition to program design and execution strategies (Dasor et al., 2016; Devas & Grant, 2003; Rifai & Haeril, 2024). From regional leaders and religious authorities to the District People's Representative Council, local actors—who shape the direction, intensity, and efficacy of population control policy implementation—range. The family planning program loses its structural incentive to efficiently engage underprivileged populations when this approach lacks political legitimacy or gets buried in conflicts of interest.

Moreover, ideological concerns, such as the cultural principles of "many children, much fortune" and the interpretation of specific religions that perceive family planning initiatives as antithetical to sharia, illustrate that population matters transcend mere technological considerations and are inherently political (Sukmaniar et al., 2018). A similar politicization of population control policies was observed in South Africa, where demographic interventions were used not merely for health planning but to serve racial and political agendas under apartheid, highlighting how reproductive governance can be co-opted for power maintenance and social control (Brown, 1987). Consequently, the perspective that regards the regulation of population increase as a component of a political strategy for poverty reduction warrants further examination within the context of West Aceh. This article seeks to analyze the politics surrounding population growth control in West Aceh as a strategy to mitigate poverty, focusing on the positioning, politicization, and implementation of family planning policies by local government officials, and assessing the effectiveness of these policies in addressing welfare challenges in regions experiencing rising population growth rates.

The case of West Aceh offers a critical lens into the intersection of population control and local governance in a decentralized political system. Indonesia, as one of the most populous countries in the world, has long been recognized for its success in family planning. However, that success is unevenly distributed. West Aceh, with a poverty rate of 17.60%—above the provincial average—represents a region where population growth outpaces job creation, amplifying structural poverty. As such, the region serves as a microcosm for broader national challenges, particularly in balancing demographic policies with social equity.

Furthermore, the global implications stem from the growing awareness that population policies are not only technical but also deeply political and culturally contested, especially in Muslim-majority regions. Local implementation in Aceh is strongly shaped by religious narratives and customary norms, making it relevant to similar contexts in Southeast Asia and beyond. This observation is echoed in Iran's case, where the effectiveness of family planning has depended not only on service provision, but on how policies are framed within cultural and religious narratives to gain community legitimacy (Hosseini-Chavoshi et al., 2016). This case is not only locally urgent but also nationally and globally significant due to a lack of in-depth research on local political dynamics in population policy.

The challenge of regulating population increase in West Aceh transcends mere administrative technicalities, encompassing strategic considerations with interconnected social, economic, and political facets. Despite the rigorous implementation of the Family Planning Program at the primary service level, including community health centers, its overall influence on poverty alleviation has not demonstrated substantial benefits. In this context, it is essential to analyze in further detail the execution of the population control policy by the West Aceh regional government, focusing on both the policy itself and the participation of local stakeholders in the implementation process. Critical inquiries that require resolution include the efficacy of the policy for controlling population growth in West Aceh via the Family Planning program, the impact of local political dynamics—manifested as both support and opposition—on the policy's effectiveness, and the degree to which this policy aids in mitigating poverty, a principal challenge in regional development.

To guide this analysis, the study applies a multidimensional theoretical framework that connects population policy with governance and welfare outcomes. First, the theory of program effectiveness, as proposed by Sutrisno (2007), suggests that a policy's success is determined by how well its objectives are met. This includes how well the public understands the program, whether it reaches the intended target groups, the timeliness of implementation, achievement of goals, and observable changes in the community. This framework is particularly relevant for evaluating the Family Planning Program in West Aceh, where factors such as public comprehension, participation of couples of reproductive age, and perceived impact are central to assessing effectiveness (Sri Rahayu et al., 2021).

Secondly, the theory of local politics emphasizes that public policy is not created in isolation but shaped through negotiations among key stakeholders—regional leaders, DPRK, religious elites, and civil society. According to Grindle (1980), these power dynamics and political alignments significantly influence how policies are shaped and implemented at the regional level. This aligns with Brown's (Brown, 1987) analysis of South Africa, where population policy was not a neutral demographic tool, but was deployed as a political instrument by elites to regulate and suppress marginalized populations. His findings underscore how reproductive governance is often

embedded in deeper ideological and power structures, a dynamic also evident in decentralized settings like West Aceh. Third, the responsive public policy theory (Easton, 1957; Verney, 2000) posits that legitimate policies must respond to public demands. If policies like family planning fail to address root structural issues such as poverty, they may be administratively present but lack social resonance and impact. As Winarno (2014) suggests, a disconnect between administrative output and social need results in weakened legitimacy.

