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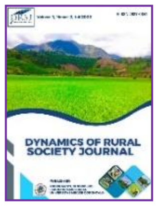

Navigating the promise and perils of village autonomy: Insights from Kepulauan Meranti, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of village autonomy on rural development in Indonesia which focuses on the implementation of Village Law No. 6/2014. The objective of this research includes: (1) analyzing the implementation of decentralization in rural Indonesia through Village Law No. 6/2014, (2) assessing the effects of village autonomy on rural development, and (3) identifying factors mediating the relationship between village autonomy and rural development. This research further uses a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative analysis and field observations. This study evaluates key variables such as resource allocation, access to services, participation, social cohesion, and economic opportunities. Results of the study indicates that village autonomy, particularly access to services and economic opportunities, significantly influences rural development. Village Law No. 6/2014 has empowered local government through increased decision-making authority, financial allocation, and community participation. However, challenges such as reliance on intergovernmental transfers, limited administrative capacity, and government inefficiencies hinder its full potential. This study identifies institutional environments and local governance practices as critical mediators, emphasizing the need for transparency, participatory planning, and capacity building. Additionally, the cash-for-work program (*Padat Karya Tunai - PKT*) is highlighted as a complementary strategy to enhance rural livelihoods and infrastructure. This research concludes that integrating PKT with village autonomy policies can foster inclusive and sustainable rural development. Recommendations include expanding PKT, improving governance mechanisms, and ensuring equitable resource distribution to address underdevelopment in rural Indonesia. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to design more effective governance frameworks and targeted interventions which support equitable growth and resilience in rural communities.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, rural development paradigms have emphasized the importance of holistic approach which integrates economic growth and quality of life improvements. Such approach particularly focuses on marginalized groups, through equitable access to economic, social, and political rights (Hafurova, 2021). This shift aligns with the concept of inclusive rural development, recognizing that rural areas face unique challenges and further require precise strategies for sustainable development (Ydyrys et al., 2023). Decentralization has emerged as a key strategy for empowering local communities by enhancing autonomy and participation in decision-making, yet its effectiveness varies across contexts. For instance, the implementation of decentralization in faced challenges, such as, inconsistent implementation, limited local government's capacity, and inadequate resources, which further highlights the importance of robust regulatory frameworks for effective local governance (Ren et al., 2024; Tešin et al., 2024). Accordingly, examining village autonomy within the framework of decentralization with multifaceted approach is crucial in addressing rural underdevelopment (Prayitno et al., 2022).

Decentralization includes three main dimensions: political, administrative, and fiscal (Sutiyo & Maharjan, 2017). Political decentralization transfers political power to lower government levels, enabling local decision-making. Administrative decentralization redistributes authority and resources for public services, while fiscal decentralization grants villages financial control over revenue generation, transfers, and expenditure decisions (Falleti, 2004; Goel et al., 2017). Successful decentralization requires a coordinated approach across these dimensions to enhance governance and service delivery, ultimately promoting rural development (Drobnjaković & Panić, 2024; Somanje et al., 2020). However, the impact of decentralization varies based on context and strategies. While some argue it can lead to regional economic disparities (Rodríguez-Pose & Ezcurra, 2009)**,** others highlight its potential to reduce poverty and enhance rural vitality (Wang et al., 2019). Effective decentralization requires mechanisms for marginalized households to engage with government and participate in decision-making (Agrawal & Gupta, 2005). Balancing decentralization efforts is crucial to prevent misallocation and ensure balanced urban-rural development (Zhou & Yang, 2023).

Decentralization in rural areas, known as the village autonomy, is prevalent in Asia and Africa, including Indonesia. India's Panchayati Raj system empowers local councils with administrative and financial responsibilities (Das, 2022; Devi & Kumar, 2023; Divi et al., 2024). China has experimented with village autonomy through the "Village Committee" system (Liu et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022). The Philippines' Barangay governance involves elected officials at the village level (Floranza, 2021; Turok & Scheba, 2020; Udanga & Cuevas, 2023). Thailand's Village Fund program provides financial resources and decision-making power to villages (Faoziyah & Salim, 2020; Liao & Shen, 2023). South Korea, Japan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya also have similar local governance structures empowering villages (Befu, 1974; Choi et al., 2020; Shangarai et al., 2023; Kang & Hong, 2023; Kate, 2023; Mgonja & Massawe, 2024; Muriisa, 2021; Okuda, 2023).

Village autonomy in Indonesia refers to a community's capacity to govern itself and manage resources independently, reflecting its members' needs and aspirations (Hakim, 2021; Putra & Alifandi, 2021; Yamani & Andika, 2024). This autonomy is shaped by local government structures, community participation, and legal frameworks that define village authorities' rights and responsibilities in decision-making and resource management (Hakim, 2021; Putra & Alifandi, 2021; Yamani & Andika, 2024). Since the enactment of Law No. 6 of 2014, village autonomy in Indonesia has strengthened local governance and community participation (Setiawan & Melinda, 2020; Wahyudi et al., 2020). This law empowers villages to manage their own affairs and encourages community-driven actions reflecting cultural and social contexts (Dawud et al., 2023; Yuniza et al., 2020). As a result, village autonomy enhances democratic inclusivity and participatory development in Indonesian society (Arsita et al., 2024; Setiawan & Melinda, 2020).

Responsive and transparent leadership in village government is crucial for village autonomy (Hakim et al., 2024; Purnomo et al., 2020; Rozaki, 2022; Sambas & Saputro, 2024). It enables villages to involve local people, strengthen local institutions, develop sustainable programs, and manage resources effectively, ultimately leading to independent and autonomous village development. However, the spatial distribution of power, or *Power Geography*, plays a critical role in shaping governance dynamics at the village level. The unequal concentration of authority—whether in formal government institutions or informal community networks—can influence decision-making, resource allocation, and political participation (Janse, 2022; Wotango & Somano, 2021).

