Bridging the Gap: Applying Rawls’ Justice Principles in North Sumatra’s Public Policies

Jopinus

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the application of John Rawls’ principles of social justice, specifically the principle of equal basic liberties and the difference principle, in the governance policies of North Sumatra. The objective is to evaluate how these principles are reflected in the policies related to health, education, and infrastructure, and to identify areas needing improvement to achieve greater social justice. The research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, focusing on the evaluation of specific government programs in public health, education, and regional development. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with government officials, policymakers, and community representatives, as well as analysis of policy documents and statistical data from relevant agencies. The findings indicate significant disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of access to public services and basic facilities, challenging the principle of equal basic liberties. The distribution of resources and public services often favors urban areas, contrary to the difference principle which asserts that inequalities are justifiable only if they benefit the least advantaged. Despite efforts through specific programs, issues such as sustainable funding, resource distribution, and infrastructure maintenance remain significant challenges. The study highlights the need for comprehensive policy reforms to address these disparities. To achieve social justice in line with Rawls’ principles, the North Sumatra government must implement fairer and more sustainable policies. This includes increasing budget allocations for remote areas, improving the distribution of medical and educational personnel, and enhancing infrastructure maintenance strategies. By adopting a more inclusive and participatory approach and committing to reducing social inequalities, the overall quality of life and welfare of all citizens in North Sumatra can be significantly improved. Consistent application of Rawlsian principles can effectively guide the creation of a more just and equitable society.

Keywords: Public Policy, Distributive Justice, Infrastructure, Rawls, Policy.

INTRODUCTION

Social justice is one of the fundamental principles that must be prioritized in every form of government, especially in the context of local governance (Nachum, 2021; Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). Local governments play a vital role in meeting the basic needs of the populace, as they are the administrative units closest to the citizens. In this context, social justice serves as a crucial foundation in formulating and implementing policies aimed at improving the welfare of all societal strata.

Over the past decade, various studies have demonstrated that social justice significantly contributes to improving the quality of life in different regions. For instance, Putnam (1993) found that local governments that implement social justice principles tend to have lower poverty rates and a better quality of life compared to those that do not. Additionally, a World Bank report (2018) indicated that equitable resource distribution enhances access to health and education services, subsequently improving a region’s Human Development Index (HDI) (BPS, 2020a).

Despite the recognized importance of social justice, its implementation in local governance often encounters numerous challenges. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) showed significant disparities in the distribution of health services across various regions of Indonesia, including North Sumatra Province, in 2020 (BPS, 2020c). In urban areas, access to health services is relatively better compared to rural and remote areas. This indicates persistent inequality in resource distribution, directly affecting the quality of life of the populace.

Inequity is also evident in the education sector. Preliminary studies conducted by the authors indicate significant disparities in the quality of education between urban and rural schools in North Sumatra. Urban schools typically have better facilities, more qualified teachers, and easier access to educational resources compared to
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rural schools. This inequality results in gaps in educational attainment among students from different regions (Bangun, 2021; Sari & Bangun, 2019).

Furthermore, research by Sen and Dreze (2013) shows that social justice involves not only granting equal rights and opportunities to all citizens but also efforts to rectify existing injustices and ensure that vulnerable groups receive adequate protection and support. In North Sumatra, vulnerable groups such as the poor, rural inhabitants, and ethnic minorities often face greater barriers in accessing public services they need (BPS, 2020b; Dinas Kesehatan Provinsi Sumatera Utara, 2019).

Therefore, it is crucial for local governments to adopt policies that actively address these injustices and ensure that all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable, receive the support they need. Local governments must strive to create a more equitable distribution of resources and improve the quality of public services across their administrative areas. These efforts will help reduce social and economic disparities and enhance the overall welfare of the people in North Sumatra Province.

To address these challenges, the theory of social justice proposed by John Rawls (1971) can be used as a framework for evaluating and formulating more equitable and inclusive local government policies. By applying Rawls' principles, such as the principle of equal basic liberties and the difference principle benefiting the least advantaged, local governments can create more effective policies in achieving social justice for all citizens.

