

## New Wine in Old Bottle: The Shaping of Village Autonomy

Muba Simanihuruk<sup>1\*</sup>, Riza Buana Ismail<sup>2</sup>, Fikarwin Zuska<sup>3</sup>, Henri Sitorus<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan 20155, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan 20155, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Department of Antropology, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan 20155, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup> Department of Sociology, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan 20155, Indonesia

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### Abstract

This article attempts to explain the relationship between fiscal decentralisation and the capacity of village officials in village planning and budgeting. Research findings in this study, which was conducted in the Sipoholon sub-district, North Tapanuli, North Sumatera, show that the capacity of village officials in the village development process is still relatively weak, as indicated by their background resources, rare training sessions, poor budget planning and management, and incoherent vision and mission that are not in line with the District-level development plans. Consequently, they also fall prey to the predatory practices of corrupt district level government officials, NGOs and the media.

*Key words: marga, adat, village, village governance capacity*

### 1. Introduction

The World Bank noted that Indonesia has made a big leap, better known as the 'big bang', in extreme fiscal decentralisation between 2001 (the first big bang) and 2006 (the second big bang), which is marked by huge transfers of funds from the central government to the regions. Indonesia is considered as the most revolutionary country in making changes to the

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system of government from being centralistic towards a decentralised government (Ma and Hofman, 2006).

This fiscal decentralisation is a bridge towards fiscal justice for districts/cities/provinces that are densely populated but poor in natural resources, because they receive subsidies from districts/cities/provinces that are rich in natural resources but have relatively small population (Kazuhisa, 2003).

Furthermore, through the policy of decentralisation of power at the provincial/district/city levels, the construction of public service facilities is more targeted and more efficient than during the centralised government era, although in certain cases, the autonomous regional governments have not been able to provide public facilities such as education and health. This may be due to their weak position in negotiating with the central government in seeking additional budget (Chowdhury; 2009).

The Jokowi government, with its Nawa Cita development program,<sup>3</sup> also carried out extreme fiscal decentralisation. The 241 villages in North Tapanuli District have received IDR 184,186,164,000 in 2019 (Depkeu, 2019). The underdevelopment of the villages is reflected in the village's level of poverty. From 1993 to 2016, poverty in rural areas reached 13.96%, whereas in urban areas it was only 7.73% (BPS, 2017).

## 2. Literature Review

This research seeks to change the development paradigm of villages, which has often been seen as marginal. Currently, development in the periphery is often considered an affirmative policy towards the village (Irawan, 2017: 17).

Centralistic and top down socioeconomic development has long been the foundation of Indonesia's development and modernization. The modernisation approach that has been used since the New Order era<sup>4</sup> assumes that the development route advances societies from the traditional or pre-modern stage to an advanced society. This is marked by the socio-cultural characteristics of traditional societies on the one hand and the socio-cultural characteristics of modern societies on the other (Coetzee, 2001: 27). Therefore, people who are not yet developed must follow the development path as laid out by the developed countries as well as adopt the modern values they have. This stage of Rostow-style development dominated the development of the New Order era, which was famous for its concepts of *lepas landas* (taking-off) and *tinggal landas* (take-off) phases.

In the Indonesian context, this top-down approach has been implemented since the 1970s. This top-down feature is exemplified by the subordination of the villages to the cities, as indicated by the introduction of new technologies in agriculture brought by the central elites to increase agricultural production (Tjondonegoro in Irawan, 2017: 19). Even the presence of organisations such as the PKK (Family Welfare Education), farmer group organisations, or cooperatives in the villages, are nothing more than forms of '*menyalurkan*' (channelling) social assistance from the APBD (Regional Development Budget) and are always *„menggantung ke atas“* (dependent to those above) (Mahendro, 2013: 16). In the same vein,

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village development was marked by a paternalistic culture. In that sense, rural organisations are seen as helpless, so they must be empowered by outsiders (especially the government) with rural development programs including the green revolution (Winarno, 1985: 29).