On the other hand, strong social ties in rural life, while beneficial for overcoming poverty and improving social standing, can create informal power structures that challenge transparency and accountability (Berki et al., 2020; Elvy, 2019). These informal structures often emerge from geographic and social proximity, reinforcing existing hierarchies and centralizing influence. While strong ties foster trust and cooperation, they can also hinder information dissemination (Coburn, 2021; Fronczak et al., 2022; Granovetter, 1973), particularly in communities where power is concentrated within localized networks. This highlights the need to balance both strong and weak ties in fostering effective governance, ensuring that power is not only distributed equitably across social networks but also spatially diffused to promote inclusivity and broader participation in village development.

Existing studies on Indonesian village autonomy have provided valuable insights into its governance mechanisms and policy frameworks (Indartuti et al., 2020; Kadir et al., 2021; Phahlevy, 2016; Pratolo et al., 2020; Zuliyah, 2020). However, recent studies often lack comprehensive analysis on how decentralization impacts rural development outcomes. Thus, this paper aims to address the main critical research question: What is the impact of village autonomy on rural development in Indonesia?

While studies have explored governance mechanisms and policy frameworks, they often overlook its tangible socio-economic impacts, particularly in the context of Indonesia's post-2014 decentralization reforms. For instance, Sutiyo & Maharjan (2017) provide a historical analysis of decentralization policies but do not examine the transformative potential of Village Law No. 6/2014. Similarly, studies by Indartuti et al. (2020) and Pratolo et al (2020) focus on institutional structures and policy implementation but fail to critically assess how decentralization influences rural development outcomes, such as poverty reduction, infrastructure development, and community empowerment. This study adopts a conceptual framework that integrates the three dimensions of decentralization—political, administrative, and fiscal—with key socio-economic development indicators such as access to services, economic opportunities, social cohesion, and community participation. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on institutional or policy analysis, this research examines how these dimensions of village autonomy translate into tangible rural development outcomes. It also identifies mediating factors—such as local governance practices, transparency, and institutional environments—that influence the effectiveness of decentralization. This integrative approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the link between autonomy and development than existing frameworks that often treat governance and socio-economic impact in isolation.

This study directly addresses this gap by providing an in-depth evaluation of the socio-economic outcomes of village autonomy, going beyond institutional and policy analysis to examine how decentralization translates into tangible improvements in rural communities. By analyzing access to services, economic opportunities, and community participation, this research offers empirical evidence on the real-world impacts of Village Law No. 6/2014. This contribution is critical for both scholars and policymakers, as it informs future decentralization strategies in achieving inclusive and sustainable rural development.

To fill this gap, this study has three primary objectives, which includes (1) to explore and analyze the implementation of decentralization in rural Indonesia through Village Law No. 6/2014, (2) to analyze the impact of village autonomy on addressing underdevelopment in rural areas, and (3) to investigate the factors which mediate the relationship between village autonomy and rural development outcomes in Indonesia. This study uses a mixed-methods approach integrating qualitative and quantitative data to provide a holistic understanding of how decentralization influences rural development in Indonesia. This study is particularly significant because it evaluates socio-economic impacts of village autonomy and identifies the driving factors and the inhibiting factors which shape its effectiveness. In doing so, this study offers valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to leverage decentralization as a tool for sustainable rural development. Furthermore, this research contributes to the broader discourse on decentralization by highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Indonesian villages, thereby enriching the global understanding of local governance and rural development in developing countries.

This study focuses on the Kepulauan Meranti region in Riau Province, Indonesia, as a case study. Meranti is a peripheral area facing common rural challenges such as limited infrastructure and economic marginalization, while also holding strategic advantages due to its proximity to Singapore and Malaysia.

This unique context makes Kepulauan Meranti a valuable site in examining how village autonomy functions in underdeveloped yet opportunity-rich rural settings. While not fully generalizable, insights from Kepulauan Meranti can inform broader discussions on rural development in similar peripheral regions across Indonesia.

Methods

The study areas

Kepulauan Meranti Regency is a division of Bengkalis Regency which was formed on December 19, 2008. The legal basis for the establishment of Kepulauan Meranti Regency is Law 12/2009, dated January 16, 2009. Geographically, Kepulauan Meranti (Fig.1) is located on the East Coast of the island of Sumatera, with a coast bordering several neighboring countries and included in the Indonesia Economic Growth Triangle (Growth

Triangle) - Malaysia - Singapore (IMS-GT). Indirectly, this area becomes the hinterland area of the Free Trade Zone (FTZ) of Batam – Tanjung Balai Karimun.

