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The Role of Political and Administrative Areas in Urban–Rural Inequality in Indonesia: A Literature Review from the Perspectives of Human Development, Public Services, and the Economy

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Abstract

The development gap between urban and rural areas in Indonesia remains a structural problem despite the implementation of decentralization policies for more than two decades. This disparity is influenced not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by differences in political, fiscal, and administrative capacity between regions. This study aims to examine the role of political and administrative areas in urban-rural inequality through a literature review focusing on human development, public services, and the economy. The method used is a descriptive literature review, which involves analysis of national scientific publications, government agency reports, and other official data sources. The results of the study show that regional administrative capacity has a significant influence on human development achievements, especially in terms of access to education and health in rural areas. In addition, the implementation of regional autonomy and fiscal policies, including the management of transfer funds, has not been fully able to reduce the gap in public services between regions. From an economic perspective, the political structure and uneven distribution of development contribute to high poverty rates and income disparities in rural areas. This study emphasizes the need to strengthen institutions, refine needs-based fiscal policies, and increase the capacity of local governments to achieve more inclusive and equitable development.

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Introduction

Basically, development inequality is caused by differences in the availability of natural resources and geographical characteristics between regions. These differences mean that each region has a different capacity to drive the development process, resulting in varying levels of progress (Suroso, 2023)^[1]. Development inequality between urban and rural areas in Indonesia remains a major challenge and shows that inequality is still a persistent structural issue (Saraswati *et al.*, 2025)^[2]. Although decentralization policies have been implemented since 1999 and have been in place for more than two decades, disparities between regions are still clearly visible (Suriadi, Magriasti & Frinaldi, 2023)^[3]. This inequality can also have further impacts, one of which is an increase in urbanization, as rural residents move to cities in search of better jobs and income (Hadijah & Sadili, 2020)^[4]. However, poorly managed urbanization can create new pressures on urban areas, such as increased traffic congestion, limited housing availability, and an increase in the number of workers who are not optimally absorbed in the informal sector (Gafur, Rahmi, & Ahmadi, 2025)^[5].

The phenomenon of development inequality is not only a problem in Indonesia, but also an issue faced by many countries around the world. In Brazil, for example, development inequality between states is very prominent due to the structure of federalism and the uneven distribution of infrastructure (Marques, 2024)^[6]. In the United States, the gap between urban and rural areas remains an important issue, where differences in access to public services and economic opportunities result in real inequalities in the welfare and quality of life of the community (Arafat *et al.*, 2025)^[7]. In general, urban areas tend to experience accelerated economic growth and improved infrastructure quality, while rural areas still face limitations in access to basic services, such as education, health, and employment. These disparities not only have an impact on the economic context, but also affect the quality of human development and social mobility of communities between regions (Sinaga, 2025)^[8].

Development inequality is not only influenced by differences in geographical and socio-economic conditions, but also by differences in political, fiscal, and institutional capacity between regions (Efendi, 2025)^[9]. Each local government has a different level of ability to design policies, manage resources, and provide public services effectively (Ulfa & Frinaldi, 2025)^[10]. Regions with better political capacity, strong budgetary support, and effectively functioning institutions are generally able to accelerate development and create a more equitable distribution of development outcomes (Sayoga & Kharisma, 2024)^[11]. Conversely, regions with limitations in these aspects often face obstacles in providing basic services, developing the local economy, and reducing rural underdevelopment. These differences in capacity then contribute to a widening or narrowing of the development gap between urban and rural areas (Pomeo & Winarti, 2024)^[12]. In this context, a literature review is important to examine previous studies and understand the role of regional political and administrative factors in reducing urban-rural inequality. Through a literature review, patterns, consistent findings, and research gaps that still require attention can be identified. In addition, this study opens up space to understand the dynamics of human development, public services, and economic aspects more comprehensively, so that the contribution of political and administrative factors to inequality can be mapped more clearly. Thus, this study aims to analyze relevant literature to provide comprehensive insights into how political and administrative areas can be optimized to achieve equitable development in Indonesia.

Based on the above background, the following questions arise:

1. How do regional policies and administrative capacities influence differences in welfare and human development between urban and rural areas in Indonesia?
2. How do regional autonomy and fiscal policies affect the inequality of public services (education, health, and infrastructure) between urban and rural areas in Indonesia?
3. How are economic disparities and poverty between urban and rural areas in Indonesia influenced by political structures and the distribution of development between administrative regions?

