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Barrier from the Side of Stunting Management Policy in Rural Areas of Indonesia: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract
This study examines the factors hindering effective stunting management in rural Indonesia, with a particular focus on government policy. Despite ongoing efforts, inadequate attention has been given to key policy-related challenges, including cross-sectoral coordination, merit-based recruitment, budget allocation, and community-based education. This study aims to identify policy barriers that hinder the implementation of stunting mitigation efforts in rural Indonesia. The method used A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 32 purposively selected participants, including regional and sub-district heads, village chiefs, health department leaders, and community health center directors, from January to August 2023. The results show that the analysis identified five primary barriers to stunting management: (1) Regulatory inconsistencies, including overlapping inter-agency guidelines that create ambiguity in implementation; (2) Human resource limitations, characterized by a shortage of skilled personnel and nepotistic recruitment practices; (3) Structural and institutional barriers, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and inter-agency conflicts of interest; (4) Misallocated funding, driven by corruption and weak oversight, leading to ineffective budget distribution; and (5) Community-related factors, including poverty, low nutritional awareness, and unsupportive cultural practices. The conclusion is The conclusion is to addressing these barriers is essential for improving stunting management in rural Indonesia. Enhancing policy consistency, strengthening institutional frameworks, and improving resource allocation are key to overcoming existing challenges. The study recommends periodic regulatory evaluations, enhanced cross-sectoral coordination, and alignment of national policies with local needs. Establishing community-based recruitment and training systems through strategic partnerships could mitigate human resource constraints. Strengthening anti-corruption measures through independent oversight and digital reporting systems. Finally, fostering sustained community education through sociocultural approaches and local leader involvement is critical to increasing awareness and participation in stunting prevention efforts.

Keywords: Policy, Qualitative Research, Rural, Stunting.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stunting is a condition characterized by a height that is lower than expected for a child's age, resulting from chronic or recurrent malnutrition, typically associated with poverty, poor maternal health and nutrition, frequent illnesses, and inadequate feeding and care in the early stages of life (World Health Organization, 2022). Children experiencing stunting face both immediate and long-term consequences, including increased morbidity and mortality, poor development, diminished learning capacity, higher risk of infections and non-communicable diseases, a tendency for fat accumulation around the central body, reduced fat oxidation, lower energy expenditure, insulin resistance, and higher risk of diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidemia, as well as reduced work and reproductive capacity in adulthood (Soliman et al., 2021).

Stunting remains a global concern due to the high number of cases. According to 2020 data, 22% (149.2 million) of children under five years old are affected by stunting (World Health Organization, 2020). A survey projection between 2010-2020 in 148 developing countries showed that one in two stunted children reside in Asia and one in three in Africa (De Onis et al., 2012). In Southeast Asia, in 2020, the prevalence of stunting was the second highest compared to other subregions in Asia, reaching 27.4% (Global Nutrition Report, 2020), with Indonesia being the second-largest contributor to the stunting rate, with a percentage of 31.8%. Specifically in Indonesia, the highest stunting rates in 2022 were found in peripheral areas such as East Nusa Tenggara, with a percentage of 35.3% (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2022). So far, reports suggest that stunting affects approximately 35% of children under five in rural Indonesia and 27% in urban areas (Beatty et al., 2024).

Research has identified several causes of stunting in rural Indonesia, including 1) low parental education, 2) household and family factors, 3) inadequate complementary feeding, 4) breastfeeding practices, 5) infections, and 6) community and policy factors. Community and policy factors include political economy, healthcare services, education, society and culture, agricultural and food systems, water, sanitation, and the environment (Beal et al., 2018). Recent studies suggest that while numerous policies regarding stunting management in Indonesia, these policies have not effectively reduced stunting rates (Saputri & Tumangger, 2019). Specifically, a study by Hermanussen & Scheffler (2024) explains that policies such as the "Stop Stunting" campaign have failed in East Nusa Tenggara due to inadequate *Posyandu* (community health posts) facilities, incompetent healthcare workers, and corruption practices. Research by Syafrawati et al. (2023) highlights policy barriers related to stunting, such as rigid funding mechanisms and poor cross-sectoral cooperation due to bureaucratic complexities. Moreover, studies indicate a strong correlation between political support or government commitment to policymaking and the incidence of stunting in children. Countries and governments focusing on stunting management tend to reduce its prevalence (Palutturi et al., 2020).

