



Strengthening Village Governance through Relational Capacity Building: Evidence from Sub-District Leadership in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The effectiveness of village governance in Indonesia depends heavily on the capacity of the sub-district head to coach and supervise village heads, yet limited human resources, weak institutional reform, and inadequate facilities frequently constrain this coaching function. This study aimed to describe and analyze the capacity building undertaken by the Camat of Kerinci Kanan Sub-District, Siak Regency, in coaching village heads, and to identify the inhibiting factors of that process.

Methodology: A descriptive qualitative case-study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation involving seven purposively selected informants, and were analyzed using the interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, guided by Grindle's capacity-building framework comprising human resource development, organizational strengthening, and institutional reform.

Results: The findings show that coaching was implemented mainly through technical guidance, direct instruction, and periodic meetings at the sub-district office; organizational strengthening was reflected in the provision of written and oral directives; and institutional reform was manifested through field supervision and direct interaction between sub-district and village apparatus. However, capacity building was constrained by the low quality of village human resources, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, and a less conducive regulatory environment.

Conclusions: Capacity building is not a process that starts from zero but builds upon existing potential through continuous collaboration between sub-district and village apparatus; strengthening human resources and facilities is recommended to optimize the coaching function.

Keywords:

capacity building; coaching; sub-district head; village governance; qualitative research.

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INTRODUCTION

Decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia place the village as the front-line government unit in direct contact with the community, making village government performance an important indicator of the success of overall governance (Antlöv et al., 2016; Fadilah & Wijayanto, 2025; Winata, 2018). Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages grants broad authority to the village head to manage government affairs, development, and community empowerment, yet this broad authority is not always balanced with adequate human resource capacity among village officials (Djafri et al., 2022; Mulyani & Hayati, 2023). In this context, the sub-district head (camat) as the leader of the sub-district holds a strategic role in conducting coaching and supervision of village governance as mandated by Government Regulation Number 17 of 2018 concerning Sub-districts.

Studies on local government capacity building have been extensively conducted in international literature. Triana (2013) demonstrates that institutional capacity strengthening in local governments in Indonesia is still hampered by regulatory overlap and unclear technical standards between central and local governments. A study by Afandi et al. (2023) on collaborative governance in handling stunting at the local level emphasizes that policy success largely depends on institutional capacity and coordination among actors at the lowest level of government. Meanwhile, Martinez et al. (2025), in the context of local governance in Europe, found that effective capacity building requires a participatory approach tailored to the specific context of each region, a finding relevant despite differences in sectors and geographical locations. At the village level, previous research also highlights that limited apparatus capacity, budget, and infrastructure are major obstacles to village apparatus capacity building in Indonesia (Antlöv et al., 2016; Asropi et al., 2025).

Although there are numerous studies on local government capacity building, research specifically highlighting the role of the sub-district head as a coach for village heads at the sub-district level, using the three-dimensional framework (Asropi et al., 2025; Grindle, 1997)—human resource development, organizational strengthening, and institutional reform—remains limited, particularly in the context of newly established sub-districts like Kerinci Kanan, Siak Regency. Initial observations at the research

site indicate that the coaching conducted by the sub-district head is still primarily administrative and written, and is not consistently accompanied by direct technical guidance, leading to errors by some village heads in preparing village regulations and village government administration. This gap between the coaching authority held by the sub-district head and the actual capacity in its implementation is the rationale for this research (Ash-shidiqqi & Wibisono, 2018; Monalisa & Isril, 2015)

Based on the description above, this study aims to: describe and analyze the capacity building of the sub-district head in coaching village heads in Kerinci Kanan Sub-District, Siak Regency, reviewed from the dimensions of human resources, organization, and institutional reform; and to identify the factors hindering the implementation of such capacity building. The results of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of local governance literature and practically to the formulation of policies for coaching village heads by sub-district governments.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a descriptive research design with a qualitative case study approach. The descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because it aims to systematically and factually describe the conditions, characteristics, and phenomena of the sub-district head's capacity building as they occur in the field (Bungin, 2007; Moleong, 2004), without manipulating research variables.

Research Location and Time

The research was conducted at the Kerinci Kanan Sub-District Office, Siak Regency, Riau Province, Indonesia, as well as in three villages within the sub-district's working area, namely Kerinci Kanan Village, Kerinci Kiri Village, and Bukit Agung Village. Field data collection was carried out in July 2020.

