



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Synergy as the Highest-Level Participatory budgeting Model

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ABSTRACT

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This study expanded Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation by introducing synergy as the highest level, emphasizing collaboration, mutual trust, and shared responsibilities for inclusive and transparent village budget management. The study employed a qualitative case study in Poka Village, using in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document reviews to examine participatory budgeting and the role of synergy. The findings revealed that synergy enhanced participatory budgeting by fostering citizen involvement, aligning decisions with community needs, and promoting trust and collaboration to improve governance effectiveness. The study highlighted challenges like communication barriers and conflicting interests, stressing the need for better participation mechanisms and capacity-building, especially for marginalized groups. The study identified challenges like communication barriers and conflicting interests, underscoring the need for enhanced participation mechanisms and capacity-building, particularly for marginalized groups.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory budgeting has gained significant global attention, being implemented in over 1,500 cities worldwide, including Indonesia, where its definitions and practices vary across different contexts (Cantador et al., 2020; Bartocci et al., 2023). In Indonesia, participatory budgeting is institutionalized through the Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan (Musrenbang), as mandated by Law Nos. 25 of 2004 concerning the National Development Planning System (Republik Indonesia, 2004). This legal framework ensures citizen participation in planning and budgeting processes and is further reinforced by Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government, specifically Article 354, which emphasizes transparent governance and the development of citizens' capacities to engage actively in administrative processes (Republik Indonesia, 2014c).

The management of village budgets through participatory practices is essential for achieving governance that is inclusive, transparent, and accountable (Damayanti & Syarifuddin, 2020). The implementation of decentralization and regional autonomy has further increased the importance of involving citizens in planning, implementation, and evaluation processes (reference needed). However, in practice, citizen participation often remains limited to formalities or ceremonial activities. Previous research has highlighted persistent challenges, including low levels of community engagement during planning and preparation phases (Adeliya, 2017; Sopanah et al., 2023).

Corruption remains a critical issue in village governance, with nearly 600 village chiefs implicated in corruption cases between 2015 and 2022, resulting in state losses amounting to approximately IDR 470 billion (Aryan, 2022). A lack of meaningful citizen participation in planning and monitoring the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD) is a contributing factor to these inefficiencies in participatory budgeting (Fitriyah et al., 2024).

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation provides a theoretical framework to understand varying levels of citizen involvement, ranging from Manipulation (minimal participation) to Citizen Control (maximum participation) (Miller et al., 2019). In the context of village governance in Indonesia, achieving the highest level of participation, Citizen Control, faces significant structural and cultural challenges, particularly in fostering sustained collaboration between stakeholders. To address these issues, a more integrated and synergistic participatory framework is required (Antlöv et al., 2016).

This research investigates the potential of synergy as an enhancement to Arnstein's ladder, positioning it as the highest level of participation in the context of village budgeting. Through a qualitative case study approach, this study explores how synergy can be achieved and applied to participatory budgeting. The research focuses on identifying the role of synergy in fostering inclusivity, transparency, and accountability in managing village budgets (Moonti & Ahmad, 2019). By bridging theoretical concepts with practical applications, this study aims to provide a framework that can enhance participatory budgeting practices, ensuring that they fulfill procedural requirements while delivering substantial outcomes for local communities.

1. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach through a case study conducted in Poka Village, a suitable research setting due to its unique characteristics. Poka Village represents a diverse community composed of various ethnicities, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, the village demonstrates a high level of information transparency, facilitating effective data collection and analysis.

Data collection was conducted through three main methods. First, in-depth interviews were held with selected informants, including village administrators, community leaders, vulnerable groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These interviews explored their experiences, perspectives, and contributions to achieving synergy in village budget management. Second, observations were carried out during the Village Convention (Musyawarah Desa or Musdes) and the Development Planning Convention (Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan or Musrenbang). These observations focused on recording the interactions and participation of villagers in decision-making processes (Tong et al., 2024). Third, documentation involving reports and records of activities and budgets was reviewed to validate and supplement the findings from interviews and observations.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to synergy in participatory budgeting (Cruickshank & Ryan, 2023). To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, a data triangulation method was applied. This method integrated information from interviews, observations, and documentation, ensuring consistency and accuracy in the research process (Hunter, 2012).

