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The Political Economy of Food Security: Overcoming Institutional Constraints in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia's persistent food security challenges extend beyond agricultural output to institutional inefficiencies and political dynamics that obstruct policy effectiveness. This study explores the political economy of food security by investigating how institutional fragmentation, bureaucratic misalignment, and political incentives shape food governance outcomes. Employing a qualitative methodology rooted in institutional theory and political economy, the research draws on document analysis and thematic interpretation of policy documents, academic literature, and official reports. The findings show that decentralization has contributed to disjointed mandates and weak inter-agency coordination, while populist pressures and elite interests distort resource allocation and policy priorities. Nevertheless, policy opportunities exist through institutional harmonization, digital governance, local innovation, and stakeholder inclusion. The study contributes a nuanced understanding of food security governance in Indonesia and proposes systemic reforms to enhance institutional coherence, transparency, and responsiveness. These findings have implications for both theory and practice in designing more equitable and sustainable food systems.

Keywords

Food Security; Political Economy; Institutional Reform; Governance; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Food security in Indonesia continues to be a significant socio-political and economic issue, marked by fluctuating access, affordability, and sustainability of food sources across the archipelago. Despite its agrarian base and considerable food production potential, Indonesia faces recurring food insecurity driven by systemic institutional challenges (World Bank, 2012). As the fourth most populous country, ensuring stable and equitable food supply is not just a developmental priority but also a matter of national security (FAO, 2015). The uneven geographical distribution of resources, poor infrastructure, and regional disparities exacerbate food system vulnerabilities, particularly in eastern provinces where undernutrition and food access disparities are

highest (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2015). This background underlines the pressing need to interrogate food security through a political economy lens, moving beyond technical fixes to institutional diagnostics.

The concept of food security encompasses more than just the availability of food; it also includes accessibility, utilization, and stability—each of which is influenced by political and economic institutions (Sen, 1981). The persistence of food insecurity in Indonesia, despite robust agricultural growth and policy interventions, suggests deeper structural problems rooted in governance, regulatory environments, and institutional design (Suryahadi & Sumarto, 2011). Political decisions around land use, import restrictions, and food price controls often reflect short-term populist objectives rather than long-term systemic reform (McCulloch & Timmer, 2008). These practices have created institutional inertia that limits the flexibility of Indonesia's food system to respond to external shocks or internal inefficiencies (Robison & Hadiz, 2004).

Theoretically, this study is grounded in institutional theory, which emphasizes the role of formal and informal rules in shaping policy outcomes, and the political economy framework, which focuses on the distribution of power and interests within food systems (North, 1990; Keeley & Scoones, 2003). Previous studies have explored the technocratic dimensions of food policy, such as input subsidies or production targets, yet few have examined how institutional constraints shape these outcomes (Headey & Ecker, 2013). This study aims to bridge this gap by integrating political economy analysis with institutional critique, particularly within Indonesia's decentralized governance model (Rasyid, 2003). This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how state apparatus, bureaucratic practices, and policy dynamics collectively influence food security outcomes.

Empirically, Indonesia's food security challenges are compounded by policy fragmentation and overlapping institutional jurisdictions. The decentralization reforms of the early 2000s have led to a diffusion of authority without adequate capacity building at the local level, weakening policy coherence (Hofman & Kaiser, 2004). Moreover, key sectors like agriculture, trade, and health are governed by ministries with conflicting mandates, resulting in inconsistent policies and poor inter-agency coordination (Anderson, 2008). These systemic issues are further complicated by political patronage networks that prioritize electoral gains over strategic policy interventions (Hadiz & Robison, 2005). In light of this context, analyzing the institutional dimensions of food security offers a critical entry point for addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

This study is motivated by the observable disjuncture between Indonesia's policy ambitions for food sovereignty and the institutional realities that hinder effective implementation. While the government promotes rice self-sufficiency and food resilience, policy execution is hampered by administrative inefficiency, corruption, and

a lack of adaptive governance mechanisms (Resosudarmo et al., 2009). This contradiction highlights the urgency of reformulating food policy strategies that account for institutional dynamics and political realities. It also opens the possibility of identifying policy windows where reformist agendas could gain traction, particularly through coalitions of reform-minded actors and civil society engagement (Grindle & Thomas, 1991).