Research Informants

Research informants were determined using purposive sampling with a key person approach, following Spradley's criteria in (Moleong, 2004), namely individuals who are fully and intensively involved in the activities that are the focus of the research. There were seven informants in total, consisting of four formal informants and three informal informants, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. List of Research Informants and Key Informants

No.	Informant	Position/Status	Category
1	M. Hassanal Lutfi, S.STP	Head of Kerinci Kanan Sub-District	Formal informant
2	Yusrihanis	Head of Kerinci Kanan Village	Formal informant
3	Rusli	Head of Kerinci Kiri Village	Formal informant
4	Parlaungan Panjaitan	Head of Bukit Agung Village	Formal informant
5	Agus	Community Representative of Kerinci Kanan Village	Informal informant
6	Sutar	Community Representative of Kerinci Kiri Village	Informal informant
7	Rahmad	Community Representative of Bukit Agung Village	Informal informant

Note: Primary data sources were obtained from the sub-district head and village heads in the form of information regarding the form of coaching; secondary data included regional geographical conditions, sub-district organizational structure, legislation, and technical and implementation guidelines.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three complementary techniques to increase data credibility: direct observation of coaching activities at the sub-district office and in the villages; semi-structured in-depth interviews with all informants using interview guidelines prepared based on the research variable operational indicators; and documentation in the form of archives, reports, and relevant sub-district and village administrative documents.

Operational Definitions and Instruments

The sub-district head's capacity building variable was measured using the conceptual framework (Grindle, 1997) adapted into three operational indicators and their sub-indicators, as presented in Table 2. These three indicators were used as guidelines for compiling interview instruments so that the data obtained were reproducible and could be cross-verified among informants.

Table 2. Operationalization of Sub-District Head's Capacity Building Variable

Indicator	Sub-indicator
Human Resources	Making guidance programs for village heads; providing detailed task instructions; discussion in case of doubt in task execution
Organization	Giving oral, written, and practical instructions to village heads; giving orders to village heads
Institutional Reform	Ability to interact with village heads and the community; ability to work with village government units

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, which is the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying interview and observation results according to research indicators; data presentation in the form of descriptive narratives and tables; and conclusion drawing and verification, which is carried out repeatedly by re-matching findings from the three data sources as a form of source triangulation to ensure data validity.

Ethical Considerations

All informants participated voluntarily after receiving an explanation regarding the research objectives, and oral consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Informant identities are listed according to their official positions because their capacity as public officials is relevant to the context of government governance research, while the confidentiality of personal responses is maintained according to social research ethical standards.

RESULTS

The research results are presented based on three capacity building indicators, namely human resources, organization, and institutional reform, which are then followed by the identification of driving and inhibiting factors.

Characteristics of Informants

Based on the observation results, the seven research informants were dominated by the productive age group with education levels ranging from high school to bachelor's degree, which reflects the diversity of perspectives between government officials and service-receiving community members.

Human Resources

Regarding the human resources indicator, interview results indicate that the sub-district head routinely conducts guidance activities for village heads and village officials concerning village administration. The sub-district head stated that this guidance is intended to assist and provide direct instructions to village officials in carrying out administrative tasks. The three interviewed village heads confirmed that they had received technical guidance and directions on drafting village regulations and village head regulations, although the frequency was considered uneven and most were delivered in writing at forums attended by all village heads, rather than individually. Community informants stated that they require direct interaction and care from sub-district leadership to objectively assess the quality of leadership, and they assessed that the intensity of interaction between sub-district officials, village officials, and the community is directly proportional to the improvement in the quality of human resources at the village level.

Organization

On the organization indicator, strengthening is carried out through providing oral, written, and direct practical instructions to village heads regarding the implementation of village government administrative tasks. The Head of Bukit Agung Village reported that staff at the village office sufficiently understand service procedures and are able to provide directions to the community politely in the event of service obstacles. Nevertheless, community informants emphasized the need for simplification of procedures, clarity of work units, transparency of service costs, and timeliness of service completion as organizational aspects that still need improvement.

Institutional Reform

Regarding the institutional reform indicator, the sub-district head explained that in addition to providing guidance, he periodically goes directly to the villages to supervise the work of village heads and village officials, including checking the completeness of village administration. This supervision activity also serves as a means of direct interaction between the sub-district head, village heads, and the community, so that constraints in the field can be immediately identified and followed up on. The sub-district head emphasized that honest acknowledgement of the weaknesses and strengths of existing capacity is an important prerequisite for the success of the capacity development program.