Method

This study uses a literature review method with a descriptive approach. The data used is sourced from previous studies that

have been published in national and international journals, as well as several official sources from government agencies. Through this approach, the study seeks to examine patterns, trends, and theoretical understandings that have developed regarding the role of political, fiscal, and institutional factors in influencing inequality. The descriptive approach was used to compile a comprehensive overview of various literature so as to provide a systematic, structured, and relevant explanation of the research focus.

The type of data used was secondary data obtained from various sources and official documents. This data includes previous research results, scientific articles, and reports published by government agencies such as the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the Ministry of Finance, and Bappenas. In addition, publications from national institutions discussing urban-rural issues, fiscal decentralization, and development inequality are used as references to strengthen the research analysis.

Data collection was conducted by searching various literature through national and international journal portals, including SINTA, GARUDA, Google Scholar, and university repositories. Literature selection was carried out to ensure relevance to the focus of the study.

Data analysis in this study was conducted descriptively by first grouping various findings from previous studies into several aspects relevant to the research questions. These aspects included human development and administrative capacity, public services and fiscal policy, and the economy and distribution of development between regions.

Each group of literature was then examined to identify patterns of similarity, difference, and trends that emerged from various studies. In addition, the analysis was also directed at understanding the policy recommendations proposed by previous studies, so that the results could provide a comprehensive picture of the factors that influence urban-rural inequality and how political and administrative interventions can play a role in reducing these disparities.

Literature Review

1. Urban and Rural Concepts

Based on the United Nations (UN) Concept of Urban and Rural Areas, UN-Habitat (2019)^[13] explains that Urban–Rural Linkages is a concept that describes the interdependent relationship between urban (city) and rural (village) areas. This interdependence is characterized by the continuous flow of goods, services, people, capital, information, and energy that connect cities and villages within a functional and sustainable territory. In this concept, cities and villages are not separate entities, but parts of a single system that are interrelated in social, economic, and environmental development. Several important aspects emphasized by UN-Habitat that strengthen urban-rural relationships are integrated planning and spatial planning between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas; strengthening the connectivity of the flow of people, goods, services, capital, and information; increasing local capacity through collaboration between communities, the private sector, and the government; developing policies that are responsive to urban and rural dynamics; and inclusive investment to strengthen cross-regional development.

Then, based on the Concept of Urban and Rural Areas according to BPS (Central Statistics Agency), BPS (2010)^[14] defines urban as the status of an administrative area at the village/sub-district level that meets the criteria for

classification as an urban area. Meanwhile, rural is the status of an administrative area at the village/sub-district level that does not meet these criteria. These criteria include certain demographic and socio-economic measures set by BPS. An administrative area is declared an urban area if it meets a number of requirements based on three main dimensions. These dimensions include population density, the percentage of households that do not depend on agriculture, which indicates non-agricultural economic activity, and the existence of/access to urban facilities such as schools, markets, health facilities, electricity, and others.

2. Theories of Development Inequality and Regional Disparities

Peripheral and border areas tend to experience slower growth than urban areas, indicating uneven regional development. This is due to differences in access to social services and economic activities, which are more concentrated in cities. Disparity is a phenomenon where development achievements in one region are higher than in another. These achievements can be measured using indicators such as the Village Development Index (IDM), which shows the extent to which infrastructure, services, and economic activities have been realized (Suroso, 2023)^[1]. In the case of Pati Regency, Suroso. (2023)^[1] shows that although the development value in suburban areas is relatively lower than in urban areas, the difference in achievements between these areas is statistically insignificant.

Regional inequality occurs due to differences in basic regional characteristics such as access to natural resources, geographical conditions, economic activity levels, and social and economic service capabilities. In a previous study, Wahyuntari & Pujiati (2023)^[15] emphasized that peripheral areas usually have lower development achievements compared to urban areas. This is due to limited access to facilities, economic networks, and relatively weak social capital. In addition, the mobility of goods and services is also less fluid.

3. The Theory of Regional Autonomy and Fiscal Decentralization

Farida, Suman & Sakti (2021)^[16] define fiscal decentralization as the transfer of authority in the management of government revenue and expenditure to local governments, giving regions the space to make fiscal decisions in accordance with local priorities. In the theory of regional autonomy and fiscal decentralization, fiscal decentralization is expected to strengthen the role of the local economy. This is because local governments that are closer to the needs of the community can make budget allocations more efficient and responsive. Decentralization can widen fiscal disparities between regions if the regions are not sufficiently prepared.

Fiscal decentralization is a form of regional autonomy that gives local governments the power to manage revenue and expenditure more independently, so that public services can be tailored to local needs. Local governments are expected to be more efficient in providing public goods/services when the central government decentralizes fiscal functions. This is because local governments are considered to have a better understanding of the needs and preferences of local communities (Ginting, 2024)^[17].

