Sustainable Governance for Strengthening Coastal Community Economies Based on Blue Economy: Evidence from Southwest Papua Province, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT:

Southwest Papua Province presents a paradox between substantial marine potential (16.63 million kg fish catch; USD 1.12 million fisheries-tourism exports) and persistent coastal poverty (16.95%; rural-urban gap of 25.9% vs 8.03%), suggesting that the principal constraint lies in governance rather than resource availability. This study analyses how sustainable governance shapes coastal blue-economy development in Southwest Papua through Lafferty's (2004) five-dimensional framework. A qualitative embedded single-case study was conducted in Raja Ampat Regency, Sorong Regency, and Sorong City. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 28 purposively-selected informants, participant observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis, analysed thematically through open, axial, and selective coding using NVivo. Coastal governance is normatively oriented toward sustainability but empirically unconsolidated. Formal institutions exist yet remain sectoral (none of 25 coastal programmes is cross-OPD); implementation lacks learning cycles; results-orientation is administrative; only 10.9% of community aspirations are realised as programmes (2.2% for customary institutions); and sectoral integration is fragmented. The principal challenge is the disconnection among institutional design, implementation, results-orientation, participation, and policy integration. Strengthening coastal economies requires a coherent, adaptive, inclusive, and integrated governance system. This study operationalises Lafferty's framework in a plural-institutional context where customary, state, and market institutions intersect, applying integrative visualisation to diagnose sustainable governance quality.

Keywords: Sustainable Governance; Blue Economy; Indigenous Participation.

Introduction.

Coastal economic development in Southwest Papua Province unfolds within a striking paradox: substantial marine potential coexists with limited welfare translation at the household level. Despite a fish catch of 16.63 million kg, economic growth of 3.6%, and fisheries-tourism exports of USD 1.12 million, poverty remains at 16.95% with a pronounced rural-urban divide (25.9% versus 8.03%) (BPS Southwest Papua, 2024). These figures confirm Mollet et al., (2024) argument that economic growth does not automatically yield equitable benefit distribution without an inclusive governance framework.

Five interlocking issues mark coastal governance in this region. First, institutional misfit: formal instruments such as the RPJMD, RZWP3K, and sectoral apparatus exist, but customary institutions and indigenous representation lack operational recognition (Nanda Magfiroh et al., 2025). Second, weak policy learning: monitoring and evaluation exist but rarely mature into adaptive cycles (Abdullah et al., 2025; Mukhlis & Perdana, 2022). Third, output-biased management: success is measured by budget absorption and beneficiary counts rather than substantive welfare change (Laila et al., 2025). Fourth, procedural participation: vulnerable groups attend forums but rarely influence decisions. Fifth, sectoral fragmentation: economic and ecological agendas remain decoupled (H, 2022). These issues do not stand alone; they mutually weaken one another within an incomplete governance system.

Although coastal governance and blue-economy literature in Indonesia is expanding (Fadhlillah, 2025; Trenggono et al., 2025), few studies have integratively operationalized (Hendarman et al., 2024) sustainable governance framework in a setting where customary institutions, indigenous rights, and formal state structures intersect as intensely as in Southwest Papua. Existing studies tend to address single dimensions without examining how the five dimensions interlock as a system. This study addresses this gap by providing a holistic diagnostic of sustainable governance quality, supported by quantitative-visual evidence from coastal planning documents, forum minutes, and informant coding. The objective is to analyse how sustainable governance shapes coastal blue-economy development across institutional fit, implementation and learning, results-orientation, participation, and sectoral integration.

Theoretical Framework

Sustainable governance has been theorised through several traditions. Integrated Coastal Zone Management (Stojanovic & Gee, 2020) provides technical coordination frameworks but underplays institutional mismatch. Adaptive governance (Folke et al., 2005) emphasises learning cycles but does not redesign formal institutions to enable adaptive learning. Results-based governance (Speckbacher, 2023) focuses on measurement but lacks normative integration of learning, participation, and sectoral coherence.

