

## Power Relations in Flood Disaster Mitigation Policy in Aceh Utara

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### Abstract

This article discusses the power relationship in the implementation of flood mitigation policies in Aceh Utara Regency, especially in Lhoksukon and Matangkuli Districts which are geographically located in lowlands and crossed by the Keureuto River. Floods that occur three to five times a year have shaped the life cycle of communities, but mitigation policies at the local level tend to be *top-down*, technocratic, and have not accommodated the adaptive knowledge and practices of citizens. This research uses a qualitative approach through field observation and in-depth interviews with the community, gampong apparatus, and policy makers. The results of the study show that power relations are manifested in information control, decision-making, infrastructure management, and aid distribution, which are often influenced by socio-political proximity. Communities responded through silent resistance and adaptations based on local wisdom, such as building stilt houses, storing rainy season logistics, and leveraging traditional knowledge to read flood signs. This situation illustrates the existence of administrative decentralization without substantive independence, where gampongs become policy implementers without adequate space for participation. This study confirms that successful flood mitigation requires a shift from a dominative pattern to a participatory collaborative pattern. The integration of local knowledge, the strengthening of social institutions, and a fairer distribution of power are prerequisites for creating resilient and sustainable disaster governance.

### Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas relasi kuasa dalam implementasi kebijakan mitigasi banjir di Kabupaten Aceh Utara, khususnya di Kecamatan Lhoksukon dan Matangkuli yang secara geografis berada di dataran rendah dan dilintasi Sungai Keureuto. Banjir yang terjadi tiga hingga lima kali setahun telah membentuk siklus kehidupan masyarakat, namun kebijakan mitigasi di tingkat lokal cenderung bersifat *top-down*, teknokratis, dan belum mengakomodasi pengetahuan serta praktik adaptif warga. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui observasi lapangan dan wawancara mendalam dengan masyarakat, aparatur gampong, dan pemangku kebijakan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa relasi kuasa terwujud dalam pengendalian informasi, pengambilan keputusan, pengelolaan infrastruktur, serta distribusi bantuan yang kerap dipengaruhi oleh kedekatan sosial-politik. Masyarakat merespons melalui resistensi diam-diam dan adaptasi berbasis kearifan lokal, seperti membangun rumah panggung, menyimpan logistik musim hujan, dan memanfaatkan pengetahuan tradisional untuk membaca tanda-tanda banjir. Situasi ini menggambarkan adanya desentralisasi administratif tanpa kemandirian substantif, di mana gampong menjadi pelaksana kebijakan tanpa ruang partisipasi yang memadai. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa keberhasilan

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### Keywords

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mitigasi banjir memerlukan pergeseran dari pola dominatif menuju pola kolaboratif yang partisipatif. Integrasi pengetahuan lokal, penguatan kelembagaan sosial, dan distribusi kuasa yang lebih adil menjadi prasyarat untuk menciptakan tata kelola bencana yang tangguh dan berkelanjutan.

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## Introduction

Aceh Utara is one of the areas in Aceh Province that often experiences floods, especially when the rainy season arrives. The floods that occurred not only disrupted economic and educational activities, but also caused great material and psychosocial losses to the community. The local government and related agencies have issued various disaster mitigation policies to address this problem, such as the construction of embankments, early warning systems, and emergency response training. However, the effectiveness of the policy is still questionable because the impact of floods remains recurring and tends to be more complex (Amalia et al., 2021; Nurdin et al., 2023).

In this context, it is important to understand that disaster mitigation policies are not merely administrative or technocratic products, but rather the result of social processes influenced by power structures and social relations at the local level (Amanda et al., 2023; Muhammad Belanawane, 2015). Policy sociology views that public policy is an arena of interaction between state actors and society, which is often colored by inequality of access, symbolic dominance, and certain political interests (Soeaidy, 2009). In North Aceh, the implementation of flood mitigation policies cannot be separated from the role of local elites, community leaders, customary institutions, and social networks in the community.

