

Faez Syahroni^{1*}, Riswan Z², Zulkri³, Abdul Manan⁴, Saprijal⁵, Agus Junaidi⁶

^{1,2,3,5,6}Universitas Al Washliyah Darussalam Banda Aceh ⁴Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh

E-mail: <u>faez.syahroni.washliyahbna@gmail.com</u>, <u>riswanzulkarnain@gmail.com</u>, <u>zulkrijeki7@gmail.com</u>, abdul.manan@ar-raniry.ac.id, saprijalktba90@gmail.com, amaagusz@gmail.com

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Abstract

Customary forests in Aceh Province play a crucial role in preserving the environment while strengthening the socio-cultural identity of the mukim community. Since Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, customary forests have been legally recognized, but their implementation still faces challenges such as weak coordination, limited funding, and minimal oversight. This study aims to analyze the implementation of customary forest policies in Aceh, focusing on supporting and inhibiting factors, and to formulate policy strategies aligned with the sustainable development goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 13 (climate action) and Goal 15 (terrestrial ecosystems). The method used is descriptive qualitative research through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation, with informants from local governments, customary institutions, NGOs, and mukim communities. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman approach, which includes reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. Initial results indicate a gap between formal regulations and implementation practices, where local regulations such as the Qanun on Customary Mukim Forests are more effective in supporting implementation than general national policies. This research is expected to produce applicable policy recommendations to strengthen coordination, resources, and participation of indigenous communities in forest management.

Keywords: Implementation; Policy; Management; Customary Forests; Sustainable Development Goals

INTRODUCTION

Customary forests in Aceh Province are ecological and cultural assets that play a crucial role in maintaining environmental balance and strengthening the identity of indigenous communities. For generations, indigenous communities have managed forest areas using customary law as a normative foundation recognized socially and culturally (Syahroni et al., 2024). This customary-based management model not only serves to preserve forests but also supports the sustainability of natural resources that support people's daily lives. However, in practice, customary forest management often faces challenges in the form of policy conflicts, overexploitation, and weak protection of indigenous peoples' rights (Hajad et al., 2025). This situation demonstrates that the existence of customary law alone is insufficient without the support of consistent and supportive state policies. Since Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, customary forests have been recognized as part of the territory of indigenous peoples, no longer as part of state forests (Apricia, 2022). This recognition marks a significant step in forestry policy reform in Indonesia, providing a clear legal basis for indigenous communities to manage their forests. However, the implementation of this decision has not been fully effective, particularly in Aceh, where various laws and regulations often conflict or even overlap (Wiyono et al., 2021). One relevant policy is the Minister of Environment and Forestry Regulation No. 32/2015 concerning Private Forests and Customary Forests, which is expected to serve as a reference in protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. However, obstacles remain in harmonizing central and regional regulations, resulting in less than optimal implementation. Efforts to recognize customary forests in Aceh gained momentum when, in September 2023, eight mukim (village communities) in three districts (Aceh Jaya, Bireuen, and Pidie) were officially declared customary forests by the government (Suparto, 2021). This affirmed the government's commitment to involving indigenous communities in

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sustainable forest resource management. Local regulations, such as Aceh Qanun Number 7 of 2016 concerning Aceh Forestry, have also strengthened the legal basis for customary forest management at the provincial level. However, implementation on the ground remains far from expectations, particularly in terms of strengthening customary institutions, legal protection, and integration with national development programs. This situation demonstrates a gap between regulations at the normative level and actual practices on the ground. Indigenous communities themselves play a crucial role in maintaining forest sustainability because they possess traditional knowledge proven effective in environmental conservation (Syahroni et al., 2023). Their extensive experience in forest management makes them key actors, understanding local ecological dynamics and developing sustainable systems tailored to local conditions. However, the lack of community involvement in policy formulation often results in forestry policies not reflecting local needs and wisdom (Cetera, 2021). As a result, the goals of environmental protection and empowerment of indigenous communities are not optimally achieved. If this situation continues, the risk of degradation of indigenous forests and the loss of local wisdom will increase.