Lafferty, (2004) addresses these limitations by positioning sustainability as a principle guiding the entire governance system. His framework specifies five interactive elements: (1) institutional fit between organisational form and sustainability function; (2) implementation and policy learning; (3) management by objectives and results; (4) substantive stakeholder participation; and (5) sectoral integration and decoupling. These elements operate as a system rather than as additive components: weakness in any one dimension reproduces weakness in others (Bosselmann, 2016; Drucker, 2012)

Two complementary perspectives enrich this framework. Interactive governance Edelenbos & van Meerkerk, (2022) treats governance as interaction among autonomous social systems—state, market, civil society, and indigenous communities—emphasising that complex systems can only be managed through equitable interaction. Network governance (Keast, 2022; Sørensen, 2022) underscores that integration and learning require relational infrastructure connecting actors across levels and sectors. Together, these perspectives suggest that Lafferty's five dimensions become operational through inter-system interaction quality and network structure.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with an embedded single-case study strategy (Firsova-Eckert, 2025; Taylor & Healy, 2023), examining coastal community economic development governance in Southwest Papua Province. Three coastal areas were purposively selected to represent diverse governance contexts: Raja Ampat Regency (marine conservation hub), Sorong Regency (fisheries production base), and Sorong City (regional administrative centre). Twenty-eight informants were purposively selected, complemented by snowball sampling, representing Bappeda (n=2), technical OPDs (n=4), Inspectorate (n=1), evaluators (n=1), DPRD (n=2), the Papuan People's Council/MRP (n=2), sub-district heads (n=2), customary leaders (n=2), fishers and coastal SMEs (n=4), women fishers (n=2), indigenous youth (n=1), NGO activists (n=2), community leaders (n=1), and supply-chain actors (n=2). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews structured around Lafferty's five dimensions, participant observation in four arenas (Musrenbang, inter-agency coordination, customary meetings, local economic sites), and focus group discussions. Secondary data covered RPJMD, RZWP3K, OPD strategic plans, programme reports, evaluation documents, and forum minutes. Thematic analysis using NVivo proceeded through open, axial, and selective coding, linking field observations to the five analytical dimensions (Corti, 2022). Validity was maintained through source and method triangulation, member checking with key informants, and peer debriefing. The study obtained ethical clearance from [Ethics Committee Name and Number]; informed consent was secured from all informants, with particular attention to free, prior, and informed consent principles in engaging indigenous communities.

Results

Institutional Fit

Formal coastal-development institutions exist but are not designed to perform integrated sustainability functions. Coastal programmes have been incorporated into regional planning, yet authority remains sectoral. As Figure 1 demonstrates, of the 25 coastal programmes and 72 activities distributed across five OPDs in 2023–2024, none was formally designed as a cross-OPD initiative.

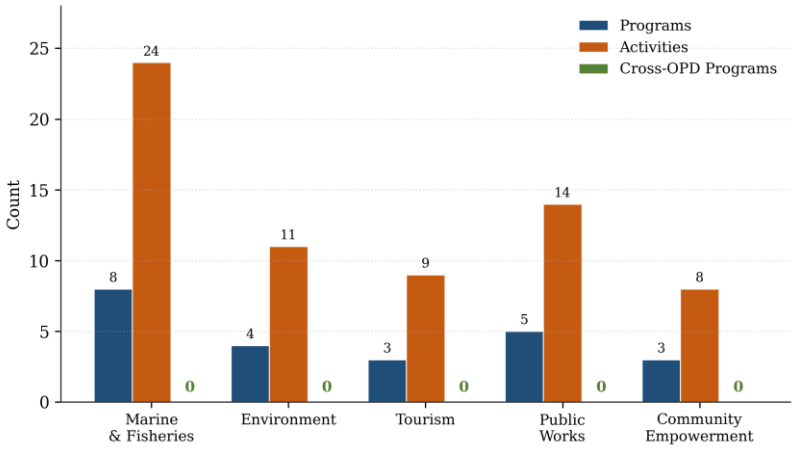

Figure 1. Distribution of coastal development programmes per OPD in Southwest Papua Province, 2023–2024

Source: Compiled from OPD work plans and RPJMD documents, 2025

This pattern empirically illustrates institutional fragmentation: institutions are formally present but operate within isolated sectoral logics. Coding across informant categories confirms this pattern. Fisheries Agency informants report programme implementation constrained by other agencies' mandates; Environment Agency informants describe ecological functions appearing as

corrective afterthoughts rather than foundational principles. Customary leaders highlight that customary institutions, though socially influential, lack equal standing in formal governance, producing institutional dualism. Academic informants and the MRP converge on the diagnosis that the problem is not institutional scarcity but functional non-synchronisation—a misalignment between formal institutional design and the integrative function sustainability demands.