4. Empirical Study of Urban-Rural Disparities in Indonesia

Research by Wulandari & Laksono (2019)^[18] focused on urban-rural disparity in the use of primary health care centers (Puskesmas) by the elderly in East Java. In this study, Riskesdas 2013 data and multinomial logistic regression techniques were used to analyze differences in health service utilization according to place of residence. The results show that elderly people in urban areas tend to have a higher chance of using outpatient services at Puskesmas compared to those in rural areas, while disparities in inpatient services are significant. The use of these health services is influenced by important determinants, such as education, socioeconomic status, distance, and transportation costs.

A study conducted by Wulandari & Laksono (2019)^[18] used data from the Basic Health Research (Riskesdas), a large-scale national health survey in Indonesia, to show that there are significant differences in the use of hospital services between urban and rural populations. The results show that adults in urban areas are more likely to use outpatient services or a combination of outpatient and inpatient services than those in rural areas. The strong determinants of this disparity are educational factors, socioeconomic status, type of insurance, distance, and transportation costs.

Research by Putirama (2021)^[19] shows that disparities in access to basic services, particularly safe drinking water and sanitation, remain significant between regions in Indonesia. The pattern of inequality is clearly evident between urban and rural areas as well as between regions. This study found that access to basic services is better and more equitable in urban areas and districts/cities that have not undergone expansion. Meanwhile, rural areas, areas that have undergone expansion, and eastern Indonesia are lagging behind. The findings of hotspots in Java, Kalimantan, and parts of Sumatra, as well as coldspots in Papua and Maluku, confirm the strong pattern of geographical disparities. This reinforces the evidence that disparities in public services, basic infrastructure, and institutional capacity remain structural issues closely related to urban-rural development gaps in Indonesia.

5. Dynamics of Fiscal and Institutional Capacity in Development Equity

Research by Farida, Suman, and Sakti (2021)^[16] analyzes the relationship between fiscal decentralization, economic growth, and regional development inequality in eastern Indonesia. This study uses panel data on provinces from 2016 to 2019 and a Three-Stage Least Square model. It finds that fiscal decentralization policies have not fully supported local economic growth or reduced development inequality. This is because regional budget allocations are not productive and the quality of human resources in budget planning and management is low, so that regional fiscal capacity is not effective in accelerating equitable development.

Research by Widiani & Erawati (2016)^[20] investigated the influence of regional fiscal capacity and economic growth on the HDI in eight districts and one city in Bali Province (2008-2013). The results show that regional fiscal parameters such as PAD and DAU do not have a significant effect on HDI, while regional economic growth has a significant positive effect on HDI. These findings illustrate that fiscal capacity does not directly result in equitable human development, but that the effectiveness of spending and economic growth play an important role.

Results and Discussion

1. The Relationship between Regional Administrative Capacity and Human Development in Urban and Rural Areas

The relationship between regional administrative capacity and human development in urban and rural areas has been extensively studied in previous research. Hartono & Putra (2025) [21] found that the implementation of regional autonomy had a positive impact on community welfare, but that this impact was not evenly distributed across regions. It was explained that regions with high administrative capacity, such as the ability to plan budgets and good governance, showed a significant increase in welfare, while regions with weak governance still lagged behind. Thus, regional autonomy contributes to increased variation in human development outcomes between administrative regions. Research by Saprianto *et al.* (2023) [22] also shows that regional autonomy allows regions to independently regulate education and health policies, but differences in the quality of human resources and fiscal capacity cause disparities in the quality of public services. Urban areas generally have more resources and facilities, resulting in a higher Human Development Index (HDI) than rural areas.

These findings are in line with international studies. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published its annual Human Development Report 2019, which contains data and analysis on human development achievements around the world, including disparities in indicators such as access to education, health, and living standards. In a global context, HDI data shows variations in development between countries and regions, where countries with stronger governance capacities tend to have higher HDI values than countries with weak administrative capacities, reflecting the importance of institutional capacity in improving people's welfare (United Nations Development Programme, 2019) [23]. In addition, the Human Development Report 2020 contains updates to the methodology and human development indicators that take into account dimensions such as inequality and multidimensional poverty, which show that human development indicators are influenced not only by income, but also by access to basic services and opportunities that are evenly distributed across all regions (Conceição & United Nations Development Programme, 2020) [24].

In general, the difference in HDI between urban and rural areas, both in Indonesia and in other countries, is not solely due to geographical factors, but rather to differences in local government capacity. Regional autonomy provides fiscal flexibility and policy authority, but without strengthening administrative capacity, the quality of the civil service, and good fiscal governance, decentralization policies have the potential to widen human development disparities between administrative regions.