2. Title Result

2.1. Implementation of Participatory Budgeting in Poka Village

Budgeting serves as a critical planning tool designed to guide institutions in achieving their objectives. In the context of village governance, budgets must reflect substantial activity plans tailored to the specific needs of the community. Effective budgeting ensures that the allocated funds

align with the essential services required by the villagers (Simin et al., 2020). According to Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages, particularly Article 54, the Village Convention (Musyawarah Desa or Musdes) is defined as a deliberative forum involving village deliberation councils, village administrators, and other community elements to discuss strategic matters related to village governance (Republik Indonesia, 2014b).

This provision is further regulated by Government Regulation Number 43 of 2014 concerning the Implementation of Law Number 6 of 2014, particularly Article 81, which elaborates on the objectives and procedures of the Musdes (Republik Indonesia, 2014a). The Musdes serves as a platform for discussing village development issues and jointly making decisions. Community members are actively involved in expressing their opinions and ideas, ensuring that decisions are aligned with village needs. These suggestions are based on direct input from the villagers, making the resulting programs more effective. The Musdes in Poka Village, typically held in September or October each year, reflects this participatory ethos. For 2024, the Musdes was held in October, initiated by distributing invitations to villagers and external stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to attend and contribute to the deliberations.

Interviews with various stakeholders in Poka Village, including the Village Chief, Village Secretary, Chairpersons of Neighborhood Associations (Rukun Tetangga or RT), Hamlet Representatives (Rukun Warga or RW), the Chairwoman of the Family Welfare Empowerment Group (PKK), and NGO members, revealed that the Musdes involves a wide range of participants. For instance:

“The Village Chief emphasized that the Musdes includes village administrators, religious leaders, community elders, youth representatives, children, business owners, vulnerable groups (such as individuals with disabilities), and social institutions like the Salempeng Sago Foundation.”

“The Village Secretary noted that traditional elders, women’s empowerment groups, educational leaders, and religious organizations are among the active participants.”

“The Chairwoman of PKK highlighted the inclusion of stakeholders such as RT/RW representatives, Badan Usaha Milik Desa (Village-Owned Enterprises), and local NGOs like the Sagu Salempeng Foundation and Arika Mahina.”

The active participation of various societal elements illustrates a collaborative approach between the government and community members, which is essential for effective governance (Damayanti & Syarifuddin, 2020). Community enthusiasm for participation was evident in statements from informants, who described their involvement as not merely fulfilling an obligation but as an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions. Participants actively contributed ideas, debated proposals, and collaboratively refined the draft programs and budgets. One informant described the process as follows:

“Each representative conveys their needs, proposes programs, and interacts to justify their suggestions. Programs are then collaboratively prepared and monitored, ensuring they reflect the priorities of the community rather than being solely determined by village administrators.”

The outcomes of the Musdes are carried forward by the Village Government Work Plan (Rencana Kerja Pemerintah Desa or RKPD) team, whose members are selected from the Musdes participants. This team reviews and prioritizes the proposed programs based on village needs. Their findings are presented at the Development Planning Convention (Musyawarah Perencanaan Pembangunan or Musrenbang), typically held at the end of the year. The Musrenbang serves as a platform for finalizing the RKPD and the Village Income and Expenditure Budget (Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Desa or APBDes), which are then submitted to the sub-district office for further processing.

Throughout this process, inclusivity is a cornerstone of participatory budgeting. Participation is not merely about involvement in planning but also about contributing to shared goals and promoting

social justice (Miller et al., 2019). The Poka Village exemplifies this principle through its emphasis on synergy and inclusiveness, ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice in decision-making.

2.2. Synergy in Participatory Budgeting

The success of participatory budgeting in Poka Village can be attributed to the synergy between village administrators and the community. Administrators actively engage with villagers at every stage of program and budget preparation, treating the community as collaborators rather than passive participants. This collaborative dynamic is reinforced by the diverse and heterogeneous nature of Poka Village's population, which includes individuals from various ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. The commitment of village administrators to fostering communication and coordination has heightened community awareness of their role in shaping the village's development.

