

Reframing Community Participation in Water Governance: A Comparative Sociology of Justice and Rural Water Access in Eastern and Central Indonesia

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Abstract

Limited access to clean water in rural Indonesia not only affects public health and well-being but also reflects structural challenges in water governance, particularly regarding the quality of community participation. This article examines the dynamics of community participation in water governance and its implications for equitable water access through a comparative study of rural areas in eastern and central Indonesia. The research was conducted in Cunca Lolos and Cunca Wulang villages (East Nusa Tenggara) and Banyuurip Village (Central Java) using a qualitative comparative case study design. Data were collected through field observations, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, and were thematically analyzed by conceptualizing participation as a socially embedded process shaped by power relations and local institutions. The findings reveal that community participation largely remains functional, limited to technical and operational involvement without equal influence in planning and decision-making processes. This pattern occurs across differing ecological contexts, indicating that water inequality is driven less by natural scarcity than by institutional and social structures. Limited participation contributes to unequal water distribution, weak transparency, low collective ownership, and fragile management sustainability, positioning water governance as an arena for reproducing local power relations. The study reframes participation as a layered social practice rather than a normative program indicator, emphasizing that participation quality is central to achieving water justice in rural governance.

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INTRODUCTION

Water constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for human survival and serves as a foundation for social reproduction, public health, and the economic sustainability of rural households. Yet, across many rural regions of Indonesia, particularly in the eastern provinces, access to safe and reliable water remains a recurring challenge, especially during the dry season. Limited water discharge, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven distribution compel some residents to travel long distances, purchase water at high prices, or rely on unstable supply systems (Roestamy & Fulazzaky, 2022; Umami et al., 2022). Global evidence likewise indicates that disparities in access to safe water disproportionately affect rural populations and socially vulnerable groups (Maryati et al., 2022; Suar et al., 2025). In the Indonesian context, however, such challenges cannot be attributed solely to ecological constraints. They

are also shaped by local governance dynamics, particularly the extent to which communities are meaningfully involved in decision-making processes concerning water management. Rural water crises, therefore, must be understood not merely as technical deficiencies but as deeply social and political phenomena.

A growing body of scholarship suggests that failures in water resource management frequently stem from weak institutional coordination and limited citizen participation in planning processes (Hakim et al., 2025; Wedi & Fathurrahman, 2025). As a common-pool resource, water requires collective mechanisms that are equitable and transparent in order to prevent the reproduction of social inequalities. Within common resource governance frameworks, effective management is shaped by locally crafted rules, social trust, and the active engagement of resource users (Hamzani et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2024). In practice, however, community participation in many rural villages is often confined to technical implementation, such as collective labor or pipe repairs, while strategic decisions remain concentrated in the hands of a limited number of village elites. This condition demonstrates that participation does not automatically translate into equitable power distribution. Participation exists along a spectrum, ranging from manipulation to citizen control, and not all forms provide meaningful bargaining power for communities (Flipo et al., 2023; Fowler, 2023).

Over the past two decades, scholarship on participation in natural resource governance has expanded significantly. Decentralization reforms have emphasized the importance of genuinely transferring decision-making authority to local communities rather than merely devolving administrative burdens (Rocca & Zielinski, 2022; Simarmata et al., 2024). At the same time, critical perspectives caution against romanticizing communities as homogeneous entities, highlighting instead the complex internal power relations that shape collective action (Rudito et al., 2022; Terzano et al., 2022). In the water sector, participation is frequently structured by social norms, patronage networks, and entrenched local practices that may not necessarily reflect democratic principles (Fahmi & Arifianto, 2022; Rudito et al., 2022; Sjaf, 2023). Empirical research further demonstrates that community-based programs often falter when internal power asymmetries and social inequalities are insufficiently addressed (Fathoni & Setyowati, 2022; Harianto & Listyani, 2025). Participation, therefore, cannot be reduced to an administrative procedure; it must be conceptualized as a layered and negotiated social process.

The literature on water justice further underscores the entanglement between resource distribution and broader socio-economic structures. The concept of hydro-hegemony illustrates how dominant actors can consolidate control over water access through institutional mechanisms (Daniel et al., 2023; Trisna Praja et al., 2024). At the local level, exclusion frequently operates through subtle restrictions on participatory spaces, limiting who is authorized to speak and influence decisions (Suryahadi et al., 2023; Wulandari et al., 2022). Without meaningful community engagement, water supply initiatives tend to suffer from weak sustainability and limited outreach to the most vulnerable populations (Baocheng et al., 2024; Basuki et al., 2022). In Indonesia, several studies confirm that infrastructure-

driven development approaches, when not accompanied by social capacity building, generate dependency on external assistance and weaken collective initiative (Bernard et al., 2023; Fauzi et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings emphasize that equitable water access is fundamentally determined by governance quality rather than merely by physical resource availability.

