

SOCIALIZATION OF PROBLEM-BASED RESEARCH STRATEGY FOR REGIONAL OFFICIALS: A CASE STUDY OF SIMALUNGUN REGENCY, NORTH SUMATRA

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji sosialisasi strategi Penelitian Berbasis Masalah (PBR) yang bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kapasitas aparatur daerah di Kabupaten Simalungun, Sumatera Utara, dalam memanfaatkan penelitian dalam mengatasi tantangan pembangunan daerah. Dilaksanakan pada tanggal 18 November 2024, di Hotel Agave, Kecamatan Panombeian Panei, sosialisasi ini melibatkan 35 orang perwakilan dari berbagai organisasi perangkat daerah (OPD). Program ini memperkenalkan prinsip dan aplikasi PBR melalui sesi interaktif, termasuk presentasi, diskusi, dan lokakarya kelompok yang difokuskan pada identifikasi dan perumusan pendekatan penelitian terhadap isu-isu daerah di dunia nyata. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dalam pemahaman peserta tentang konsep PBR dan pengakuan relevansi pendekatan tersebut dengan tata kelola daerah. Peserta terlibat aktif dalam mengidentifikasi masalah prioritas seperti kesenjangan pendidikan pedesaan, produktivitas pertanian, dan kesenjangan layanan kesehatan masyarakat. Lokakarya ini memfasilitasi dialog lintas sektoral, mendorong pemikiran kolaboratif, dan menyoroti sifat saling terkait dari tantangan pembangunan daerah. Meskipun hasilnya positif, beberapa kendala dicatat, termasuk keterampilan penelitian yang terbatas, kurangnya mekanisme formal untuk mengintegrasikan penelitian ke dalam kebijakan, dan resistensi birokrasi terhadap perubahan. Peserta menyatakan perlunya peningkatan kapasitas yang berkelanjutan, dukungan kelembagaan, dan hubungan yang lebih kuat dengan lembaga akademis untuk mempertahankan penerapan metode PBR. Studi kasus ini menyoroti potensi upaya sosialisasi yang terarah untuk menumbuhkan budaya pembuatan kebijakan berbasis bukti dalam konteks tata kelola yang terdesentralisasi. Studi kasus ini juga menggarisbawahi pentingnya melembagakan kapasitas penelitian dan menciptakan lingkungan yang mendukung penyelidikan berbasis masalah dalam pemerintahan daerah. Temuan ini memberikan wawasan praktis bagi para pembuat kebijakan dan

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praktisi pembangunan yang ingin mempromosikan tata kelola berbasis penelitian dalam pengaturan pemerintah daerah yang serupa.

Kata Kunci : Peningkatan kapasitas, Kebijakan berbasis bukti, Tata kelola daerah, Penelitian berbasis masalah, Pejabat daerah, Sosialisasi, Kabupaten Simalungun

ABSTRACT

This study examines the socialization of a Problem-Based Research (PBR) strategy aimed at enhancing the capacity of regional officials in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra, to utilize research in addressing local development challenges. Conducted on November 18, 2024, at the Agave Hotel in Panombeian Panei District, the socialization involved 35 representatives from various regional apparatus organizations (OPD). The program introduced the principles and applications of PBR through interactive sessions, including presentations, discussions, and group workshops focused on identifying and formulating research approaches to real-world regional issues. Results show a significant increase in participants' understanding of PBR concepts and recognition of the approach's relevance to local governance. Participants actively engaged in identifying priority problems such as rural education disparities, agricultural productivity, and public health service gaps. The workshop facilitated cross-sectoral dialogue, encouraging collaborative thinking and highlighting the interconnected nature of regional development challenges. Despite positive outcomes, several obstacles were noted, including limited research skills, lack of formal mechanisms for integrating research into policy, and bureaucratic resistance to change. Participants expressed the need for ongoing capacity-building, institutional support, and stronger linkages with academic institutions to sustain the adoption of PBR methods. This case study highlights the potential of targeted socialization efforts to foster a culture of evidence-based policymaking in decentralized governance contexts. It also underscores the importance of institutionalizing research capacity and creating enabling environments for problem-based inquiry within regional administrations. The findings provide practical insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to promote research-driven governance in similar local government settings.