2. The Effectiveness of Fiscal Policy and Regional Autonomy on Public Services

Based on research conducted by Sari (2025) [25], it was found that national fiscal allocations (General Allocation Funds, Special Allocation Funds, Revenue Sharing Funds) did increase regional financial capacity, but were not yet effective in reducing income and public service disparities between regions. The study also explains that inequality remains high because the fund distribution mechanism is still based on a macro formula, rather than on the actual needs of each region (especially remote rural areas). In addition,

research conducted by Runiasih & Ahmad (2025) [26] confirms that fiscal decentralization policies in the education sector have expanded access to financing, but regions with high fiscal capacity continue to dominate in terms of educational quality. It is also explained that urban areas are better able to utilize BOS/DAK funds for facility improvements, while rural areas are often constrained by planning and limitations in teaching staff.

These findings are in line with an international study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on fiscal decentralization and equitable public services. In the 2019 Human Development Report, UNDP emphasizes that fiscal transfers from the central government to the regions can indeed increase the financial capacity of local governments, but do not automatically reduce public service inequality if the fund allocation mechanism is still based on a macro formula and does not consider the specific needs of the region, especially rural and remote areas (United Nations Development Programme, 2019) [23]. The study also shows that in various developing countries such as India, the Philippines, and Brazil, fiscal transfer systems tend to benefit urban areas that have stronger administrative and fiscal capacities, while rural areas continue to lag behind in the provision of education, health, and basic infrastructure services.

In addition, the 2020 Human Development Report published by UNDP emphasizes that the effectiveness of public spending is greatly influenced by the planning and governance capacity of local governments, not solely by the amount of funds allocated. Regions with good administrative capacity are able to convert public budgets into improvements in the quality of education and health services, while regions with low institutional capacity face obstacles in budget planning, fiscal management, and human resource availability, resulting in human development outcomes that lag behind despite receiving fiscal transfers (Conceição & United Nations Development Programme, 2020) [24].

Thus, both in Indonesia and in other countries, decentralized fiscal policies do not fully guarantee the equitable distribution of public services between urban and rural areas. National fiscal transfers without strengthening regional administrative capacity and fiscal planning have the potential to produce uneven impacts, even widening the human development gap between regions. This confirms that differences in local government administrative capacity are a key factor in determining the effectiveness of central government funds in reducing public service inequality.

3. Study on the Influence of Political Structure and Development Distribution Patterns on Economic Inequality between Administrative Regions

The development gap between urban and rural areas in Indonesia remains high despite more than two decades of decentralization policies, as evidenced by significant differences in access to infrastructure, basic services, and human development achievements between districts/cities. In many provinces, urban centers enjoy much better-quality roads, electricity, education, and health care than rural areas in the hinterland, thereby encouraging the concentration of economic activity and widening economic disparities between administrative regions (Santi & Iskandar, 2021) [7]. A number of studies emphasize that this inequality is not only triggered by purely economic factors, but also by differences in political, fiscal, and institutional capacity at the regional

level that affect how development resources are allocated. A study on fiscal decentralization in 33 provinces in Indonesia found that Local Own-Source Revenue and General Allocation Funds have a negative and significant effect on development inequality between regions, meaning that regions with greater fiscal capacity are relatively able to reduce inequality, but the effect is uneven due to differences in governance capabilities and local political priorities.

Politically, local power structures, including elite configurations, party coalitions, and levels of community participation, have a direct influence on the direction of public spending allocation, thereby determining the extent to which development is focused on urban centers or expanded to reach disadvantaged villages. In a context of weak public participation and dominant patronage practices, budgets tend to be concentrated on projects that benefit certain groups in the city center, resulting in an urban bias in the distribution of development and indirectly perpetuating economic disparities between administrative regions (Fadlurrohman, 2016)^[28].

From an institutional perspective, a study on regional inequality in North Sumatra shows that regional economic growth can actually increase inequality when institutional capacity and regional planning are inadequate, because new economic activities are concentrated in urban centers. This finding is in line with literature that highlights that decentralization without strengthening bureaucratic capacity and regional accountability mechanisms has the potential to result in "decentralization of inequality," namely autonomy that strengthens strong regions and leaves weak regions, including remote rural areas, behind.

