



The Role of The West Sumba Regency Government in Addressing Socioeconomic Inequalities Resulting from Traditional Practices in The Community

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ABSTRACT

The people of West Sumba Regency are one of Indonesia's indigenous communities that continue to uphold ancestral cultural values and traditions in their social lives. Customary practices such as Belis in marriage and funeral rituals hold significant cultural, social, and spiritual value. However, changing times have caused the meanings of some of these customary practices to shift, which can lead to socioeconomic pressures, particularly for communities with low economic status. This study aims to analyse the role of the West Sumba Regency Government in addressing socioeconomic inequalities resulting from traditional practices and to examine the implementation of government policies in maintaining a balance between cultural preservation and improving community welfare. The study employs a qualitative descriptive method, with data collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a multi-cultural country with many different value systems, customs and traditions that have developed in its society. (Mariyono, 2024). This diversity is a part of the nation's identity and a guide for controlling social connections in the community. One of the regions that still strongly adhere to traditional traditions is West Sumba Regency (Sila et al., 2024). The locals of West Sumba have a traditional system which is not only a heritage of culture but also the base of regulation of social life, family relations, and numerous daily activities of the community. (Rismawidiawati et al., 2025).

In West Sumba society, traditional rituals are strongly associated with the Marapu belief system which has an impact on different parts of life such as marriage and death. Traditional activities such as belis (bride price) and traditional burial ceremonies are a major part of the community's social life (Durah Langoday et al., 2025). These two activities have not only spiritual and symbolic importance, but also influence the social and economic situations of the community, since their observance requires numerous tangible necessities (Ghungnga et al., 2025).

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In Sumba culture, the belis custom represents a gesture of esteem from the groom's family to the bride's family and signifies the value of women in the context of marriage. Moreover, belis functions to reinforce familial connections within extended families.(Hermawan & Nomleni, 2024). In practice, belis is typically presented as animals, including horses, buffalo, and pigs, and may be supplemented by additional expensive objects that signify the family's social status. (K. et al., 2024). Nevertheless, societal advancements and alterations in social structure have led to a transformation in the significance of belis. (Gesiradja et al., 2025). Under certain conditions, the escalating worth of belis is perceived not only as a mark of esteem but may also evolve into a source of economic strain for communities with constrained financial resources.(Nenak et al., 2026).

Over-demand of dowry leads to delays in marriage, family tensions and even the rise of chronic debt. (Romes et al., 2026). In addition, the changing meaning of the dowry is also influenced by the emphasis on social standing and family prestige, such that the value of the dowry sometimes becomes part of social competitiveness, which leads to a greater economic burden on the society.(Ama et al., 2022).

Apart from the belis practice, traditional burial rites are also a custom that has a major impact on the economic state of the community. (Kamuri & Toumeluk, 2021). In Sumba's traditional beliefs, death is a voyage to the world of the ancestral spirits and hence funerals must be performed with the utmost reverence through a succession of ancient rites (Baan et al., 2022). These rites usually entail animal sacrifices, providing food for the guests, and other traditional requirements (Wungubelen et al., 2024).

Traditional funerals can be expensive which can be an issue for low income groups. Some households have to sell productive assets or borrow huge amounts to meet conventional obligations. Such a situation might have long-term economic ramifications as family resources which are meant to be utilized for education, business or improved well-being are redirected to meet customary duties(Ndolu et al., 2025).

This phenomenon demonstrates the dilemma between the need to maintain traditional values and the desire to enhance the community's well-being. On the other hand, it is the social and moral duty of the communities to preserve their customs as a means of cultural identification and to commemorate their ancestors. On the other side, however, economic restrictions put some members of the community under pressure to match the expectations of established customs. This scenario can lead to wider social problems, such as structural poverty, social conflict and disparity in well-being.(Ama et al., 2022).

The local government has a huge role to play in these things. The government of the West Sumba Regency is obliged to make policies that are in accordance with the balance of cultural preservation and protection of the community with the economy of the community. The government should not only focus on resolving economic problems but also take into account the cultural values embedded in the life of the people.(Dongga et al., 2024).

The intervention forms that can be done by the government are making regulations related to customary practices, providing social assistance to low-income communities, encouraging community economic empowerment, and building communication with customary leaders so that changes can be carried out gradually without eroding cultural values.(Arisanti & Juliawati, 2026). However, the implementation of these policies faces various challenges due to the strong influence of customary practices in community life and concerns that changes to these practices may be viewed as a violation of ancestral values(Rubi et al., 2024).