Driving and Inhibiting Factors

Based on the triangulation of interview and observation results on the three indicators above, three main factors were identified that inhibit the sub-district head's capacity building in guiding village heads: the low quality of village official human resources in operating available administrative facilities; the limitation of facilities and infrastructure supporting village administrative services; and the regulatory climate and sub-district leadership policies in providing facilities, space, and time for personal and organizational capacity development which are not yet fully conducive. A summary of findings is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Research Results per Capacity Building Indicator

Indicator	Key Findings	Inhibiting Factors
Human Resources	Technical guidance and village administrative direction are carried out periodically, but are uneven and tend to be classical/written	Low quality of village official human resources in operating administrative facilities
Organization	Oral, written, and practical instructions are provided to village heads; village service procedures are considered sufficiently understood by village officials	Procedures are not fully simple; service cost transparency and timeliness still need improvement
Institutional Reform	Routine field supervision and direct interaction between the sub-district head, village heads, and the community are effective means for identifying constraints	Regulatory climate and policies regarding the provision of facilities, space, and time are not fully conducive

DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that the sub-district head's capacity building in guiding village heads in Kerinci Kanan District has been implemented across all three dimensions, albeit with varying levels of maturity: the human resources and institutional reform dimensions show relatively consistent implementation through technical guidance and field supervision, whereas the organization dimension is still dominated by one-way instructions that are administrative and written in nature. This pattern aligns with Winata's findings that the capacity development of village apparatus in Indonesia is often hindered at the technical implementation stage, despite the availability of a guidance policy framework, and strengthens the argument that ambiguity in the division of authority between levels of government complicates the optimization of the guidance function at the sub-district level.

The role of field supervision carried out by the sub-district head, as a form of institutional reform in this study, aligns with research confirming that coordination and direct interaction across local government actors are keys to successful policy implementation at the grassroots level (Sukma et al., 2023). In line with this, Grindle emphasizes that an effective capacity building strategy must be participatory and adapted to the local context (Quang et al., 2021)—a principle reflected in the approach of the Kerinci Kanan sub-district head, who combines technical guidance with direct interaction in the field rather than merely relying on written instructions from the sub-district office. Furthermore, the capacity building efforts observed in this study encompass the three levels identified in the literature: the system level (regulatory framework), institutional level (organizational procedures), and individual level (skills and motivation) of village officials (Hartati et al., 2020).

However, the obstacles identified—the low quality of village human resources and limited facilities and infrastructure—are consistent with broader studies on local government capacity building in developing countries (Chakunda, 2015; Hussein, 2006; Nemec et al., 2015). These studies demonstrate that budget and infrastructure limitations are structural obstacles that are difficult to overcome solely through administrative guidance (Quang et al., 2021; Wahyudi et al., 2020). These findings indicate that the sub-district head's guidance function should not stand alone; it must be supported by resource allocation policies from the regency government, consistent with the view that capacity building is a multi-level process involving personal, organizational, and broader institutional systems (Hartati et al., 2020; Quang et al., 2021).

The practical implication of these findings is the necessity for stronger, more personalized, and sustainable guidance, not only through collective forums but also through individual mentoring for village heads who require the most capacity strengthening, accompanied by advocacy from the sub-district head to the regency government for the fulfillment of village facilities and infrastructure. Theoretically, this research reinforces the importance of viewing capacity building at the sub-district-village level as a relational process rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge, enriching the framework by incorporating trust-based interaction as a crucial dimension of public service governance (Bartels & Turnbull, 2019; Ekuma, 2017).

This research has a number of limitations. First, the single case study design in one sub-district limits the generalizability of findings to other sub-districts with different geographical, social, and institutional characteristics. Second, the number of informants is relatively limited; while in accordance with the principle of information adequacy in qualitative research (Sugiyono, 2011; Usman & Akbar, 1996), it still restricts the diversity of perspectives that can be explored. Third, data were collected at one point in time, failing to capture the longitudinal dynamics of capacity building. Further research is suggested to use a multi-case design or a mixed-methods approach to test the measurability of these findings on a broader scale.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the sub-district head's (camat) capacity building in guiding village heads in Kerinci Kanan District, Siak Regency, has been implemented across three main dimensions—human resources, organization, and institutional reform—through a combination of technical guidance, administrative instructions, and field supervision, accompanied by direct interaction between sub-district officials, village officials, and the community. These findings confirm the initial research proposition that capacity building is not a process that starts from scratch, but a process of building and optimizing existing potential sustainably.

The significance of this study lies in strengthening empirical evidence regarding the strategic role of the sub-district head as a facilitator at the sub-district level within the village governance system in Indonesia, while also providing a concrete picture of structural barriers—low quality of village human resources, limited facilities and infrastructure, and an uncondusive regulatory climate—that need to be addressed by policymakers at the regency level. Based on these findings, this study recommends: improving the quality of village apparatus human resources through the provision of adequate facilities in every village; strengthening the alignment of village official placements with their expertise and fields of duty; and creating a better village administration system to support timely and accurate public services. The author leaves room for future researchers to follow up on these recommendations through quantitative or evaluative studies regarding the effectiveness of sub-district head guidance programs on a regency/city scale.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in the research and writing of this article.

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