In practice, implementing social justice at the local government level often faces complex challenges. In North Sumatra Province, for example, there are several prominent issues related to inequality in the distribution of resources and public services. Field data indicates that access to health services, education, and basic infrastructure is still uneven across the province (Bangun, 2021; BPS, 2020b). Communities in remote and underdeveloped areas often receive significantly lower levels of service compared to those in urban centers. This disparity creates significant gaps in the quality of life and opportunities for people living in these areas.

This inequality raises important questions: How can social justice be effectively implemented in the formulation of local government policies? More specifically, how can John Rawls' theory of justice be used as a framework for evaluating and improving local government policies in North Sumatra to be more just and inclusive? Rawls' theory of justice, with its principles of equal basic liberties and the difference principle benefiting the least advantaged, offers a relevant approach for evaluating existing policies and formulating new, more equitable policies.

This study aims to analyze the application of the concept of social justice in local government policies in North Sumatra Province. Using John Rawls’ theory of justice as an analytical framework, this research will evaluate how current policies have met or failed to meet the principles of social justice. The main questions to be answered are: How are Rawls’ principles of justice applied in the distribution of resources and public services policies in North Sumatra? Are current policies fair and inclusive for all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable groups?

This study holds significant implications both academically and practically. Academically, it is expected to contribute to the development of literature on social justice in the context of local governance, especially by applying John Rawls' theory of justice. Additionally, it aims to provide new insights into how social justice principles can be effectively implemented in local government policies to reduce inequality and improve community welfare.

Practically, the results of this study are expected to provide concrete recommendations for policymakers in North Sumatra Province in formulating more equitable and inclusive policies. Therefore, this research not only serves as a theoretical study but also as a practical guide to enhancing social justice in local governance. The recommendations derived from this study are expected to help local governments identify existing injustices and formulate more effective policies in achieving social justice for all citizens, especially the most vulnerable.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Social justice is a fundamental principle that underlies various political theories and moral philosophies. In the academic literature, this concept is frequently linked to efforts aimed at achieving an equitable distribution of resources and opportunities within society. John Rawls, a leading philosopher in this field, introduced the theory of justice known as “Justice as Fairness.” Rawls proposed two primary principles: first, each individual possesses an equal right to basic liberties, and second, social and economic inequalities must be arranged to benefit the least advantaged members of society (Miller, 2021; Rawls, 1971; Wei, 2008).

Extensive research has explored the application of Rawls’ theory of justice across different contexts. For instance, a study by Lamont and Favor (2017) demonstrated that the implementation of Rawls’ justice principles can enhance social welfare by ensuring public policies prioritize the most vulnerable groups (See also: Andersson, 2022; Heath, 2013; Miller, 2021). This research underscores the importance of designing policies that consider not only economic efficiency but also the fair distribution of resources.

In the context of local governance, the literature indicates that the principles of social justice are frequently overlooked during the policy formulation process. A study by Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016) found that decentralization in Indonesia, which is intended to empower local governments, often fails to address injustices in resource distribution. This research highlights that although decentralization grants greater autonomy to regions, without a clear framework for social justice, the outcomes may exacerbate existing inequalities.

In North Sumatra Province, inequality in access to public services remains a significant issue. Reports from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2020b) reveal substantial disparities in access to health, education, and infrastructure services between urban and rural areas. Further research by Suryadarma et al. (2006) confirmed that the quality of education gap between urban and rural areas in Indonesia remains wide. These studies indicate that despite efforts to enhance access and quality of public services, the benefits are still unevenly distributed, favoring more developed areas.

Moreover, the literature suggests that policy approaches focusing solely on economic growth often fail to achieve social justice. Amartya Sen (1999), in his book “Development as Freedom,” emphasizes that development should be viewed as a process of expanding individual freedoms and capabilities, rather than merely increasing income. This perspective aligns with Rawls’ principles, which emphasize the importance of basic liberties and benefits for the least advantaged.

Analyzing governance policies in North Sumatra through the lens of John Rawls’ theory of justice can provide a robust framework for evaluating and formulating more equitable policies. By applying Rawls’ principles, local governments can identify existing injustices and devise policies that emphasize both efficiency and the fair distribution of resources and public services. This study aims to bridge a gap in the literature regarding the application of social justice principles at the local government level, particularly in North Sumatra Province, and to offer concrete policy recommendations for enhancing social justice in the region.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze the application of social justice concepts in local government policies in North Sumatra Province. The case study design was selected as it enables researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of the specific context and complexities of the local policies implemented (Creswell, 2014). This approach also facilitates the collection and analysis of data from various sources, providing a comprehensive understanding.