Understanding the barriers to stunting management policies in rural areas is crucial, as these regions often face specific challenges such as limited access to healthcare services, inadequate infrastructure, and cultural practices that influence caregiving and nutrition. Without a deep understanding of these barriers, stunting mitigation programs risk being misdirected, ineffective, or even rejected by local communities (Soviyati et al., 2023). Additionally, weak intersectoral coordination and inefficient budget management may worsen the situation. By understanding these barriers, governments and stakeholders can design more inclusive, data-driven policies that cater to local needs and significantly reduce stunting prevalence.

While numerous studies have focused on the causes of stunting in the family context, there has yet to be a comprehensive study on the factors contributing to stunting in Indonesia, particularly considering the role of policymakers and responsible parties in managing the stunting issue. This research aims to provide an innovative approach by exploring the causes

of stunting from the perspective of policymakers directly involved in formulating these policies. Using a qualitative research method, this study offers in-depth insights into the challenges faced in addressing stunting in remote areas of Indonesia, as perceived by policymakers. The primary objective of this research is to explore the policy barriers hindering efforts to combat stunting in rural areas of Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted in the East Nusa Tenggara Islands Region, Indonesia, between January and August 2023. Participants were recruited directly using a purposive sampling approach, which included policymakers handling stunting, such as regents, sub-district heads, village heads, heads of health services, and heads of community health centers—consisting of 32 participants. The criteria for participants include 1) officials who have served for more than a year and 2) who have dealt with stunting problems. After obtaining approval, one of the researchers (PKST) recorded a semi-structured in-depth interview. Several nonverbal expressions were recorded on the field note sheet.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore policy barriers and policymaking experiences in stunting management. The main variables examined in this research are policy barriers and policymaking experiences. Policy barriers are defined as constraints that affect the effectiveness of policy implementation, including aspects of regulation, inter-agency coordination, oversight processes, and resource allocation. Meanwhile, policymaking experiences refer to policy managers' perceptions, challenges, and perspectives regarding decision-making processes, cross-sectoral coordination, and policy implementation within the local context. The study's interview guide questions are summarized in Table 1.

To gather relevant information on these two variables, two researchers with extensive experience in qualitative research developed an in-depth semi-structured interview guide using open-ended questions designed to explore the experiences of policymakers managing stunting. The development of the interview questions was informed by a review of relevant literature on stunting and public policy, consultations with public health experts, and preliminary trials with similar respondents. The interview guide covered participants' experiences in designing and implementing stunting policies, challenges faced in cross-sectoral coordination, and their perspectives on the effectiveness of existing policies. Interviewers also used reflective and intuitive questions to encourage participants to provide deeper insights and nuanced responses. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes in a single session, allowing for comprehensive data collection.

The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, recorded, and manually transcribed. Data analysis followed Braun & Clarke, (2006), thematic analysis framework, consisting of six stages. In the first stage, researchers familiarized themselves with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the context and identify information relevant to the research questions. The second stage involved generating initial codes by creating descriptive or interpretive labels for appropriate data. In the third stage, researchers developed themes by reviewing the generated codes to identify patterns of meaning that could be grouped into themes or subthemes. The fourth stage involved reviewing potential themes, where researchers iteratively checked the consistency of themes with the coded data and the entire dataset. The fifth stage focused on defining and naming themes, with researchers constructing detailed analyses of the thematic framework and explaining each theme and subtheme based on the data. The process concluded with the sixth stage, a recursive report-writing phase, where findings were systematically organized and reviewed to ensure accuracy and alignment with the research objectives. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of policy barriers and policymaking experiences in stunting management from the perspective of policymakers, thereby providing significant insights into the complexity of stunting management in Indonesia.

Table 1. Question Guide

Question
1. Can you explain how to form a stunting policy to overcome the problem, including team involvement, the procedure's form, and the specific policy product's form?
2. Can you explain the situation related to the stunting policy implementation process in the field, including resource capacity, form of implementation, and related parties as implementers?
3. How do you assess the policy implementation process in the field? Including successes and obstacles that arise?
4. What problem-solving strategies do you use if you experience obstacles related to policy implementation?
5. What are your hopes for the current stunting management policy?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say?