Power relations play an important role in determining who gets access to information, aid, and protection from disasters. In many cases, community groups that have connections to government actors or that belong to dominant social networks tend to benefit more (Islam & Walkerden, 2015). In contrast, marginalized groups such as women heads of households, the poor, or residents living on riverbanks are often in a vulnerable position because they do not have enough influence in the policy formulation and implementation process. This shows that there is a structural imbalance in the distribution of disaster protection.

In addition, the social structure in the people of North Aceh, which is still thick with customary norms and religious values, also affects how mitigation policies are received and implemented. The role of religious and customary leaders in conveying information, shaping risk perceptions, and coordinating local responses to disasters is crucial. However, their absence in the formal process of policy planning often results in existing policies not being fully internalized in people's daily living practices. This is where the importance of sociological analysis lies in bridging the formal structure of policy and social practice of society.

Furthermore, the sociological approach in examining disaster mitigation policies allows us to see policies not only as a *top-down* order, but as the result of social negotiations involving various actors with different positions, interests, and powers. By looking at the dimensions of power relations and social structures, we can identify social barriers that are invisible but determine the success or failure of a policy. This is important in an effort to encourage policies that are more inclusive, equitable, and rooted in the social realities of society.

Based on the above considerations, this study aims to analyze how power relations and social structures affect flood mitigation policies in North Aceh. The focus lies on the interaction between the government, local elites, and the community in the process of formulating and implementing policies. Through a sociological approach, this study is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of more participatory and socially just disaster management policies.

This study is important considering that floods are disasters that hit North Aceh almost every year and have a wide impact on the social, economic, and psychological life of the community. Although various mitigation policies have been designed and implemented by the government, the reality on the ground shows that the effectiveness of implementation is still weak. This is not only due to technical or budgetary limitations, but also because of unequal power relations and complex social structures at the local level. In the context of the North Aceh society which is still strongly influenced by customary norms, the authority of religious leaders, and informal social networks, policies are often not effectively internalized if they do not consider these social structures. Therefore, sociological approaches have become very relevant to understand these dynamics in more depth.

Academically, this paper makes an important contribution in enriching the study of policy sociology, especially in the context of disasters which have tended to be approached technocratically. Meanwhile, practically, the results of this research can be an input for policymakers to be more responsive to the social realities of local communities. By examining the relationship of power and social structure in the flood mitigation process, this research can encourage more inclusive, equitable, and participatory policy formulation. This study is also important to strengthen the social resilience of communities in the face of disasters, as well as to ensure that protection is not only given to those who have access and power, but also to vulnerable groups who are often marginalized in policy practice.

To provide a clear structure, this article is organized as follows. The next section elaborates the theoretical framework by integrating Foucault's concept of power relations and Giddens's structuration theory to explain how disaster policies operate within sociopolitical contexts. The third section presents the research methodology, followed by the analysis of empirical findings focusing on power relations, policy dynamics, and community adaptation. The final section concludes with theoretical reflections, policy implications, and recommendations for future research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study of disaster mitigation has so far been dominated by technocratic and managerial approaches, focusing on physical and infrastructural aspects, such as embankment construction, early warning systems, and spatial planning (Yulianti et al., 2025). This approach tends to ignore the social dimension of disasters, especially how policies are shaped and implemented in the context of complex social structures and power relations. Meanwhile, there is currently limited research that specifically explores how the relationship between state actors, local elites, and communities shapes mitigation policies, especially in the context of regions such as North Aceh which have a distinctive social and cultural structure.

In the Indonesian context, especially in post-conflict regions such as Aceh, local power dynamics, customary norms, and religious authority play a large role in the acceptance and implementation of policies. This research offers an update by integrating the perspective of policy sociology into disaster mitigation studies. A focus on power relations and social structures allows for a more in-depth analysis of inequalities in access to disaster protection and the extent to which top-down policies may or may not take root in local communities. Thus, this research fills an important gap in the academic literature and contributes to designing mitigation policies that are more equitable, contextual, and socially resilience-oriented.