Primary data for this research was obtained through in-depth interviews with local government officials, policymakers, and community representatives in North Sumatra. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing flexibility in exploring relevant topics and obtaining detailed insights from respondents. Additionally, secondary data was collected from policy documents, annual government reports, academic publications, and reports from non-governmental organizations focused on social justice and resource distribution in North Sumatra.
Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis techniques, which involved coding the data and identifying key themes that emerged from the collected data. Initially, interview transcripts and policy documents were analyzed to identify relevant concepts and categories related to the application of social justice. Subsequently, the coded data was organized into broader themes reflecting John Rawls’ principles of justice, such as the principle of equal basic liberties and the difference principle.

Each identified theme was then further analyzed to evaluate how the existing policies in North Sumatra align with or deviate from the principles of social justice. This analysis also included comparisons between policies implemented in urban and rural areas to assess the degree of inequality in resource distribution and public service provision.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation was conducted by collecting information from multiple sources and types of data (interviews, policy documents, and secondary reports). Second, member checking was performed by confirming preliminary findings with several respondents to ensure that data interpretations were accurate and reflected their perspectives. Third, an audit trail was established by thoroughly documenting each step of the research process, from data collection to analysis and conclusion drawing.

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the focus on North Sumatra Province may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts within Indonesia or internationally. Second, the qualitative approach with a case study design has limitations regarding sample representativeness, although it provides in-depth insights. Third, access to some policy documents may be restricted, potentially affecting the completeness of the collected data. Despite these limitations, this research aims to provide a profound understanding of the application of social justice in local government policies in North Sumatra, along with concrete recommendations for policy improvements in the future.

**RESULT**

**Application of the Principle of Equal Basic Liberties**

**Analysis of Health Policies**

Health policies in North Sumatra aim to enhance access to and the quality of health services across the province. The local government has initiated various programs, including the construction of community health centers (Puskesmas) and the enhancement of hospital facilities in major cities as well as remote areas. Despite these significant efforts, evaluations indicate that access to health services remains inequitable. Data from the North Sumatra Health Office (2019, 2023) reveal that health facilities in urban areas are more comprehensive and of higher quality compared to those in rural areas. Urban hospitals are equipped with advanced medical equipment and sufficient human resources, whereas in remote areas, Puskesmas often lack basic equipment and competent medical personnel.

Furthermore, the number of medical personnel in remote areas is significantly limited, with a high doctor-to-patient ratio. In some villages, for instance, a single doctor may have to serve more than 5,000 residents, which is far from the ideal standard. This situation results in limitations in patient care and often forces residents to travel long distances to urban centers to receive adequate health services. This not only increases the financial burden on impoverished families but also exacerbates their health conditions due to delays in receiving necessary care (Dinas Kesehatan Provinsi Sumatera Utara, 2019, 2023).

These policies have a significant impact on vulnerable groups and remote communities. These populations often have to travel long distances to access basic health services, increasing their health risks and exacerbating social inequality in the region. For example, pregnant women in remote areas frequently encounter difficulties in obtaining prenatal care and delivering safely, leading to high maternal and infant mortality rates in these regions. Additionally, individuals with chronic illnesses or serious health conditions often do not receive continuous care, deteriorating their quality of life and increasing morbidity rates in remote areas.
While health policies in North Sumatra have led to some improvements, significant gaps in access to and the quality of health services between urban and rural areas persist. To achieve the principle of equal basic liberties, further efforts are required to ensure that all communities, regardless of their geographic location, have equal access to quality health services. These efforts should include increasing the distribution of medical personnel, enhancing facilities in remote areas, and implementing special programs for vulnerable groups to reduce existing inequalities.

**Analysis of Education Policies**

Education policies in North Sumatra are focused on improving access to and the quality of education for all societal segments. The local government has undertaken efforts to build and renovate school infrastructure and enhance the capacity of teaching staff through regular training. These initiatives include renovating damaged school buildings, providing adequate learning facilities such as laboratories and libraries, and distributing books and learning materials to various schools across the province. However, analyses indicate that significant disparities in the quality of education between urban and rural areas persist.