Implementation and Policy Learning

Implementation occurs but lacks systematic learning cycles. OPD implementers confirm that programmes follow work plans and technical guidelines but encounter constraints in targeting accuracy, geographic conditions, and mentoring capacity. Programme facilitators observe that interventions typically halt at initial aid distribution; post-programme strengthening, follow-up mentoring, and evaluation-based redesign are inconsistent. Sub-district heads describe top-down programmes with limited space for local adaptation, while fishers report that aid often misaligns with fishing seasons, equipment needs, and economic risks they face. Coastal SME actors confirm that initial support rarely translates into stable market access or financing continuity. Crucially, monitoring and evaluation have not matured into mechanisms that feed lessons back into policy redesign. MRP informants emphasise that evaluation remains administrative—focused on activity realisation rather than substantive benefit to indigenous coastal communities. The result is administrative repetition rather than adaptive learning: programmes are executed, reported, and renewed, but recurring weaknesses are not systematically addressed in subsequent design cycles.

Management by Objectives and Results

Sustainability objectives have been formally articulated, but results-orientation remains administrative. Bappeda informants report that planning documents specify goals and indicators, but these indicators inadequately capture substantive welfare and resource-sustainability changes. Technical OPDs measure success through budget absorption, beneficiary counts, and activity targets—parameters that confirm activity but not transformation. Inspectorate informants confirm that performance reports exist but the linkage between targets, realisation, and field-level impact is weakly verified. Evaluator informants observe that indicators are too narrow and technocratic to capture multidimensional sustainability, while MRP informants emphasise that outcome measures must include benefit distribution to indigenous coastal communities. This pattern manifests a systemic gap between formal availability and substantive functioning across all five governance dimensions. Figure 2 visualises this asymmetry, showing that while institutional and procedural elements are nominally established (scores 7.5–8.5 on coding intensity), their substantive operation remains weak (scores 3.0–4.0).

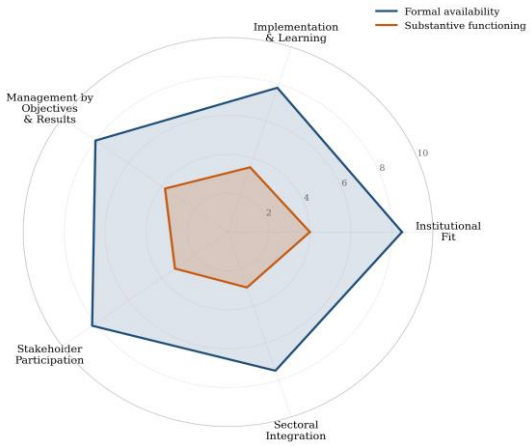

Figure 2. Sustainable governance dimensions: formal availability versus substantive functioning
Source: Thematic coding intensity scores, 2026

Stakeholder Participation

Participation spaces exist but operate procedurally rather than substantively. Small-scale fishers attend forums but rarely feel their views shape decisions. Coastal women appear in participatory spaces but are positioned as supplementary rather than agenda-setting actors. Indigenous youth have minimal strategic space, while NGOs describe forums as consultative rather than co-productive. The structural asymmetry of participation is illustrated in Figure 3, which compares fisher representation against the production of written follow-up across six forum types.