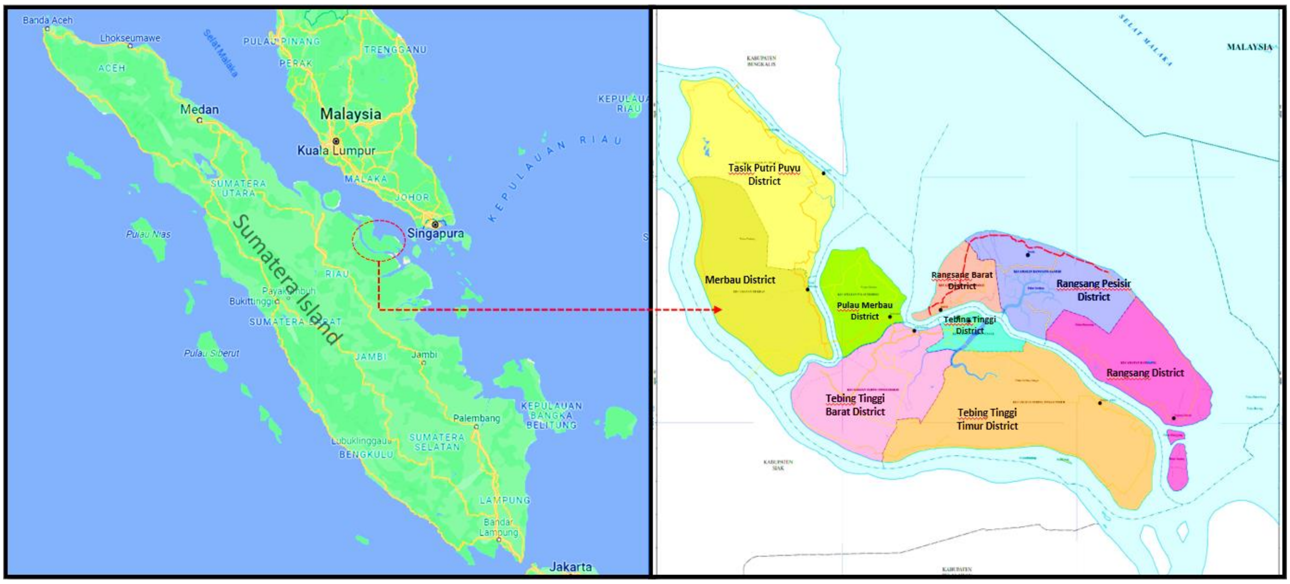

Figure 1. Kepulauan Meranti Regency Location
Source: (Regional Development and Planning Agency, 2022)

The reason for selecting Kepulauan Meranti as the study case is due to its unique combination of geographic and socio-economic characteristics that reflect both the promise and the perils of village autonomy in rural Indonesia. As a peripheral region, it exemplifies challenges commonly faced by underdeveloped areas, such as inadequate infrastructure, limited access to public services, and low levels of investment. At the same time, its strategic proximity to Singapore and Malaysia offers distinctive opportunities for cross-border economic integration and access to global markets.

Moreover, Kepulauan Meranti is administratively complex and includes diverse village development statuses, making it a suitable site to explore how decentralization policies, such as Village Law No. 6/2014, are implemented in practice. These contextual features—combined with the region's dependency on village funds and its exposure to governance challenges—make it a relevant and insightful case for examining how village autonomy operates in underdeveloped yet opportunity-rich environments. While not intended to be fully generalizable, insights from this region can inform broader discussions on decentralization, governance, and rural development across other peripheral areas in Indonesia.

Research methods

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining various techniques of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The quantitative approach is applied to examine the impact of village autonomy on rural development. Accordingly, a questionnaire was administered to village communities between April to June 2023. This study employed a total sampling method by including all 39 village facilitators in Kepulauan Meranti as respondents. Village facilitators were selected because they are appointed and trained by the Indonesian Government, equipping them with standardized knowledge and practical expertise related to Village Law No. 6/2014, rural governance, and community empowerment. They reside in the villages where they work, allowing them to observe local dynamics closely while maintaining a degree of neutrality, as they are not formal members of the village government. This positioning enables them to provide informed yet objective assessments of village autonomy implementation and its socio-economic impacts. Using total sampling ensures that the entire population of qualified respondents is represented, eliminating sampling bias and enhancing the reliability and comprehensiveness of the data.

With the help of SPSS software, a multiple linear regression was conducted. Based on the guideline of Village Law No. 6/2014, village autonomy is divided into five independent variables (Table 1): such as resource allocation, access to essential services, participation and inclusion, social cohesion, and economic opportunities. Rural development is determined as dependent variable (Y).

Table 1. Variables of village autonomy

No	Village Autonomy Variables	Indicators to measure the variable
1.	Resource allocation (X1)	*The process of distributing available resources, such as funds, infrastructure, and services, within a village community*
2.	Access to essential services (X2)	*The availability and accessibility of essential services in rural areas, such as connectivity infrastructure, healthcare facilities, schools, markets, and financial services.*
3.	Participation and inclusion (X3)	*Civic participation and involvement in decision-making processes at the local level. It examines whether all areas have opportunities for residents to participate in community initiatives, governance structures, and planning processes*
4.	Social cohesion (X4)	*The sense of belonging, the degree of unity, cooperation, and connectedness within village community among village societies*
5.	Economic opportunities (X5)	*The contribution of village autonomy from economic aspects such as creating job opportunities, increasing the community's income, and improving the quality of access to markets and village financial services*

Source: (Analyzed and Synthesized from Village Law No. 6/2014)

The operationalization of the village autonomy variable is primarily based on the framework established in Village Law Number 6 of 2014, which outlines the core principles of village governance and development, including authority over budgeting, service delivery, and community participation. These components were further refined by referencing key academic sources that interpret and analyze the law's implications for local governance, such as Angkasa & Evardi (2022), Andari & Fitria (2023), Kushandajani (2017), Putri et al. (2023), Rudiarta et al. (2020), Sujito and Ghofur (2023), and Timotius (2018). The five indicators—resource allocation, access to essential services, participation and inclusion, social cohesion, and economic opportunities—reflect both the legal mandates and the practical dimensions of autonomy emphasized in rural decentralization literature. This combined legal and scholarly foundation ensures that the variables are not only aligned with Indonesia's policy context but also consistent with international perspectives on effective local governance.