This study uses Michel Foucault's theory of power relations and Anthony Giddens' social structuring as a theoretical foundation for understanding the interaction between government and society in the context of disaster mitigation policies. Foucault (1972) views that power is not only owned by a specific state or actor, but is spread across a network of daily social practices, including in public policy discourse. Power works through knowledge, discourse, and institutional mechanisms, which then shape behavior, limit choices, and create certain categories in society, including who is considered entitled to protection and who is not. In the context of flood mitigation policies, power is seen in who is involved in the planning process, who determines the priority allocation of resources, and how policies are communicated to communities.

Meanwhile, structuring theory Giddens (1984) explains that social structures are not something rigid and coercive, but are constantly shaped and reproduced by the actions of actors. In the context of public policy, structures such as village bureaucracy, customary institutions, and local value systems serve as "rules" and "resources" that can enable or limit community actions in responding to mitigation policies. Giddens emphasized the importance of the duality of *structure*, which is that society forms the structure, as well as being shaped by the structure. This is relevant to the case of Aceh Utara, where the community is not only the object of policy, but also an active actor although it does not always have equal power in the process of implementing flood policies.

Analysis based on these theories allows researchers to see that the failure or ineffectiveness of disaster mitigation policies is not always due to technical weaknesses or lack of budgets, but also due to the lack of connection between policies and the prevailing social structure. In the society of North Aceh, local power structures involving religious, customary, and village bureaucratic leaders form a complex social terrain and sometimes contradict the logic of formal policy. In this regard, local knowledge and relational dynamics are often ignored in top-down policies, thus creating resistance, access inequality, and distrust of government programs.

Using the framework of Foucault and Giddens, this article not only maps who is dominant and who is marginalized in flood mitigation policies, but also explains how power works subtly through narratives, procedures, and social structures. This approach opens up space to understand that effective policies are those that are able to touch the social reality of society, not only from logistical and administrative aspects, but also from symbolic and structural aspects. Therefore, this study encourages the need for mitigation policy formulation that is responsive to social structures and local power relations, so that disaster management strategies are more equitable and sustainable.

## Methods

This study was conducted in the worst locations of the floods in Lhoksukon District and Matang Kuli District, North Aceh Regency. This location was chosen because this area is one of the areas most affected by flooding every year, but the mitigation policies implemented have not shown significant effectiveness. In addition, the region has a distinctive social structure, with strong influences from indigenous figures, religions, and local elites, which is particularly relevant to be studied through a sociological approach. The complexity of the power relationship between communities and local governments in disaster management is also an important reason, as it can illustrate how the perspective of policy sociology is carried out in a unique and dynamic social context.

The research approach used in this study is a qualitative approach with a data collection model that includes visual *data (observations)*, spoken (*spoken*), and written data (*documents*) (Hignett & McDermott, 2015). These various data were collected by means of non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and the use of documents (Busetto et al., 2020; Cardno, 2018; Gratch et al., 2014; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Research informants are selected or determined from people who are considered to understand the research problem being researched (Hignett & McDermott, 2015). The informants of this study consisted of community leaders, traditional leaders, Geuchiek Gampong, Mukim and the surrounding communities who were determined purposively. All informants in this study were placed as study subjects.

Data analysis is carried out interactively and starts from the beginning of data collection to the writing of transcripts and reports. The stages follow the model (Akinyode & Khan, 2018) namely through the stages of data collection, data verification, data processing, data coding, finding relationships between themes, data interpretation and drawing conclusions. As visualized below.

## Result and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the empirical findings of the study, focusing on the dynamics of power relations within the implementation of flood disaster mitigation policies in North Aceh Regency. The analysis aims to demonstrate how the interaction between formal governance structures and local sociocultural systems shapes the effectiveness of disaster management in a decentralized context. Drawing upon interview data, field observations, and document analysis, the discussion connects empirical evidence with the theoretical perspectives of Foucault's *power relations* and Giddens's *structuration theory*. By doing so, it highlights the mechanisms through which authority, knowledge, and social agency operate simultaneously in policy practice. The discussion is structured thematically to capture key aspects such as bureaucratic dominance, community participation, and the role of local knowledge in shaping adaptive responses to recurring floods.

