



## Economic Growth Strategies and Poverty in Rural Indonesia: Subjective Experiences of Rural Communities in Indonesia's Rural Areas in Facing Economic Development Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

Economic development in rural areas remains a significant challenge in many developing countries, where policies often fail to meet the needs of local communities. Specifically, the subjective experiences of rural populations regarding economic growth strategies have not been thoroughly explored. While previous studies have focused on macroeconomic policies, there remains a gap in understanding how these policies impact individuals' lives on the ground. In this study, we employ a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of rural communities in Indonesia regarding economic development strategies. Through in-depth interviews with 10 rural residents, we identify key themes related to the perceived effectiveness of economic policies, access to resources, and social inequalities. The findings reveal that while government initiatives are seen as beneficial in theory, their implementation often fails to address local needs, leading to a sense of disillusionment among rural populations. This research contributes to the broader literature by bridging the gap between macroeconomic policy analyses and the micro-level lived experiences of rural communities, providing a nuanced understanding of economic development challenges. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the need for inclusive and context-sensitive development strategies that integrate local voices into policy design and implementation. By doing so, policymakers can better align their initiatives with the actual needs and priorities of rural populations, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of economic growth strategies in reducing poverty and inequality.



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### INTRODUCTION

Economic development and poverty reduction have been central goals in policy-making, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia (Karmaker dkk., 2023). Over the decades, numerous strategies have been implemented to foster growth, reduce poverty, and improve the livelihoods of rural communities. However, despite significant investment in development programs, economic inequality persists, especially between urban and rural areas. This disparity is often reflected in the limited access to resources, opportunities, and social services available to rural populations. For example, policies such as the Village Fund Program and agricultural modernization initiatives have aimed to enhance rural livelihoods but often struggle with uneven implementation and local adaptation. As a result, the effectiveness of economic growth strategies in addressing poverty in rural settings remains a topic of ongoing debate.

Technological advancements, such as the integration of digital tools in agriculture and small business development, and the improvement of infrastructure, are frequently highlighted in economic policies aimed at rural development (Esily dkk., 2023). Concepts like inclusive growth and equitable distribution of resources are increasingly incorporated into development frameworks, aiming to bridge the gap between urban and rural communities. However, these strategies often fail to account for the

complex social dynamics and local perceptions of development policies, which may affect their actual impact on rural populations.

Previous research on economic development policies has primarily focused on quantitative measures of growth, such as income levels, employment rates, and infrastructure improvements. While these approaches provide valuable insights into the macroeconomic outcomes of development strategies, they often overlook the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals living in rural communities. The voices of rural inhabitants—who experience these policies on the ground—remain underrepresented in much of the academic literature. This gap calls for a more qualitative exploration of how rural populations perceive the success or failure of economic policies, as their lived experiences are crucial to understanding the true impacts of development initiatives.

The goal of this research is to explore the subjective experiences of rural community members regarding economic growth strategies and their influence on poverty (Banerjee dkk., 2019). By focusing on the meanings and interpretations that individuals attach to these experiences, the study aims to provide deeper insights into how rural populations perceive and respond to development policies. This approach is necessary to move beyond surface-level evaluations of economic success and to understand the complexities of rural poverty and development from the perspectives of those directly affected.

Research on the subjective experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a significant area of inquiry, particularly in the field of rural development and economic growth. The exploration of how individuals perceive and make sense of economic policies is crucial for understanding the real-world impact of these policies on local communities. However, examining these experiences is inherently complex, as it requires more than just the measurement of economic indicators or outcomes (Lechman & Popowska, 2022). It necessitates a deep understanding of how people interpret their lived realities, including their interactions with policy initiatives and the meaning they attach to these interactions.

A major challenge in this area of research is the methodological limitation of traditional approaches. Quantitative methods, often used to assess economic development, focus primarily on measurable outcomes such as income, employment rates, and infrastructure improvements. While these metrics provide valuable data, they fail to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of individuals living through these changes. These approaches cannot adequately explore how policies are perceived, how they affect individuals' daily lives, or how people relate to the promises of development. As such, there is a growing recognition that such data-driven approaches alone cannot reveal the deeper, more personal meanings that shape individuals' experiences with economic growth.