Fourth, structural poverty theory reframes poverty not as an individual failure, but as a product of systemic injustice and unequal access to opportunities—economic, educational, and health-related. High fertility rates exacerbate poverty unless countered by fair redistribution policies. As such, family planning should be seen not merely as a reproductive health issue, but as a key redistributive mechanism that influences household economic outcomes (Sheppard, 2017). This integrated theoretical approach enables a more nuanced analysis of how population control policies are politically positioned and implemented in West Aceh, and to what extent they function as interventions against entrenched poverty.

Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology utilizing a case study technique to thoroughly examine the dynamics of population control strategies in West Aceh. The primary emphasis is on the implementation, communication, and acceptance of the policy by local communities, as well as its contribution to the poverty reduction objective. This methodology was selected as it enables researchers to investigate the intricate socio-political landscape and delineate the power dynamics underlying population policy.

The research site was identified in two primary sub-districts: Johan Pahlawan and Meureubo. The selection of these two areas is based on their distinct social characteristics: Johan Pahlawan is predominantly urban, exhibiting superior access to education and public services, whereas Meureubo exemplifies a semi-rural locale grappling with issues related to gender equality, the impact of traditional values, and restricted access to information and family planning services. This disparity is evidenced by data from BPS Aceh Barat (2024), which illustrates variations in participation rates for family planning and human development indices across sub-districts. This is further corroborated by field findings from prior studies, including Sumual et al., (2024) and Ramadhan & Idami (2020), which highlighted the significant impact of cultural and religious norms on the acceptance of population policies. This indicates discrepancies in the acceptance and efficacy of the Family Planning program's execution.

Researchers performed firsthand observations, comprehensive interviews, and recording of diverse family planning services and counseling activities at both the village and health center levels in each location. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals directly involved in or affected by the Family Planning Program. This included health officials, village-level family planning cadres, religious leaders, women of reproductive age, and their spouses. The purposive sampling method was used to ensure representation across various social roles and perspectives relevant to the program's implementation and reception. Criteria for selection were based on participants' roles in decision-making, accessibility, and depth of experience with the program.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Patterns were identified across interview transcripts and field notes to explore recurring themes related to power

dynamics, policy acceptance, and structural constraints in family planning implementation. Comparative analysis between Johan Pahlawan and Meureubo was also applied to highlight contextual differences in outcomes.

Result and Discussion

Between Policy and Power: The Structural and Political Dimensions of Family Planning Disparities

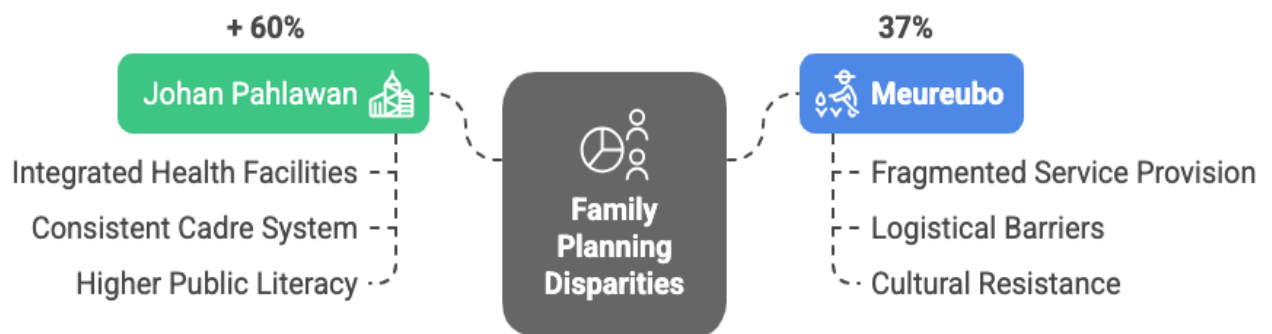


Figure 1. Family Planning Disparities in West Aceh (Johan Pahlawan and Meureubo)