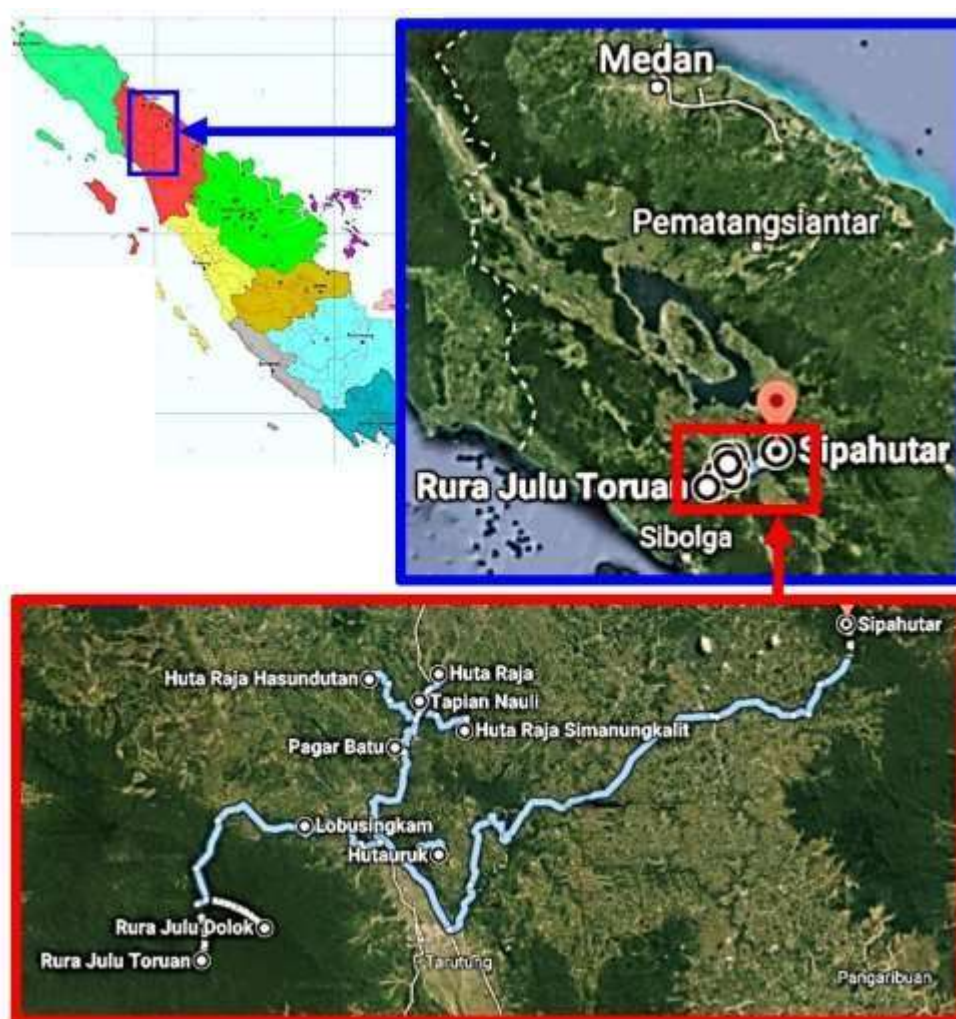
Sufficiently self-regulating villages have slowly been marginalised since the colonialism era and continued till the New Order era. The centralisation of the government to Java/Jakarta had given birth to a tiered predatory government system starting from the village level to the sub-district, district, provincial and central levels. The village is at the lowest level of the government hierarchy, turning the village government to become the most neglected and maybe even forgotten level of government. This development dependency makes the village synonymous with underdevelopment and poverty. The Jokowi government since 2014 has changed this paradigm through development from the periphery. The Nawa Cita program intends to give recognition to the village.

Identity-based politics, including those of *adat*, is rising. The rise of identity politics is influenced by at least four factors: (1) the support of and inspiration from international networks and organisations for the recognition of the rights of traditional or indigenous peoples; (2) the important role of *adat* in the Indonesian political imagination since the 20<sup>th</sup> century; (3) the oppression of marginal groups during the New Order era; and (4) the transition from the authoritarian development paradigm to the fragile and opportunistic state-society relations that came after the New Order era (Henley, 2008: 2).