In response to these issues, this study seeks to answer three key research questions: (1) What institutional barriers most significantly hinder Indonesia's food security efforts? (2) How do political economy dynamics shape policy implementation in the food sector? (3) What policy opportunities exist for improving institutional coherence and food governance in Indonesia? The objectives are twofold: first, to identify and categorize institutional constraints within Indonesia's food system, and second, to explore feasible policy pathways that align institutional reform with food security objectives. Through this inquiry, the study contributes to the growing discourse on governance and development, offering both diagnostic and prescriptive insights into one of Indonesia's most pressing policy domains.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature on food security has evolved significantly over the past decades, increasingly incorporating multidimensional approaches that extend beyond mere production-centric paradigms. Foundational studies have established that food security is a complex phenomenon involving availability, access, utilization, and stability—each influenced by socio-political contexts and institutional dynamics (Maxwell & Slater, 2003; FAO, 2008). In the Indonesian context, literature highlights the paradox between self-sufficiency goals and persistent malnutrition, revealing a disconnect between policy design and outcome (Suryahadi & Sumarto, 2011). While government strategies focus on increasing domestic food production, especially rice, studies have shown that such policies often neglect distributional equity, price volatility, and dietary diversity (Simatupang & Timmer, 2008).

The political economy of food security provides a critical lens through which to analyze these issues. Scholars argue that power relations, vested interests, and bureaucratic cultures shape food policy decisions more decisively than market forces or climatic factors (Keeley & Scoones, 2003; Headey & Ecker, 2013). In Indonesia, decentralization has been examined as both a potential enabler and barrier to effective food governance. While local autonomy theoretically allows for more responsive and context-specific policymaking, it has often resulted in policy fragmentation and weakened oversight (Hofman & Kaiser, 2004; Rasyid, 2003). Studies have further shown that overlapping mandates among ministries create inefficiencies, while short-term

political incentives undermine long-term food system resilience (Anderson, 2008; Robison & Hadiz, 2004).

Existing literature has made valuable contributions to understanding technical and economic dimensions of food security, including analyses of input subsidies, agricultural productivity, and trade policy (Simatupang & Timmer, 2008; McCulloch & Timmer, 2008). However, fewer studies have critically examined the institutional architecture that underpins these strategies, particularly in Indonesia's post-decentralization governance landscape. This study addresses that gap by synthesizing insights from institutional theory and political economy, positioning itself within a growing body of work that calls for more integrated and systemic approaches to food security (North, 1990; Grindle & Thomas, 1991). By doing so, it contributes to a richer understanding of how institutional constraints and policy opportunities intersect to shape food outcomes in Indonesia.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study rests primarily on institutional theory, which posits that institutions—defined as the rules, norms, and routines that structure human interaction—play a central role in shaping policy outcomes (North, 1990). In the context of food security, institutions govern how resources are allocated, how decisions are made, and how responsibilities are distributed across actors and agencies. Institutions can either facilitate or constrain policy effectiveness, depending on their design, functionality, and adaptability (Peters, 2001, pp. 14–17). For Indonesia, the fragmentation and overlapping responsibilities within government bodies managing food systems illustrate how institutional misalignment can lead to inefficiency and incoherence (Hofman & Kaiser, 2004).

Institutional theory also underscores the significance of informal practices, such as patronage and political networks, in shaping institutional behavior. These dynamics are particularly relevant in Indonesia, where political incentives often override technocratic planning, leading to suboptimal food policies (Robison & Hadiz, 2004). Formal institutions, such as the Ministry of Agriculture or Trade, may adopt policies with long-term goals, but implementation is frequently disrupted by informal alliances and electoral calculations (Hadiz & Robison, 2005). This interplay between formal structures and informal practices highlights the need to analyze institutional contexts in a holistic and politically informed manner.

Complementing institutional theory is the political economy framework, which analyzes how political and economic interests, power relations, and ideologies shape policy processes (Keeley & Scoones, 2003). Political economy approaches emphasize

that policy decisions are often the result of bargaining among actors with differing interests, not merely technocratic responses to objective problems. In Indonesia, food policies are influenced by a constellation of actors—including political elites, bureaucrats, business groups, and civil society—each with distinct and sometimes conflicting agendas (Grindle & Thomas, 1991). For instance, rice import bans may be politically expedient but economically inefficient, serving the interests of local producers at the expense of broader food access (Simatupang & Timmer, 2008).