Rural development, as the dependent variable in this study, is measured through a combination of indicators adapted from the Village Development Index (VDI) and aligned with the goals outlined in Village Law No. 6/2014. These indicators include: (1) improvements in village infrastructure (e.g., roads, sanitation, public buildings), (2) access to basic public services (e.g., health, education, clean water), (3) economic vitality (e.g., job opportunities, income levels, market access), and (4) community well-being (e.g., participation in local planning, social inclusion). These dimensions reflect both tangible development outcomes and broader quality-of-life improvements that village autonomy is expected to influence, thereby providing a comprehensive measure of the success of rural development initiatives under the decentralization framework.

The qualitative approach was adopted in this study to obtain in-depth and accurate data adjusted to the conditions in the field (Neuman, 2006). This approach is also intended to explain and explore statistical results from quantitative analysis. Therefore, several interview sessions were held with some rural stakeholders such as five village heads, three village facilitators, two regional government officers and some village communities. To optimally achieve research objective, the selection of villages heads for interview was based on the status of VDI (Village Development Index) comprising all five categories: Very under-developed village, under-developed village, developing village, advanced village, and independent village. Each village head will represent each VDI. VDI is an indicator of village development progress that is determined based on Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages and Minister of Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions and Transmigration Regulation Number 2 of 2016 concerning Village Development Index.

Data processing technique

For the quantitative data, responses from the questionnaires were coded and entered into SPSS software for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, followed by multiple linear regression analysis to determine the relationship between village autonomy variables and rural development outcomes. Assumptions such as normality, heteroskedasticity, and multicollinearity were tested to ensure the robustness of the regression model.

For the qualitative data, interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved coding responses, identifying recurring patterns, and categorizing them into key themes related to governance practices, institutional challenges, and local perceptions of village autonomy. This analysis was conducted inductively to allow insights to emerge from the data and was used to support and interpret the quantitative findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Result and discussion

Village autonomy in rural areas in Kepulauan Meranti

Since 2015, the government of Indonesia has allocated more than 400 trillion Indonesian Rupiah (26,8 billion US dollars) for 74.961 villages in Indonesia. In Kepulauan Meranti, from 2018-2022, the Government has allocated more than 30.6 million USD to 96 villages (Figure 2). The Village Fund is used to finance village development programs (Table 2) that cover the fields of the government sector, village development, community development, and community empowerment.

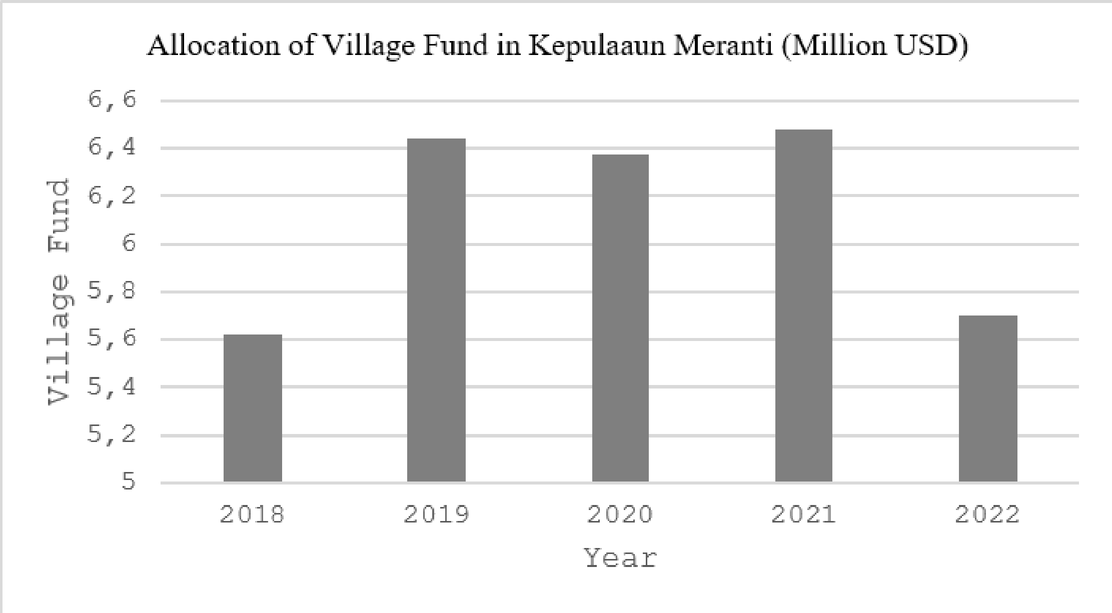

Figure 2. Allocation of village in Kepulauan Meranti
Source: (Village community empowerment agency of Kepulauan Meranti Regency, 2023)

Table 2. The utilization of village fund in Kepulauan Meranti Regency 2018-2021 (%)

Year	Sector				
	Government	Infrastructure	Community Building	Community Empowerment	Urgent
2018	3.00	79.52	11.46	5.85	0.16
2019	1.13	86.13	7.12	5.27	0.35
2020	1.68	55.18	4.28	3.67	35.18
2021	5.33	47.01	5.91	6.87	34.88

Source: (Village community empowerment agency of Kepulauan Meranti Regency, 2022)

The data in Table 2 present the allocation of village funds across key sectors in Kepulauan Meranti Regency from 2018 to 2021. A large portion of the funds has consistently been directed toward infrastructure, especially in 2018 and 2019, reflecting local priorities such as improving roads, bridges, and basic facilities. The sharp increase in allocations for the “Urgent” category in 2020 and 2021 suggests a shift in village-level spending in response to pressing or unforeseen needs, possibly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This distribution of funds provides contextual insight into how village governments have exercised the autonomy granted by Village Law No. 6/2014, enabling them to set priorities and allocate resources based on local needs. This background supports the broader aim of this study to examine how village autonomy influences rural development planning and outcomes.