### 3. Data and Method

This research is a descriptive study on the effect of the rising identity politics on development in the villages. It was conducted in 10 villages located in two sub-districts in North Tapanuli District, North Sumatera (see Map 1). Data collection was carried out by distributing questionnaires to village heads. To complete the data also conducted in-depth interviews with several key informants such as traditional leaders, village heads, Bapemas (Office of the Village Community Empowerment Agency), and elite officials in the district government offices, using semi-open interview guides. Quantitative data processing was later conducted to analyse trends. Because data sampling in the field did not meet the planned sampling framework, this study should not be seen as representative to the entire population.

*Map 1: Location of the research*



## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Result

#### 4.1.1. Economic development in the villages

There are three kinds of official development status used by the government in categorising the villages: *desa berkembang* (developing villages), *desa tertinggal* (underdeveloped villages), and *desa sangat tertinggal* (very underdeveloped villages). This research's field data found that although the 10 villages in two sub-district (Sipoholon and) studied in this research have received an average of at least IDR 700,000,000 each (see Table 1), only 7 of them have "developing" status.

Table 1: Village Funds in Sipoholon sub-district, North Tapanuli District

No.	Village	Village Status	Village Fund in 2017
1	Rura Julu Dolok	Underdeveloped	IDR 737,633,041.00
2	Tapian Nauli	Developing	IDR 741,577,757.00
3	Rura Julu Toruan	Very underdeveloped	IDR 741,878,411.00
4	Hutaraja Simanungkalit	Developing	IDR 742,264,467.00
5	Sipahutar	Developing	IDR 744,594,746.00
6	Hutaraja	Developing	IDR 753,413,181.00
7	Hutaraja Hasundutan	Developing	IDR 759,883,333.00
8	Pagarbatu	Developing	IDR 760,000,000.00
9	Hutauruk	Developing	IDR 768,515,503.00
10	Lobusingkam	Underdeveloped	IDR 786,644,029.00

Source: Field data, 2018

Although the village funds from the central government and the allocation of village funds from the district level are increasing, the condition of the development of villages in this district is still relatively lagging behind those of other neighbouring districts. Of the 241 villages in the district, only 4 (1.66%) are categorised as developed villages, 93 (38.59%) as developing villages, 125 (51.87%) as underdeveloped Villages, and 19 (7.88%) as very underdeveloped villages (BPS, 2018). This lag is also reflected in the human resources of the village apparatus. The education of village officials in Sipoholon sub-district was mostly at the high school (SMA) equivalent level (see Table 2). Even though this level of education still meets the standard demanded in Law No. 6/2014 on Villages, this level does not guarantee enough competency for the managing the increasing village planning and budgeting activities.

An official at the Bapemas said that employees from their internal offices sometimes had to play the role of the Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda) to help plan the village development as well as the Regional Financial Management Agency (Dipenloka) in order to prepare village financial accountability. Village assistants are also sometimes involved in village planning and budgeting.

Table 2: Education of Village Heads in Sipoholon sub-district, North Tapanuli District

Education Level	Number of Village Heads	
Junior High School (SMP) equivalent		10%
High School (SMA) equivalent		70%
Bachelors (S1) equivalent		20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field data, 2018

According to informants in the district government, it is difficult to get resources in North Tapanuli in general, especially in the villages, because of poverty and limited flat land available in this region. This limited flat land makes large-scale agriculture impossible. Only small scale agriculture is feasible, which limits the efforts to improve economic production in the villages.

Another main difficulty to development is that some villagers do not own agricultural land, so they have to rent land from land owners with a flat sharing system (50 percent for land owners and 50 percent for tenants). This system is known as *mamola pinang* (splitting the areca nut into two). Again, this limits the villagers' options to improve their economic conditions.



This condition has led to the phenomenon of brain drain, where bright and young people have to migrate to Medan or even to Java. On the other hand, there was also remigration, where Batak people who failed to succeed overseas returned to their home villages. People who return to this village are called “*orang-orang yang putar haluan*” (those who turned around). An informant said that they often carry and introduce vice from the cities, such as gambling, drugs, and even prostitution, to villages that are religious.