Schools in urban areas generally possess more comprehensive facilities and higher-quality teaching staff compared to those in rural areas. Urban schools are often equipped with modern technology and adequate laboratories to support the teaching and learning process. Conversely, in rural areas, many schools still lack basic facilities such as proper desks and chairs and have limited access to adequate learning materials. Data show that the student-to-teacher ratio in rural areas is higher, adversely affecting the teaching and learning process. In some villages, a single teacher may have to instruct more than 40 students in one class, reducing the effectiveness of instruction and the attention that can be given to each student.

The impact of these policies is evident among vulnerable groups and remote communities, which tend to receive lower-quality education. Children in rural areas often face numerous barriers to obtaining proper education, including long distances to school, poor road infrastructure, and limited family economic resources. The low quality of education in these areas widens the educational gap between urban and rural children, subsequently affecting their future opportunities. Children from impoverished families and remote areas tend to have fewer opportunities to pursue higher education or secure decent employment in the future (BPS, 2020c, 2020b).

While education policies in North Sumatra have led to some improvements, significant gaps in access to and the quality of education between urban and rural areas remain. To achieve the principle of equal basic liberties, further efforts are needed to ensure that all children, regardless of their geographic location, have equal access to quality education. These efforts should include increasing the distribution of educational resources, providing regular training and incentives for teachers working in remote areas, and implementing special programs to support children from vulnerable groups to reduce existing inequalities and narrow the educational gap in North Sumatra.

**Analysis of Basic Infrastructure**

The policy for basic infrastructure development in North Sumatra encompasses the construction of roads, bridges, and the provision of clean water access. The local government has allocated substantial funds to these infrastructure projects with the objective of enhancing connectivity and community welfare. The construction of roads and bridges is expected to facilitate access to economic centers, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions. Additionally, the provision of clean water access aims to improve the quality of life by ensuring that communities have access to safe and affordable water sources. However, despite these significant efforts, evaluations indicate that access to basic infrastructure remains uneven across the province.

Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2020c) reveal that urban areas have significantly better access to infrastructure compared to rural areas. In major cities, main roads are generally in good condition and well-maintained, whereas in remote areas, roads are often in poor condition and inadequate for effective transportation. Many rural roads become muddy and impassable, especially during the rainy season, hindering the mobility of residents and their access to various essential services. Additionally, many villages still lack
proper access to clean water, forcing residents to collect water from distant and often unhygienic sources, which negatively impacts their health.

This situation creates significant disparities in the quality of life between urban and rural residents. The impact of these disparities is acutely felt by rural communities, who face difficulties in accessing markets, healthcare, and education. Poor road conditions and inadequate infrastructure hinder farmers and traders in rural areas from transporting their products to markets, ultimately reducing their income and exacerbating poverty. Furthermore, limited access to healthcare and education services results in a lower quality of life and restricted educational opportunities for children in remote areas.

While the basic infrastructure development policy in North Sumatra has led to some improvements, significant gaps in access to and the quality of infrastructure between urban and rural areas persist. To achieve the principle of equal basic liberties, further efforts are necessary to ensure that all regions, particularly remote areas, have adequate access to basic infrastructure. This includes improving road conditions, providing safe bridges, and ensuring equitable access to clean water. More equitable infrastructure development can help reduce disparities, improve mobility, and enhance the welfare of communities across North Sumatra.

Application of the Difference Principle

Analysis of Resource Distribution Equity

John Rawls’ difference principle emphasizes that economic and social inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. In North Sumatra, resource distribution policies frequently reveal an imbalance between urban and rural areas. Evaluations indicate that budget allocations for development and public services are disproportionately higher in urban areas compared to rural regions. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2020c) indicate that the proportion of budget allocated for infrastructure projects and public facilities in major cities is significantly greater than in remote areas. This economic inequality is evident from the income disparity between urban and rural populations. Urban residents generally have greater access to better job opportunities, higher education, and more comprehensive public services. Conversely, rural residents often experience worse economic conditions, typically relying on agriculture and informal sectors, which tend to be less stable and less profitable than the dominant sectors in urban areas (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). This inequality is exacerbated by the uneven distribution of resources, where rural populations do not receive a fair share of development budgets (World Bank, 2018).