The ratification of the Village Law marks a significant milestone in village autonomy and has brought substantial changes to development in villages across Kepulauan Meranti Regency. Before its enactment, village development relied heavily on regional government programs. However, due to the regional government's limited financial resources, progress was relatively slow. In contrast, after the implementation of the Village Law, villages were granted both authority and financial support from the central government, enabling them to accelerate development in their respective areas. As a regional government officer stated during an interview:

> *As a new autonomous region, Kepulauan Meranti Regency has become the most underdeveloped region in Riau Province. To keep up with this situation, Kepulauan Meranti requires a lot of resources, especially financial resources. With that limitation, with that limitation, meeting the needs and initiatives of 96 villages was extremely challenging. The enactment of Village Law No. 6/2014, a milestone for village autonomy, is crucial in this regional development. Disparities and development issues in villages are being handled not only by the regional government but also by the village government. Financial support from the government called 'Dana Desa' to every village in Kepulauan Meranti enables the local community to address local needs that might differ from other villages. (Interview with an officer of Village community empowerment agency of Kepulauan Meranti Regency, 2 May 2023)*

The most salient feature of village autonomy is local participation in village development. Every year, the village government will organize a village discussion forum (*Musyawarah Desa*). The village government together with its local communities will devise a village development plan which contains the annual and mid-term village development programs. Village development programs are tailored to village needs by considering village potential and conditions within the scope of authority granted by Village Law No. 6/2014.

> *Village Law No. 6/2014 obliges the village government to involve the village community in the development process, not only in development planning, but also in the implementation and supervisions of development programs. As far as I am concerned, there are two kinds of development planning: annual planning for one year and mid-term planning for six years. At the beginning of July every year, the annual planning process, called RKPDesa, will start; the process will take three months until September. After RKPDes, an annual budget planning called APBDesa will start being formulated. The APBDesa document should be finalized before the end of the year. (Interview with a village facilitator, 2 May 2023)*

Besides local participation in decision-making based on local priorities and needs, village autonomy can affect the distribution of resources, such as infrastructure, services, and public goods in the village area. This occurs because when village governments are in charge of resource allocation, there is a possibility of achieving greater fairness and equity in the distribution of resources. This ensures that marginalized or disadvantaged areas within the village receive proper attention and investment. With limited financial resources, the Kepulauan Meranti Government prioritizes connecting access and infrastructure between villages and between sub-districts. Therefore, the existence of village autonomy and village funds is highly expected to fulfill infrastructure at the level of each village such as access roads between hamlets, access roads to agricultural locations, as well as village-level education and health facilities.

> *Kepulauan Meranti is among the regional governments with the smallest budgets in Riau province. In 2022, the infrastructure budget was more than 402 billion Rupiah (around 27 million USD), allocated to address connectivity issues within the Regency and access to the provincial capital, Pekanbaru. According to the 2022-2026 medium-term development plan (RPJMD), 15.74% of the 929.41 km of roads are severely damaged, and 23.64% are damaged. Additionally, sanitation infrastructure and livable settlements remain significant problems. With village autonomy since 2015, village-level infrastructure needs such as roads, markets, preschools, and health facilities can be gradually addressed by each village, allowing the limited budget to prioritize other urgent sectors (Interview with an officer of the Regional Planning Agency of Kepulauan Meranti Regency, 2 May 2023).*

The regional government officer's statement is supported by secondary data from the village funds realization report, obtained from professional village facilitators in Kepulauan Meranti. Based on this report, in 2022, village funds have positively contributed to the fulfillment of village infrastructures such as village roads, healthcare facilities, and bridges as shown in Table 3. The utilization of village funds as a financial resource in exercising village autonomy is based on local needs and conditions that the infrastructures built in each village vary from others.

Table 3. The utilization of village funds on village infrastructure in 2022

No	Village Infrastructure	Volume	
1	Village Road	7,361	Meter
2	Village bridge	123	Meter
3	Village community's hall	2	Unit
4	Sports facility	2	Unit
5	Village Integrated Healthcare Center	5	Unit
6	Village Dam	2	Unit
7	Village pre-school building	2	Unit
8	Water tunnel	4	Meter
9	Public bathing and washing facility	1	Unit
10	House renovation	3	Unit
11	Water pipe	900	Meter
12	Drainage channel	679	Meter
13	Irrigation canal	860	Meter
14	Well	9	Unit
15	Boat Mooring	324	Meter
16	Land Retainer wall	110	Meter
17	Fish pond	10,580	m2

Source: (Village community empowerment agency of Kepulauan Meranti Regency, 2022)

The Village Fund plays a crucial role in the development of Kepulauan Meranti. Currently, most of the villages' revenue and financial resources depend heavily on fiscal transfers from the central government. While this is beneficial, it also raises concerns about the villages' over-reliance on central government funds. According to local government officials responsible for village development, the ability of villages to generate revenue independently, known as Own Village Revenue, is still very low. On average, the composition of Original Village Income accounts for less than 10% of the total village financial revenues.

> *The Village Fund is crucial for rural development, improving infrastructure, and empowering village communities. However, despite the Village Law being enacted eight years ago and villages receiving funds from the central government, dependency remains high. Over 90% of village revenue comes from government transfers, with the remainder sourced from the villages' own revenue. This indicates that villages still lack stable financial resources and independent revenue generation (Interview with an officer of the Village Community Empowerment Agency of Kepulauan Meranti Regency, 2 May 2023).*

The implementation of village autonomy in Kepulauan Meranti has faced challenges, particularly in the transparency and accountability of village governments. While autonomy grants villages significant authority and resources, the lack of accountability mechanisms might lead to corruption and unfair practices. Since the policy's inception in 2015, at least eight village heads and officials have been detained for misappropriating village funds, resulting in state losses exceeding 2 billion Rupiah (approximately 134,000 USD). This undermines rural development efforts despite the potential benefits of village autonomy.