To ensure the validity of this study, we applied the guidelines which encompass credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. 1) Credibility was achieved through the intensive engagement of researchers with study participants. In-depth interviews were conducted over 2–3 weeks at each research site to develop a deep understanding of participants' experiences. The interview process was pre-tested on two sample participants to ensure the interview techniques were effective and aligned with the research objectives. Additionally, researchers ensured that participants met predefined criteria, such as their role in stunting policymaking or their direct involvement in policy implementation. Dependability was ensured through triangulation of theoretical sources and participant data to verify the accuracy of findings. The two researchers held regular reflections and weekly meetings to discuss the data collected, ensuring comprehensive data interpretation and avoiding perceptual errors. The two researchers collaborated by dividing data analysis tasks: one researcher focused on initial coding, while the other reviewed and verified the resulting codes. This iterative process involved discussions and alignment until consensus was reached on the themes generated. Confirmability was achieved by thoroughly documenting the data collection process for all 32 participants. This documentation included details on their backgrounds, positions in policymaking, and involvement in stunting-related issues. Each piece of data was verified against direct information provided by participants to ensure its validity and avoid the researchers' unilateral interpretation. Although the number of informants was limited, including representatives from various levels of policymaking—from national policymakers to local implementers—was justified as a sample that reflects relevant variations in perspectives. Transferability was ensured by employing a maximum variation sampling technique, which guaranteed that the sample represented diverse policy contexts and participant experiences. This approach was designed to collect data that reflects the dynamics of policymaking across different levels, thereby enhancing the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Data collection continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new information emerged from the interviews. The study achieves high validity by employing a meticulous design, effective researcher collaboration, and sufficient data representation to address the research objectives. The Universitas Citra Bangsa Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval under number LP3M/KE/VII.125/UCB.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2. Characteristics Participant

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Woman	11	34
Man	21	66

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
30-40	10	31
41-50	18	56
51-60	3	9
61-70	1	3
Position in Government		
Regent	1	3
Head of the Health Service	1	3
Head of Division	1	3
Sub-District Head	7	22
Head of Community Health Center	7	22
Village Head	15	47
Education		
Masters	5	16
Bachelor	20	62
Diploma III	5	16
Senior High School	2	6
Length of tenure		
1-3 Years	10	31
4-6 Years	18	56
> 6 Years	4	13

Table 2 show that the most of the gender is male, 21 participants (66%). The majority were aged 41-50, as many as 18 participants (56%). The highest position is village head, with 15 participants (47%). The highest level of education was a bachelor's degree, with 20 participants (63%). The most extended term of office was 4-6 years, with as many as 18 participants (56%).

Table 3. Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub Themes
Inconsistent regulations	1. Work guides overlap 2. Lack of Consistent and Realistic Guidelines 3. Regulations that are too rigid
Scarcity of human resources	1. Many officers are less skilled 2. Lack of human resources 3. Recruitment is full of nepotism
Organizational structure problems	1. Conflict of interest 2. Sectoral ego 3. Inefficient work structure
Funding problems	1. Inaccurate Allocation of Funding 2. Untimely Disbursement of Funds 3. Corruption
Problems in society	1. Lack of knowledge 2. Poverty 3. Cultural Issues

Table 3 show that this research produced six main themes, namely 1) Inconsistent regulations, 2) Scarcity of human resources, 4) Organizational structure problems, 5) Funding problems, and 6) Problems in society.

Theme 1: Regulatory inconsistencies

Work guides overlap

The work guide is an important reference for stunting managers to implement the work agenda. However, guidance often differs between the two government agencies. This is illustrated in the participant's statement:

"We work with many overlapping guidelines from various government agencies, for example, from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Villages; we are confused about which to follow." P3

Lack of consistent and realistic guidelines

Because various agencies are responsible for stunting management, some work guidelines are focused on something other than regional conditions. One participant expressed the following:

"Our guidelines are sometimes inconsistent and constantly changing, and I feel they are less realistic given the conditions on the ground." P9

Regulations that are too rigid

The stunting management program has been regulated in regulations, so implementers in the field must work to follow existing guidelines. They must be cautious in translating the rules and are worried about exposing them to legal sanctions.

"We work by existing regulations, which are very rigid; if we mistranslate or implement them, we can be subject to sanctions, especially when using funds." P16

Theme 2: Scarcity of human resources

Many officers are less skilled

Stunting management officers are an essential element in efforts to eradicate stunting. Officers must be more competent in resolving stunting because they fail to provide interventions to the target group.