### Power Dynamics in the Implementation of Flood Mitigation Policies in North Aceh

Geographically, the central location of the flood in North Aceh Regency is in a low-lying area. This location makes the area highly vulnerable to waterlogging and annual flooding.

Topographically, most of the land surface is relatively flat with an elevation that does not differ much from one point to another. The almost flat contour of the soil makes it difficult for rainwater to flow quickly, causing water to be easily inundated, especially in the rainy season. This area is also crossed by the flow of the *Krueng Keureuto River* which is the main source of water as well as a potential threat of flooding if the water discharge increases sharply. The Keureuto River that passes near residential areas is a crucial factor in understanding the physical character of this area. On the one hand, the river is an important base for the community's agricultural and fishery activities (Field observation, 2025).

Residents in Lhoksukon and Matangkuli Districts, North Aceh Regency, have long coexisted with flood disasters that continue to recur every year. These floods generally occur three to five times a year, making them part of the seasonal cycle that has been anticipated by the community. For the community, floods are not an extraordinary event for them, but a reality that is familiar and embedded in daily life. The main cause of flooding in this area is the overflow of water from the Keureuto River. When the water discharge increases in the rainy season, water from upstream overflows and goes down to residential areas. The impact of flooding is quite serious, water can stagnate for one week, disrupt agricultural activities (crop failure), disrupt the learning process of students, and even worship activities. Schools are usually closed because buildings and road access are submerged in water.

In dealing with this situation, the community has developed adaptive strategies for generations. Based on the interview, Hanifah (2025) explained that once the signs of flooding began to look like rain that did not stop or the water level of the river, residents were used to immediately saving valuables to higher places. This action was carried out spontaneously and without the need for instructions from the village government, indicating the existence of collective experience-based preparedness. Citizens' preparedness, such as rescuing items to high places, is a form of *silent resistance* to situations that they cannot control (Helsloot & Ruitenberg, 2004) This strategy was born out of limited access to formal disaster management mechanisms. The community does not wait for the government, but instead acts independently. In Foucault's theory, power relations are not always in the form of direct domination, but also present in the form of local practices and knowledge that are constantly reproduced by citizens to survive.

Losses due to floods not only have a social impact, but also an economic impact. Hanifah said that she had experienced rice harvest failure due to a combination of floods and pest attacks. Floods worsen land conditions, damage crop yields, and all agricultural capital such as fertilizer and rice field processing costs are wasted. This shows that floods weaken the economic resilience of communities, especially for those who depend on the agricultural sector.

Nevertheless, the attitude of the community reflects the high social resilience of the local community. The community no longer relies much on the government and external assistance, but instead relies on vigilance and experience to survive. People form survival instincts that are an integral part of their lives in the face of disasters. This situation arises when the most obvious power relations are seen in access to aid. The flood victims experienced a drastic decline after the change of leadership. In the old Geuchik period, aid was faster and more adequate. Now, residents only receive makeshift assistance of one bamboo rice, several eggs, and instant noodles. It shows how power relations at the local level play an important role in determining who gets, when, and how much, as described in Bourdieu's theory of power

distribution. Inequality in the distribution of aid also shows the existence of *patron-client relations* at the gampong level (Murtadho & Wijayanto, 2025). Assistance is no longer positioned as a citizen's right, but as a form of generosity from local power holders. In this condition, residents are in a dependent, but also critical, position. Although there are people who are not frontal, in voicing their disappointment with the change in leadership pattern, which according to them is less responsive than before.

However, behind the losses and inequality, society shows that high social resilience survives not because the state is present effectively, but because citizens have formed their own knowledge and mechanisms for survival. From a sociological perspective of power, this experience illustrates how citizens "accept power" but at the same time "confront power" in local, subtle, and strategic ways.