Keywords: Capacity building, Evidence-based policy, Local governance, Problem-based research, Regional officials, Socialization, Simalungun Regency

INTRODUCTION

In an era where evidence-based policymaking is increasingly recognized as a foundation for effective governance, the role of research in informing regional development has become vital. Across the globe, governments are embracing strategies that integrate scientific inquiry into public administration to ensure that policy decisions are grounded in accurate, context-sensitive data (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). In Indonesia, decentralization has empowered local governments with more autonomy over development planning. However, this shift has not always been accompanied by sufficient capacity-building, especially in terms of utilizing research for problem-solving at the local level (Suwondo, 2019).

Problem-Based Research (PBR) is a promising approach that aligns research efforts with real-world issues faced by communities. It emphasizes identifying specific, localized problems and designing research to generate actionable solutions (Barrows, 1996). This approach is not only more responsive to immediate needs but also encourages collaboration between researchers and policy implementers. When applied at the regional level, PBR can bridge the longstanding gap between academic outputs and their practical application in policy, planning, and implementation (Chavarro, Tang, & Rafols, 2013).

Simalungun Regency in North Sumatra offers a compelling case for the application of this strategy. As a region with a diverse population and varying socio-economic challenges—ranging from underdeveloped infrastructure to disparities in public service delivery—Simalungun requires context-specific solutions (Herman et al., 2025). However, despite the abundance of problems ripe for investigation, there is minimal evidence of structured collaboration between researchers and regional officials in addressing these issues. This disconnect suggests a critical need for socializing the value and practice of problem-based research among government stakeholders.

The socialization of PBR strategies to regional officials can serve as a foundational step toward institutionalizing research culture in regional governance. This includes equipping officials with skills to identify researchable problems, engage with academic institutions, interpret research findings, and apply them in policymaking. However, several obstacles—such as low research literacy, limited access to data, and the absence of integrated research frameworks—continue to hinder these efforts (Purwanto & Sulistiyono, 2021). Without targeted interventions, these gaps may perpetuate a cycle of poorly informed planning and ineffective policy outcomes.

Existing literature has demonstrated the importance of aligning research with local development goals. For instance, studies by Maarif et al. (2015) and Simanjuntak et al. (2024) emphasize the role of capacity-building in enhancing public sector performance. Yet, most of these studies focus on the outcomes of research utilization rather than the processes through which research awareness and capacity are cultivated among regional officials. Particularly lacking are empirical studies that examine how problem-based research strategies can be introduced and sustained within local governments.

This study addresses that gap by exploring the process of socializing a problem-based research strategy to officials in Simalungun Regency. Through qualitative analysis and stakeholder engagement, the research seeks to understand not only the effectiveness of such socialization efforts but also the institutional and cultural factors that influence their success or failure. The goal is to identify best practices and challenges that may inform future capacity-building initiatives in other regions with similar governance and developmental contexts.

By focusing on the interface between research and policy at the local level, this study contributes to the broader discourse on evidence-based governance in Indonesia. It highlights the importance of embedding a research-oriented mindset in regional administration and aims to offer a practical model for enhancing public sector responsiveness through strategic research engagement. In doing so, it brings to light the critical but often overlooked preparatory work

necessary for integrating research into policy: the socialization and internalization of research strategies among frontline government actors.

While research has established the benefits of using data-driven approaches in public administration, few studies investigate how local governments—particularly in decentralized systems like Indonesia's—are introduced to and adopt problem-based research strategies. The literature tends to emphasize either high-level policy evaluation or the role of academics in shaping policy but offers limited insight into the practical socialization of research methods among local government officials. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the early-stage process of PBR socialization, particularly how it is received, understood, and implemented by public servants in Simalungun Regency

METHOD OF IMPLEMENTATION

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the process and impact of socializing a problem-based research (PBR) strategy to regional government officials in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra. The method focused on observing the implementation of the socialization activity, capturing participants' responses, and analyzing the effectiveness of the intervention in raising awareness and understanding of PBR among local government stakeholders.

The core activity was a structured socialization program conducted on November 18, 2024, at the Agave Hotel, located on Jl. Pematang Siantar-Saribudolok, Panombeian Panei District, Simalungun Regency. This event was selected as the central site for implementation due to its accessibility to local government offices and its suitability for hosting a focused, single-day capacity-building program.

The participants of the program consisted of regional apparatus representatives from various offices (Organisasi Perangkat Daerah or OPD) in Simalungun Regency. These participants were selected purposively to ensure diverse representation from strategic departments, such as planning, education, agriculture, health, and regional development. In total, 35 participants attended, including structural and functional officials responsible for development planning and policy implementation.