Given these circumstances, it is important to conduct research on the role of the West Sumba Regency Government in addressing socioeconomic inequalities resulting from customary practices in the community. This study is expected to provide insight into how the local government fulfils its role

in resolving the socioeconomic issues faced by indigenous communities, as well as what strategies can be implemented to strike a balance between cultural preservation and improving community well-being.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive qualitative method (Furidha & Sidoarjo, 2023). This approach was chosen because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the social phenomena related to the role of local government in addressing socioeconomic inequalities resulting from customary practices in West Sumba Regency. The qualitative approach allows researchers to understand social reality based on the experiences, perspectives, and actual conditions of the community regarding the relationship between customary practices, social pressures, economic conditions, and government policies. The research was conducted in West Sumba Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province. The research location was selected based on the characteristics of a community that still strongly upholds traditional values, particularly in the practices of *belis* and traditional funerals, which have a significant impact on the community's social and economic life.

2.2 Data Collection

a. In-depth interviews

The interviews were conducted to gather information on customary practices, their economic impacts, and the role of local governments in addressing these issues. The interviews were directed at various groups of informants to understand the perspectives of the community, customary leaders, and government officials regarding the relationship between indigenous culture and community well-being.

b. Participatory observation

The observation was conducted by examining the social conditions of the community and the practice of traditional customs in the field. The purpose of the observation was to gain a realistic picture of how traditional rituals are performed, the economic conditions of families, and the social interactions that take place within the community.

c. Documentation

Documentation is used as supporting data through the collection of various relevant documents, such as local government documents, socioeconomic data, traditional archives, books, scientific journals, and previous research related to the research problem.

2.3 Document Analysis.

Data analysis in this study employed qualitative data analysis techniques through three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The data reduction stage involved sorting relevant information based on the research focus; the data were then presented in the form of descriptive analyses to identify patterns of relationships between customary practices, the community's socioeconomic conditions, and local government policies. Conclusions were then drawn based on the interpretation of the data that had been analyzed in depth. To ensure the validity of the data, this study employed source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from various informants, while methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation so that the data obtained would be scientifically valid.

3. Results

3.1 Traditional Practices and Social Norms in West Sumba Society

The people of West Sumba Regency are an indigenous community that still adheres to a set of cultural values in their daily life. Customary practices are perceived not only as cultural heritage, but also as instructions for governing social interactions, family systems, social status and numerous community activities. In the West Sumba civilization, customary behaviours have a high place since they are directly related to cultural identity and respect for ancestors.

The Belis tradition in marriage is a widespread practice that has an important effect on the community. Socially, culturally and symbolically, Belis is a mark of respect from the groom's family to the bride's family. This practice includes not only the giving of tangible presents, but also the development of kinship relationships among extended relatives. In practice, Belis are usually livestock, such horses, water buffalo and pigs, and other valuables that indicate a family's social status.

But social developments have changed the interpretation of the Belis tradition. Used to be, the word Belis meant respect and familial loyalty. Now, it symbolizes the social standing of a family. In certain circumstances the high value of Belis is no longer based just on traditional values but also by educational attainment, social standing and family reputation. These developments have made it impossible for some members of the community, especially those with little economic means, to live up to the obligations of tradition.

The alteration in the meaning of Belis shows that culture is related to the socioeconomic situations of a community. When traditional values become a measure of social respect, people may feel pressure to conform to the standards prevailing in their society. This proves that traditional behaviours are not simply a cultural system, but also affect the economic patterns of communal life. In addition to the Belis tradition, traditional funeral rituals are also cultural traditions that occupy a significant position in the life of the people of West Sumba. In the traditional funerals, the last honour to the dead family members is to respect the ancestors. Therefore, these rites are undertaken on a large scale involving the extended family and the surrounding community.

In practice, traditional funeral rituals are costly as they entail provision of livestock, food and other traditional needs. This example illustrates how intimately cultural traditions are tied to the economic possibilities of the family. The rich are in a better position to meet the conventional expectations, while the impoverished have more difficulty in fulfilling these social obligations.

3.2 The Socioeconomic Impact of Customary Practices on Communities

Research findings reveal that customary practices like Belis and traditional funerals have a substantial effect on the socio-economic status of communities especially among the impoverished. These customs are culturally significant, but the high expenditures of carrying them out can be a financial strain for families with low means. In some circumstances families have to adopt various economic tactics in order to meet customary obligations, including selling productive assets, using family resources or taking loans from outsiders. The activities are based on a sense of social obligation of the community members to maintain the honor of the family in the customary community.

The cost of ancient rituals is not only a hardship on short-term finances, but it can also have an influence on the long-term well-being of a family. Using productive assets for traditional use could restrict a family's capacity to establish commercial initiatives. Moreover, the debt incurred by conducting these rituals can also be a barrier to meeting other necessities like as children's education, healthcare and enhancing the family's standard of living.