Source: Processed by author, 2025

The pronounced disparity between Johan Pahlawan and Meureubo sub-districts reveals that family planning implementation in West Aceh is not merely shaped by technical inputs or service availability but is deeply embedded in socio-political and structural contexts. Johan Pahlawan, as an urban center, enjoys institutional advantages such as integrated health facilities, a consistent cadre system, and higher levels of public literacy. These conditions facilitate an informed and voluntary uptake of family planning, with participation exceeding 60%. Meanwhile, Meureubo struggles with fragmented service provision, logistical barriers, and cultural resistance, resulting in significantly lower participation, 37%. This difference shows that national rules often don't work well in different local situations, so it's important to adapt policies to fit local needs. A responsive policy approach that allows micro-level adaptation is crucial, yet such flexibility requires not only administrative adjustments but also political will and institutional autonomy.

Crucially, these disparities are not accidental but arise from historically entrenched patterns of exclusion. Structural Poverty Theory helps elucidate how communities like Meureubo are systematically disadvantaged—not only in economic terms but also in access to health knowledge, decision-making spaces, and public investment. Households with lower access to services tend to have more children, amplifying their economic vulnerability. This disadvantage is not a reflection of uninformed choices but of constrained environments. The BPS data in 2023, which shows a higher average number of children in poorer households, confirms the intergenerational nature of this exclusion. Without redistributive policies that prioritize service equity, infrastructure reinforcement, and gender-inclusive education, family planning efforts risk becoming another layer in a system that serves the already served. The following visual summarizes the interconnected structural barriers experienced in Meureubo, which collectively reinforce reproductive vulnerability and socioeconomic exclusion.

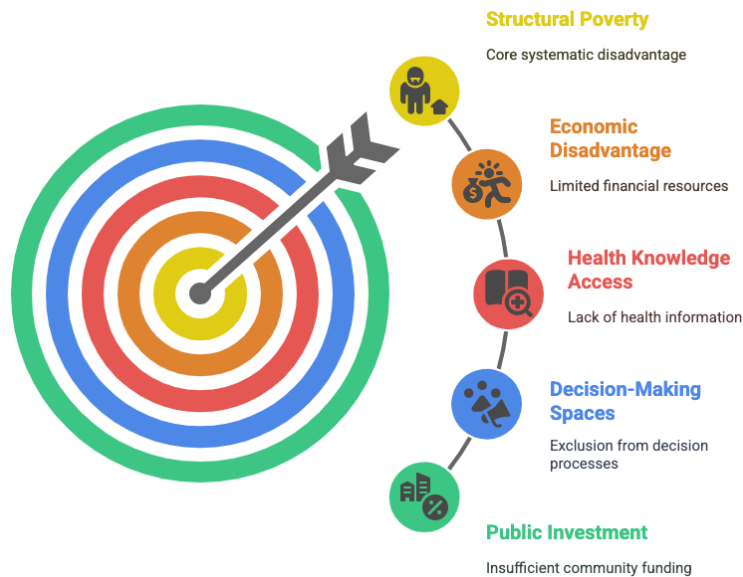


Figure 2. Structural Poverty in Meureubo

Source: Processed by author, 2025

However, structural reform alone is insufficient without recognizing how local political dynamics mediate policy translation. In West Aceh, decentralization often operates within power asymmetries where religious leaders, the District People's Representative Council members, and village elites hold gatekeeping authority over public narratives and resource flows. Family planning is frequently reframed through moral or doctrinal lenses—either legitimized as a health-oriented *ijtihad* (effort) or delegitimized as a threat to divine sovereignty. These political-theological contests shape the acceptability, intensity, and scope of program implementation. Sub-districts with politically connected leaders tend to receive better support, while peripheral areas remain under-resourced. Thus, policy implementation becomes a contested space where interests, ideologies, and authority intersect (Garritzmann et al., 2021; Howarth, 2010; Sager & Gofen, 2022).