Another relevant conceptual lens is governance theory, which expands the analysis from state-centric models to multi-actor coordination mechanisms. Governance frameworks explore how diverse stakeholders interact in policymaking, highlighting the importance of institutional arrangements, accountability structures, and participatory mechanisms (Kooiman, 2003). In Indonesia's decentralized system, governance challenges manifest in weak horizontal coordination among ministries and vertical disconnects between central and local governments (Rasyid, 2003). These governance gaps exacerbate implementation problems, particularly in the food sector where coordination is critical for ensuring supply chain integrity and timely policy responses (Anderson, 2008).

Finally, path dependency theory contributes to the understanding of why institutional change in food policy is difficult. Path dependency suggests that once policies and institutions are set in motion, they become self-reinforcing due to increasing returns, sunk costs, and vested interests (Pierson, 2000). Indonesia's enduring focus on rice self-sufficiency, despite evidence of its limitations, illustrates how historical policy choices can constrain future reform. Understanding path dependency is crucial for identifying feasible policy windows and entry points for reform that consider existing institutional inertia and power dynamics (Grindle, 2004).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study constructs a robust analytical framework that captures both structural and agency-related dimensions of food security governance. Institutional theory elucidates the constraints embedded in organizational structures and norms; political economy highlights power struggles and strategic behavior; governance theory sheds light on coordination and accountability; and path dependency explains the resilience of suboptimal policies. Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive analysis of Indonesia's food security challenges, guiding both diagnostic assessment and prescriptive recommendations.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Numerous studies have explored various dimensions of food security in Indonesia, offering important empirical insights while also leaving critical gaps unaddressed. Early

research by Timmer (2004) emphasized the central role of rice policy in shaping Indonesia's broader food security agenda. Timmer identified how rice self-sufficiency became a political priority due to its centrality in public legitimacy and regime stability. His study, using historical policy analysis, highlighted how price controls and trade interventions were deployed to manage rice supply, but often at the cost of market distortions and inefficiencies. This foundational research established the nexus between food and political stability but paid limited attention to institutional fragmentation.

Simatupang and Timmer (2008) extended this discussion by assessing the efficacy of rice import policies. They employed quantitative modeling to demonstrate that protectionist policies inflated domestic prices and disproportionately affected poorer consumers. Their findings pointed to a trade-off between political motives and welfare outcomes, suggesting the need for institutional reforms to harmonize production incentives with access equity. However, the analysis focused predominantly on economic variables, leaving institutional dynamics underexplored.

In a subsequent study, McCulloch and Timmer (2008) analyzed the implications of food price volatility and trade liberalization. They showed how food price shocks had differential impacts across income groups, calling for better-targeted safety nets and more flexible trade regimes. Their policy recommendations included enhanced market intelligence and improved logistics infrastructure. While impactful, their research did not delve deeply into how institutional misalignments or bureaucratic inertia might constrain such policy innovations.

Robison and Hadiz (2004) offered a political economy critique by exploring how Indonesia's post-Suharto political transition affected governance, including in the food sector. Using qualitative case studies, they showed that decentralization led to the entrenchment of local political elites, creating new forms of rent-seeking and policy capture. Their work emphasized how informal networks and vested interests undermine policy coherence, especially in sectors like agriculture and food security. However, their analysis was general to governance and did not directly apply to food policy mechanisms.

Suryahadi and Sumarto (2011) investigated the relationship between poverty and food insecurity in rural Indonesia. Using household-level data, they found that economic vulnerability was closely tied to fluctuations in food prices and local food availability. Their research recommended targeted poverty alleviation programs and better coordination between agricultural and social protection policies. Although relevant, their study did not integrate a political economy or institutional framework, thus overlooking deeper systemic drivers of food insecurity.

Finally, Anderson (2008) examined bureaucratic performance in Indonesia, particularly focusing on policy coordination challenges across ministries. He used institutional diagnostics to argue that unclear mandates and overlapping jurisdictions resulted in fragmented implementation and policy incoherence. His study included the food sector as a case example and stressed the need for clearer delineation of roles, stronger inter-ministerial communication, and capacity-building at the subnational level. However, his focus remained technical, without fully addressing the political context shaping bureaucratic behavior.