"Many officers lack skills in the field, especially regarding their role in assisting families with stunted children." P2

Lack of human resources

Adequate personnel responsible for managing stunting can support efforts to accelerate stunting eradication. Retention of management staff will reduce the portion of stunting problem intervention work.

"There is still a lack of manpower in the field to solve the stunting problem; some of those we recruit end up quitting their jobs." P18

Recruitment is full of nepotism

Nepotism refers to giving preference or special treatment to family members or close friends in the hiring process without considering the potential officer's true abilities or qualifications.

"Most of the employees recruited are family members or election success teams without considering competency." P11

Theme 3: Organizational structure problems
Conflict of interest

A conflict of interest occurs when a person or group has multiple interests that may conflict with each other or have the potential to battle. Policies and guidelines governing conflicts of interest are required, such as disclosure of claims and actions to avoid or manage such conflicts.

"I see a conflict of interest between agencies, especially regarding funding; everyone wants to be involved to attract funding." P13

Sectoral ego

Sectoral egos can become obstacles to achieving cooperation, consensus, and better solutions to various problems. Therefore, it is essential to have leaders and stakeholders who have a broader vision and are willing to work together for a more significant good than their sectoral egos.

"We are not united and of one mind in our efforts to solve stunting; each agency seems to be running alone, and communication is not good." P23

Inefficient work structure

Inefficient work structures can hamper productivity, result in higher costs, and frustrate workers. Therefore, it is essential to continually evaluate and update work structures to keep them efficient and aligned with organizational goals.

"We have a lot of work structure, and our communication is sometimes ineffective, so our work becomes less efficient; this can be proven by data reporting, which is often problematic." P19

Theme 4: Funding problems
Inaccurate allocation of funding

Mistargeted funding refers to situations where financial resources are allocated or used for purposes inconsistent with the organization's or project's priorities or goals. This can result in wasted resources, reduced efficiency, and stakeholder dissatisfaction.

"Our classic problem is the lack of finance on target; often, areas with high stunting have limited funds." P6

Untimely disbursement of funds

Untimely funding or delays in the distribution of funds can hamper various stunting management activities. This can be a serious problem, slowing progress and creating uncertainty in planning and implementation.

"Our funding often falls late, even though the program has been running in the field for several months; this especially happens at the beginning of the year." P1

Corruption

Funding corruption is misappropriating financial resources by those in charge of their allocation. It poses a significant problem, leading to economic losses, inequality, and eroding public trust, thus impeding stunting mitigation efforts.

"In some of our villages, village funds for stunting prevention were corrupted; we have prosecuted the perpetrators and brought them to justice." P10

Theme 5: Problems in society

Lack of knowledge

Lack of knowledge about stunting is a serious problem because it can hinder efforts to prevent and treat it.

"We continue to educate the public about stunting and its prevention, but the main problem is their low level of education." P20

Poverty

Poverty and stunting are closely related, and stunting is often one of the impacts of poverty. Poverty can affect various aspects of life, including access to nutritious food, adequate health services, and good sanitation, all of which play a role in stunting.

"Family low income makes it difficult for them to access nutritious food for their children."

P14

Cultural issues

Cultural issues can also impact the level of stunting in a society. Culture plays an essential role in determining behavior, eating practices, child care, and the use of community resources.

"Traditional ceremonies and feasts divert financial resources from nutritious food." P17

DISCUSSION

Inconsistent regulations

Inconsistent regulations in stunting management often involve overlapping policies between central and regional levels of government. One example is the guidelines for implementing supplementary feeding programs issued by the central government, which frequently conflict with local regulations on procuring and distributing these foods. As a result, there is ambiguity in the division of responsibilities between regional health departments and the central government, ultimately hindering the program's effectiveness. Additionally, regulations on village fund allocations for addressing stunting often clash with regional priority policies, making it difficult for local program implementers to adapt strategies to meet the specific needs of their regions. At the national level, policy misalignment also occurs among relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Villages, and the Ministry of Education, each of which implements its programs for stunting management (Prasetyo et al., 2023). For instance, the Ministry of Health may prioritize nutrition education programs, while the Ministry of Villages focuses on sanitation infrastructure development. These inconsistencies complicate implementation, especially when policies are translated into operational plans at the regional level without clear guidance. Effective communication and management among government agencies could reduce these overlaps, improving overall efficiency and productivity in stunting management (Campos & Reich, 2019). This research found that inconsistent and impractical guidelines lead to ambiguity, uncertainty, and inefficiency in task execution.