This phenomenon shows that the discrepancy in socioeconomic status among indigenous tribes is not only determined by economic causes but also associated with social structure and dominant

cultural beliefs. Communities with little economic resources still try to meet conventional norms owing to social pressure and the desire to preserve their cultural identity. The socio-economic impact of the Belis tradition is substantial, as it can create financial pressure on families. The transition of Belis from a mark of respect to a symbol of social rank has created a greater economic burden on the community especially among those with modest economic means.

3.3 Customary Practices as a Form of Social Structural Pressure

In West Sumba society, customs have a great social influence in determining the behaviour of the community. The performance of ancient rituals is not simply a matter of individual or family desires, but also of the social expectations and conventions that have established within the society.

Sometimes there is societal pressure on those who do not achieve the usual standards, as they are seen as not having fulfilled their cultural commitments. Some families feel forced to conform to traditional values due to this reality, even if it causes economic hardship.

The social pressure indicates that customary practices are a social framework that controls communal life. In this setting, customary behaviours can have a positive effect in maintaining communal solidarity and identity, but they can also establish a dependence on particular social standards which are difficult for the poor to satisfy. Therefore, changes in customary practices cannot be made immediately by an economic approach just. Understanding the cultural values of the society is vital so that the efforts to solve the problems can be accepted without social strife.

3.4 The Role of the West Sumba Regency Government in Addressing Socioeconomic Inequality

The government of West Sumba Regency has a major role in overcoming the socio-economic problems of traditional practices. These rituals are part of the identity of the community and cannot be eliminated by the local government, but there is a responsibility to ensure that cultural practices do not worsen the inequalities in well-being.

The government can play its part through three key functions: regulator, facilitator and mediator. As a regulator, the government can make policies concerning the protection of the poor and increase the social welfare. The government can also serve as a facilitator by providing economic empowerment programs to help communities increase their financial capacity. Meanwhile, the government as mediator can stimulate contact between Communities, traditional leaders and important parties

Government policies should take into account changing cultural values in the context of indigenous communities. A purely regulatory approach to change without understanding the social conditions of the community will definitely face obstacles in its implementation. Changes in the customary practices of the Sumba community are determined by several social factors including the level of education and changes in the mindset of the community. Thus, the government should adopt an educational and participatory approach in the formulation of policies on customary practices..

3.5 Implementation of Government Policies to Maintain a Balance Between Customary Practices and Community Well-Being

The ability of local governments to address socio-economic problems arising from customary practices depends largely on the effective implementation of policies. Policies that have been put in place will not be effective if they are not supported by strong implementation methods.

Edwards III's theory of policy implementation argues that policy success depends on four major factors: communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure. Communication is very crucial in indigenous communities. The government needs to be able to communicate policy

objectives in a way that takes into account the values and viewpoints of local people. Besides communication, availability of resources is also very important. The government needs budgetary support, personnel resources and coordination with diverse stakeholders to ensure that programs it implements run properly.

The major hurdle for the execution of policy is the strong influence of traditional values in people's lives. Some members of the community believe that changes to traditional practices may be at odds with the values of their ancestors. Hence, the government should employ a collaborative strategy by including traditional leaders who have a great influence in the community.

Thus, the removal of existing traditions cannot help to solve socioeconomic inequities caused by customary behaviours but rather attempts to reach a balance between the preservation of culture and promoting communal welfare. Local governments need to foster adaptative transformation to retain cultural values without excessive economic impact on the community.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this discussion indicate that traditional customs in West Sumba Regency are crucial to community life, functioning as both a cultural identity and a social framework that regulates familial ties, social hierarchy, and reverence for ancestors. Customs like belis and conventional funerals possess significant cultural and social importance; yet, their interpretations may evolve with time, resulting in socioeconomic repercussions for certain community members, especially those of lower economic standing.

The considerable expectations linked to executing traditional ceremonies may contribute to financial pressure on families within the community. The necessity for livestock, the expenses associated with rituals, and societal expectations compel certain families to adopt different strategies, including liquidating productive assets or securing loans to meet customary duties. These circumstances suggest that the problem of socioeconomic disparity in indigenous communities is not exclusively tied to economic elements but is also shaped by the existing social framework and cultural principles.

The West Sumba Regency Government is crucial in tackling these challenges by serving as a regulator, facilitator, and mediator. The administration must develop strategies that harmonize the preservation of cultural traditions with the enhancement of community welfare. These initiatives can be realized by economically empowering the community, offering social safeguards for at-risk populations, and promoting dialogue and collaboration with traditional authorities to guarantee that any modifications align with the community's cultural principles.

Consequently, socio-economic disparities stemming from traditional customs cannot be rectified merely by eliminating these activities, but rather through a flexible and cooperative strategy. Cultural conservation should be aligned with initiatives aimed at enhancing community welfare, ensuring that traditional traditions continue to serve as a foundation for identity and social cohesion without imposing an economic strain on the inhabitants of West Sumba.

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