> *The phenomenon of village autonomy has led to the emergence of the perception of "petty kings" among some village heads. When coupled with a lack of supervision, especially from the village community, this increases the likelihood of abuse of authority by the village head in managing the village budget. Since the beginning of village autonomy following the Village Law No. 6/2014, at least five village heads and three village government officials have been held accountable before the law for misappropriating village funds. Their actions have resulted in state losses amounting to billions of Rupiah. (Interview with an officer of Village community empowerment agency of Kepulauan Meranti Regency, 2 May 2023)*

The impact of village autonomy on rural development

To answer the main research question, this study employs quantitative analysis using SPSS, complemented by qualitative insights from interviews. Before conducting multiple linear regression, data validity and reliability were confirmed through SPSS tests. A classical assumption test, including normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity evaluations, was performed to ensure unbiased, consistent, and accurate regression estimates. After passing these tests, multiple linear regression analysis was interpreted through the F-test, T-test, and coefficient of determination analysis.

The F-test aims to determine whether the independent variables simultaneously affect the dependent variable. The F-test was carried out to assess the effect of all the independent variables together on the dependent variable. The results of the F-test in this paper are presented in the ANOVA table below:

Table 4. Anova table for F-test

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	361.005	5	72.201	23.270	.000[b]
	Residual	96.184	31	3.103		
	Total	457.189	36			

a. Dependent Variable: Y

b. Predictors: (Constant), X5, X2, X1, X4, X3

The confidence level used in this research is 0.05 or 5%, if the significant value of F < 0.05 it can be interpreted that the independent variables simultaneously affect the dependent variable or vice versa (Ghozali, 2016). From the ANOVA table, the significance value is 0.000 (0.000 < 0.05). This indicates that the village autonomy variables (X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4 and X_5) simultaneously have a significant effect on rural development in rural areas in Kepulauan Meranti. In addition, during an interview with the village head, it was confirmed that the statistical analysis above is accurate. The village autonomy provided by Law No. 6/2014 has given villages the ability to develop their villages and tackle inequalities. With access to village funds, villages can now address development disparities.

> *Prior to village autonomy based on Village Law No. 6/2014, we could only propose to the local government and hoped that our proposal would be approved and the local government would carry out development in our village according to what we had proposed. However, the possibility of obtaining development from the local government was very small considering the geographical location of our village which is far and not strategic. However, with the existence of the village autonomy policy and village funds, we are slowly able to meet development needs in the village. (Interview with a village head, 2 May 2023)*

T-test

The T-test aims to determine whether each independent variable (partially) affects the dependent variable. In this paper, the variable of village autonomy is divided into five independent variables: Resource allocation (X1), Access to essential services (X2), Participation and inclusion (X3), Social cohesion (X4), and Economic opportunities (X5). Therefore, the T-test attempts to examine the effect of these independent variables (partially) on rural development which serves as a dependent variable (Variable Y). The results are presented in the table below:

Table 5. Coefficients table for T-test

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Unstandardized Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.285	1.992		.645	.524
	X1	-.008	.199	-.005	-.040	.968
	X2	.494	.188	.292	2.629	.013
	X3	.300	.247	.227	1.211	.235
	X4	.068	.228	.050	.299	.767
	X5	.683	.211	.448	3.230	.003

a. Dependent Variable: Y

Decision making is done by looking at the significance value in the Coefficients table. The interpretation is that if the significance value is < 0.05 (5%), it has a significant effect; if the significance value is > 0.05 (5%), it has no significant effect (Ghozali, 2016). Based on the table above, the significance value of X_1 is 0.968, X_2 is 0.013, X_3 is 0.235, X_4 is 0.767, X_5 is 0.003. Therefore, the interpretation of the T-test is as follows:

a. variable X_1 (Resource Allocation) has no significant effect on variable Y (Rural Development);

b. variable X_2 (Access to essential services) has a significant effect on variable Y (Rural Development);
c. variable X_3 (Participation and inclusion) has no significant effect on variable Y (Rural Development);
d. variable X_4 (Social cohesion) has no significant effect on variable Y (Rural Development);
e. variable X_5 (Economic opportunities) has a significant effect on variable Y (Rural Development);

From the T-test results above, it can be seen that there are three independent variables (X1-Resource Allocation, X3-Participation and Inclusion, and X4-Social Cohesion) that do not have significant effect on rural development in Kepulauan Meranti. Meanwhile, variable X2- Access to essential services and X5-Economic opportunities significantly effect rural development.

Accroding to the qualitative result from interviews, the insignificant effect of the Resource Allocation Variable is due to the inequal concentration of resource allocation and low capacity of the village government. Since the allocation of resources were determined fully by the village government, there was an increasing concerns about inequal concentration of resources on specific areas which are already relatively well-off or politically influential. Such thing can lead to inequalities, where certain areas receive a disproportionate share of resources, while other regions are left marginalized. In addition, with low transparency and accountability, as well as the low quality of village government officers, concerns grew significantly due to high possibility in misconduct of authority in managing local resources.