Taken together, these studies have advanced the understanding of food security in Indonesia but have tended to focus on either economic modeling, policy analysis, or broad governance critique in isolation. A consistent research gap lies in the intersection of institutional and political analysis with food security outcomes. Few studies comprehensively examine how institutional barriers—both formal and informal—interact with political incentives to shape food policy effectiveness. Moreover, the potential for institutional reform and policy realignment remains under-theorized. This study addresses this gap by explicitly analyzing Indonesia's food security through an integrated institutional and political economy framework, responding to the need for more context-sensitive and systemic explanations.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using conceptual and interpretive methods to explore the institutional and political economy dimensions of food security in Indonesia. The type of data used is primarily textual, comprising government documents, policy briefs, academic articles, international development reports, and legislative records. This type of qualitative data is appropriate for exploring institutional practices, regulatory frameworks, and political narratives (Babbie, 2010, pp. 305–308). Textual data allow for deeper analysis of language, symbolism, and structure embedded in food policy discourse, providing nuanced insight into how institutions and actors shape outcomes beyond quantitative indicators (Yin, 2009, pp. 138–142).

The data sources are drawn from a range of reputable and traceable outlets. Primary sources include Indonesian government publications, such as reports from the Ministry of Agriculture and BPS–Statistics Indonesia. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles from Scopus-indexed journals, international policy papers from institutions like the World Bank and FAO, and academic books on Indonesian politics and governance (World Bank, 2012; FAO, 2015). These data sources provide a multi-layered understanding of policy development and institutional performance across

different governance levels. They are also selected to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings through triangulation of information (Creswell, 2013, pp. 160–163).

For data collection, the study employs document analysis, a technique widely used in qualitative research to systematically examine texts for themes, patterns, and meanings (Bowen, 2009). This method involves coding and interpreting data from official reports, policy statements, legislative acts, and scholarly works. Through document analysis, the study captures both the explicit content and the implicit institutional assumptions embedded in the food policy discourse. The analysis pays particular attention to institutional mandates, governance arrangements, and coordination mechanisms among stakeholders (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, pp. 121–124). This technique is especially useful in identifying contradictions, gaps, and overlaps in policy and governance documents.

In terms of data analysis, thematic analysis is employed to interpret the collected materials. This involves identifying recurring themes related to institutional barriers, political economy dynamics, and policy opportunities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are derived inductively from the data while also being informed by the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier. Thematic analysis allows for the synthesis of diverse textual sources into coherent categories, facilitating the comparison of institutional narratives across different sectors and governance levels. This method supports the objective of revealing how structural constraints and actor interests shape food policy implementation in Indonesia.

The final step involves drawing conclusions through conceptual synthesis. This means linking the themes discovered during analysis back to the theoretical frameworks and research questions to form a cohesive narrative (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 245–247). Conclusion drawing in this study does not imply definitive or generalizable outcomes but rather offers interpretive insights grounded in data and theory. The process includes triangulating findings across data sources and reflecting on their implications for policy design and institutional reform. By using this interpretive strategy, the study not only addresses the research questions but also generates actionable recommendations for improving food governance in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study emphasize the complex, interwoven nature of institutional arrangements, political dynamics, and food security outcomes in Indonesia. Drawing from institutional theory and political economy, it becomes increasingly evident that the persistence of food insecurity in Indonesia cannot be attributed solely to technical limitations, market volatility, or agricultural underperformance. Instead, it reflects

deeper, systemic failures in the architecture and performance of public institutions. These include fragmented governance, overlapping mandates, regulatory ambiguity, and a persistent reliance on informal networks such as clientelism and bureaucratic patronage, all of which significantly impair policy design and execution (Robison & Hadiz, 2004; Anderson, 2008). Such dysfunctions are further entrenched by a bureaucratic culture that resists transparency and innovation. These dynamics confirm the findings of earlier governance research, which warned that Indonesia's decentralization reforms—while democratizing authority—simultaneously produced a highly fragmented policymaking environment that inhibits coherent, cross-sectoral policy responses (Hofman & Kaiser, 2004; Rasyid, 2003).