### **Power Relations and Sociological Perspectives of Flood Management Policy**

The power relationship in flood management policies in North Aceh is evident through the dominance of information by the sub-district against the gampong government. One form is the flood early warning system which is distributed through WhatsApp groups, where the sub-district head and sub-district staff are the main controllers of information. The gampong government only plays the role of receiving information and implementing the field. This communication structure reflects a *top-down* power relationship, where information is not reciprocal, but one direction from top to bottom. Furthermore, power relations are also manifested in the decision-making mechanism and the regulation of fixed procedures (*protap*) for disasters. The gampong government does not have the authority to determine independent measures when floods hit, but must wait for instructions from the sub-district or the Regional Disaster Management Agency (BPBD). This shows that there is a structural dependence that makes gampong a mere implementing actor, without room for participation in the disaster policy formulation process.

Although village funds are allocated for flood management, such as logistics procurement, post construction, and emergency evacuation, its management is still limited by technical procedures from above. In this context, there is what is referred to as administrative decentralization, not substantive decentralization. The gampong government bears great responsibility when disasters occur, but it is not accompanied by independence in determining local strategies. Fiscal power is not always accompanied by decision-making power.

The power relationship is also reflected in the control of large infrastructure, such as the Keureuto Dam. The authority over dam operations is in the hands of the central or provincial government, while communities downstream such as in Matang Kuli and Lhoksukon districts only receive the impact of the technical policy. It describes a form of structural power relations, in which control over infrastructure is used for macro purposes, but the risk is imposed on local communities without participation in the planning or management process.

In terms of aid distribution, power relations are seen through control over resources. Logistical assistance from the sub-district and BPBD was distributed to residents through the gampong device. However, in practice, access to assistance is not always even and has the potential to be influenced by the close relationship between residents and officials. Here,

sociologically power is not only present institutionally, but also in the form of symbolic and social power that determines who is prioritized in distribution.

Meanwhile, mitigation efforts such as counseling and education to the community have indeed been carried out since 2020. However, the mitigation approach is still very technocratic and ignores the local knowledge possessed by citizens. In fact, people such as those who have lived for a long time in flood-prone areas have an experience-based adaptive strategy. This rejection of local knowledge reflects the hegemonization of scientific and bureaucratic discourse, which dominates the state's view of risks and disasters.

Overall, the power relationship in flood management in Aceh Utara is hierarchical and layered. The gampong government and local communities are in a subordinate position to the sub-district government, BPBD, and infrastructure stakeholders. This relationship is not only administrative, but also cultural and symbolic, where citizens' voices are often marginalized in decision-making. To create a more equitable and participatory disaster governance, there needs to be a shift from a dominative pattern to a collaborative pattern, where people are not only seen as victims, but also as active actors in disaster mitigation and adaptation.

### **Community Resistance and Adaptation to Policies**

Communities in Aceh Utara face annual floods as part of the inevitable natural cycle. However, until now, there is no formal policy system at the gampong level that specifically regulates disaster mitigation and management. The absence of an official evacuation system, proper evacuation sites, and a lack of disaster training indicate the weakness of state intervention at the local level. In this situation, community resistance arises in the form of dependence on their own initiative and their low involvement in foreign policy which is considered not to respond to local needs (Rahman et al., 2024; Roberts, 2023) This form of resistance is not in the form of open resistance, but rather a withdrawal from non-functional policy structures.

In the midst of the state's absence in disaster issues, local social institutions took over an important role in organizing community responses. Gampong apparatus such as keuchik and tuha peut do play a role in gampong administration, but have not been actively involved in disaster mitigation matters. On the contrary, non-formal institutions such as study groups, youth organizations, *meumasab* administrators (musalla), and religious leaders play a major role in maintaining social solidarity. They became evacuation drivers, aid distributors, and guardians of the norm of togetherness when floods came. In this context, communities show a form of cultural resistance to formal policies by relying on local values that are more responsive to crises.