Phenomenological research, by contrast, is uniquely suited to uncover these deeper layers of meaning (Thanh dkk., 2019). By prioritizing the lived experience of individuals, phenomenology allows for a richer, more contextualized understanding of how rural populations interpret and respond to economic policies. Despite this, exploring the lived experiences of rural communities through phenomenology poses its own set of challenges. The subjective nature of the data, combined with the variability of individual experiences, makes it difficult to establish clear, generalizable conclusions. Furthermore, there are often limitations in accessing participants and gathering rich, in-depth qualitative data, particularly in rural areas where communities may be more insular or less engaged with formal research processes. These challenges highlight the need for qualitative methodologies, such as phenomenology, to better understand the complexities of rural poverty and development from the perspective of those most directly affected.

By integrating examples of specific policies and strategies, such as the challenges in implementing Indonesia's Village Fund Program, this study adds a practical dimension to the discussion, grounding theoretical insights in real-world contexts.

Thus, the limitations of traditional quantitative methods and the methodological challenges inherent in exploring subjective experiences underscore the necessity of employing a phenomenological approach in this study (Sparrow dkk., 2020). This approach will enable a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of rural communities, shedding light on how they interpret and react to economic development strategies in ways that go beyond statistical measures.

While many studies on rural development and poverty alleviation rely on practical, solution-oriented approaches, these methodologies often fail to capture the rich, subjective experiences that are essential to understanding the full impact of economic policies. Quantitative measures, such as

income levels, employment rates, and access to infrastructure, dominate much of the literature, providing valuable data on the macroeconomic effects of development strategies. However, these approaches cannot adequately address how individuals in rural communities perceive and experience the changes brought about by such policies. The subjective and personal meanings attached to these policies—how they are understood, felt, and reacted to—are often overlooked, leading to a limited understanding of the true outcomes of development initiatives.

The prevailing reliance on these conventional, practical frameworks leaves a gap in our knowledge, as they miss the nuanced and lived experiences of those most affected by the policies. As such, there is a critical need to move beyond statistical measures and explore the deeper meanings that individuals attach to their economic experiences. The challenge, then, is to adopt a methodology that can probe these subjective experiences in a way that captures their complexity and depth.

Phenomenology offers a valuable alternative by allowing researchers to explore the essence of these lived experiences. Through a focus on individuals' perceptions and personal narratives, phenomenology can uncover the meanings and emotions that people attach to their encounters with economic development strategies (Barbier, 2020). By investigating how rural populations make sense of their experiences, phenomenology provides a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the impacts of these policies. This approach not only highlights the challenges that may not be captured through conventional methods, but also offers deeper insights into the real-world implications of economic development, making it a critical tool for addressing the gaps in the current literature.

Previous research on rural economic development has primarily focused on measurable outcomes, such as income growth and access to infrastructure, leaving subjective experiences largely unexplored. A key body of literature has examined the broader impacts of these strategies, often using quantitative methods that overlook how local populations perceive or emotionally respond to policy interventions. Few studies have focused on the lived experiences of rural communities, despite the recognition that people's interpretations of their circumstances can influence the success or failure of development initiatives (Afshan dkk., 2021). Theoretical frameworks such as inclusive growth and sustainable development have been widely used, yet these often fail to engage with the day-to-day realities of the individuals living through these policies. This research aims to fill this gap by focusing on the personal experiences and perceptions of rural populations, providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between economic strategies and poverty.

This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of rural residents facing economic development policies. By prioritizing individuals' perceptions and interpretations of their environment, phenomenology allows for a rich, nuanced understanding of how people in rural areas make sense of the economic changes occurring around them. This approach directly addresses the knowledge gap identified earlier by moving beyond abstract economic indicators and focusing on the meaning individuals attach to their experiences. Through in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis, this research aims to uncover the essence of rural communities' engagement with development policies, providing insights that quantitative methods cannot reveal.