Compounding this institutional fragmentation is a historical tendency to frame food security predominantly in terms of self-sufficiency and production, particularly of rice, without equal emphasis on governance quality or distributional equity. While empirical work has made important contributions to understanding food production systems and trade flows, relatively few studies have interrogated how bureaucratic behavior, institutional inertia, and political incentives affect policy delivery and resource allocation. For instance, while rice subsidies and food imports remain highly politicized issues, their implementation continues to suffer from chronic inefficiencies, lack of coordination, and limited institutional accountability (Timmer, 2004; Simatupang & Timmer, 2008). Consequently, such policies often achieve only partial or temporary success, and may even generate unintended consequences—such as price distortions or exclusion of vulnerable populations—when not embedded within a robust institutional framework. By focusing on the interplay between institutional structures and actor behavior, this study contributes a more integrated and politically attuned interpretation of food insecurity, especially within the context of post-authoritarian, decentralized governance in Indonesia.

A second layer of analysis highlights how institutional dysfunction is frequently rooted in jurisdictional overlaps and the absence of clearly delineated authority. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the regulatory ecosystem surrounding rice importation and distribution. Historically, the Ministries of Agriculture, Trade, and State-Owned Enterprises have exercised simultaneous—but poorly coordinated—control over various aspects of rice import licensing, often with conflicting objectives, timeframes, and political interests (McCulloch & Timmer, 2008). This institutional entanglement generates policy inconsistency, delays in decision-making, and frequent policy reversals, which in turn foster uncertainty among importers, farmers, and consumers. Such uncertainty erodes confidence in government interventions and weakens the effectiveness of both market-based and state-led initiatives aimed at improving food availability.

This finding reinforces the relevance of governance theory, which emphasizes the critical role of coordination, transparency, and accountability in delivering effective

public services (Kooiman, 2003). Governance theory underscores the importance of horizontal and vertical coherence in policy implementation, warning that fragmented authority without formalized collaboration mechanisms often results in inefficiencies and policy incoherence. Moreover, the study reveals the salience of path dependency in shaping Indonesia's food policy trajectories. Long-standing commitments to rice self-sufficiency, framed under the banner of food sovereignty, continue to dominate national discourse, even when empirical evidence suggests that such policies are economically inefficient and environmentally unsustainable under current conditions (Pierson, 2000). These historical policy commitments become self-reinforcing, making institutional transformation politically costly and administratively difficult.

Crucially, the research also identifies several forward-looking opportunities for reform that align with Indonesia's hybrid governance structure, which merges centralized political authority with decentralized administrative functions. In this environment, institutional innovation must be both top-down—driven by national leadership and regulatory clarity—and bottom-up, facilitated by empowered local actors and community participation. Emerging opportunities include strengthening the role of civil society and non-state actors in advocating for nutrition-sensitive and inclusive food policies. Civil society organizations are increasingly active in monitoring food distribution, promoting dietary diversity, and holding governments accountable for policy failures. Their involvement introduces new avenues for participatory governance and citizen feedback, especially in areas underserved by formal institutions.

Additionally, the study identifies digital technology as a critical enabler of institutional reform. The integration of e-governance tools—such as digital subsidy platforms, satellite-based crop monitoring, and real-time food distribution trackers—can significantly improve supply chain transparency and reduce leakages. These innovations are particularly effective when backed by reformist bureaucrats and policy entrepreneurs willing to challenge entrenched interests and institutional norms (Grindle & Thomas, 1991). Such actors serve as catalysts for change by leveraging policy windows, mobilizing support coalitions, and translating evidence into actionable reforms. Thus, this study not only maps the existing institutional and political constraints to food security but also illuminates the strategic points of intervention that could lead to meaningful transformation. By doing so, it contributes to filling a critical research gap identified in the Introduction and offers both diagnostic and prescriptive insights into Indonesia's food policy landscape.

1. Bureaucratic Fragmentation and Overlapping Mandates

Addressing the first research question—what institutional barriers most significantly hinder Indonesia's food security efforts—this section finds that

bureaucratic fragmentation and overlapping mandates are the most pervasive structural constraints. The decentralization reforms initiated in 2001 gave local governments considerable autonomy, but without corresponding clarity in the roles and responsibilities of central and regional authorities (Hofman & Kaiser, 2004). As a result, food security initiatives are often inconsistently implemented, with some regions excelling in policy innovation while others lag behind due to lack of capacity or political will (Rasyid, 2003).