The socialization program was divided into three main segments:

1. Opening and orientation session, which introduced the purpose of the activity and provided an overview of the role of research in regional development.
2. Main session on Problem-Based Research, which included a presentation on the concept, benefits, methodology, and case examples of PBR relevant to the local context. Interactive discussions followed to allow participants to share regional issues and explore how PBR could address them.
3. Workshop and reflection session, where participants were guided through a group activity to identify a local policy issue and formulate a basic PBR framework that could be applied in their respective departments.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: (1) direct observation during the sessions to capture engagement and participation levels; (2) short pre- and post-activity questionnaires to assess participants' understanding of PBR concepts before and after the socialization; and (3) field notes and informal interviews with selected participants and facilitators to provide contextual insights into attitudes, challenges, and opportunities for adopting PBR in local governance.

The implementation method was designed to be participatory and reflective, emphasizing active involvement over passive instruction. This aligns with the underlying

philosophy of PBR itself, which values co-construction of knowledge and the integration of practical experiences in the research process. The event also served as a pilot to evaluate how regional officials respond to the introduction of research strategies and to identify areas that require further support or follow-up training. The outcomes of this method of implementation are used to analyze both the immediate impact of the socialization and the longer-term implications for embedding research practices in regional governance processes. The findings are expected to inform future capacity-building efforts and contribute to a model for institutionalizing evidence-based policymaking at the local level.



Figure 1. Presentation on the socialization by the keynote speaker, Prof. Dr. Herman, S.Pd., M.Pd. at the Agave Hotel, located on Jl. Pematang Siantar-Saribudolok, Panombeian Panei District, Simalungun Regency

RESULTS

1. Increased Awareness and Conceptual Understanding

Pre- and post-session questionnaires indicated a notable increase in participants' understanding of PBR principles. Prior to the activity, only 22% of participants reported being familiar with problem-based research as a distinct approach to regional policy formulation. After the session, 81% of respondents demonstrated a clear grasp of key PBR components, such as issue identification, research design aligned with local problems, and participatory methods. This result suggests that even a one-day intensive session can significantly improve foundational knowledge when properly structured.

2. Relevance to Local Issues

During the group discussion and workshop sessions, participants identified several pressing local problems suitable for PBR application, such as agricultural supply chain inefficiencies, education access in rural areas, and gaps in public health service delivery. These issues reflect the complex and contextual nature of development challenges in Simalungun Regency. Participants acknowledged that conventional top-down approaches have often failed to produce sustainable solutions, reinforcing the relevance of the PBR approach in their daily administrative roles.

3. Positive Engagement and Participation

Observation during the sessions revealed a high level of engagement. Most participants actively contributed to the discussions and expressed a desire to be more involved in research-oriented activities in the future. The collaborative nature of the workshop encouraged interdepartmental communication, with officials recognizing overlaps in their challenges and expressing interest in cross-sectoral problem-solving using research. The interactive method used in the socialization—especially the practical group exercises—was cited as one of the most impactful elements.

4. Challenges Identified

Despite the positive response, several barriers to implementation were identified during the informal interviews and reflection session:

- 1) Lack of institutional frameworks for integrating research into daily operations.
- 2) Limited human resource capacity, particularly in research design and data analysis.
- 3) Bureaucratic inertia, where existing workflows do not incentivize or accommodate evidence-based planning.
- 4) Weak partnerships between local government and research institutions.

These challenges mirror findings from previous studies (e.g., Purwanto & Sulistiyono, 2021; Suwondo, 2019), which have consistently highlighted structural and cultural gaps in local governance that hinder research integration.

5. Need for Ongoing Support

Participants emphasized the need for continued mentoring and capacity-building following the socialization session. Many requested follow-up technical training on research methods, data collection, and policy evaluation. There was also interest in the creation of a regional research coordination team or working group to facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration and linkages with academic institutions.

6. Institutional and Policy Implications

The results indicate that with the right facilitation and support, regional officials are both capable and willing to engage with research-based strategies. However, for PBR to take root as a sustainable practice, institutional support and policy alignment are crucial. This includes formalizing research responsibilities in regional development planning processes, providing incentives for research initiatives, and ensuring access to relevant data and resources.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the socialization of the Problem-Based Research (PBR) strategy for regional officials in Simalungun Regency highlight several critical themes regarding awareness, institutional readiness, and the future potential for integrating research into local governance. This discussion examines these themes in relation to broader literature on evidence-based policymaking and decentralized governance in Indonesia.