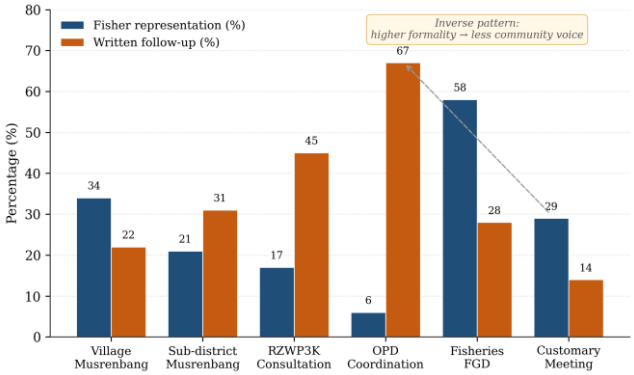

Figure 3. Fisher representation versus written follow-up across coastal governance forums, 2023–2025

Source: Compiled from forum minutes, OPD reports, and field observations, 2026

Figure 3 reveals an inverse pattern: forums producing the highest written follow-up are precisely those with the lowest community representation. OPD coordination forums achieve 67% follow-up but only 6% fisher representation; conversely, Fisheries FGDs draw 58% fisher representation but produce only 28% follow-up. The aspiration trajectory in Figure 4 further demonstrates this asymmetry: of 640 aspirations recorded across four research sites during 2022–2024, only 21.9% entered planning documents, 10.9% were realised as programmes, and merely 2.2% of customary-institution aspirations received concrete policy response.

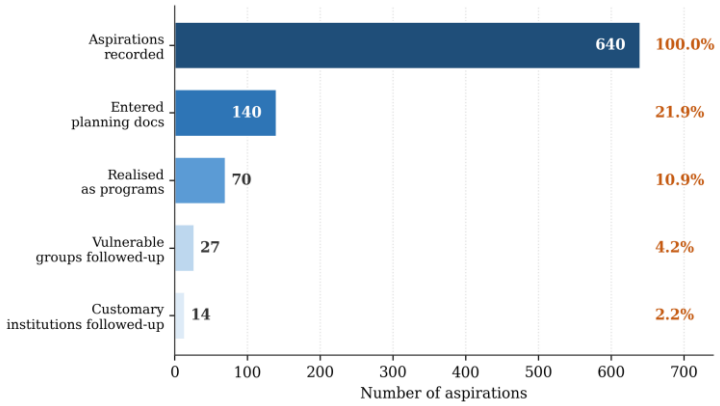

Figure 4. Trajectory of aspirations from forum recording to policy realisation, 2022–2024

Source: Compiled from forum minutes across four research areas, 2022–2024

These figures empirically substantiate what informants describe: participation exists as procedural attendance, but the conversion of voice into policy decision remains weak—particularly for vulnerable groups and indigenous institutions whose aspirations are systematically filtered out of the policy stream.

4.5 Sectoral Integration and Decoupling

Cross-sectoral synchronisation is pursued formally but weakens at implementation. Bappeda informants confirm that synchronisation occurs in planning, but during implementation each OPD reverts to its sectoral mandate. Fisheries informants describe routine conflicts between production targets and conservation requirements; Environment informants observe that ecological protection is often perceived as constraining economic agendas rather than grounding them. Tourism informants identify substantial but unstable synergy potential with fisheries and coastal sectors. Business actors emphasise that regulatory certainty and inter-agency coordination determine business sustainability, while NGOs and the MRP underscore that integration must balance growth, ecological protection, and indigenous benefit distribution. The absence of any cross-OPD programme (Figure 1) is the most direct empirical signal of operational decoupling.

Synthesis of Findings

Reading the five dimensions integratively, Table 1 synthesises principal findings across the framework.

Table 1. Summary of findings across sustainable governance dimensions

Dimension	Principal Finding
Institutional fit	Formal institutions exist but operate sectorally; no cross-OPD programme exists; customary institutions and indigenous representation lack operational recognition.
Implementation & learning	Programmes are executed but evaluation does not feed back into redesign; learning is replaced by administrative repetition.
Management by objectives & results	Goals and indicators are articulated, but measurement focuses on budget absorption and beneficiary counts rather than substantive welfare and resource sustainability.
Stakeholder participation	Forums are open but procedural; only 10.9% of aspirations become programmes and 2.2% of customary aspirations receive policy response.
Sectoral integration / decoupling	Formal synchronisation occurs in planning but fragments at implementation; economic and ecological agendas remain decoupled.

