

Who Gets the Salt Aid? Distributive Politics of Community Salt Business Assistance in Jeneponto, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT:

State assistance to small-scale salt producers is commonly treated as a technical matter of delivering production inputs, yet its allocation determines which coastal households gain access to scarce public resources. This study examines the allocation and distribution of assistance under the Community Salt Business Development Program (PUGAR) in Jeneponto Regency, one of the main salt-producing areas of South Sulawesi. A descriptive qualitative design was applied, combining in-depth interviews with officials of the district Marine and Fisheries Office, field coordinators, leaders and members of community salt business groups, field observation of salt ponds and assistance use, and analysis of program documents. The analysis is organised around four questions: who receives assistance, what is received, when it is received, and how it is allocated. The findings show that eligibility has shifted from individual need to group membership, so that organised, active, and well-connected groups become the effective beneficiaries. The assistance consists mainly of collective physical assets and limited training opportunities whose control tends to concentrate among group leaders. Timing advantages accrue to groups that obtain information early through village authorities and maintain frequent contact with facilitators, while volatile annual production exposes the gap between administrative cycles and producers' needs. Allocation operates through a formal procedure layered with informal relational criteria that reward sociability and proximity. The program therefore improves production capacity for some groups while reproducing unequal access among salt farmers. A needs-based registry, a public distribution calendar, and open village-level verification are required to make allocation more equitable.

Keywords: distributive politics; salt farmers; state assistance; local bureaucracy; access inequality

1. INTRODUCTION

Coastal households that depend on resource-based livelihoods face compounding environmental and economic pressures, and their

capacity to adapt is shaped by the assets, organisations, and public support they can mobilise (Mutanda & Nhamo, 2026). Longitudinal evidence from coastal communities

shows that households remaining in a single resource-dependent activity experience lower well-being than those able to diversify and build financial resilience (Janmaimool et al., 2025). Access to basic infrastructure and to decision-making arenas remains a persistent concern of small-scale producers, even in settings with strong institutions (Engen et al., 2026). In Indonesia, two decades of livelihood interventions in coastal areas have produced few demonstrably sustainable outcomes, largely because support has been short-term and weakly evaluated (Stacey et al., 2021). These conditions make the design and allocation of state assistance to coastal producers a central question of public policy rather than a merely technical one.

Salt farming is one of the most exposed coastal livelihoods because production depends entirely on dry-season evaporation, pond conditions, and simple equipment. Experimental evidence demonstrates that geomembrane-lined crystallisation ponds raise yields to 1,908.28 kg per hectare per harvest compared with 1,280.97 kg under conventional methods, shorten crystallisation time from 5.08 to 2.41 days, and increase NaCl content from 88.77% to 92.03% (Wiwoho & Prasada, 2024). Technology adoption, however, improves farmers' well-being only when the technology fits the producers' conditions and capacities (Abdul-Majid et al., 2024). The Government of Indonesia has pursued this agenda through the Community Salt Business Development Program (Pengembangan Usaha Garam Rakyat, PUGAR), established under Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries Regulation No. 41 of 2011, which provides production facilities, strengthens community salt business groups (Kelompok Usaha Garam Rakyat, KUGAR), and supplies technical mentoring to reduce dependence on imported salt and to raise producers' welfare.

Public programs of this kind do not distribute resources in a vacuum. Choices about how limited resources are allocated among competing commodities, regions, and groups involve explicit trade-offs between income, employment, and efficiency objectives (Nasikh et al., 2021). In ocean and coastal governance, equity has become

a core concern because the benefits of public investment often bypass marginalised producers, prompting calls to embed fairness in both the process and the outcomes of allocation (Croft et al., 2024). At the global level, the distribution of fisheries subsidies is markedly unjust, with most support flowing to already advantaged actors (Skerritt et al., 2023), while small-scale producers frequently lack the vocabulary and platforms to articulate the injustices they experience (Arias Schreiber et al., 2022). The allocation of salt assistance therefore needs to be read as a question of who is included in, and who is excluded from, the benefits of state intervention.