One illustrative example is the management of food stock and price stabilization. BULOG, the national logistics agency, is formally tasked with maintaining food reserves, yet its authority has been curtailed by the Ministry of Trade's control over import licensing and the Ministry of Agriculture's jurisdiction over production policies (Anderson, 2008). This trifurcation leads to a situation where no single agency has the mandate or capacity to respond quickly to food crises, resulting in delayed interventions and policy misalignment. The inefficiency is compounded by conflicting political interests at different levels of government, further weakening policy coherence (Robison & Hadiz, 2004).

Moreover, budget allocations for food security programs are frequently channeled through different ministries with limited coordination. This vertical and horizontal fragmentation results in duplicated efforts, inconsistent targeting, and minimal impact on long-term food resilience (World Bank, 2012). For instance, subsidies for fertilizer and rice are administered through different bureaucracies without a unified monitoring system, making evaluation and reform difficult. Institutional theory explains this as a failure of formal rule design and accountability structures, which prevents synergy and learning across agencies (Peters, 2001, pp. 19–22).

The fragmentation is not limited to national agencies. At the local level, food policy implementation is often hampered by unclear regulations, lack of technical capacity, and political interference. Local governments, empowered through decentralization, have developed their own food strategies, but without strong guidance or monitoring from the central government, many of these strategies remain aspirational rather than operational (Suryahadi & Sumarto, 2011). This institutional dissonance creates significant policy gaps, especially in remote and underdeveloped regions where food insecurity is most acute.

An important finding is that this bureaucratic complexity is not merely a matter of poor design but is maintained by entrenched interests. Political economy theory reveals that multiple actors benefit from maintaining the status quo, such as rent-seeking bureaucrats, politically connected importers, and local

elites who gain from controlling program budgets and procurement processes (Hadiz & Robison, 2005). These actors resist reform because a more streamlined and accountable system would threaten their discretionary power and economic benefits.

The implications are profound. Without institutional realignment, even well-conceived food security policies will struggle to achieve their intended outcomes. Reform must begin with clarifying mandates, consolidating responsibilities under fewer agencies, and creating formal coordination mechanisms with enforceable accountability standards. Only by addressing these institutional bottlenecks can Indonesia build a food system that is both resilient and equitable.

2. Political Incentives, Populism, and Food Policy Implementation

This section addresses the second research question: how do political economy dynamics shape policy implementation in Indonesia's food sector? The findings reveal that food policies are often shaped less by rational planning or evidence-based approaches, and more by short-term political incentives, populist pressures, and elite interests. These dynamics generate distortions in the design and execution of food programs, perpetuating inefficiencies and weakening the state's capacity to respond to food insecurity in a sustainable manner (Robison & Hadiz, 2004).

One of the clearest manifestations of political influence is the government's persistent focus on rice self-sufficiency, a policy rooted more in nationalistic symbolism than in food systems logic (Timmer, 2004). Politicians frequently use rice availability and price stability as tools to gain electoral support, especially during local and national campaigns. Subsidies for rice distribution, fertilizer, and agricultural inputs are often expanded in pre-election years despite evidence showing their limited long-term impact on farmer productivity or food access (Simatupang & Timmer, 2008). These populist measures create fiscal burdens while failing to address structural issues such as land tenure insecurity or post-harvest losses.

Furthermore, policy capture by agribusiness lobbies and politically connected importers has led to regulatory distortions, such as protectionist trade policies that serve elite interests while raising food prices for consumers (McCulloch & Timmer, 2008). For example, restrictive import licensing for staple foods has been used as a rent-seeking tool, allowing select firms to benefit from price differentials between international and domestic markets. These arrangements

are often opaque, with limited public scrutiny or institutional checks, highlighting how vested interests manipulate regulatory environments to their advantage (Hadiz & Robison, 2005).

The interplay of political competition and bureaucratic discretion also creates policy volatility. Successive administrations frequently rebrand food security programs without altering their underlying structure, resulting in symbolic changes rather than substantive reform (Grindle & Thomas, 1991). For instance, transitions from programs like *Raskin* to *BPNT* (non-cash food assistance) were implemented with limited stakeholder consultation and uneven capacity across regions. While the intent was to improve targeting and reduce leakages, the lack of institutional continuity and local preparedness has led to confusion and inconsistency in delivery (World Bank, 2012).

Another important aspect is the central role of subnational political elites in shaping policy implementation. In decentralized Indonesia, district heads (bupati) and governors wield significant discretion in program execution. Many use food security budgets as political capital, directing resources toward supportive constituencies or political allies rather than areas of greatest need (Hofman & Kaiser, 2004). This political logic undermines the principles of equity and needs-based planning, leading to inefficient allocation of resources and persistent regional disparities in food security outcomes.