The issue mentioned above can be analyzed through the concept of power geography (Granovetter, 1973), which examines how power imbalances and spatial inequalities intersect (Janse, 2022; Wotango & Somano, 2021). This concept suggests that resource distribution is influenced by unequal access to decision-making, reinforcing existing power structures and perpetuating social and economic disparities. Dominant actors such as government agencies and powerful economic interests control resource allocation, leading to preferential treatment for certain regions and marginalization of others. Moreover, interviews indicate that dissatisfaction with village autonomy arises because decision-making does not consider all community voices, resulting in perceptions of exclusion. Strong social cohesion within villages limits diversity of perspectives, creating echo chambers that hinder identifying and addressing underdevelopment. Granovetter's "strength of weak ties" theory helps explain this, as strong ties within communities, while fostering social support, also restrict the flow of new information and diverse viewpoints. This lack of the diversity of perspectives, creating echo chambers that hinder the identification and addressing of underdevelopment (Coburn, 2021; Fronczak et al., 2022; Granovetter, 1973).

Coefficient of determination

The coefficient of determination shows the extent to which the contribution of the independent variables in the regression model is able to explain the variation in the dependent variable. The coefficient of determination can be seen through the value of R-square in the Model Summary table (Table 6). According to Ghozali (2016) a small coefficient of determination means that the ability of the independent variables to explain the dependent variable is very limited. Conversely, if the value is close to 1 (one) and away from 0 (zero), it means that the independent variables have the ability to give all information needed to predict the dependent variable (Ghozali, 2016).

Table 6. Model summary table for coefficient of determination

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.889[a]	.790	.756	1.76145

a. Predictors: (Constant), X5, X2, X1, X4, X3

From the model summary in Table 6, the value of R-Square is 0.790. This means that the variation in all independent variables explains 79% of the changes in the dependent variable. While the remaining 21% (Note: from 100% - 79%) is influenced by other variables which are not included in the research. This indicates that Resource Allocation, Access to Essential Services, Participation and Inclusion, Social Cohesion, and Economic Opportunities collectively influence rural development by 79%. This result is significant at an alpha level of 5% based on the results of the F-test. Furthermore, we calculate the effective contribution of each independent variable to the dependent variable in the regression analysis. The sum of the effective contributions of all independent variables equals the R-Square value. The value of the effective contribution of each independent variable is as follows:

Table 7. Effective contribution of independent variables

Variable	Effective Contribution
X1	-0.003
X2	0.215
X3	0.173
X4	0.036
X5	0.369
Total	0.790

X_1 (Resource Allocation)
X_2 (Access to essential services)
X_3 (Participation and inclusion)
X_4 (Social cohesion)
X_5 (Economic opportunities)

Based on the data above, it can be seen that the biggest contributor of rural development in Kepulauan Meranti is Economic Opportunity (0.369). This result shows that Economic Opportunities such as creating job opportunities, increasing the community's income, and improving the quality of access to markets and village financial services can positively affect the improvements in rural development in Kepulauan Meranti. One of the salient features that has been captured in rural areas in Kepulauan Meranti is the implementation of a development program called *'Padat Karya Tunai (PKT)'* or "cash-for-work" program. The PKT program aims to provide employment opportunities and generate income for the local community. It helps alleviate poverty and reduce unemployment by offering temporary jobs to villagers who struggle to find regular work (Inah et al., 2023; Sutisna & Qibthiyyah, 2023). The program hires individuals from the village to work on infrastructure development, environmental conservation, or community-based initiatives. Participants are paid in cash for their contributions on a daily basis, providing immediate income to meet their basic needs. This program not only supports those in need but also contributes to the development of rural areas by promoting community engagement and improving local infrastructure, ultimately enhancing the quality of life in villages. It aligns with the findings from interviews with village stakeholders, as shown below:

> *Based on the guideline issued by the central government, one of the priorities of village funds utilization is to create job opportunities through the Padat Karya Tunai (PKT) scheme. This program aims to assist the low-income village community and those who are currently unemployed. It is especially helpful in villages where most people work as seasonal farmers and rely heavily on the harvest season. The PKT program ensures that workers receive daily wages from the village government, which helps them meet their daily needs. For instance, the construction of farm roads is an example of how this policy is implemented. Typically, workers are among farmers in the village who are awaiting the harvest season*. *(Interview with a village head, 2 May 2023)*

The findings from the study align closely with the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature on decentralization which involve transferring planning, decision-making, and administrative authority to local units to improve service delivery and governance. The significant positive impacts of Access to Essential Services and Economic Opportunities on rural development observed in the study support this theoretical assertion. The Village Law No. 6/2014 in Indonesia, which enhances village autonomy, empowers local governments to address development needs directly, leading to improve local capacity and development outcomes.

However, the non-significant impact of Resource Allocation on rural development can be attributed to two main challenges: the concentration of resource use and limited administrative capacity at the village level. Interviews with village facilitators revealed concerns about inequalities in distribution of resources, where resources are often allocated to an advantaged or politically connected areas. This aligns with the theory of Power Geography (Janse, 2022; Wotango & Somano, 2021), which concludes that spatial inequalities and power imbalances shape resource flows, leading to disparities. Additionally, the lack of technical and managerial competence among village officials—which is also highlighted in previous studies (Kadir et al., 2021; Pratolo et al., 2020)—limits the capacity to translate financial resources into tangible developmental outcomes. As a result, although the Village Fund provides financial autonomy, the governance structures needed to support effective planning, monitoring, and execution are still underdeveloped.

Meanwhile, the limited influence of Participation and Inclusion may be attributed to procedural formalism and elite dominance in the village decision-making process. This observation reflects Agrawal & Gupta (2005) argument that genuine participation must enable marginalized groups to meaningfully engage with governance structures. In the absence of inclusive mechanisms, development plans tend to reflect the interests of dominant groups, sidelining community diversity. This corresponds with findings by Setiawan & Melinda (2020) and Zuliyah (2020), which emphasize the gap between policy and practice in participatory village governance.