Despite these advances, much of the existing research remains concentrated at the national policy level or on specific intervention projects, offering limited insight into the everyday practices of water governance within villages characterized by diverse socio-cultural contexts. Comparative studies do exist, yet they are predominantly cross-national in scope (Machado et al., 2022; Tong et al., 2022). Within Indonesia, research that simultaneously compares participation dynamics between ecologically dry eastern regions and relatively water-abundant central regions remains scarce. Such ecological and historical differences may produce distinct configurations of social relations and institutional arrangements. Furthermore, participation is frequently treated as a normative variable assumed to be inherently positive, without critically examining how it is interpreted, enacted, and negotiated by villagers within localized power structures.

Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need to interrogate how participation is practiced in the quotidian realities of rural water governance and how these practices shape patterns of access and justice. When participation is reduced to compliance or communal labor, deliberative spaces and collective negotiation become constrained. It is precisely at this juncture that the sociological dimensions of water justice become salient. By comparing villages in East Nusa Tenggara and Central Java, this study reconceptualizes participation not as a procedural indicator but as a lived social relation, one that is continuously negotiated, contested, and embedded in local institutional contexts. The comparative approach enables a nuanced understanding that differences in ecological endowment do not necessarily correspond to differences in participatory quality. Beneath divergent environmental conditions, similar patterns emerge in which participation remains largely operational rather than deliberative.

This study advances a perspective that situates participation as a social arena shaping the direction of distributive justice in rural water governance. The analytical focus extends beyond the question of whether communities are involved to interrogate how they are involved, whose voices are recognized, and how decisions are ultimately produced. Through a comparative case study of Cunca Lolos and Cunca Wulang villages in East Nusa Tenggara and Banyuurip village in Central Java, this research seeks to analyze the dynamics of community participation in water governance and its implications for equitable rural water access. Theoretically, it contributes to the sociology of development and rural sociology by demonstrating that the sustainability of common resources is deeply contingent upon the quality of local social relations and institutional arrangements. Practically, the findings aim to inform policymakers and village authorities in designing more inclusive, transparent, and justice-oriented water governance frameworks.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design, grounded in the understanding that community participation in water governance cannot be reduced to statistical indicators alone but must be examined as a socially embedded process shaped by meanings, power relations, and lived experiences. A qualitative framework enabled the researchers to capture everyday practices, institutional dynamics, and the ways in which villagers interpret their involvement in water management (Georgios & Barraí, 2023; Imanuella et al., 2025). The comparative design was selected to analyze variations in ecological and social contexts between eastern and central Indonesia and to assess how environmental conditions intersect with institutional structures and participation patterns (Czibere & Kovách, 2022; Zhu & Guo, 2022). Cunca Lolos and Cunca Wulang villages in East Nusa Tenggara Province were chosen due to their dryland characteristics and high vulnerability to seasonal water scarcity, while Banyuurip Village in Central Java Province was selected as a comparative site with relatively stable water availability. These sites were purposively selected to generate meaningful ecological and social contrasts aligned with the study's analytical focus (Hidayat et al., 2023; Nugroho et al., 2024).

The study involved 27 informants, comprising village heads, village officials, community-based water managers, customary or community leaders, women responsible for domestic water use, farmers, and village youth. Informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques on the basis that they possessed direct experience and contextual knowledge of water governance in their respective villages (Pradipta & Putri, 2024; Purba & Wahyu, 2022). Village heads and water managers were interviewed to explore institutional arrangements and decision-making processes, while women and farmers were included because they represent the primary users of water for domestic and productive purposes. The inclusion of youth and community leaders aimed to capture intergenerational dynamics and the sources of social legitimacy underpinning water governance practices. This composition enabled the researchers to obtain diverse perspectives and to analyze actor relations within everyday governance processes.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Participant observation was conducted to directly examine water distribution practices, village meetings, and interactions between residents and water managers. In-depth interviews were employed to explore personal experiences, perceptions of distributive justice, and the meaning of participation from each informant's standpoint (Mukhlis et al., 2025; Sujito & Ghofur, 2023). Focus group discussions were organized in each village to stimulate dialogical exchange among residents and to identify collective differences in perspectives. In addition, documentary materials, including village regulations, meeting minutes, and records of water assistance programs, were analyzed to understand the formal governance framework. This methodological combination ensured that the data were not merely narrative but also institutionally and contextually grounded.

Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and time (Hadi et al., 2025). Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from village

officials, water managers, and community members. Method triangulation was conducted by cross-checking interview findings with observational data and official documents. Furthermore, member checking was undertaken by discussing summarized findings with key informants to verify interpretative accuracy. The analysis proceeded thematically through stages of data reduction, categorization, and reflective meaning-making (Kinseng, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Social and Institutional Context of Water Governance in Cunca Lolos, Cunca Wulang, and Banyuurip Villages

Water governance in rural settings cannot be disentangled from the social and institutional contexts that shape everyday community life. In Cunca Lolos, Cunca Wulang, and Banyuurip villages, water constitutes not merely a biophysical resource but a social medium that connects residents, village authorities, and community-based water managers. Particularly in East Nusa Tenggara, limited water availability has generated patterns of dependency on existing management systems, reinforcing the centrality of village institutions in regulating access and allocation. Under such conditions, institutional arrangements play a decisive role in determining how water is distributed and who holds authority over its management. Water governance, therefore, reflects the intersection of power, norms, and compliance embedded within rural social structures. This perspective aligns with broader rural sociological scholarship, which conceptualizes common-pool resource governance as inherently relational and institutionally mediated (Handayani et al., 2023).

In the three villages studied, water management institutions were generally established through formal village decisions and operated by individuals or groups regarded as legitimate actors. Legitimacy derived from formal administrative positions, accumulated experience, or social recognition at the local level. However, such legitimacy was not consistently accompanied by transparent and inclusive accountability mechanisms. In practice, community members often accepted decisions made by water managers without sufficient space to articulate their aspirations or contest policy directions. Consequently, participation tended to assume the form of compliance rather than substantive engagement. This pattern indicates that formal recognition of authority does not automatically translate into participatory governance, particularly when institutional arrangements remain centralized and weakly deliberative.

The social context becomes more complex when considering the regional differences between research sites. In East Nusa Tenggara, ecological dryness and reliance on limited water sources have strengthened the position of water managers as central actors in local governance. Control over scarce resources tends to consolidate authority, thereby narrowing the participatory space available to ordinary residents. In contrast, Banyuurip Village in Central Java, despite having relatively more stable water availability, does not exhibit a significantly more participatory governance model. Decision-making traditions that remain centralized continue to constrain meaningful citizen involvement. These findings suggest that ecological conditions alone do not determine the quality of participation; rather, social norms,

institutional cultures, and power configurations are equally influential. Community participation must therefore be analyzed within a broader framework of social relations and institutional practices rather than viewed solely as a technical response to environmental scarcity.

From the standpoint of rural sociology, water governance illustrates how local institutions regulate common resources and shape collective action. As argued by Handayani et al. (2023), the sustainability of common-pool resource management depends substantially on locally crafted rules and active user involvement. Nevertheless, the findings of this study reveal that local regulations governing water distribution were not fully developed through inclusive participatory processes. This limitation potentially weakens the sense of collective ownership over water resources and undermines long-term sustainability. Interview data indicate that community involvement was largely confined to technical activities, such as communal labor and maintenance of water infrastructure, with minimal engagement in planning and decision-making processes. Several residents reported limited knowledge of formal regulations and allocation mechanisms at the village level. Such conditions create a structural distance between community members and water governance institutions, fostering passive forms of participation.

The Context of Forms, Levels, and Meanings of Community Participation in Water Governance

Community participation in water governance in Cunca Lolos Village, Cunca Wulang Village, and Banyuurip Village demonstrates relatively similar patterns despite differing regional contexts. The findings indicate that community involvement is predominantly manifested through technical and operational activities, such as collective voluntary labor, pipe network repairs, and regulating water distribution at particular times. Village authorities and water management committees often interpret these activities as evidence of active community engagement. However, from a sociological perspective, such participation does not yet reflect equal involvement across the entire water governance process. Community members are rarely included in planning, rule formulation, or evaluation stages of water management systems. Consequently, participation tends to function as support for decisions that have already been determined. This condition reflects a narrow interpretation of participation within rural water governance practices.