Informants consistently highlighted the importance of collaboration. As stated by the Chairperson of an RT:

“We, the people of Poka, are heavily involved in village activities because this is for the common good. Village administrators cannot work alone; they need the active participation of the villagers.”

This approach aligns with the concept of community-based development emphasized in Law No. 6 of 2014, which advocates for a locality-focused strategy. Through synergy, Poka Village has demonstrated that participatory budgeting can effectively address community needs and enhance the quality of life for its residents.

2.3. Synergy as the Highest Level of the Ladder of Citizen Participation

Participatory budgeting can only be effective and efficient when there is synergy between village administrators and the villagers. Synergy fosters cooperation between differing mindsets, enabling better outcomes throughout the budgeting process. It entails respecting differences in opinions and ideas while continuing to collaborate for the collective benefit. Synergy requires setting aside selfish interests and pursuing personal or group objectives without undermining other individuals or groups. Fundamentally, synergy involves uniting separate perspectives through effective communication and coordination. Additionally, trust plays a vital role in establishing synergy. Mutual trust between village administrators and the villagers, rooted in the belief that cooperation is motivated by good intentions for the common good, can significantly enhance the outcomes for all parties involved (Halim, 2019).

Village administrators are tasked with creating public spaces, such as villager meetings, Musdes, and Musrenbang, to encourage active participation and idea-sharing for the village's progress (Adeliya, 2017). These platforms enable collaborative interactions, laying the groundwork for synergy by incorporating diverse perspectives from all participants.

Synergy between village administrators and villagers in participatory budgeting also promotes social inclusion. The regulatory framework for social inclusion, as outlined in the Village Governance Law (Undang-Undang Desa), provides opportunities for marginalized groups, such as women and the poor, to actively participate in planning and implementing village development programs (Ra'is, 2017). Achieving optimal results in village governance requires collaboration with all levels of society rather than limiting interactions to specific societal figures. Inclusiveness, therefore, becomes a cornerstone of participatory budgeting (Damayanti & Syarifuddin, 2020).

Inclusiveness is an approach that fosters an open and welcoming environment for individuals from diverse backgrounds, including variations in characteristics, abilities, statuses, ethnicities, and cultures (Halim, 2019). This inclusive approach has been effectively implemented in Poka Village. Not only do all societal elements in the village participate in the Musrenbang, but they also actively contribute ideas and engage directly in decision-making processes. This inclusive engagement

underscores the importance of synergy and ensures that participatory budgeting in Poka Village addresses the needs and aspirations of the entire community.

2.4. Synergy as the Highest Level of the Ladder of Citizen Participation

This study introduces synergy as the highest level in Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation theory, expanding and enriching its original model. Synergy reflects a participatory process where citizens and their government collaborate closely, sharing power and responsibilities to achieve optimal outcomes. Synergy is built on dialogue, openness, mutual respect for differing opinions, and a willingness to embrace others' ideas without feeling threatened intellectually or personally.

The participatory budgeting process in Poka Village exemplifies this concept. Village administrators facilitate public spaces, such as *Musdes* and *Musrenbang*, enabling citizens to express ideas, engage in open discussions, and contribute to joint decision-making. These meetings are not merely platforms for submitting suggestions but serve as avenues for representing all community groups. Participants, including marginalized groups, actively voice concerns and propose solutions that address the community's needs. Village administrators in Poka Village acknowledge the importance of collaborative governance, recognizing that effective decision-making relies on mutual support between government representatives and the villagers.

This collaborative approach has yielded tangible results for Poka Village. For instance, the village was awarded first place at the regional level in Ambon and third place at the provincial level in Maluku for its exceptional development achievements in 2021. Additionally, Poka Village won first place in the Ambon-level Nuclear Family Planning (*Keluarga Berencana*/KB) competition. The village was also chosen by the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries as the target location for developing a Smart Fisheries Village (*Smart Fisheries Village*/SFV). These accomplishments underscore the effectiveness of synergy in participatory governance, demonstrating that participation is not only a means to an end but a continuous learning process where all stakeholders grow together.