On the other hand, the successful management of customary forests is also closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, SDG Goal 13 on climate change mitigation and Goal 15 on terrestrial ecosystem management are highly relevant to customary forest policies (Siringoringo, 2022). Effective implementation of customary forest management policies can support the achievement of these global targets and strengthen Indonesia's position on the international development agenda. The central government, through Asta Cita (Indonesian National Development Plan), also prioritizes environmental preservation and food security, making customary forests a key component of this strategy. Thus, Aceh's customary forest management impacts not only local communities but also Indonesia's reputation and commitment to the global stage. Despite significant opportunities, several structural barriers still hinder the optimization of customary forest policies. Factors such as bureaucratic apathy, a lack of competent human resources, and weak law enforcement exacerbate policy implementation (Bahri et al., 2021; Manik, 2022). Furthermore, the existence of new regulations, such as the Job Creation Law, has created legal uncertainty because they often align with Constitutional Court rulings regarding customary forests (Gusman & Raspati, 2024). This demonstrates the competing political and economic interests in forest control, which can be detrimental to indigenous communities. Therefore, a comprehensive evaluation of policies is needed to ensure they align with the principles of social justice and sustainability. Without corrective measures, the recognition of customary forests will remain a mere formality without substantive meaning.

Based on the above description, it is important to further examine the implementation of customary forest policies in Aceh, both in terms of opportunities and obstacles. This research is expected to answer questions regarding the extent to which customary forest policies have been implemented, the factors that support and hinder them, and how such management can support sustainable national development. The urgency of this research lies in efforts to maintain ecological sustainability, strengthen policy harmonization, and empower indigenous communities. Furthermore, this research is expected to contribute to the formulation of more equitable and effective policy recommendations. Therefore, this research has academic, practical, and strategic relevance for the development of Aceh and Indonesia as a whole.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customary forest management in Indonesia has received widespread attention since Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, which changed the status of customary forests to part of customary law community territories (Apricia, 2022). This change provides a crucial legal basis for indigenous communities, including those in Aceh, to manage forests according to local wisdom. However, research shows that the implementation of this decision still faces serious challenges due to overlapping regulations and weak protection of customary rights (Wiyono et al., 2021). Several studies have highlighted factors influencing the implementation of customary forest policies. Edwards III emphasized that communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure are key determinants of policy success (Setiyadi, 2024). Similar findings were presented by Manik (2022), who stated that human resources and institutions play a significant role in the effectiveness of land tenure resolution policies in forest areas. Furthermore, bureaucratic apathy and weak law enforcement are also obstacles (Bahri et al., 2021). Social forestry studies provide a comparative perspective on customary forest management. A study by Hasan, Niapele, and Salim (2022) in North Tidore emphasized that community-government collaboration is crucial to the program's success. Pambudi (2023) also highlighted the need for continuous policy adaptation to ensure its relevance to local dynamics. This is crucial because customary forests, such as those in Aceh, share the same goals as social forestry: promoting sustainability and community well-being.

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Recent literature highlights political and regulatory challenges that could weaken the position of indigenous communities. Gusman and Raspati (2024) argue that the Job Creation Law tends to favor investment interests over protecting customary rights. Meanwhile, Pertiwi, Sakdiyah, and Rian (2024) emphasize the importance of integrating customary law into the national legal system for resolving environmental disputes. This is relevant for Aceh, which has a tradition of mukim customary law as a basis for social and ecological legitimacy. From the literature review above, it can be concluded that research on the implementation of customary forest policies in Aceh remains highly relevant. The gap between formal recognition and field practice is a key issue that requires further investigation. This research is expected to contribute to formulating policy recommendations that are more equitable, effective, and aligned with sustainable development goals.

METHOD

Types of research

A qualitative approach is used in this type of study. One requirement of qualitative research is that the researcher follows a clear, systematic, and disciplined methodology, which is intended to ensure the accuracy of the research findings (Kilonzo, 2023). The purpose of this research is to determine whether a program, policy, activity, or phenomenon is working or not (Sugiono, 2020), therefore a qualitative and descriptive approach is used.