Although the government has made efforts to address these inequalities through social assistance programs and subsidies, the results remain uneven. Programs such as direct cash assistance and food subsidies have provided some relief to poor families but are often insufficient to address the deeper roots of inequality. Additionally, these programs are frequently implemented ineffectively, failing to reach the most needy groups. Consequently, injustice in resource distribution remains a significant issue in North Sumatra.

The application of Rawls’ difference principle in resource distribution policies in North Sumatra continues to face substantial challenges. The imbalance in budget allocation and income disparity between urban and rural areas indicate that current policies have not fully succeeded in benefiting the least advantaged. To address this inequality, policies must focus more on redistributing resources to the areas most in need, increasing economic opportunities for rural residents, and implementing more effective and targeted assistance programs.

Analysis of Public Service Equity

Evaluations of public services in North Sumatra demonstrate that Rawls’ difference principle has not been fully applied. Data from the North Sumatra Provincial Health Office (2019, 2023) reveal significant variations in the quality and access to public services such as healthcare, education, and transportation between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, healthcare facilities such as hospitals and clinics are adequately available and equipped with modern medical equipment. Urban schools also tend to have better facilities and more qualified teaching staff. Adequate public transportation supports the mobility of urban residents in accessing various public services.
In contrast, residents in remote areas frequently encounter difficulties in accessing basic services. Healthcare facilities in rural areas are often inadequate, with a very limited number of medical personnel and insufficient medical equipment. Rural schools frequently lack basic facilities such as laboratories and libraries and suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers. Inadequate public transportation and poor road conditions further exacerbate rural residents’ access to public services. Consequently, their social and economic conditions continue to deteriorate.

Current policies have not fully addressed the needs of the most disadvantaged groups, such as the poor and those living in remote areas. The impact of these unjust policies is deeply felt by these groups, who often have to struggle harder to obtain the same services available to urban residents. For instance, poor rural residents may have to travel long distances and incur significant expenses to access basic healthcare or quality education. This injustice not only worsens their conditions but also hampers their efforts to escape the cycle of poverty.

Overall, the application of Rawls’ difference principle in public services in North Sumatra requires substantial improvement. To achieve more inclusive justice, public service policies must focus more on enhancing access to and the quality of services in the most disadvantaged areas. This effort should include increasing resource allocation for healthcare and education facilities in rural areas, improving the quality of public transportation, and developing special programs aimed at supporting the most vulnerable groups. By doing so, it is anticipated that public services in North Sumatra will become more equitable, reduce social inequalities, and improve the welfare of the entire population.

Case Studies: Specific Policies

Case Study of Health Policy

A significant health policy in North Sumatra is the primary healthcare integration program, aimed at improving healthcare access in remote areas. This policy includes the construction of community health centers (Puskesmas) in rural areas, the provision of village ambulances, and training for local medical personnel. Evaluations indicate that this program has successfully enhanced access to basic healthcare services in several remote regions. Data from the North Sumatra Provincial Health Office (2019, 2023) show an increase in visits to Puskesmas and a decrease in maternal and infant mortality rates in areas served by this program. Interviews with local residents reveal that they feel more supported and secure with the availability of nearby healthcare facilities. However, the program still faces challenges related to sustainable funding and the equitable distribution of medical personnel.

Despite the positive impacts of this health program, sustainable funding remains a significant issue. Many Puskesmas in remote areas struggle to obtain adequate medical supplies and facilities due to budget constraints. Additionally, the distribution of medical personnel is still uneven, with many doctors and nurses reluctant to be stationed in remote areas due to a lack of incentives and unfavorable working conditions. Addressing these issues requires a more comprehensive strategy and support from various stakeholders, including the central government and non-governmental organizations, to ensure that this program can continue and provide long-term benefits.

Case Study of Education Policy

A prominent education policy in North Sumatra focuses on improving access to and the quality of education in rural areas. This program includes the construction of new schools, distribution of books and learning materials, and capacity building for teachers through regular training. Evaluations of the policy indicate that the program has successfully increased school participation rates in several rural areas. Overall, the policy has contributed to an increase in the number of children continuing their education to higher levels in areas served by the program. Interviews with various education stakeholders reveal that better facilities and learning materials have boosted students’ motivation.