The limited form of participation is closely related to the institutionalization of water governance at the village level. Decision-making processes are generally dominated by actors possessing formal authority or specific social legitimacy, such as village heads or water managers. The broader community is positioned primarily as implementers or beneficiaries rather than as decision-making subjects. As a result, community aspirations and lived experiences are not fully accommodated within water management policies, reinforcing the social distance between local communities and water governance institutions.

The citizen participation framework proposed by Afrizal et al. (2023) and Batubara et al. (2023) helps explain the position of community participation observed in this study. Field findings suggest that participation remains at the level of pseudo-participation, including

information sharing and consultation. At this stage, communities may be informed or asked for opinions, yet there is no guarantee that their views influence final decisions. Participation has not reached the level of partnership or citizen control, where communities hold equal roles in decision-making processes. Consequently, participation has not achieved a transformative character, explaining why water governance remains dominated by particular actors.

Furthermore, the meaning of participation among rural communities is shaped by local social and cultural norms. In several cases, participation is understood as compliance with village decisions or as a social obligation to maintain communal harmony. Respect toward local authority often discourages community members from expressing criticism or dissenting opinions, resulting in passive and non-confrontational participation. Generational differences and social positioning also influence participation levels. Younger groups tend to adopt more critical perspectives toward water governance; however, their opportunities for engagement are often limited. Village decision-making structures remain dominated by groups perceived as more senior or experienced, constraining the emergence of new ideas and innovation in water management. Participation, therefore, is not homogeneous but layered according to village social structures.

Overall, these findings emphasize that community participation in water governance cannot be measured solely by physical involvement. Participation should be understood as a social process encompassing access to information, deliberative spaces, and meaningful influence in decision-making. As emphasized by Batubara et al. (2023), participation is frequently shaped by established power relations and social practices and does not automatically produce justice. Therefore, efforts to strengthen community participation in water governance must focus on transforming social and institutional relations at the village level so that participation can function as a mechanism for achieving more equitable and sustainable water governance.

Inequality of Access and Power Relations in Rural Water Governance

The findings further reveal that limited community participation in water governance is closely intertwined with unequal access to water resources at the village level. In several research sites, water distribution is not consistently equitable, particularly during the dry season when water discharge declines significantly. This condition is exacerbated by the absence of strong collective monitoring mechanisms governing water allocation. Communities with closer relationships to water managers or village officials tend to obtain more stable access to water, whereas other groups must endure shortages without adequate channels to express objections. Such inequality indicates that water governance has not yet fully embodied principles of social justice.

Power relations in water governance are evident in the dominance of certain actors within decision-making processes. Interview findings reveal that community members generally lack clarity regarding who determines water distribution rules and how oversight mechanisms operate. One informant stated, “we simply follow the arrangements, because the managers and village government regulate everything” (Interview with FH). This

statement reflects passive acceptance of existing power structures. When decision-making authority is concentrated among a small group of actors, transparency and accountability weaken, creating social distance between managers and beneficiary communities. Over time, such unequal relations may generate social tension, particularly when water needs are not fulfilled equitably. Another informant noted that community members rarely voice protest because they feel they lack authority in water governance (Interview with BH). This situation illustrates how social structures shape resource distribution, transforming water, ideally a shared basic necessity, into an arena for reproducing social inequality.

From the perspective of power and participation theory, this condition reflects what Dhosa (2024) and Putra (2023) describe as structural exclusion. Power operates not only through overt control but also through mechanisms that limit who is permitted to participate in decision-making processes. In this study, exclusion occurs when communities are not provided opportunities to participate in formulating water governance regulations. Consequently, resulting policies tend to reflect the interests of dominant actors rather than collective needs. This finding reinforces Basuki et al.'s (2024) concept of pseudo-participation, wherein communities are present but lack bargaining power. Without addressing unequal power relations, initiatives aimed at increasing participation are unlikely to achieve substantive outcomes.

These inequalities and imbalanced power relations directly affect the sustainability of water governance. When communities feel excluded from access and decision-making processes, their sense of ownership toward water infrastructure diminishes. Several informants explained that damaged facilities are often left unrepaired until conditions worsen because maintenance is perceived solely as the responsibility of water managers (Interview with FA). This situation demonstrates the strong interconnection between equitable access, participation, and sustainability. Therefore, strengthening rural water governance requires the creation of inclusive and transparent participatory spaces in which power relations can be collectively negotiated.