In this light, population control cannot be reduced to service expansion or media campaigns. It must be treated as a political project requiring inclusive coalitions, grassroots engagement, and narrative re-alignment. The success of decentralized family planning depends not only on institutional design but also on political maneuverability—how actors mobilize legitimacy, frame policy meaning, and mediate community consent. Without acknowledging this, feminist efforts may unintentionally entrench existing disparities. A structurally and politically grounded approach is essential, not only for expanding access but also for democratizing control over reproductive choices, which serves as a pillar of social justice and poverty alleviation.

Politics of access and the role of local actors

The implementation of the Family Planning Program in West Aceh is deeply intertwined with the dynamics of local politics, which involve a constellation of actors with varying degrees of influence and interest. While the local government, through the DP3AKB (Department of Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, and Family Planning), is structurally responsible for executing the program, its effectiveness is often hindered by institutional limitations—particularly inadequate budgetary allocations, a shortage of human resources, and the diminished political leverage of technical departments within the broader regional bureaucracy. This reflects what

Lipsky (1980) calls “street-level bureaucracy,” where front-line implementers operate under conditions of constrained capacity and discretionary negotiation with the public.

Local politics plays a decisive role in determining budget priorities (Liao & Zhang, 2012; Liu et al., 2010), and in many cases, family planning programs receive limited support due to competing political interests. According to Grindle's (1980) *politics of policy implementation* theory, public policies are not implemented in a vacuum but result from negotiated power relations between political elites, religious authorities, and institutional actors. In West Aceh, this is evident in the tendency of local governments to prioritize infrastructure development or populist schemes that yield short-term political gains, often at the expense of social programs like family planning. Sub-districts with stronger political connectivity, such as Johan Pahlawan, tend to secure more funding and programmatic attention, while marginalized areas like Meureubo are left behind. This selective responsiveness reflects what Easton (1957) refers to in systems theory as the 'differential conversion of demands into outputs' in the policy process.

Moreover, the success or rejection of family planning programs is heavily influenced by how these initiatives are framed by influential local actors. In certain areas, religious and community leaders support the program by presenting it as a moral and health-related obligation. Conversely, in other contexts, similar figures oppose it on ideological or theological grounds, claiming it contradicts Islamic teachings or local customs. These positions are then reinforced through community forums, such as religious assemblies and village deliberations, shaping collective attitudes and determining whether policies are socially accepted or resisted. This process of constructing meaning aligns with policy framing theory (Meyer, 1995; Shön & Rein, 1994), which highlights how stakeholders' narratives shape policy legitimacy and citizen acceptance.

Scientifically, this aligns with the core of local political theory, which asserts that public policy is not merely the outcome of administrative planning but also a contestation of meaning and legitimacy within power-laden community structures. When family planning policies are appropriated as instruments of political or moral assertion, their stability and effectiveness are compromised. Therefore, for family planning programs to succeed in politically and culturally heterogeneous settings like West Aceh, it is imperative to develop adaptive, cross-sectoral coalitions that engage both formal political institutions and informal cultural leaders in a coordinated and inclusive governance process. As Hadiz (2004) argues, in post-decentralization Indonesia, local governance is often shaped by competing patronage networks and religiously-inflected elite politics, making inclusive coalition-building essential to avoid elite capture and ensure public policy responsiveness.

Disconnect between family planning programs and poverty alleviation strategies

This research reveals a significant finding: the lack of integration between family planning policies and poverty alleviation programs. The execution of family planning remains situated within the health sector, rather than being integrated into the broader macro policy framework of regional development. Data from Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS) Aceh Barat, (2024) indicates that families experiencing economic hardship are likely to have a higher number of children, perpetuating a cycle of long-term economic vulnerability. Families of considerable size facing financial constraints encounter significant challenges in fulfilling fundamental requirements, including education, healthcare, and child nutrition.

This occurrence theoretically aligns with Sheppard's structural poverty theory, which posits that poverty arises from systemic structural imbalances rather than only from individual deprivation. This indicates that when family planning programs are not associated with initiatives to redistribute welfare or provide equitable access to public resources, the program may devolve into a medical endeavor lacking genuine impact on poverty alleviation.

By including family planning programs in efforts to reduce poverty, the government can create better solutions, like offering financial rewards for people who actively use family planning, providing counseling focused on family welfare, and getting low-income individuals involved in planning for development. Currently, the approach used is still sectoral and less responsive to the reality of structural poverty. In this context, the theory of responsive public policy (Easton, 1957) is also relevant, as it emphasizes that effective policies must be able to address the needs of the most affected communities. Therefore, it is urgent to transform the family planning program into part of an integrated welfare policy.