However, the program still faces challenges regarding the quality of teaching staff and resource limitations in some areas. Many rural schools lack qualified and trained teachers, hindering the teaching and learning process. Additionally, resource constraints, such as insufficient books and learning materials, often reduce the program’s
effectiveness. To address these issues, the local government needs to enhance training programs and provide incentives for teachers in remote areas, as well as ensure a more equitable distribution of educational resources. With appropriate efforts, the priority education program in North Sumatra Province can have a more significant impact on improving the quality of education in the region.

**Case Study of Infrastructure Policy**

The regional development program is one of the infrastructure policies implemented in North Sumatra, aimed at improving transportation access in rural areas. This policy includes the construction and repair of village roads, bridges, and the provision of public transportation. Evaluations indicate that the program has improved the mobility and accessibility of rural communities. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2020b) show a significant increase in the number of villages with adequate road access. Interviews with village residents reveal that improved infrastructure has made it easier for them to access markets, schools, and healthcare services, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

However, the program also faces challenges related to infrastructure maintenance and consistent funding. Many roads and bridges that have been constructed or repaired experience deterioration due to a lack of regular maintenance. Additionally, unstable funding often hinders the completion of new infrastructure projects. To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the regional development program focused on villages, better maintenance strategies and more consistent budget allocations from the local government are needed. Thus, this program can continue to provide long-term benefits for rural communities and improve connectivity throughout North Sumatra.

**DISCUSSION**

**Implications of Findings on Rawls’ Theory of Justice**

The findings of this study indicate that the principles of Rawls’ theory of justice, particularly the principle of equal basic liberties and the difference principle, have not been fully implemented in the government policies of North Sumatra. The principle of equal basic liberties, which emphasizes that every individual should have the same rights to basic freedoms, is clearly not uniformly applied. The analysis of health, education, and infrastructure policies reveals significant disparities between urban and rural areas (Rawls, 1971). This inequality violates the principle of equal basic liberties because residents in remote areas do not have the same access to public services and basic facilities as those in urban areas. This indicates that existing policies still fail to provide the same basic freedoms for all citizens (Fleurbaey, 2020; Hart, 2019; Sen, 1999).

Furthermore, the findings regarding resource distribution and public service provision demonstrate that Rawls’ difference principle has also not been fully implemented. The difference principle emphasizes that economic and social inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged (Lamont & Favor, 2017; Wei, 2008). However, data indicate that budget allocations and public service distribution tend to favor urban areas over remote regions. For instance, budgets for infrastructure development and improvements in health and education facilities in urban areas are significantly higher than in rural areas. This inequality demonstrates that current policies have not succeeded in benefiting the least advantaged groups, which should be the main focus according to Rawls’ difference principle. Consequently, the existing policies not only exacerbate injustice but also hinder social and economic development in remote areas (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016).

Evaluations of specific policies, such as health programs, education programs, and regional development initiatives, show government efforts to reduce inequality, but the results remain uneven. For example, the primary healthcare program aims to improve healthcare access in remote areas but still faces challenges related to sustainable funding and equitable distribution of medical personnel. The priority education program in North Sumatra focuses on improving access to and the quality of education in rural areas, but the quality of teaching staff and resource limitations remain major obstacles. While the regional development program has improved mobility and accessibility for rural communities, infrastructure maintenance and consistent funding continue to be issues. These programs reflect the government’s good intentions in applying Rawls’ principles of justice, but their implementation is still far from perfect.
Despite improvements in access to and quality of services in some remote areas, challenges such as sustainable funding, resource distribution, and infrastructure maintenance remain significant obstacles. This indicates that while there have been efforts to implement Rawls’ principles of justice, the execution has not been optimal and requires substantial improvement (World Bank, 2018). Existing policies need to be redesigned with greater attention to Rawls’ difference principle, ensuring that inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged. Additionally, more effective mechanisms are needed to monitor and evaluate policy implementation to ensure that the goals of social justice are truly achieved.

Therefore, this study emphasizes the need for profound improvements in the formulation and implementation of policies in North Sumatra. The local government must ensure that Rawls’ principles of justice are genuinely applied in every policy, with a specific focus on reducing inequality and enhancing the welfare of the least advantaged. Better implementation of these principles will not only help reduce social injustice but also improve the quality of life and opportunities for all residents of North Sumatra. With the appropriate efforts, Rawls’ distributive justice principles can serve as an effective guide to achieving a more just and inclusive society (Andersson, 2022; Rawls, 1971).