Research Location

This research was conducted in eight customary forest areas in Aceh Province, which are divided into three districts: Aceh Jaya District (Mukim Krueng Sabee and Mukim Panga Pasi are two mukims recognized as customary forests), Pidie District (Three mukims, namely Mukim Beungga in Tangse District, Mukim Paloh, and Mukim Kunyet in Padang Tiji District, are recognized as customary forests), and Bireuen District (Mukim Blang Birah, Kuta Jeumpa, and Krueng are three mukims recognized as customary forests).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Interview Results on the Implementation of Aceh Customary Forests

Informant	Key Statements	Main Theme
Aceh Regional	"The planning already exists, but it has not yet been	Planning & Funding
Development Planning	prioritized, and funding is still on a small scale."	
Agency (Fauzan Nur,		
S.Hut., M.Si)		
Social Forestry Center	"We only provide assistance and act as facilitators; the	Role of Ministries &
(Khairul Munadi)	technical aspects of the policy are the responsibility of the	Coordination
	relevant agencies."	
Aceh Environment and	"The proposal came from an NGO, but after the decision	Institutions &
Forestry Agency (Asrul)	was made, we didn't know the progress of the	Coordination
	implementation"	
KPH 1 DLHK Aceh (T.	"There are no ongoing programs because NGOs are not	Technical Institutions &
Kamaruzzaman)	coordinating, although there have been new initiatives	Coordination
	recently."	
KPH 2 DLHK Aceh	"We have followed up in Bireuen, supported by local	Technical
(Firdaus)	regulations, but illegal forest encroachment and land mafia	Implementation & Field
	have emerged."	Challenges
Aceh Jaya Regional	"The 2017 Qanun already exists, but implementation is	Local Regulations &
Secretariat (Zulfa Nazli)	still stalled despite joint efforts by traditional leaders."	Implementation

An interview with the Aceh Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda) through Mr. Fauzan Nur, S.Hut., M.Si., revealed that customary forests have received attention in terms of planning, but have not yet become a priority for regional development. This is evident in the small budget allocations, which are limited to specific programs. This statement indicates that despite the existence of regulations for recognition, the integration of customary forests into development planning is not yet optimal. This condition aligns with the findings of Wiyono, Susanto, and Darusman (2021), which noted a gap between legal policy and implementation at the regional level. Therefore, it can be concluded that planning and funding are significant initial challenges in

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implementing Aceh's customary forest policy. The Social Forestry Center, represented by Mr. Khairul Munadi, emphasized that the ministry's role is primarily facilitative. Their function is to assist communities and local governments to ensure the customary forest certification process proceeds according to procedure. However, technical matters remain the responsibility of provincial and district agencies. This statement demonstrates a division of roles that has not been fully coordinated effectively. According to Edwards III's policy implementation theory, communication and coordination between institutions are key to successful implementation (Setiyadi, 2024), so weak coordination may explain the slow progress of policies on the ground.

An interview with the Aceh Environment and Forestry Service, conducted by Mr. Asrul, highlighted the issue of weak follow-up after the ratification of customary forests. According to him, the recognition of customary forests in Aceh began with a proposal from an NGO, but after the ratification, progress reports on implementation were unclear. This indicates a communication gap between the proposing NGO, the local government, and the indigenous community. This situation aligns with research by Bahri, Kusmanto, and Broven (2021), which found that weak bureaucracy and poor coordination were the main inhibiting factors in forest protection policies. Thus, the implementation barriers in Aceh are more structural and coordinative, rather than merely regulatory. The perspective from KPH 1 Aceh, through Mr. T. Kamaruzzaman, emphasized that the mukim customary forest program has not yet been implemented technically because the proposing NGOs have not coordinated with the technical implementing units. This has only begun to be addressed through more intensive communication, although concrete programs have only recently emerged in Bireuen through KPH 2. This information suggests that the bureaucratic structure at the technical level has not been fully involved from the outset, thus lacking a strong institutional foundation for policy implementation. Suparto (2021) also emphasized the important role of local governments and technical units in accelerating the recognition and implementation of customary forests. Therefore, coordination between NGOs and technical agencies needs to be strengthened to ensure the policy's effectiveness.