The overlap in policies primarily stems from central government management of stunting policies, although local regulations also play a significant role. The division of jurisdiction between the central and regional governments often renders health policies ineffective (Santinha et al., 2023). Strict regulations, rooted in Indonesia's history of corruption, have resulted in a highly cautious approach to policy implementation, particularly in financial management. While stringent financial governance rules aim to curb corruption, they often

make it difficult for policymakers to interpret regulations, especially those related to economic aspects. Similar concerns about potential corruption allegations have also slowed stunting intervention efforts in Guatemala (Bogin, 2022). In the international context, several countries have successfully addressed policy overlaps in stunting reduction through coordinated approaches. For example, Bangladesh employs a multisectoral approach to integrate stunting reduction policies into national development plans. All sectors, including health, education, and agriculture, collaborate under the coordination of a single ministry specifically responsible for nutrition issues. This integrated approach minimizes policy overlap, enabling more cohesive stunting management (Campos & Reich, 2019). In Rwanda, stunting management policies involve robust coordination through a national committee overseeing all nutrition-related activities. This committee ensures that all programs from the central government or international partners align with the national strategic plan to reduce stunting. This approach prevents policy overlap and provides efficient, priority-driven resource allocation (Iruhiriye et al., 2024).

In contrast, Indonesia's stringent regulations on fund utilization often pose barriers. Regulations requiring lengthy administrative processes and highly detailed financial reporting for every stunting program frequently slow down policy implementation at the grassroots level. Although these measures aim to mitigate corruption risks, they reduce flexibility in implementation and hinder rapid responses to emerging issues. Similar concerns have been observed in Guatemala, where strict anti-corruption policies have delayed food aid distribution to vulnerable groups, including children at risk of stunting (Bogin, 2022). Therefore, a more comprehensive evaluation of regulations is needed to harmonize policies across different levels of government. Furthermore, learning from prosperous countries like Bangladesh and Rwanda could inspire Indonesia to develop more integrated and efficient coordination mechanisms for stunting management

Scarcity of human resources

The issue of human resources (HR) in addressing stunting is a critical concern that requires thorough attention. This study highlights that one of the main challenges in this area is the significant number of unskilled personnel. The success of stunting prevention and management programs depends on the quality of HR, particularly the success of healthcare workers serving in primary healthcare facilities such as community health centers and integrated health service posts.

Research by Bogin, (2022) emphasizes that healthcare workers in primary community health services must possess adequate skills, motivation, and experience. Unskilled personnel can hinder the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing stunting. The ability to educate, care for, and support individuals affected by stunting plays a crucial role in the success of these programs. Zai et al., (2023) assert that healthcare teams' skills in educating the community, providing care, and guiding patients through recovery significantly reduce stunting rates. Therefore, to improve the quality of stunting management, the government must implement scheduled and continuous training programs for healthcare workers to update their skills regularly.

In addition to the quality of HR, the shortage of personnel poses another obstacle in combating stunting. Research conducted in the Sumatra region, Syafrawati et al., (2023) identify the lack of field personnel at Puskesmas as a factor impeding the implementation of stunting prevention programs. For instance, a village midwife responsible for four community health centers across different villages faces a heavy workload and limited time and resources to coordinate and supervise activities effectively. Addressing this shortage requires recruiting healthcare workers based on precise needs analysis, ensuring each region has adequate personnel to carry out stunting prevention programs effectively.

Furthermore, nepotism in recruitment processes is another significant issue. Nepotism can lead to appointing unqualified personnel in critical positions for stunting management. This

can reduce the quality of decision-making and result in inefficient task execution, ultimately impacting the program's success. Research by Miranda et al., (2023) in East Nusa Tenggara reveals that unclear recruitment criteria and non-continuity-based personnel turnover frequently occur. This creates instability in assigned teams, hindering the development of standardized and adequate capacity. To mitigate the negative impacts of nepotism, HR management practices must shift towards greater openness, transparency, and sustainability. Recruitment processes should be based on clear qualifications and measurable individual achievements rather than personal connections.

The government must design comprehensive policies covering recruitment, training, and regular performance monitoring to ensure an appropriate number of employees and HR quality in stunting prevention. Establishing clear capacity standards for personnel and well-defined recruitment criteria will create a more competent and effective team in executing community stunting prevention tasks. In conclusion, addressing HR issues related to the quantity and quality of healthcare workers requires a holistic and integrated approach. Such efforts are essential to ensure that stunting management meets expectations and significantly reduces stunting rates in Indonesia.