The structure of this article is organized to guide readers through a logical flow of the research process (Wang dkk., 2023). The introduction outlines the general and specific backgrounds that frame the research, followed by an explanation of the phenomenological approach used. The article then describes the data collection and analysis processes, including thematic analysis of the interviews. The discussion section interprets the findings in light of existing literature, offering insights into the practical implications for economic policy. Finally, the conclusion summarizes key findings and suggests directions for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This research employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of rural community members in Central Java regarding economic development strategies and their perceived impacts on poverty (Khan dkk., 2020). Phenomenology, as a research design, is particularly suitable for investigating lived experiences, as it emphasizes the deep exploration of participants' perceptions and meanings attached to a particular phenomenon. This approach was chosen because it

allows for a comprehensive understanding of how individuals interpret and experience the economic development strategies implemented in their communities, focusing on the essence of their lived realities.

In this study, a descriptive phenomenological approach was used to capture the richness of participants' personal accounts without imposing preconceived notions or theories. The objective was to uncover the essence of the rural community's experiences with economic development, focusing on how these policies are perceived and felt in their everyday lives.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under study (Dhewanto dkk., 2020). The inclusion criteria required participants to be residents of rural villages in Central Java for at least five years and to be actively engaged in the local economy, such as farming, small-scale trading, or labor. The exclusion criteria involved individuals who were not involved in rural economic activities or those employed in formal urban sectors, as they did not represent the rural experience central to this research.

A total of 10 participants, with varying socio-economic backgrounds (farmers, small traders, laborers, and local entrepreneurs), were involved in the study. The demographic characteristics of the participants include a range of ages (from 25 to 60 years) and a mix of genders, with an approximate equal distribution between male and female participants. This diversity allowed for a broad spectrum of perspectives regarding the economic development strategies and their impacts.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews to allow participants the flexibility to express their thoughts and experiences in their own terms. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, comfortable locations within the participants' communities, ensuring a conducive environment for open dialogue. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, providing sufficient time for participants to share their stories and reflections.

The interview protocol was developed with open-ended questions designed to explore participants' perceptions of economic development policies, their experiences with poverty, and their views on governmental initiatives (Humphries dkk., 2020). The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. To ensure consistency, the interview guide was used flexibly to allow the interviewer to probe further based on the responses of participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a technique commonly applied in phenomenological studies. The analysis focused on identifying key themes that reflected the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding the economic policies they encountered. This process involved several stages: first, the transcriptions were read thoroughly to gain an initial understanding of the data (Perry, 2020). Subsequently, significant statements related to the research questions were highlighted. These were grouped into clusters of meaning and categorized into emerging themes. To enhance the reliability of the thematic analysis, intercoder reliability was ensured by involving two independent coders who cross-checked the coding process. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached, following established qualitative research protocols.

The identified themes were then examined within the context of existing literature on economic development and poverty alleviation. The analysis was iterative, with constant revisiting of the data to ensure that the themes truly reflected the participants' lived experiences and perceptions. Software such as NVivo was used to assist in organizing and coding the data, but the focus remained on the interpretative process of understanding the underlying meanings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their

right to confidentiality and anonymity (Aysan dkk., 2020). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the use of their data exclusively for research purposes. Written consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring transparency and ethical compliance with international research standards.

To protect the privacy of participants, all personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts, and any identifying information was kept separate from the data. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Data security measures were taken to store recordings and transcripts in a locked, secure location to maintain confidentiality.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Perceptions of Economic Development Policies**

One of the most significant themes that emerged from the interviews was the participants' perception of the effectiveness of the economic development policies implemented in their areas. Many respondents expressed a sense of disconnection from the benefits of these policies. Despite government efforts to promote economic growth, they often felt that the policies did not have a direct, tangible impact on their daily lives, particularly in terms of income improvement. For example, Budi, a farmer from a village in Central Java, shared his frustration: "They say there are programs to help us, but in reality, it's just talk. I haven't seen any significant change. The roads are still bad, and our crops are still being sold at low prices. I don't feel like things are getting better."