Lack of male involvement and gender culture challenges

The lack of male participation in family planning programs is a major obstacle to the effectiveness of this policy. The majority of family planning initiatives primarily focus on women, encompassing aspects such as counseling, education, and medical services. Household decisions frequently reflect the influence of husbands, particularly in contexts characterized by patriarchal social structures, as observed in West Aceh. Interviews conducted with various participants revealed that the utilization of contemporary contraceptive methods is frequently undertaken discreetly by wives due to concerns regarding potential disapproval from their husbands.

This phenomenon illustrates the shortcomings of the gender perspective within family planning policy. The lack of reproductive education for men, insufficient advocacy for male contraceptive use, and the prevailing notion that family planning is solely a woman's responsibility contribute to the inequity of this program. To address this issue, it is essential to formulate a strategy that adopts a family-centered approach, positioning men as engaged collaborators in the realm of family planning. Engaging male religious leaders in family planning initiatives may serve as a strategic approach to altering collective perceptions.

From the perspective of program effectiveness theory (Sutrisno, 2007), the limited engagement of men in the family planning initiative indicates that one of the key indicators of effectiveness—specifically, the participation of the target demographic and the realization of tangible change—has not been achieved to its fullest potential. In the absence of men's active participation, the processes of household decision-making will lack inclusivity, resulting in diminished effectiveness of policy outcomes. Consequently, strategies that exclusively focus on women cannot be deemed effective and should be substituted with transformative approaches that consider gender dynamics.

Implications for the Politics of Welfare

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that population control policies have a strategic position in regional welfare politics. To effectively aid in poverty alleviation, this policy must be perceived not merely as a health initiative but as an integral component of a comprehensive development plan. This method necessitates collaboration among the health, education, economic, and local governance sectors.

Population control policy can serve as a primary tool for welfare distribution if systematically designed. Structural poverty theory (Easton, 1957; Verney, 2000) underscores the necessity of mitigating disparity in resource availability as a means to alleviate poverty. Family planning policy should be integrated with social security, access to essential services, and economic education for families. Furthermore, responsive public policy theory underscores the significance of inclusivity in policymaking to effectively address the needs of the impoverished as the primary target demographic.

Data from BPS indicates an inverse relationship between the total fertility rate (TFR) and the household welfare index in West Aceh, as illustrated in the subsequent graph:

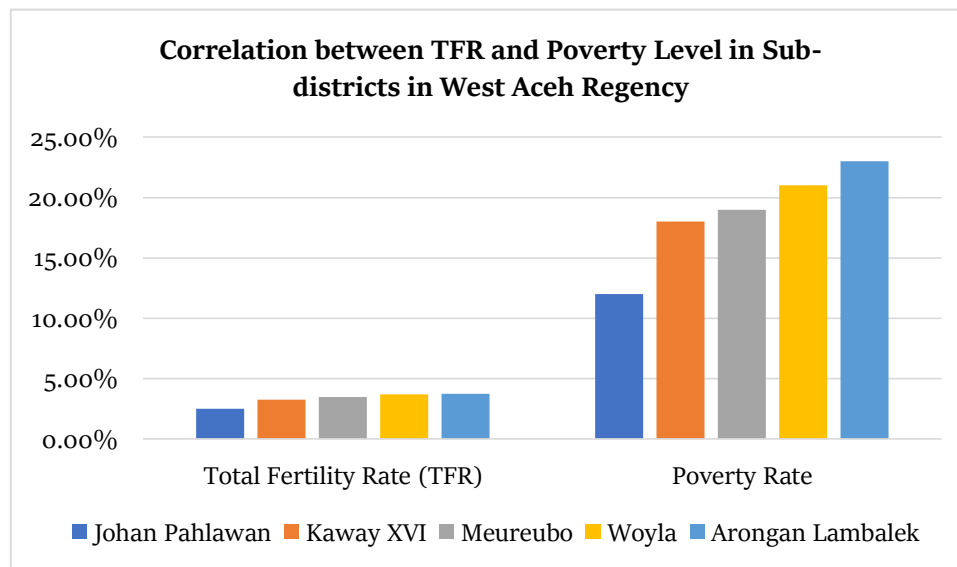


Figure 1. Correlation between TFR and Poverty level

Source: Researcher's analysis from BPS Aceh Barat (2024)