Community adaptation to flooding is shaped by local experience and knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation. Some residents built stilt houses as a form of structural adaptation to waterlogging. On the other hand, residents also showed non-structural adaptation by saving rainy season logistics, moving valuables, and adjusting planting times to avoid damage due to flooding. Traditional knowledge in reading natural signs such as rising river discharges or changes in animal behavior is also a fairly effective early warning system. This adaptation is autonomous, born not from state policies, but from the results of social learning and collective experience.

When floods hit, the community's response took place quickly and spontaneously, but without a clear structure. The evacuation process was carried out based on social networks, with

support from community leaders and hamlet heads. Logistical assistance often comes from residents who are not severely affected, while assistance from the government or outside organizations usually comes after the floods recede. In emergency conditions, the community shows high solidarity, carries out mutual cooperation to strengthen emergency embankments, clean waterways, and evacuate affected families (Rahman et al., 2024; Yankyera, 2024) This response shows that despite the absence of policies, people still survive through the social forces they have built themselves.

Limitations in terms of disaster training, logistics, and the lack of role of technical institutions such as BPBD in fostering gampong cause local institutions to not be integrated into formal policy systems. Coordination between gampong institutions is still sectoral, not yet integrated in systematic disaster planning. As a result, the potential of social institutions and great collective spirit is not utilized to the fullest. The resistance here appears in the form of daily practices that run outside the state system, society creates its own system because the state system is not functionally present.

Even so, gampong communities in North Aceh have great potential to be involved in a more participatory policy system. If the practice of mutual cooperation, local social institutions, and traditional wisdom can be recognized and facilitated by formal policies, then community resistance can be diverted into collaboration. The establishment of gampong disaster preparedness forums, disaster training, and strengthening local context-based regulations can be strategic steps in building a resilient and sustainable disaster management system. People do not reject policies, they just adjust to the fact that policies have not been present in a meaningful way.

## **Conclusion**

The dynamics of flood management in North Aceh show that disasters are not only natural problems, but also power relations issues. The vulnerability of the lowlands and crossed by the Keureuto River makes flooding an annual cycle that shapes the people's lifestyle. However, instead of being present effectively, mitigation policies at the local level tend to be top-down, technocratic, and have not accommodated people's adaptive knowledge and practices. Power relations are clearly seen in information control, decision-making, infrastructure management, and aid distribution, which are often influenced by socio-political proximity.

On the other hand, the community shows high social resilience through tacit resistance and adaptation based on local wisdom. They rely on social networks, traditional knowledge, and solidarity to survive, despite the lack of state support. This situation reflects the existence of administrative decentralization without substantive independence at the gampong level. Thus, the success of flood mitigation in North Aceh requires a shift from a dominative pattern to a participatory collaborative pattern. Recognition and integration of local knowledge, strengthening social institutions, and a fairer distribution of power are key to building a resilient, sustainable, and community-friendly disaster management system.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of international policy sociology and disaster governance by integrating Foucault's and Giddens's frameworks to explain how power operates within post-conflict local governance. It extends the discourse on policy sociology by showing that disaster mitigation is a socially embedded process rather than a purely

administrative mechanism. Empirically, the study offers new evidence on how power asymmetries shape disaster policy implementation in Aceh, highlighting the contradictions between formal decentralization and practical dependence. The findings show that community adaptation is not simply reactive but reflects a form of local agency that contests and complements state authority.

Future research should be directed toward three main areas that can broaden the analytical scope of disaster governance within the context of decentralization. First, comparative studies across different regions are needed to assess how power relations vary under distinct decentralization models, thereby revealing the extent to which institutional structures influence the effectiveness of disaster mitigation policies. Second, more in-depth empirical research on sectoral policies—such as those related to agriculture, housing, and education—is essential to understand the challenges of cross-sectoral policy integration in disaster management. Third, further studies should explore how local knowledge systems can be incorporated into formal institutional frameworks to build disaster governance that is both resilient and culturally grounded. Through these directions, this study strengthens both theoretical and practical understandings of how power and social structures interact to shape disaster policy and practice within decentralized societies.

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### **Wawancara/ Interviews (12pt, Bold)**

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