Governance theory helps explain why these political distortions persist. Weak accountability mechanisms, limited transparency, and underdeveloped civil society oversight allow politicians and bureaucrats to operate with impunity (Kooiman, 2003). While formal institutions exist to regulate food systems, informal norms and power dynamics often override them in practice. For example, public consultations on food policy are frequently perfunctory, with decisions predetermined by elite bargaining processes that exclude marginalized voices (Keeley & Scoones, 2003).

Despite these challenges, the study also identifies emerging opportunities for reform through coalition-building and policy entrepreneurship. There is growing awareness among reformist bureaucrats, civil society organizations, and international donors of the need to depoliticize food policy and enhance institutional accountability. Initiatives such as open government platforms and participatory budgeting have begun to create pressure for greater transparency in food-related programs, although their impact remains uneven (Grindle, 2004).

In summary, political economy dynamics in Indonesia's food sector are characterized by a misalignment between public interest and elite incentives.

Policies are often shaped by electoral cycles, rent-seeking behavior, and administrative discretion rather than coherent strategic planning. Overcoming these dynamics requires strengthening institutional checks, promoting policy transparency, and fostering inclusive policymaking processes. Without addressing these foundational political distortions, efforts to improve food security will remain constrained by systemic dysfunction.

3. Reform Pathways and Policy Opportunities for Institutional Coherence

This section addresses the third research question by exploring what policy opportunities exist for improving institutional coherence and food governance in Indonesia. The analysis reveals that although the political and institutional landscape is fragmented, there are emerging reform pathways that can be leveraged to enhance the coherence, transparency, and responsiveness of Indonesia's food security framework. These opportunities are embedded in existing institutional mechanisms and driven by both internal reform actors and external accountability pressures (Grindle & Thomas, 1991).

One key opportunity lies in the harmonization of institutional mandates across relevant ministries. Currently, the overlapping roles of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Trade, and the National Logistics Agency (BULOG) create confusion and inefficiencies. Policy coherence could be improved through legal and procedural reforms that clarify the scope of each agency's responsibilities and establish formal coordination frameworks (Anderson, 2008). For instance, integrating food security indicators into national and regional development plans could facilitate alignment across sectors and levels of government, reducing policy fragmentation (World Bank, 2012).

Another potential reform avenue is the development of inter-ministerial task forces or steering committees focused specifically on food system governance. These bodies can serve as institutional bridges, facilitating communication and policy synchronization among key stakeholders. Such mechanisms have shown promise in other policy areas such as disaster risk management and could be adapted to address food security challenges in a cross-sectoral manner (Hofman & Kaiser, 2004). Moreover, using performance-based budgeting and results-oriented planning tools would help improve accountability and reduce wasteful spending within food programs (Peters, 2001, pp. 23–26).

Decentralization, while a source of fragmentation, also presents opportunities for local-level innovation. Some subnational governments have demonstrated successful models of community-based food systems, including urban

agriculture, school feeding programs, and integrated nutrition strategies. These localized approaches can be scaled up through policy support and technical assistance from the central government. In particular, incentivizing best practices through grants or recognition schemes could motivate lagging regions to adopt more effective governance models (Suryahadi & Sumarto, 2011).

Digital technologies also offer transformative potential. The adoption of e-procurement systems, satellite monitoring of crops, and digital subsidy transfers has already begun to reduce leakages and improve service delivery in some sectors (World Bank, 2012). Expanding these tools to the food security domain could enhance transparency, improve data accuracy, and support evidence-based policymaking. Digital tools can also facilitate citizen engagement, enabling communities to report food shortages or maldistribution in real-time and thus improve local responsiveness (Pierson, 2000).

Civil society organizations and independent policy watchdogs are becoming increasingly active in the food security space, advocating for inclusive, sustainable, and rights-based approaches. These actors play a crucial role in holding institutions accountable, especially in a context where formal oversight mechanisms remain weak (Kooiman, 2003). Their engagement can be institutionalized through consultative platforms, participatory policymaking processes, and collaborative monitoring frameworks. Moreover, international donors and development partners can support capacity building for both state and non-state actors, facilitating a culture of mutual accountability (Grindle, 2004).