First, the significant improvement in participants' understanding of the PBR approach demonstrates that regional officials are not only open to research-based frameworks but also capable of grasping complex methodological concepts when presented in a relevant and practical manner. Prior to the session, most officials were unfamiliar with the formal concept of PBR, although they often engaged with local problems in their routine duties. This disconnect

illustrates a common challenge in local governance—where knowledge exists in practice, but lacks theoretical framing and institutional reinforcement. The socialization session helped bridge this gap by contextualizing research within the officials' day-to-day responsibilities.

The relevance of PBR to the regional issues identified during the session (e.g., infrastructure, education inequality, and service delivery gaps) aligns with findings from Chavarro, Tang, and Rafols (2013), who argue that research becomes more impactful when grounded in local, problem-specific contexts. This localization of research not only increases the likelihood of policy adoption but also fosters ownership and accountability among implementers. In the case of Simalungun, the workshop allowed participants to realize that many of their challenges could benefit from systematic inquiry and collaborative problem-solving, rather than isolated administrative interventions.

However, enthusiasm alone does not guarantee long-term implementation. The socialization session revealed structural and cultural barriers that could hinder the adoption of PBR at the institutional level. Chief among these are limited human resource capacity in research methodologies, the absence of formal mechanisms linking OPDs with academic institutions, and bureaucratic inertia that discourages innovation. These challenges echo broader critiques of Indonesia's decentralization process, which has granted autonomy to local governments without ensuring that they have the tools and support systems necessary to manage that autonomy effectively.

The importance of ongoing support and institutionalization was also emphasized by participants, who recognized that a single training or socialization session is insufficient. For PBR to become embedded in regional governance, it must be supported by policies that incentivize research, budget allocations for knowledge initiatives, and formal partnerships with universities or research institutions. Similar recommendations have been made in studies on capacity-building in Indonesia, particularly concerning the integration of research into medium-term development planning.

Moreover, the participatory and cross-sectoral format of the session proved to be particularly effective. It allowed officials from different OPDs to realize the interconnectedness of their work and the value of collaborative problem-solving. This aligns with the principles of PBR, which encourage interdisciplinary approaches and shared ownership of both problems and solutions (Barrows, 1996). Strengthening this cross-sectoral collaboration could be key to operationalizing research in a fragmented administrative environment like that of Simalungun Regency.

Finally, the session highlighted the potential for Simalungun to become a model for other regencies seeking to adopt evidence-based strategies. While challenges remain, the initial enthusiasm and active participation of officials suggest fertile ground for further development. Scaling up such initiatives, supported by provincial or national-level policy frameworks, could help build a broader culture of research-driven governance across Indonesia's decentralized regions. In conclusion, the socialization of the PBR strategy in Simalungun shows promise as an entry point for institutionalizing research in regional development planning. However, its success depends on sustained support, capacity-building, and institutional commitment. The case demonstrates both the feasibility and challenges of introducing research frameworks to local government and offers lessons that are relevant beyond Simalungun.

CONCLUSION

The socialization of the Problem-Based Research (PBR) strategy to regional officials in Simalungun Regency represents an important first step in bridging the gap between academic research and practical policymaking at the local level. This case study demonstrated that

regional apparatus—when given the appropriate platform, guidance, and contextual relevance—are both willing and able to engage with research-based approaches to address complex development challenges. Key outcomes from the socialization activity held on November 18, 2024, at the Agave Hotel, Simalungun Regency, include a measurable increase in participants' understanding of the principles and benefits of PBR, a strong alignment between the identified local issues and PBR methodology, and a high level of engagement and interdepartmental collaboration during the workshop sessions. These results suggest that even brief, well-structured interventions can stimulate critical thinking and introduce new planning paradigms to regional officials.

However, the session also highlighted persistent institutional challenges. These include limited technical research skills, weak connections between government and academia, and a lack of formal mechanisms to integrate research into policy planning processes. Addressing these barriers requires sustained follow-up support, capacity-building programs, and policy reforms at both the local and provincial levels. The findings of this study reinforce the argument that local governments in decentralized contexts like Indonesia need more than just autonomy—they require the tools, knowledge systems, and institutional culture to make evidence-based decisions. Problem-Based Research offers a relevant and adaptable model for addressing these needs, particularly when supported by inclusive and participatory methods of engagement.

In conclusion, the Simalungun case illustrates both the opportunities and the necessary conditions for embedding a culture of research in regional governance. Future efforts should build on this foundation by developing structured capacity-building programs, formalizing research collaboration networks, and aligning development planning frameworks with problem-based inquiry. Such steps will be essential to transforming short-term awareness into long-term institutional change—thereby enabling more responsive, data-informed, and effective regional policymaking.

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