The success of Poka Village's participatory budgeting is attributed to the synergy among village administrators, villagers, and external stakeholders. This synergy fosters collaboration, trust, and a shared commitment to development goals. Based on these observations, researchers argue that the highest level of participation in Arnstein's Ladder is not Citizen Control, but synergy—a state where power and responsibilities are shared between government and citizens. As Tritter and McCallum (2006) noted, effective participation necessitates close collaboration among governments, service providers, and users. Similarly, Fung (2006) emphasized that trust and commitment are foundational to fostering synergy in participatory governance.

Village administrators play a crucial role in building trust by committing to implement decisions responsibly, thereby encouraging villagers to participate actively in the deliberation process. The addition of synergy as the highest level in Arnstein's Ladder highlights the importance of inclusive and dynamic interactions in participatory governance. This revised model acknowledges the interconnected roles of governments and communities, emphasizing shared power, responsibility, and common goals.

The figure below illustrates the modified model of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, with synergy positioned as the highest level of participation:

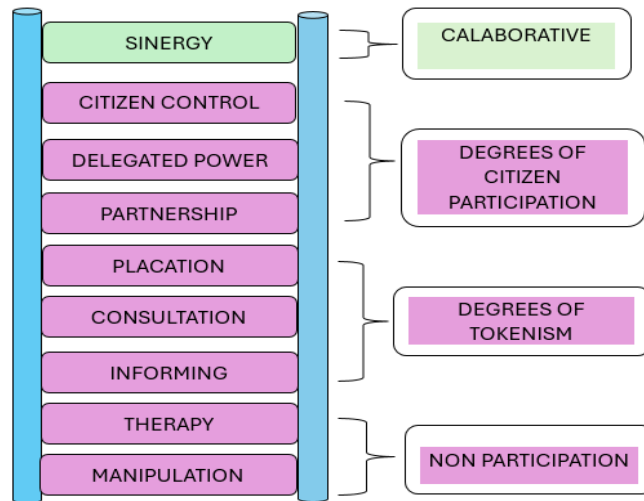


Table 1. Model Modified

Source: Data processed by researchers.

This addition enriches the literature on participatory governance, demonstrating how collaboration between government and citizens can lead to more inclusive and effective outcomes. Synergy encapsulates the essence of participatory budgeting in Poka Village, where decision-making processes are transparent, inclusive, and responsive to community needs, ultimately achieving better development outcomes.

3. CONCLUSION

This research expands Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation theory by introducing synergy as the highest level of participation in the context of village budget management. Through a case study in Poka Village, this study demonstrates that synergy goes beyond the concept of villagers’ control by fostering close collaboration between villagers and village administrators throughout all stages of planning and budget management. Synergy plays a crucial role in producing decisions that are more inclusive, transparent, and accountable, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of village governance. As the highest level of participation, synergy emphasizes not only collaboration but also mutual trust and commitment among stakeholders. This ensures that decision-making processes are guided by shared interests and oriented towards the collective good. The findings highlight that successful synergy in village budget management relies on open communication, active involvement, and a willingness to share power and responsibilities among all participants.

Despite its benefits, challenges remain in implementing synergy. These challenges include differing interests among community groups and communication barriers that may hinder optimal citizen involvement. To address these issues, village administrators must enhance participation mechanisms and build the capacity of vulnerable groups, ensuring that all community members are equally empowered to contribute to decision-making processes.

This research offers a theoretical contribution by expanding Arnstein’s model and presenting a new perspective on creating more inclusive, transparent, and accountable village budget management. From a practical standpoint, it provides a framework that village administrators can adopt to significantly enhance citizen participation in budget governance. Future research is recommended to explore the application of synergy in diverse village contexts to further enrich the literature on sustainable participatory budgeting and public governance. By broadening the scope of

investigation, researchers can deepen the understanding of how synergy contributes to more effective and equitable governance practices.

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