Source: Thematic analysis results, 2026

5. Discussion

The findings reveal that sustainable governance in Southwest Papua's coastal blue economy operates as five interlocking deficiencies rather than as separate issues. Institutional misfit—where formal authority, customary institutions, and cross-sectoral coordination remain unaligned—produces conditions in which implementation runs as administrative execution rather than as a learning cycle (Jentoft & Chuenpagdee, 2022; Rahman et al., 2025; Singh et al., 2021). Recent studies in Portugal, Cuba, and Lithuania consistently demonstrate that the presence of policy instruments does not automatically yield functional governance; rather, governance depends on the integrated design of legal frameworks, implementation strategies, and policy objectives as one social-ecological system. The empirical absence of cross-OPD programmes documented in this study (Figure 1) mirrors this global pattern of sectoral compartmentalisation.

Weak policy learning intertwines with output-biased management. Recent literature describes this as the institutionalisation gap in learning (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2023; Martin et al., 2025; Zaki, 2024) in which evaluation produces compliance documentation rather than evidence-based redesign. The literature on blue-economy measurement—particularly Indonesia's blue economy index (Soemodinoto & Pedju, 2022) and social-equity indicator frameworks (Browne

et al., 2022) emphasises that serious assessment must unite ecological, economic, social, and policy dimensions. The 10.9% aspiration-to-programme conversion rate, and particularly the 2.2% for customary institutions (Figure 4), signals that current measurement frameworks systematically render indigenous benefits invisible to policy.

The participation findings (Figures 3–4) align with international evidence that participatory arenas can operate symbolically when administration remains strongly sectoral. Cioffi et al. (2024) document similar patterns in Cadiz Bay, while Ishtiaque et al. (2021) and (Zun Nurain, 2026) show that blue-economy networks in Bangladesh tend to displace non-state actors to weaker positions when the state remains central. The inverse relationship documented in Figure 3—the more formal the forum, the less community voice it admits—reflects what Kooiman (2003) terms meta-governance failure: the inability of governing systems to create conditions in which heterogeneous actors interact equitably to produce shared solutions. Sectoral integration likewise cannot be resolved by coordination meetings alone; it requires operational capacity to convert formal coordination into substantive integration (Hellman, 2024; Vince et al., 2024).

Two implications follow. Theoretically, the study extends Lafferty's framework to plural-institutional contexts by demonstrating that institutional fit must encompass recognition and integration of indigenous governance systems, not merely formal organisational design. Interactive and network governance (Sørensen, 2022) function as complementary lenses operationalising Lafferty's dimensions through inter-system interaction quality and relational infrastructure. Practically, the findings suggest five priorities: (1) integrating customary institutions and the MRP into operational, not merely consultative, decision-making; (2) instituting quarterly reflection forums that link field implementers and communities to policy designers; (3) reformulating performance indicators to capture substantive outcomes alongside administrative outputs; (4) establishing binding follow-up protocols for vulnerable-group aspirations; and (5) institutionalising cross-OPD programmes with dedicated budgets at the coastal-fisheries-environment-tourism nexus.

This study has limitations. The embedded single-case design provides analytical depth but limits statistical generalisation; comparative multi-province studies would strengthen external validity. The cross-sectional design captures governance at one point in time; longitudinal research could trace reform trajectories. Future research could integrate quantitative blue-economy indicators (Gourvenec et al., 2025) with the qualitative diagnostics presented here and expand sampling to national-level policy actors to illuminate multi-level dynamics.

5. Conclusion

Sustainable governance in coastal blue-economy development in Southwest Papua Province has not yet operated as a complete system. Formal institutions, programmes, indicators, participation forums, and coordination mechanisms exist, but they remain disconnected from one another. None of the 25 coastal programmes is cross-OPD; only 10.9% of community aspirations become programmes; only 2.2% of customary-institution aspirations receive policy response; and the more formal the participatory forum, the less voice it admits from communities closest to coastal realities. The principal challenge is therefore not the absence of institutions or programmes but the disconnection among institutional design, implementation, results-orientation, participation, and sectoral integration. Strengthening coastal community economies through the blue economy requires transformation toward a coherent, adaptive, inclusive, and just governance architecture—one that recognises the equal standing of formal and customary institutions and converts substantive participation into binding policy outcomes.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Qualitative data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical restrictions protecting informant identities.

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