Lastly, there is a growing policy discourse around transitioning from food sovereignty narratives—which prioritize domestic production at all costs—toward food systems thinking, which integrates environmental sustainability, nutritional outcomes, and market efficiency (Headey & Ecker, 2013). This shift provides a strategic window for institutional reform, as it aligns with global trends and opens the door for innovative policies that go beyond staple-centric strategies. By embracing a food systems approach, Indonesia can better address the multifaceted nature of food security while creating space for institutional experimentation and adaptive learning (Keeley & Scoones, 2003).

In conclusion, while institutional inertia and political resistance present serious obstacles, there are multiple entry points for reforming Indonesia's food security governance. These include clarifying institutional mandates, fostering inter-agency collaboration, supporting local innovations, leveraging digital technologies, and strengthening civil society participation. Capitalizing on these

opportunities requires sustained political will, strategic coalition-building, and a shift toward more inclusive and systemic policymaking processes.

This study has examined the political economy of food security in Indonesia through an institutional lens, addressing three interrelated research questions. First, it identified that bureaucratic fragmentation and overlapping mandates among key institutions significantly hinder the effective implementation of food policies. The decentralization process, though aimed at improving responsiveness, has resulted in policy dissonance and coordination failures across governance levels. Second, it revealed that political economy dynamics—particularly populism, elite interests, and short-term political incentives—deeply influence the design and delivery of food programs. These dynamics distort priorities, lead to inefficient resource allocation, and perpetuate a cycle of policy volatility and symbolic reforms. Third, the research outlined a set of policy opportunities that could enhance institutional coherence and food governance, including inter-ministerial coordination, digital governance tools, local innovations, and greater involvement of civil society and reformist coalitions.

The findings reinforce the theoretical proposition that formal institutions, informal norms, and power relations collectively shape policy outcomes. Institutional theory explains the persistence of inefficiencies due to weak accountability structures and path-dependent bureaucratic behavior, while political economy frameworks clarify how actors' interests and power asymmetries obstruct systemic reform. By integrating these perspectives, this research contributes a more nuanced understanding of the governance deficits that underlie food insecurity in Indonesia. It shows that technical solutions, while necessary, are insufficient unless accompanied by institutional realignment and political recalibration.

Theoretically, the study expands the application of institutional and political economy frameworks to food security in a decentralized state. It refines existing models by contextualizing them within Indonesia's hybrid governance structure, where central authority coexists with strong local discretion. This contributes to comparative political economy scholarship by providing an example of how hybrid institutional arrangements affect food systems.

Practically, the findings offer a roadmap for policymakers seeking to strengthen food security governance. Recommendations include clarifying agency mandates, embedding accountability mechanisms, adopting digital tools for policy execution, and building multi-stakeholder platforms for participatory governance. These insights are especially relevant for designing context-sensitive and politically viable interventions that address both structural and agency-related challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the institutional and political economy dimensions of food security in Indonesia, revealing that governance failures—not production shortfalls alone—are central to the persistence of food insecurity. Through qualitative analysis grounded in institutional theory and political economy, the research identified three core findings. First, institutional fragmentation and overlapping mandates among key ministries and agencies disrupt policy coherence and undermine implementation. Second, political incentives—especially those driven by electoral pressures and elite interests—shape food policy decisions in ways that often conflict with long-term objectives. Third, despite these barriers, policy opportunities exist through institutional realignment, digital innovation, local governance reform, and greater civil society engagement.

The study's theoretical alignment affirms that food security must be understood as a governance issue embedded in power structures and institutional norms. It confirms the relevance of path dependency and governance theory in explaining policy inertia and coordination failures. By situating Indonesia within a broader framework of decentralization and hybrid institutional arrangements, the research contributes original insights to comparative food security governance and institutional analysis.

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations emerge. Policymakers must prioritize mandate harmonization and formal coordination mechanisms to reduce fragmentation. Performance-based budgeting and transparency tools should be integrated into food security programs to ensure accountability. Furthermore, local innovations should be incentivized, and digital technologies leveraged to improve policy responsiveness. Finally, future research should explore longitudinal institutional change and the role of emerging actors—such as social movements and private sector coalitions—in transforming food governance. In closing, food security in Indonesia cannot be guaranteed solely through increased production or imports. It requires institutional integrity, political commitment, and systemic reform.

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