Centralized political structures and uneven patterns of development often exacerbate economic disparities between administrative regions, as seen in the case of Brazil, where federalism has caused a gap between developed southern regions such as São Paulo and underdeveloped northern regions such as Amazonas due to unequal infrastructure investment, and in the United States, where there is a disparity between economic centers such as New York and California, which are prioritized, and Appalachia and the Rust Belt, which are neglected due to local political lobbying. The UN study in the Human Development Report also highlights similar phenomena in Asian and Latin American countries, where authoritarian or semi-federal political structures hinder the redistribution of resources, resulting in a Gini index between regions of 0.4-0.6, and recommends fiscal decentralization for equity (Arafat *et al.*, 2025)^[7].

In the context of human development and public services, studies at the district/city level show that deficits in basic infrastructure, distribution of teachers and health workers, and access to social services are much worse in rural areas than in urban areas, and this condition is closely related to the weak capacity of local government and the limited political representation of rural groups in the planning process. This indicates that political structures and development distribution patterns not only affect economic indicators (such as per capita GRDP), but also reinforce multidimensional inequalities in education, health, and access to public services between urban and rural areas (Yumna & Suryahadi, 2015)^[29].

4. Discussion comparing national literature findings with international findings related to the phenomenon of urban–rural inequality

The literature describes that urban-rural inequality in Indonesia is mainly related to disparities in infrastructure, public services, and regional fiscal capacity, with fiscal decentralization positioned as the main instrument to reduce these gaps. However, various studies also show that without governance reform and the strengthening of local institutions, decentralization has not been able to eliminate the pattern of development concentration in urban areas and has caused persistent disparities between districts/cities (Santi & Iskandar, 2021)^[27].

A study by Steyermark (2022)^[30] on urban-rural inequality emphasizes that the differences between urban and rural areas are not only economic in nature but also reflect political cleavages influenced by agrarian history, party systems, and the design of democratic institutions. Global studies show that in many countries, urban and rural areas have different political preferences and policy needs, so that the allocation of public resources often follows the configuration of political support and power relations between urban and rural groups.

From a development policy perspective, international studies have found that countries that have successfully reduced urban-rural disparities generally combine needs-based fiscal transfers, performance-based public service incentive schemes, and policies that promote rural-urban connectivity and more balanced market interactions. This approach differs from practices in many developing countries, including Indonesia, which still grapple with transfer formulas that do not sharply target the needs of disadvantaged regions and have not fully linked the amount of transfers to improvements in human development indicators and public services.

Sjaf *et al.* (2025)^[31] also highlight the importance of strengthening political and administrative capacity in rural areas to be able to extract benefits from decentralization, for example through increased citizen participation, local accountability, and technocratic support for development planning. When compared with national findings, it is evident that Indonesia's challenge lies not only in the amount of resources, but also in institutional design that ensures that political and administrative structures in the regions are truly capable of directing development towards reducing urban-rural disparities, rather than simply replicating existing urban biases.

Conclusion

This literature review shows that the development gap between urban and rural areas in Indonesia is a multidimensional issue influenced not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by the political, fiscal, and institutional capacity of local governments. First, differences in the quality of administrative capacity have been shown to contribute significantly to disparities in human development. Urban areas, which generally have more competent officials and stronger fiscal management, are able to utilize regional autonomy more effectively to improve the quality of education, health, and infrastructure services. Conversely, many rural areas lag behind due to limited bureaucratic

capacity and low technical readiness in planning and managing development programs.

Second, although fiscal decentralization is designed to strengthen the role of regions through instruments such as DAU, DAK, and DBH, its effectiveness in reducing interregional inequality remains limited. Imbalances in fiscal and institutional capacity mean that regions with weak economic bases or remote geographical locations are unable to make optimal use of fiscal transfers. This results in public services—particularly education, health, and basic infrastructure—remaining better in urban areas than in rural areas, thus perpetuating disparities in public services.

Third, local political structures and development distribution patterns also reinforce economic disparities between administrative regions. Development policies are often biased towards urban areas, especially when budget decisions are influenced by the interests of local political elites and weak public accountability mechanisms. This condition accelerates the concentration of economic activity in urban areas and slows economic growth in rural areas. In addition, weak local institutions cause economic growth to actually increase inequality because the benefits of development are mostly absorbed by urban centers.

The results of the literature review show that the success of reducing urban-rural inequality is highly dependent on strong institutional design, needs-based fiscal management, and increased regional administrative capacity. Thus, efforts to achieve equitable development in Indonesia require not only increased fiscal allocation, but also institutional reforms that ensure that every region, both urban and rural has adequate capacity to plan, implement, and evaluate development effectively. This study emphasizes the need for integration between fiscal policy, governance, and development planning that is responsive to local characteristics in order to achieve sustainable reduction of interregional inequality.

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