#### 4.1.2. Efforts to address the problems of low capacity

Realising these limitations particularly in human resources, the district government through the Bapemas conducted trainings to increase the capacity of village officials (see Table 3), which included topics on how to manage RPJMDes (Village Mid-Term Development Plan), Perdes (Village Regulations), and BUMDes (Village Owned Enterprises). Unfortunately, some of these trainings was not well targeted, lacking in both appropriate training approach and the expertise of the training resource persons and facilitators.

Some village heads said that they did not understand the materials presented because they were very theoretical, and their presentation consist of monologues. Some village heads said that the trainings were not entirely their initiative, but rather because of directions and instructions from the elite of the Bapemas.

Table 3: Themes of Village Head Trainings in Sipoholon sub-district, North Tapanuli District

No.	Village	Village Head	Drafting the RPJMDes	Drafting the Village Government Work Plan	Drafting of Perdes	Drafting of Village Heads Joint Regulation	Drafting of APBDes	Developing BUMDES	MUSREMBANG Training	Village Leadership	Village Asset Management	Socialisation of Laws/Permemdes	Total training attended
	Pagarbatu	Manimbun Hutabarat	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10
	Hutauruk	Prins John Manalu	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	1
	Hutaraja Hasundutan	Tarzan Situmeang	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10
	Hutaraja	Mantu Sibagariang	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10
	Rura Julu Toruan	Lamhot Simanungkalit	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	10
	Rura Julu Dolok	Cristophel Simanungkalit	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6
7	Lobusingkam	Immer Hutagalung	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	7
8	Sipahutar	Johni Sipahutar	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
9	Tapian Nauli	Lamsar Panggabean	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
10	Hutaraja Simanungkalit	Rimson Parulisan Simanungkalit	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
<b>Total of Village Heads that attended</b>			<b>Yes</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>80</b>
			<b>No</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>20</b>

Source: Field data, 2018

The low capacity of village officials is recognised by an elite official in the district level. This informant said that all villages in the district experienced SILPA (Budget Underspent for the Year) due to the low ability of village officials in planning and reporting village finances. In fact, almost all villages were sanctioned with TGR (Compensation Claims). These are the findings of the district’s internal audit inspectorate. If the TGR is not returned, the penalty

may be a criminal trial. Furthermore, at some level, the vision and mission of the Village Medium Term Development Plan (RPJMDes) is less synchronised with the District Medium Term Development Plan (RPJM). Therefore, the Bupati's (Head of District's) development vision<sup>5</sup> lack the support of the vision and mission of each village.

This informant also stated that the village heads' fear of the district internal audit inspectorate staff was quite high. They are also afraid of NGOs and journalists who sometimes visit to oversee the use of village funds. They are seen as just looking to find faults. If there are irregularities, these NGOs and journalists sometimes blackmail the village heads.

The *modus operandi* for this blackmail operation is quite like an organised criminal syndicate. The legal institutions that are aware of the irregularities that occur divulge them to NGOs and journalists, who then proceed to use the information to blackmail. The local media, both print and online, will then repeatedly publish the information as news headlines by interviewing NGO activists. The journalist then interviewed the legal apparatus and reported that the village head was suspected of misusing village funds and would be examined by the legal apparatus.

The only way out for the village heads is to capitulate to the blackmail. This blackmail practice is nearly systemic, which proves that power is not merely monopolised by the ruling and governing groups as understood in the Marxist theories. Power within a power relation, such as between the district and villages, is always distributed among actors (Foucault, 1982: 29). The power relations between the state actors and their people are fully demonstrated in the corruption of the villages. Each actor has a certain degree of power. The village heads have no alternative but to keep each of these actors happy if they do not wish to end up in prison.

