

Community Voices are Shaping Aceh's Future

Building Aceh Through Inclusive Participation

In a modest meeting room in Banda Aceh, voices from across the province ring out loud, confident and full of hope. Rahmah, a woman with a disability from Southwest Aceh, moderates a workshop as Erlin from Children and Youth Disabilities for Change brings to life the everyday struggles people with disabilities face in accessing basic services.

Rahmah and Erlin were not just part of another well-meaning but fruitless conversation about helping the community. They were part of a team working with officials to ensure government policies reflect the needs of society's most vulnerable.

Their strong engagement reflects a changing approach to policy, one that values lived experience as a foundation for better decisions.

"We used to be asked only for data. Now we sit together (with government officials) to help draft development plans. This isn't just a change in process. It's recognition that people with disabilities have voices and rights too," says Rahmah.

This is the new face of development in Aceh: more inclusive, more transparent and more participatory. People once left behind by society are now stepping forward, claiming their place in shaping the province's future.



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Why Participation Matters

Good governance is not only about building bridges and schools. It's about building trust. And trust begins with listening: creating space for communities to share their views, from planning development through to monitoring its progress.

In Aceh, meaningful participation has not always been available. According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS), only around 34% of Acehnese feel they have the opportunity to be involved in development planning. The numbers are even lower among vulnerable groups, including women, people with disabilities and Indigenous communities.

Yet Aceh holds a significant advantage: Special Autonomy, which gives the province considerable scope to shape development according to local needs. However, this flexibility has not always translated into genuine participatory practice.

When Voices from the Margins Guide Policy

People began to notice change when the Aceh Government started drafting its Regional Action Plan for the Respect, Protection and Fulfilment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Through this process, people with disabilities were no longer treated as statistics. They were invited to take part in shaping policy.

Workshops buzzed with the voices of residents from West Aceh, Nagan Raya, South Aceh and Subulussalam. In every session, people with disabilities were not only present but also took the lead as speakers, moderators and facilitators.



Marlinda, an advocate for women's and disability rights, emphasised that these forums open up genuine dialogue. *"We don't just raise problems. We work together to find solutions."*

This transformation was driven by cross-sector collaboration, strengthening the government's commitment to enabling meaningful participation and designing policies that respond to real community needs.

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Through the direct involvement of persons with disabilities, we are able to contribute new ideas and insights towards the development of a more inclusive Aceh in the future.

Erlina Marlinda,
CYDC Institute


Institutionalising Participation in Aceh

The success of the participatory approach in drafting the regional action plan and the proposed regional regulation (Qanun) on disability encouraged the government to go further. It recognised that participation must not rely solely on goodwill but must also be formally embedded to ensure it continues over time. This recognition led to a new regulation on community participation in development, providing a legal foundation that requires all regional government agencies to enable local involvement in every stage of the development process, from planning to implementation to evaluation.

The “Thematic Development Forum” model initiative, which was previously implemented by the provincial government and supported by SKALA, the Australia-Indonesia Partnership Program for Accelerating Basic Services, has now officially become part of the governance system. These forums are more than just spaces for discussion; they serve as mechanisms that give vulnerable groups an equal voice in setting the government's development priorities for Aceh.

The regulation on community participation in development outlines the following:

- Principles of inclusivity and equal participation
- Mechanisms to involve communities from planning to evaluation
- Obligations for regional government agencies (OPDs) to fund participatory activities
- Use of the Self-Management Type III approach to strengthen collaboration with civil society
- Active involvement of women, people with disabilities and Indigenous communities as co-creators of development



Why do we specifically emphasise community participation in development? Because we have observed that, to date, there are still areas where community involvement in the various stages of development has not been fully optimise

**Hasrati,
Planner at Bappeda Aceh**




The benefits of this regulation are already being felt. Development planning forums (Musrenbang) have become spaces for substantive dialogue. Communities now attend not only to listen, but also to contribute ideas that are taken seriously. Collaboration between OPDs and civil society has grown stronger, along with a deepening sense of shared ownership over development processes.


The process of drafting the regulation itself became a shared learning space, where local government, vulnerable groups, civil society and academia came together at the same table. This spirit of cooperation encouraged a shift in mindset and strengthened trust among stakeholders.

Aceh's story shows that the best policies are born from listening. When communities are given space to express their lived realities, the result is not just a document but policies that are meaningful and relevant.

The Aceh Government's commitment to institutionalising participation marks an important step towards inclusive governance. With policies that reflect the voices of the people, development is no longer driven by the interests of just one group. It becomes a shared endeavour, one that ensures everyone can access and benefit from its outcomes.



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