In contrast, KPH 2, led by Mr. Firdaus, has shown greater progress in implementing customary forests (mukim), particularly in Bireuen Regency. They are following up on policies based on local regulations, namely the Mukim Customary Forest Qanun Number 5 of 2017. However, serious challenges have emerged in the form of illegal forest encroachment and land mafia practices that damage the ecosystem. This situation shows that formal recognition of customary forests does not automatically prevent environmental destruction. This finding is consistent with a study by Gusman and Raspati (2024), which emphasized that new regulations, such as the Job Creation Law, have the potential to weaken indigenous peoples' sovereignty over forests, making them vulnerable to illegal exploitation. From the district government perspective, an interview with Zulfa Nazli, Head of the Economic and Natural Resources Division of the Aceh Jaya District Secretariat, revealed that although the Mukim Customary Forest Qanun has been in place since 2017, its implementation remains stagnant. Collaborative efforts with traditional leaders and mukim have been undertaken, but the results have not been optimal. This situation demonstrates that the mere existence of regulations is insufficient without consistent implementation support and adequate resources. This aligns with Manik's (2022) argument that the effectiveness of policy implementation is greatly influenced by the quality of human resources and institutions. Therefore, Aceh Jaya needs to strengthen its institutional and resource aspects so that customary forests can operate according to regulatory mandates.

Overall, the interview results revealed a consistent pattern: regulations for recognizing customary forests exist, but implementation remains weak due to challenges in coordination, funding, institutions, and oversight. From the perspective of Edwards III's policy implementation theory, the four aspects of communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure still face significant obstacles in Aceh. On the other hand, the experience of FMU 2 in Bireuen demonstrates opportunities if local regulations are strengthened and technical programs are well-coordinated. By integrating local perspectives, local government support, and the national agenda and SDGs, Aceh's customary forests have the potential to become a model for sustainable management based on local wisdom. This research confirms that successful implementation of customary forest policies requires not only legal recognition but also consistent coordination and program sustainability on the ground.

DISCUSSION

Interviews revealed that despite the strong legal basis for customary forest recognition in Aceh, its implementation still faces serious obstacles. These obstacles include limited funding, weak coordination between institutions, and a lack of follow-up after customary forest certification. According to Edwards III, implementation failure often stems from weak communication and coordination between actors (Setiyadi, 2024). The Aceh case clearly demonstrates this situation, where planning exists but has not yet been prioritized in regional development.

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Thus, the gap between formal recognition and actual implementation remains a major issue. From a resource perspective, statements from the Aceh Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda) and the Aceh Environment and Forestry Agency (DLHK) confirm the lack of financial and institutional support for strengthening customary forests. Policy effectiveness, however, depends on the availability of adequate human resources, funding, and technical capacity (Manik, 2022). This lack of resource support has resulted in customary forests remaining at a symbolic level, lacking concrete operational programs. This reinforces the findings of Bahri, Kusmanto, and Broven (2021), who emphasized that weak bureaucratic capacity is a barrier to environmental policy. In other words, without adequate resource investment, customary forests have the potential to become merely administrative recognition.

Institutional factors are also a crucial factor influencing implementation. Interviews with the Aceh Environment and Forestry Agency (DLHK) and Forest Management Unit (FMU) 1 revealed that coordination with the proposing NGOs was poor from the outset. This resulted in the ineffective involvement of the technical institutions responsible for implementing the program. Suparto (2021) emphasized that local governments and technical units play a strategic role in accelerating the implementation of customary forests. The Aceh case demonstrates institutional fragmentation, where NGO initiatives are not fully aligned with regional bureaucratic structures. This fragmentation creates a gap between the customary forest recognition process and follow-up on the ground. On the other hand, interviews with KPH 2 in Bireuen revealed more positive dynamics due to the existence of local regulations in the form of Mukim Customary Forest Qanun No. 5 of 2017. This regulation provides a more operational legal basis for program implementation. However, new challenges have emerged in the form of illegal encroachment and land mafia practices that damage the ecosystem. This demonstrates that the existence of regulations alone is not enough; consistent monitoring and law enforcement mechanisms are needed. This phenomenon aligns with a study by Gusman and Raspati (2024), which warns that economic interests often undermine indigenous peoples' sovereignty over forests. Therefore, customary forest protection policies must be accompanied by strong monitoring instruments and legal sanctions.

From a sustainable development perspective, the implementation of customary forests is closely linked to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly goals 13 (climate action) and 15 (terrestrial ecosystems). Customary forests have the potential to maintain biodiversity, prevent deforestation, and support climate change mitigation (Siringoringo, 2022). However, interviews indicate that this strategic role has not been fully integrated into regional development agendas. When customary forests are not prioritized, their contribution to achieving the SDGs is also hampered. Therefore, strengthening customary forests can be an effective strategy to align local agendas with global development commitments. The discussion also highlighted the importance of indigenous community participation as key actors in forest management. According to Syahroni et al. (2024), mukim institutions possess local wisdom relevant to environmental conservation. However, interviews revealed that indigenous communities are often only involved in the initial stages of proposals, while follow-up is dominated by bureaucracy and NGOs. This creates an imbalance of roles that can potentially undermine the legitimacy of policies in the eyes of the community. Therefore, implementation strategies must restore the central role of indigenous communities in every stage of management. Authentic participation will strengthen both the effectiveness and sustainability of policies.

Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the implementation of Aceh's customary forests still faces four main challenges: suboptimal communication, limited resources, fragmented institutions, and weak legal oversight. However, opportunities are also evident, particularly in Bireuen, which has a strong local regulatory framework. Synthesizing interview findings with policy implementation theory suggests that improvements in these four aspects can enhance implementation effectiveness. By strengthening coordination, institutional capacity, community participation, and integration with the SDGs agenda, Aceh's customary forests can become a model for sustainable governance based on local wisdom. Therefore, this research is crucial for providing fair, effective, and sustainable policy recommendations for the future of customary forests.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that the recognition of customary forests in Aceh has a clear legal basis through Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012 and several local qanuns. However, this formal recognition has not been followed by optimal policy implementation. Interviews indicate that planning exists, but it has not yet been prioritized among regional development priorities. Minimal funding and the absence of a clear technical program demonstrate the government's weak commitment to implementation. Thus, a significant gap remains between regulations and the reality on the ground.

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From an institutional perspective, coordination between actors remains a major challenge. The Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda), the Environment and Forestry Agency (DLHK), the Forest Management Unit (FMU), and NGOs often operate in separate channels without a robust integration mechanism. This results in technical implementing units, such as FMU 1, not being involved from the outset, resulting in slow implementation. This institutional fragmentation aligns with previous studies that emphasized the crucial role of local governments in accelerating the recognition and implementation of customary forests (Suparto, 2021). Therefore, institutional coordination reform needs to be a priority on the implementation agenda. Resource factors also significantly influence policy effectiveness. Budget constraints, minimal technical support, and a shortage of experts hinder implementation as expected. This situation aligns with Edwards III's implementation theory, which places resources as a key component of policy success (Setiyadi, 2024). Without adequate resources, customary forest recognition has the potential to become merely an administrative formality. Therefore, investment in institutional capacity and long-term funding is essential.

Positive results have been seen in KPH 2 in Bireuen, which is supported by Mukim Customary Forest Qanun No. 5 of 2017. This regulation provides a foundation that enables technical programs to run more effectively than in other areas. However, new challenges have emerged in the form of illegal forest encroachment and land mafia practices. This phenomenon demonstrates that regulation alone is insufficient without consistent oversight and law enforcement. Therefore, strengthening legal aspects and oversight must go hand in hand with strengthening local regulations. From a sustainable development perspective, customary forests have a significant contribution to achieving the SDGs, particularly goals 13 (climate action) and 15 (terrestrial ecosystems). However, interviews revealed that this potential has not been fully integrated into regional development agendas. When customary forests are not prioritized, their contribution to climate change mitigation and ecosystem conservation is hampered. This highlights the need to synchronize local policies with national and global agendas. Thus, customary forests can be a strategic instrument in supporting Indonesia's commitment to sustainable development.

The participation of indigenous communities as key actors is also a critical success factor. Interviews indicate that the role of indigenous communities tends to decline after the ratification process, replaced by bureaucracy and NGOs. This is despite previous research highlighting the importance of local wisdom of the mukim community in maintaining forest sustainability (Syahroni et al., 2024). Therefore, participatory mechanisms are needed that place indigenous communities at the center of every stage of implementation. This will strengthen and sustain the policy's legitimacy. Overall, this study concludes that the implementation of customary forests in Aceh faces four main obstacles: poor communication, limited resources, institutional fragmentation, and weak legal oversight. However, opportunities also exist, particularly with supportive local regulations and persistent indigenous community initiatives. To improve these conditions, an integrative strategy is needed that combines legal, institutional, resource, and community participation aspects. In this way, Aceh's customary forests can develop as a model for sustainable management based on local wisdom that supports national and global agendas. This research provides an empirical and theoretical basis for formulating more equitable, effective, and sustainable policies.

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