#### 4.1.3. The problem of the local political system

Local *adat* or traditions in Indonesia have a long history of rejecting economic development. This tendency exists in many parts of Indonesia regardless of their local characteristics such as religion or politics. For example, in the name of *adat*, villagers in Bali reject mega-tourism development projects and reject outsiders living in their villages (Widyaswara, 2018). Similarly, Dayak residents in West Kalimantan, for the sake of and on behalf of *adat*, have committed violence against migrants (Marry and Iskandar, 2016). Some of the demands of the Indigenous Peoples (MHA) as voiced by the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN) can be summed up as: "If the State does not want to recognise us, then we will also not recognise the State."

In the Batak society, there is an *umpasa* (), which stated:

"*Ompu Raja di jolo, martungkothon siala gundi. Adat pinungka ni ompunta na parjolo, ihuthonon ni digit na parpudi*"

This saying can be roughly translated as:

"The king walks in front with the *si ala gundi* stick (sceptre). Customs made by the ancestors must be followed by the generation behind it."

The message is followed thoroughly by many Batak people.

Kinship politics is still prominent in the village governance at the research area. It makes genuine leadership regeneration and reinvigoration very difficult. This form of traditional identity politics is experiencing a revival despite the modern democratic system. For example, it is nearly impossible for members of migrant clans (*marga boru*) to become village head candidates in several villages in North Tapanuli. Only members of the founding clans (*marga sipungka huta*) are eligible to be elected to become village head.

Such *adat* that takes advantage of the political decentralisation of the Reform era has become a dilemma. Village autonomy is expected to recognise the origin of the village, which include both aspects that are good and bad for development. On one hand, the district government has never legalised the existence of *adat* villages. On the other hand, indigenous villagers with all their interests are trying to revitalise *adat* and use it as their tool to preserve their leadership of the village.

This system of village autonomy is often called the *supradesa* (central to district), which is like a double-edged sword. It openly acknowledges the village as a recognition of *adat* as well as the bottom-up approach to development. In reality, it also sustains the hegemony of the political leadership, which continues to run and approved of from above (a top-down approach).

In a sense, this new decentralisation policy is intended to make revolutionary changes from the bottom-up in the form of „village-building“. Unfortunately, the human resources and leadership culture is still from the old era, which is about „building villages“. This type of leadership is characterised by two hierarchical and predatory power relations. At the village level, village officials are characterised by patrimonial and nepotistic bureaucracies based on *marga* or kinship politics. At the district level, officials demand loyalty from village officials at the expense of innovations from below, which is practically what a patron-client relationship is. This is referred to by informants as “*anggur baru dalam guci lama*” (new wine in old jars). No matter what new innovations are introduced to the community, it will still be shaped by the old existing form.

## 4.2. Discussion and Recommendation

Research findings in this study have shown that the capacity of village officials in the village development process is still relatively weak. Village apparatus resources mostly are only senior high school graduates. Proper trainings to increase their capacity are relatively rare. Consequently, all villages in the research area experience budget underspent and were forced to repay TGR. In addition, the villages’ development plans are not synchronised with the district government’s plans.

Extreme fiscal decentralisation at the village level have not been followed by an increase in the capacity of village officials and village representative body. The relatively low level of education of the village apparatus is not helped by the capacity building trainings that were not well targeted.

Political decentralisation at the village and district levels, on the other hand, has not empowered the people at the village level to make any significant change. It even revived and strengthened traditional political systems, which will make the introduction of new innovations and new actors extremely difficult. In short, the political system has become stagnant as it focuses more on maintaining power than in improving the lives of people.



The solution to overcoming this condition require the government from the district to central level to reconsider the importance and position of *adat* in village governance within the modern political and economic system. The radical view would be to revolutionise the entire political system by ignoring *adat* entirely, much like a return to the New Order era, for the sake of economic development.

The opposite of this view, which is equally radical, is to strengthen the *adat* system further regardless of the economic costs. People will be forced to live (and suffer) under this old system, revolt and continue to topple leaders with unsatisfactory rule (creating a vicious cycle), or simply leave and live elsewhere (emigration).

The best solution, which most likely will be chosen by the government, will lie somewhere in between these two views. It will be gradual and take a long time, possibly inter-generational. Being allowed to run its course will be the true test on whether *adat* will be able to survive or be abandoned by its subjects.