Organizational structure problems

The issue of stunting requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach, given its complexity involving various sectors such as health, education, sanitation, and food. Research shows that one of the main obstacles in addressing this issue is the conflict of interest among policymakers from different institutions. This conflict can significantly impact decision-making, ethics, and the integrity of the health system. In this context, multisectoral collaboration becomes crucial to tackle stunting effectively. However, the challenge of intersectoral coordination remains a significant issue. Research by Al Jawaldeh et al., (2020) emphasizes the need for high-level national coordination mechanisms to align cross-sectoral efforts in addressing stunting.

An ideal organizational structure for addressing stunting must be simple and efficient. A structure with minimal hierarchy will accelerate communication and decision-making. A flat hierarchy is more suitable for fostering intersectoral collaboration and creating inclusive decision-making involving governmental and non-governmental entities (Santinha et al., 2023). Additionally, visionary leaders with cross-sectoral coordination skills are essential. Leaders must prioritize the public's interest above the interests of specific institutions. The organizational structure also needs to decentralize tasks to the local level while maintaining national oversight mechanisms. Information technology should be utilized to speed up information flow and monitor program performance through digital platforms that enable stakeholder communication and coordination. However, inefficient work structures are still commonly found. Research in West Java by Afandi et al., (2022) shows that the collaborative framework for stunting intervention has yet to achieve the desired outcomes. The participation of various groups remains minimal, even sparking debates, mainly because non-governmental actors are involved without formal responsibilities. Stakeholders need to create shared values and commit firmly to high-quality collaborative governance.

Similar issues are also found in other countries. In India, for instance, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program faces challenges in inter-departmental coordination, slow decision-making, and overlapping functions (Bhattacharya & Ravi, 2024). A community-based approach empowering local workers, such as *Anganwadi Workers*, has successfully addressed many of these barriers (Trivedi et al., 2022). In Ethiopia, intersectoral coordination challenges also arise, mainly because the health sector operates separately from other relevant industries, such as education and agriculture. The solution has been the establishment of cross-sectoral committees supported by technology platforms for information sharing (Belew et al.,

2023). In the Philippines, conflicts of interest among government agencies have been a significant obstacle to the National Nutrition Program. A single coordination body managed nutrition-related programs (Guillermo & Guillermo, 2023).

In Indonesia, research in East Nusa Tenggara, Niga, (2023) illustrates that the stunting intervention system has too many hierarchical layers, making communication and decision-making slow. This hampers adequate information flow and causes delays in collective decision-making. The government needs to simplify organizational structures, enhance communication, and support effective change management to overcome this issue. Additionally, work process optimization measures must be taken, including listening to input from field workers. As a recommendation, Indonesia could establish a single coordination body with cross-sectoral authority to align national policies. Simplifying hierarchies, decentralizing tasks, leveraging digital technology, and providing training for organizational leaders are critical steps. Furthermore, integrating non-governmental actors, such as NGOs, academics, and the private sector, must be done with clearly defined responsibilities. With an efficient and collaborative organizational structure, Indonesia can accelerate decision-making, improve stakeholder coordination, and reduce overlapping responsibilities, enabling more effective stunting interventions.

Funding problems

Funding allocation is the primary key to overcoming stunting in Indonesia. Results will be minimal if funds are not used effectively for relevant programs. District stakeholders said that previously, the entire budget was split among District Sector Agents (DSAs). Handling the stunting reduction program results in a budget that is not large enough to manage, so it is not on target (Herawati & Sunjaya, 2022).

Apart from not being on target, fund transfers are often late because they are related to the year the budget is used. As a comparison, the study shows that the distribution of 2021 Village Funds in several regions in Indonesia, which are also used to address stunting, was delayed. This is due to several administrative problems the regional and village governments carry out (Indartuti, 2022).

Funding problems such as corruption were also found in this study. News reports indicate that the village head carried out acts of corruption in village funds. Corrupted funds include funds used for stunting management. Overcoming sin in village funds requires collaborative efforts between the government, community, and related parties. This is a long-term effort that requires a strong commitment to ensure that existing resources are used to improve the welfare of rural communities without corruption. A strict legal and judicial system must be implemented to suppress corruption cases.