Impacts of Limited Community Participation in Village Water Governance

The findings indicate that limited community participation directly influences how water governance is implemented in the villages studied. In practice, water management responsibilities are largely delegated to village water managers and local government authorities, while community members remain positioned primarily as beneficiaries. This condition aligns with the findings of Bernard et al. (2023) and Machado et al. (2022), which demonstrate that community-based resource management is frequently dominated by particular local actors. This dynamic is reflected in one informant's statement: "those responsible for water management are the managers; the community is only asked to help when damage occurs" (Interview with FA). This statement illustrates that community involvement has not extended into decision-making processes. Consequently, community members lack a comprehensive understanding of the water governance system operating within their villages. Water management is therefore perceived as the responsibility of specific actors rather than as a collective obligation.

Limited participation also contributes to weak social control over water governance. Several informants revealed that community members do not clearly understand how water distribution rules are established. One informant explained that “the community simply follows decisions and has never been involved in managing water to prevent shortages” (Interview with FH). This situation demonstrates that water governance operates in a largely one-directional manner. When communities are excluded from early stages of decision-making, the potential for dissatisfaction increases. However, such dissatisfaction is rarely expressed openly due to the absence of clear deliberative mechanisms. Another consequence of limited participation is the emergence of perceived injustice in water distribution. In several cases, particularly during the dry season, water does not flow evenly to all households. One informant noted that when water supply stops, residents can only wait without knowing where to submit complaints (Interview with FH). This condition shows that limited participation affects not only governance processes but also access to water resources. When communities are excluded from rule formulation, they lose bargaining power to demand equitable distribution.

Furthermore, limited participation reduces community ownership of water infrastructure. Several informants indicated that damage to water facilities is often regarded solely as the responsibility of water managers. Community involvement typically occurs only when physical assistance is requested, such as repairing pipelines. One informant stated, “we were once asked to help dismantle and reinstall pipes, but we were never invited to discuss the rules” (Interview with FA). This pattern suggests that participation is situational rather than structural. Hidayat et al. (2023) argue that such forms of engagement tend to be unsustainable because they are not accompanied by a sense of collective ownership. As a result, maintenance of water infrastructure remains suboptimal and dependent on the initiative of a small number of actors.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that community participation in water governance across the research sites remains limited and non-substantive. Communities function primarily as technical implementers rather than decision-making actors. The consequences include weak collective ownership, perceptions of distributive injustice, and limited social control over water governance processes. These findings reinforce the argument that limited participation constitutes not merely a technical issue but also a social problem that affects the sustainability of rural water governance. Accordingly, community participation emerges as a crucial analytical lens for understanding water governance dynamics in rural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the dynamics of community participation in rural water governance across eastern and central Indonesia remain dominated by functional participation patterns that position citizens as technical implementers rather than decision-making subjects. As a result, the quality of participation has not ensured equitable access to water resources. Through a comparative analysis across differing ecological contexts, the study demonstrates that the primary challenge lies not solely in resource scarcity but in

institutional structures and local power relations that restrict deliberative spaces for citizens. The research objective, to analyze participation dynamics and their implications for equitable water access, is addressed through findings showing that unequal water distribution and weak governance sustainability are closely linked to limited community access to planning processes, rule formulation, and monitoring mechanisms. The novelty of this study lies in reconceptualizing participation not as an administrative indicator of program success but as a social arena in which resource justice is negotiated at the village level. Strengthening rural water governance therefore requires transforming institutional relations toward more deliberative, transparent, and equitable participation. In such a framework, communities are not merely present in implementation practices but possess bargaining power in determining the direction and principles of water distribution as a shared resource.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This research was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles in social science research. All informants participated voluntarily after receiving a clear explanation of the research objectives and providing informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to protect participants' identities and social positions. The research process respected local cultural values, social norms, and community dynamics within the study locations and ensured that no parties were harmed during data collection.

The data and information presented in this article were collected through valid qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. All data were carefully verified and analyzed to ensure accuracy and reliability. This research did not receive funding from any external institution, and the author declares no conflicts of interest related to the preparation or publication of this article. The author assumes full responsibility for data interpretation, analysis, and conclusions presented herein.

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) in a limited capacity for technical assistance, particularly for improving language clarity, sentence coherence, and academic writing style editing. AI tools were not used to generate research data, fabricate interview results, construct theoretical frameworks, or conduct substantive analysis of research findings. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, edited, and validated by the author. The author expresses gratitude to all informants who generously shared their experiences and perspectives, as well as to the reviewers for their constructive feedback and suggestions that contributed to improving this article.

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