## Terminologies and Abbreviations

All words are in the Toba Batak language unless mentioned otherwise.

<i>adat</i>	Indonesian: Custom or tradition
<i>Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nasional</i>	Indonesian: The Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago
AMAN	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nasional</i>
<i>Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Desa</i>	Indonesian: Village Income and Spending Budget
<i>anggur baru dalam guci lama</i>	Indonesian: new wine in old jars
APBDes	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Desa</i>
<i>Badan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Desa</i>	Indonesian: Village Community Empowerment Body
<i>Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah</i>	Indonesian: Regional Development Planning Agency
<i>Badan Usaha Milik Desa</i>	Indonesian: Village-Owned Enterprise
Bapemas	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Badan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Desa</i>
<i>Bappeda</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah</i>
BUMDES	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Badan Usaha Milik Desa</i>
<i>Bupati</i>	Indonesian: <i>Kabupaten</i> (District)-level leader in the modern State of Indonesia
<i>Dalihan Natolu</i>	Institution that preserve Batak customs and traditions
<i>desa berkembang</i>	Indonesian: developing villages
<i>desa sangat tertinggal</i>	Indonesian: very underdeveloped villages
<i>desa tertinggal</i>	Indonesian: underdeveloped villages
<i>Dinas Pendapatan Pengelolaan Keuangan</i>	Indonesian: Regional Financial Management Agency
<i>Dipenloka</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Dinas Pendapatan Pengelolaan Keuangan</i>
<i>lepas landas</i>	Indonesian: taking-off
<i>mago</i>	Disappear
<i>mamola pinang</i>	Splitting the areca nut into two
<i>marga</i>	Genealogically-based clan unit of the Toba Batak ethnic group and the Batak in general.
<i>marga boru</i>	The clan of newcomers to the village
<i>marga pamungha huta</i>	The clan of the founders of the village
<i>marga sipungka huta</i>	The descendants of the <i>marga pamungha huta</i>
<i>Masyarakat Hukum Adat</i>	Indonesian: Indigenous Peoples
MHA	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Masyarakat Hukum Adat</i>

<i>MUSREMBANG</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Musyawarah Rencana Pembangunan</i>
<i>Musyawarah Rencana Pembangunan Nawa Cita</i>	Indonesian: Council of Development Planning Sanskrit: Nine wishes. President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's nine-point development plan.
<i>orang-orang yang putar haluan</i>	Indonesian: those who turned around
<i>Orba</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Orde Baru</i>
<i>Orde Baru</i>	Indonesian: New Order. The era of the 32 years of the Soeharto presidency 1965-1998) in Indonesia.
<i>Pendidikan Kesejahteraan Keluarga</i>	Indonesian: Family Welfare Education
<i>Peraturan Desa</i>	Indonesian: Village Regulation
<i>Peraturan Kepala Desa</i>	Indonesian: Village Heads Joint Regulation
<i>Peraturan Menteri Desa</i>	Indonesian: Regulation of the Ministry of Villages
<i>Perdes</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Peraturan Desa</i>
<i>Perkades</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Peraturan Kepala Desa</i>
<i>Permendes</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Peraturan Menteri Desa</i>
<i>PKK</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Pendidikan Kesejahteraan Keluarga</i>
<i>Rencana Kerja Pemerintah Desa</i>	Indonesian: Village Government Work Plan
<i>Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Desa</i>	Indonesian: Village Mid-term Development Plan
<i>RKPDes</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Rencana Kerja Pemerintah Desa</i>
<i>RPJMDes</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Desa</i>
<i>SILPA</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Sisa Lebih Pembiayaan Anggaran</i>
<i>Sisa Lebih Pembiayaan Anggaran</i>	Indonesian: Budget Underspent for the Year
<i>TGR</i>	Abbr. Indonesian: See <i>Tuntutan Ganti Rugi</i>
<i>tinggal landas</i>	Indonesian: Take-off
<i>Tuntutan Ganti Rugi</i>	Indonesian: Compensation Claims

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