Indonesian local politics provides a particular setting for such distribution. The transition to direct elections of district heads reduced capital spending and household access to public services, with the largest losses in districts marked by strong clientelistic tendencies (Lewis & Dong, 2025). Customary and social brokerage networks have also proven resilient across successive electoral cycles and continue to mediate relations between citizens and the state (Rusta & Kartini, 2026). Comparative research shows that the class structure of a community shapes the political connections residents use to claim resources from the state (Agbalajobi et al., 2025), and that intermediaries improve public goods provision only when citizens are organised enough to hold them accountable (Paniagua, 2022). Frontline officials, moreover, exercise considerable discretion in translating policy into practice, making them decisive actors in governance outcomes (Holstead et al., 2021).

The design of eligibility rules also shapes who benefits. Evidence from India shows that simpler and more verifiable eligibility criteria substantially reduce exclusion errors in social transfers (Asri et al., 2022), while research in West Java indicates that multi-sector partnerships improve both the accuracy of targeting and the timeliness of disbursement (Kuntjorowati et al., 2024). Group-based registration increases smallholders' willingness to participate in subsidy programs (Hendrawan & Musshoff, 2024), but input subsidies generate heterogeneous effects across areas with different market and institutional

conditions (Ricome et al., 2024). Studies of village funds in Indonesia further indicate that larger allocations do not automatically accelerate development unless local institutions are able to convert transfers into productive outcomes (Hilmawan et al., 2023).

Jeneponto Regency illustrates why these distributive questions matter for salt producers. Data from the Jeneponto Marine and Fisheries Office record 626 salt farmers in 2024, concentrated in Bangkala (396), Arungkeke (173), Tamalatea (39), and West Bangkala (18) Districts. Salt output has fluctuated sharply, from 61,000.34 tons in 2018 and 90,000.61 tons in 2019 to 16,770.39 tons in 2020, 20,000 tons in 2021, 801.8 tons in 2022, 83,604 tons in 2023, and 28,033.4 tons in 2024. The combination of a large and spatially uneven producer population with highly unstable production means that demand for PUGAR assistance consistently exceeds supply. Under such scarcity, the allocation of assistance becomes an arena in which groups compete for access to state resources, and in which proximity to the bureaucracy and to local intermediaries may matter as much as need.

Existing research on farmer organisations in Indonesia shows that participatory and decentralised group governance strengthens members' commitment and adaptability (Kusnandar et al., 2023), that farmer groups in South Sulawesi can build effective collective rules even within weak formal schemes (Sirimorok et al., 2024), and that implementation of community-based programs often remains suboptimal despite adequate regulation because facilitator capacity and village engagement are limited (Widiyanto et al., 2025). Studies of rural knowledge networks also reveal that program design can place some groups at the centre and others at the margins of information flows (Pratiwi et al., 2022). However, these studies have not examined salt assistance as a problem of distributive politics, nor have they traced how formal procedures and informal relations jointly decide the beneficiaries, content, timing, and mechanism of allocation. Drawing on the classic formulation that politics concerns who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936), and on the view

that state rules are reshaped by the social forces through which they are implemented (Migdal, 1988), this study aims to analyse the allocation and distribution of PUGAR assistance in Jeneponto Regency along these four dimensions.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design, which is suited to understanding meanings, processes, and social relations as they unfold in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Jeneponto Regency was selected purposively as one of the main centres of community salt production in South Sulawesi and as a long-standing recipient of PUGAR assistance. Fieldwork was conducted from January to March 2026, after the completion of the 2025 fiscal-year program cycle, so that the processes of proposal, verification, determination, and distribution could be observed in full. Informants were selected purposively from four categories: the leadership of the Jeneponto Marine and Fisheries Office, the PUGAR field coordinator responsible for verification and monitoring, KUGAR leaders, and members of salt farmer groups receiving assistance. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, direct observation of salt ponds, assistance use, and interactions between officials and groups, and documentary analysis of program regulations, technical guidelines, beneficiary data, and district production statistics.