The lack of significant impact from Social Cohesion may seem counterintuitive, given its widely acknowledged role in fostering collective action. The study's qualitative insights suggest that while strong local ties among village communities are beneficial, they may also create echo chambers that stifle diverse perspectives and innovative solutions. This resonates with Granovetter's (1973) "strength of weak ties" theory, which argues that overly tight social networks can hinder innovation and information dissemination. Strong ties, while useful for building trust, may also consolidate informal power and discourage the inclusion of outside voices—ultimately leading to development programs that are less adaptive, less diverse, and less effective (Berki et al., 2020; Coburn, 2021; Fronczak et al., 2022).These findings suggest that the structural conditions of governance and social dynamics in the villages—rather than the mere presence of funds or participatory structures—shape development outcomes. This underscores the need to go beyond fiscal decentralization and address the institutional, relational, and spatial challenges that inhibit effective village autonomy (Sutiyo & Maharjan, 2017; Zhou & Yang, 2023).

In the context of this study, effective village governance is driven by local participation and context-specific strategies. Economic factors and programs such as *Padat Karya Tunai* play a crucial role in supporting rural restructuring, fostering economic growth, and promoting sustainable development. Furthermore, flexible governance systems and the active role of local governments in managing local dynamics are essential components of strengthening village autonomy. The study highlights that responsive and transparent leadership is a key determinant of successful village governance. Indonesia's Village Law (No. 6/2014) exemplifies how legislative frameworks can empower local governments, facilitating effective decentralization and enhancing rural development outcomes. This comprehensive approach enables rural communities to balance local needs with global challenges, thereby fostering inclusive and sustainable growth.

This study makes a distinct contribution to the literature on village autonomy and rural development by empirically examining the socio-economic outcomes of decentralization at the village level. Unlike previous studies such as Indartuti et al. (2020) and Phahlevy (2016), which focused primarily on legal frameworks and conceptual critiques, this research evaluates the tangible impacts of autonomy using a mixed-methods approach. It also addresses the methodological limitations highlighted in Pratolo et al. (2020) by combining quantitative analysis with in-depth interviews to ensure data richness and contextual understanding. Furthermore, while Kadir et al. (2021) and others identified elite capture and weak institutional capacity as challenges, this study adds a new analytical perspective by incorporating the concept of power geography to explain how spatial and social inequalities influence resource distribution and governance outcomes. Most notably, the findings challenge the assumption that participation and cohesion always enhance development, revealing that without inclusive mechanisms and network diversity, these factors can contribute to stagnation. These contributions not only fill a gap in the empirical literature but also provide valuable insights for policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of village autonomy in Indonesia.

Conclusions

Village Law No. 6/2014 has significantly transformed local governance and rural development in Indonesia by increasing village-level authority, enabling direct financial transfers, and institutionalizing community participation. A key instrument of this empowerment, the Village Fund, has allowed villages to implement development programs based on local priorities. However, this progress is accompanied by persistent challenges. Villages remain heavily reliant on intergovernmental transfers due to limited own-source revenue, undermining fiscal autonomy. In many cases, administrative decentralization is weakened by a shortage of skilled personnel, resulting in compromised governance and implementation capacity. These issues are further exacerbated by instances of misappropriation and lack of effective oversight.

The quantitative analysis showed that village autonomy variables—resource allocation, access to services, participation, social cohesion, and economic opportunities—significantly affect rural development. Access to essential services and economic opportunities were particularly impactful. The model summary indicated that these variables collectively explain 79% of the variation in rural development, while the remaining 21% is influenced by external factors. However, the effectiveness of village autonomy is highly dependent on the quality of local governance. Poor management can lead to unequal resource distribution and social disparities, stressing the need for accountability and transparency in resource utilization.

Theoretical insights from Power Geography (Janse, 2022; Wotango & Somano, 2021), and Granovetter's "strength of weak ties" (Coburn, 2021; Fronczak et al., 2022; Granovetter, 1973) illuminate this dynamic. Strong local ties, while valuable for social solidarity, may limit the diversity of voices in development forums, resulting in narrowly framed decision-making. In tightly-knit communities, dissent is often subdued, and information circulation is restricted. These social and spatial dynamics reduce inclusiveness and innovation in rural planning.

Field interviews also revealed that local governance practices and institutional quality mediate the relationship between autonomy and development. Villages with transparent, participatory, and accountable governance are better positioned to implement meaningful development. One promising mechanism is the *Padat Karya Tunai* (PKT) or "cash-for-work" program, which integrates employment generation with infrastructure development and community engagement. When aligned with autonomy policies, PKT strengthens local economies, supports social inclusion, and builds community resilience. Its emphasis on environmental sustainability and skill development also contributes to long-term rural transformation. This study recommends further institutionalizing and scaling up PKT within village autonomy strategies. By embedding principles of fair decision-making, transparency, and inclusive planning, the synergy between PKT and autonomy can address both immediate needs and systemic underdevelopment.

Future research should explore strategies for enhancing village financial independence, particularly through the development of own-source revenues. In addition, qualitative studies on leadership behavior, oversight mechanisms, and digital transparency tools could offer valuable insights into governance improvements. Comparative studies between remote regions like Kepulauan Meranti and more resource-rich villages would also help identify success factors shaped by geography and context. Lastly, building on Granovetter's theory, further investigation into how social network structures influence participatory quality and governance outcomes could enhance the understanding of community-led development in rural Indonesia.

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Statement of originality and plagiarism-free

The author declares that this article is an original work that has not been published elsewhere and is free from plagiarism. All references and citations have been properly acknowledged according to the applicable standards.

Declaration of conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this research, authorship, or publication.

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