**Policy Implications for Local Government**

Based on the findings of this study, the local government of North Sumatra needs to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of existing policies and take concrete steps to reduce inequality. The first step should be to increase more equitable budget allocations for remote areas. Policies that allocate larger budgets for infrastructure development, healthcare improvements, and education in remote areas will help reduce the gap between urban and rural regions (Sen, 1999). For instance, building more Puskesmas and schools in remote areas and providing adequate facilities will enable communities in those regions to have better access to basic public services, thereby improving their quality of life (World Bank, 2018).

The second step is to enhance the distribution of medical and teaching personnel to remote areas. Providing greater incentives for medical and teaching staff willing to work in remote areas can be an effective solution to address this imbalance. Incentives could include additional allowances, housing facilities, or better career development opportunities (Anwar et al., 2020; Furqan et al., 2023). Additionally, regular training programs and capacity building for local teaching and medical staff need to be continually enhanced to ensure that the quality of services provided in remote areas is comparable to those in urban areas. This will ensure that remote communities receive better and more equitable healthcare and education services.

The third necessary step is to develop a better infrastructure maintenance strategy to ensure that investments made are not wasted. Regular maintenance and stable budget allocations for infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and healthcare facilities will ensure the sustainability of the programs implemented (BPS, 2020c). The local government needs to establish clear and structured maintenance programs and ensure that funding for these programs is not interrupted. Moreover, involving the local community in the maintenance process can enhance the sense of ownership and responsibility towards the existing infrastructure. Community participation can also help identify problems more quickly and provide solutions that are more appropriate to local needs (Margareta & Salahudin, 2022; Niswaty et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of improving resource distribution policies and public services to reduce social inequality in North Sumatra. More effective implementation of Rawls’ principles of justice can help the local government achieve this goal. By focusing on enhancing access to and the quality of services in remote areas, the local government can create a more just and inclusive environment for all residents (Rawls, 1971). This aligns with Rawls’ difference principle, which emphasizes that policies should benefit the least advantaged members of society (Sen, 1999).

To achieve this, the local government needs to formulate comprehensive and sustainable policies that not only address current inequalities but also prevent future injustices. This includes strengthening policy monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, ensuring transparency and accountability in budget management, and involving various stakeholders, including the community, in the planning and implementation process (Bourgeois &
Maltais, 2023; Markwat, 2021; McQuestin et al., 2023). With an inclusive and participatory approach, the local government can more effectively identify existing needs and problems and formulate more targeted policies.

Thus, improving resource distribution policies and public services will not only reduce social inequality in North Sumatra but also enhance the overall welfare and quality of life of the population. Through strong commitment and consistent implementation of Rawls’ principles of justice, the local government can create fairer and more equitable conditions for all citizens, especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged (Andersson, 2022; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1999).

CONCLUSION

This study elucidates that the principles of social justice proposed by John Rawls, particularly the principle of equal basic liberties and the difference principle, have not been fully realized in the governmental policies of North Sumatra. The analysis of health, education, and infrastructure policies reveals significant disparities between urban and rural areas, indicating unequal access to fundamental public services. These findings underscore the critical need for policy reforms to ensure that all citizens, especially those in remote areas, have equitable access to essential facilities and services.

Furthermore, the evaluation of specific government programs in health, education, and regional development highlights that, despite substantial efforts to mitigate inequality, the outcomes remain inconsistent. These programs face numerous challenges, including unsustainable funding, uneven resource distribution, and inadequate infrastructure maintenance. To achieve more inclusive and equitable social justice, the local government must enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of these programs, with a specific focus on the most underserved regions.

In pursuit of social justice in alignment with Rawls’ principles, the local government of North Sumatra must design and implement more equitable and sustainable policies. This involves increasing budget allocations for remote areas, ensuring a more equitable distribution of medical and educational personnel, and developing comprehensive infrastructure maintenance strategies. By adopting an inclusive and participatory approach, coupled with a strong commitment to reducing social inequality, it is anticipated that the quality of life and overall well-being of all residents in North Sumatra will be significantly improved. Consistent application of Rawls’ principles of justice can provide an effective framework for fostering a more just and equitable society.

REFERENCES