Problems in society

The lack of knowledge has long been considered one of the main factors contributing to stunting. Low levels of parental education, particularly maternal education, are strongly linked to the prevalence of stunting in childhood. Although not universally applicable, the likelihood of a child experiencing stunting increases with the lower educational attainment of their parents. Children whose parents have the lowest levels of education are up to twice as likely to be stunted compared to those whose parents have the highest levels of education. Parental education significantly influences parenting practices (Yani et al., 2023). Parenting is closely associated with the growth and development of children under five. Various aspects of parenting include feeding practices, psychosocial stimulation, hygiene, environmental sanitation, and access to healthcare services (Mulyani et al., 2023).

In addition to the lack of knowledge, poverty has been identified as another contributing factor in this study. Research shows that childhood poverty and malnutrition are interconnected, mediated by inadequate dietary intake, low educational attainment, poor living standards, and the lack or absence of access to healthcare facilities, clean water, sanitation, and proper hygiene

practices (Rahman et al., 2021). Household income is a critical measure of a family's ability to afford essential components related to improving nutrition, such as food, water, sanitation, and medical care (Vaivada et al., 2020). Addressing stunting requires tackling poverty within a broader framework. This can include programs and policies supporting poverty alleviation, such as social assistance initiatives, improved access to education and healthcare, and upgrades to infrastructure and sanitation in impoverished areas.

Additionally, community-based nutrition programs that provide education on healthy eating habits and effective parenting practices can help reduce stunting among children from low-income families. Cultural practices have also been identified as barriers to stunting eradication efforts. Traditional celebrations and events often held by communities are typically extravagant and costly. Families hosting such events spend significant money on food and event supplies, such as guest seating, tents, and stages. This can result in high expenses, debt, and an increased risk of poverty when families choose to finance such events. A study involving 120 participants in Madura, East Java, revealed that cultural practices, such as hosting parties and gift-giving, could reduce the effectiveness of nutritional interventions by 0.276 times compared to those not influenced by such practices (Wiliyanarti et al., 2022). It is crucial to balance preserving cultural heritage and ensuring community welfare. Education and awareness regarding cultural practices that may contribute to poverty and stunting are essential to empower communities to make informed decisions when upholding their traditions.

Furthermore, support in the form of financial education, training, and social assistance programs can help communities mitigate the economic impact of cultural traditions. The failure to address stunting also leads to various societal challenges. One significant consequence is the increased long-term healthcare burden. Stunted children are more likely to have lower cognitive abilities, are more susceptible to chronic illnesses, and are at higher risk of developing metabolic disorders such as obesity or diabetes later in life (Grey et al., 2021; Handryastuti et al., 2022). This increases healthcare costs for families and the state. Moreover, the failure to combat stunting exacerbates society's poverty cycle. Stunted children tend to have lower productivity as adults due to physical and cognitive limitations, directly impacting their earning potential and increasing their likelihood of remaining in poverty (Montenegro et al., 2022). Without effective interventions, breaking this cycle becomes even more difficult. The failure to address stunting also worsens social inequality. Children from impoverished and less-educated families who fail to receive adequate nutritional interventions will fall further behind those from more affluent families (Yani et al., 2023). This inequality deepens social disparities and can potentially create long-term tensions. Therefore, addressing the failure to combat stunting is not solely a healthcare issue; it requires a multidimensional approach involving various sectors, including education, economics, culture, and social development. This is essential to minimize the adverse effects of stunting and improve overall societal well-being.

This qualitative research has limitations that must be acknowledged. First, this research focuses on a small sample of policymakers regarding stunting. To generalize the findings and help improve the problem of stunting management policy barriers, future research should use qualitative and quantitative methods on more prominent and representative samples in various regions of Indonesia. In addition, the review must be carried out in two directions, with policy implementers in the field and the community as a group that feels the impact of the policy to obtain appropriate feedback and corrections.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion is to addressing these barriers is essential for improving stunting management in rural Indonesia. Enhancing policy consistency, strengthening institutional frameworks, and improving resource allocation are key to overcoming existing challenges. The study recommends periodic regulatory evaluations, enhanced cross-sectoral coordination, and

alignment of national policies with local needs. Establishing community-based recruitment and training systems through strategic partnerships could mitigate human resource constraints. Strengthening anti-corruption measures through independent oversight and digital reporting systems. Finally, fostering sustained community education through sociocultural approaches and local leader involvement is critical to increasing awareness and participation in stunting prevention efforts.

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