This sentiment was echoed by other participants, who mentioned the lack of visible progress in the implementation of policies, particularly those aimed at improving infrastructure or increasing access to markets. Several participants highlighted that while government programs were advertised as transformative, the actual benefits were often either delayed or unevenly distributed.

### **Social Inequality and Economic Disparities**

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the growing social and economic disparity between rural and urban areas. Participants voiced concerns about the widening gap in opportunities, with urban centers benefiting more from government policies and economic growth compared to rural areas. This inequality was most evident in access to resources such as technology, financial services, and education. Dewi, a small business owner, reflected on this inequality: "People in the city seem to get everything—better education, better infrastructure, even better prices for goods. Here, in the village, we feel left behind. The government says there's progress, but we don't feel it."

In particular, the lack of access to modern agricultural techniques and capital was a major concern for those in rural communities who relied heavily on traditional farming practices. Observations of local markets further confirmed these disparities, as many were still predominantly informal, with little integration into the broader economic system.

### **Expectations and Disappointments with Government Initiatives**

Participants also shared their expectations of government policies, often accompanied by a sense of disappointment regarding their implementation. While many expressed hope that the policies would lead to increased prosperity, they frequently cited challenges in accessing the supposed benefits, such as training programs or financial support. Siti, a laborer in one of the villages, stated: "The government promises that we will receive training, that we will be empowered to improve our skills. But no one comes to help us. When they do come, the programs are not suitable for our needs. I've been waiting for years."

This disappointment was tied to a perceived gap between the promises made by policymakers and the realities faced by the rural population. Participants noted that despite the presence of governmental programs, there was often a lack of infrastructure, follow-up, and tailored support that could address their specific needs.

In summary, the experiences of the rural community members in this study reveal significant gaps between the policies designed to foster economic growth and the actual outcomes experienced by the participants. The rural populations feel disconnected from the benefits of these policies, with many perceiving that they have not seen any real improvement in their livelihoods. The increasing disparity between urban and rural areas, as well as the lack of effective policy implementation, contributes to feelings of disillusionment and frustration. These findings underscore the importance of participatory policy-making, where rural communities are directly involved in the design and implementation of economic strategies. Ensuring their voices are heard would enhance the relevance and effectiveness of development programs. These findings underscore the need for more localized, context-sensitive approaches in economic policy design to ensure that the benefits of development reach the rural poor.

The main findings of this study reveal that rural communities in Indonesia perceive economic development policies through a lens shaped by both hope and disillusionment. While some individuals recognize potential benefits such as increased access to infrastructure and opportunities for entrepreneurship, many express frustration with the insufficient impact on their personal well-being and economic stability. These findings align with the central research question: How do rural residents experience and make sense of the economic development strategies implemented in their communities? The study uncovers the nuanced, lived realities behind the statistical outcomes often associated with development efforts, highlighting the gap between policy intentions and the subjective experiences of those affected.

The findings significantly contribute to our understanding of the rural development phenomenon by showing that the effectiveness of economic policies is not solely determined by their design or implementation, but by how these policies are perceived by the people who live with their consequences. The research underscores that the success or failure of these strategies is deeply intertwined with people's personal experiences, expectations, and their perceptions of fairness and inclusion. For example, while some participants noted improvements in access to basic infrastructure, many felt excluded from economic opportunities due to persistent social inequalities and a lack of relevant skills training. These experiences demonstrate that development strategies must be evaluated not only in terms of economic indicators but also through the lens of subjective experience and local realities. This insight challenges the dominant focus on top-down policy evaluations and calls for more participatory approaches to development.