The graph visually depicts a negative correlation between the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and the Household Welfare Index (proxied by poverty levels) across sub-districts in West Aceh. In essence, the higher the birth rate in a given area, the lower the observed welfare level, as reflected by higher poverty rates. This inverse relationship suggests that uncontrolled population growth directly strains household resources, particularly in areas with limited economic opportunities, low education access, and weak public service delivery. For instance, sub-districts with high TFR—like Meureubo—tend to have limited access to reproductive health services and lower participation in the family planning program. This perpetuates a vicious cycle where large family size, constrained income, and minimal social protection reinforce each other, deepening long-term poverty. In contrast, urban sub-districts like Johan Pahlawan, which exhibit lower TFR and higher the family planning participation rates, show relatively better welfare indicators. This supports the argument that access to family planning services and information enables households to make rational fertility decisions, which in turn improves their socioeconomic outcomes over time. These findings indicate a partial success of the KB program in urban areas like Johan Pahlawan, but a policy failure in structurally disadvantaged areas such as Meureubo, where the program's reach remains limited despite high fertility-related vulnerability.

This pattern reinforces the Structural Poverty Theory, which asserts that poverty is not simply the result of individual behavior but is rooted in systemic inequalities—such as inadequate

access to contraception, healthcare, and gender-sensitive education. Thus, the disparities shown in the graph reflect structural barriers, not just behavioral choices. This pattern aligns with findings by Widyastari & Isarabhakdi (2016), who showed that uneven access to family planning in Indonesia reinforces fertility-related poverty, particularly in rural areas with low service density.

Therefore, the graph underscores the pressing need to integrate family planning policies with broader poverty alleviation strategies, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. This integration can be pursued through several targeted approaches, including expanding access to contraceptives in regions with high total fertility rates (TFR), tailoring family planning outreach programs to align with the cultural contexts of conservative communities, and linking participation in family planning initiatives with conditional social assistance or economic incentives. Furthermore, promoting greater male involvement in reproductive decision-making is essential to ensure more equitable and effective implementation of family planning programs.

Conclusion

This research shows that the population control policy in West Aceh has not been fully leveraged as an effective instrument for poverty alleviation. The primary inhibiting factors include regional disparities, the impact of local political dynamics on policy formulation, the lack of integration between family planning initiatives and welfare strategies, and the limited involvement of men. This complexity underscores the necessity for family planning policies to extend beyond mere administrative strategies, requiring integration within a wider socio-political and welfare framework. This study employs theoretical frameworks from program effectiveness, local government politics, responsive public policy, and structural poverty to argue that the effectiveness of family planning initiatives is significantly influenced by their responsiveness to local contexts, the backing of a robust coalition of stakeholders, and their incorporation into broader regional socioeconomic development strategies.

It is posited by researchers that for population control policy to effectively serve as a mechanism for poverty alleviation in West Aceh, a series of strategically interconnected steps must be implemented. Initially, it is imperative for local authorities to formulate a family planning policy that is tailored to the specific social, cultural, and geographical attributes of each region. The disparities observed among sub-districts suggest that a standardized methodology fails to adequately address the diverse needs across different societal strata. Furthermore, the execution of programs necessitates robust cross-sector collaboration and the engagement of local stakeholders, including religious figures, traditional leaders, and informal institutions, to foster broader societal acceptance. Third, it is essential that family planning policies are incorporated into the regional welfare policy framework as a component of a poverty alleviation strategy, rather than being limited to a reproductive health program.

Moreover, initiatives to engage males as significant participants in family planning must be amplified. Family planning initiatives must expand their focus beyond women to actively engage males, thereby promoting equitable and effective decision-making within households. Ultimately, enhancing area-specific databases and social indicators is crucial for the more focused and quantifiable implementation of family planning programs. Employing an integrated, inclusive, and evidence-based approach, population control measures will be more effective in alleviating poverty and achieving sustainable prosperity in Aceh Barat.

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