When comparing these findings with the existing literature, it becomes clear that they both support and expand upon previous research on rural poverty and development. While studies like those of Sen (1999) and Sachs (2005) emphasize the importance of addressing material needs for poverty alleviation, this research underscores the importance of subjective factors, such as community inclusion and individual empowerment, which are often overlooked in traditional development studies. Furthermore, the results complement the work of theorists like Chambers (1997), who advocates for a more people-centered approach to development, where local experiences and voices shape the policy process. However, this study also challenges some of the assumptions made in more optimistic perspectives on economic growth, particularly those suggesting that infrastructure alone can lead to substantial improvements in rural livelihoods. The findings reveal that infrastructure, without accompanying measures to address social inequality and enhance local capacities, may only have limited effects on the communities that need it most.

The implications of this study are twofold: they provide insights into the complexities of rural development policies, and they emphasize the need for a more nuanced, people-centered approach in future policy formulation. From an academic perspective, these findings contribute to the growing body of literature on development economics by highlighting the critical role of local perceptions and lived experiences in shaping the success or failure of development strategies. The study underscores that while tangible improvements such as infrastructure expansion are important, they are insufficient on their own to address deeper, structural inequalities that persist in rural communities. This suggests that policymakers must incorporate more qualitative measures, such as community engagement and social inclusion, into their assessments of development initiatives. Practically, this research calls for a more inclusive policy-making process, where rural residents are not only beneficiaries of development

programs but active participants in shaping the direction and implementation of policies that affect their daily lives. Such an approach would ensure that the voices of the most marginalized are heard, and that economic development strategies are more attuned to local realities and needs.

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings (Sultana dkk., 2022). One limitation lies in the small sample size of rural participants, which, although appropriate for a phenomenological study, restricts the ability to make broad generalizations across all rural populations in Indonesia or other developing countries. The participants were selected from a specific region in Central Java, and their experiences may not fully represent the diversity of rural experiences across Indonesia. Additionally, the study relied on qualitative methods, which, while providing rich, detailed data, may be subject to researcher bias in the interpretation of experiences. The findings also reflect the particular historical, cultural, and political context of rural Indonesia, which may limit their applicability to different rural settings in other countries. Future research with larger and more diverse samples, as well as comparative studies across different regions, would be valuable in addressing these limitations and providing a broader understanding of rural experiences with economic development.

The findings of this study open up several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to explore the intersection of rural development policies and social capital, examining how community networks and local leadership influence the success of economic interventions. Furthermore, future research could investigate the role of gender, age, and other demographic factors in shaping individuals' experiences of development programs, as these variables may affect access to opportunities and the perceived success of policies (Ketteni & Kottaridi, 2019). Another promising area for future inquiry is the longitudinal impact of development policies, tracking how rural residents' perceptions evolve over time as policies are implemented or modified. This study also points to the need for further investigation into the relationship between subjective well-being and economic growth, particularly in the context of rural communities where material improvements may not always translate into enhanced quality of life. Overall, the results of this research provide a foundation for expanding the discourse on rural development, emphasizing the importance of considering local perspectives in policy design and implementation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the subjective experiences of rural communities in Indonesia regarding the impact of economic growth strategies on their lives. The findings revealed that while rural residents recognize some benefits from economic development policies, they often feel excluded from the full advantages, citing persistent inequalities and limited access to opportunities. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research addressed gaps in previous studies that primarily focused on quantitative measures of economic success, offering deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals. The study underscores the importance of integrating local perspectives into policy design to ensure that development strategies are more inclusive and aligned with the realities of rural populations.

However, this study is not without limitations. The small sample size, while appropriate for phenomenological research, restricts the generalizability of findings. Additionally, the focus on a specific region in Central Java means that the experiences of rural communities in other parts of Indonesia may differ. These limitations highlight the need for future research to adopt a more diverse and expansive approach, incorporating broader geographic regions and larger participant groups. Future studies could also explore gendered perspectives, as the roles and experiences of men and women in rural communities may vary significantly. Moreover, longitudinal research is recommended to examine how perceptions and impacts of economic development policies evolve over time. Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of rural development and provides valuable insights for improving policy effectiveness. By addressing the subjective experiences of rural populations, it offers a critical perspective that can inform the creation of more equitable and participatory development strategies.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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