Data were analysed with the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded according to the four analytical dimensions of beneficiaries, content of assistance, timing, and allocation mechanism, and were then organised into thematic matrices that compared the positions and practices of each actor. Credibility was ensured through source triangulation across officials, facilitators, group leaders, and members, and through method triangulation across interviews, observation, and documents. Dependability and confirmability were maintained by documenting each analytical

step and by checking interpretations against official records.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented according to the four distributive dimensions of the PUGAR program in Jeneponto Regency. Each dimension builds on

the previous one: the definition of beneficiaries determines who can claim the content of assistance, the content shapes what is at stake in its timing, and the mechanism of allocation explains how these outcomes are produced and reproduced.

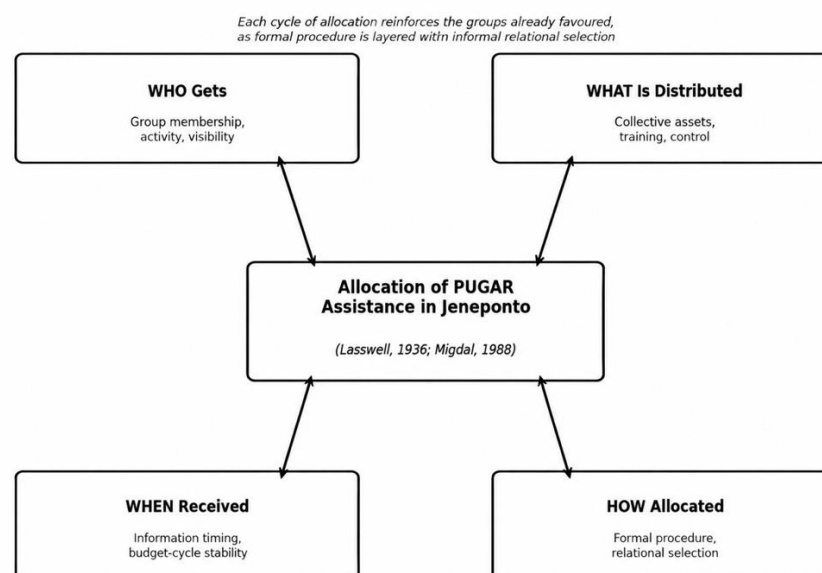


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the four distributive dimensions of PUGAR assistance allocation in Jeneponto Regency. Source: elaborated by the authors, adapted from Lasswell (1936) and Migdal (1988).

3.1 Who Gets: Group Membership as the Gateway to Assistance

The primary finding on beneficiaries is that PUGAR in Jeneponto no longer recognises the individual salt farmer as a claimant. Proposals can only be submitted through a KUGAR, so that membership in a recognised group has become the formal precondition for any access to assistance. This rule strengthens collective organisation, yet it also shifts the basis of entitlement from household need to organisational status. Salt farmers who work alone, who belong to inactive groups, or who are unable to join an existing group are excluded before any assessment of their production conditions takes place. Group-based registration is known to raise participation in subsidy schemes (Hendrawan & Musshoff, 2024), but in Jeneponto the same arrangement also functions

as an entry barrier that separates organised producers from unorganised ones.

Group membership alone, however, does not guarantee assistance, because a second filter operates among the groups themselves. Groups whose officers regularly visit the village office and the Marine and Fisheries Office, attend program activities, and maintain communication with facilitators are processed more quickly than groups that are less active. Officials also assess the "seriousness" of farmers when selecting participants for program activities, as shown by the selection of a single farmer from one group to attend a socialisation event in Makassar on the basis of perceived commitment. Such judgements are made within the discretion that frontline officials hold in implementing policy (Holstead et al., 2021). Consequently, the effective beneficiary is not simply a group, but a group whose leaders

are visible to, and trusted by, the implementing bureaucracy.

The spatial distribution of salt farmers reinforces this pattern. As Table 1 shows, Bangkala District contains 63.3% of all salt farmers in the regency and Arungkeke 27.6%, while Tamalatea and West Bangkala together account for only 9.1%. Large production centres host more groups, more frequent program activities, and denser contact with facilitators, whereas farmers in small centres

have fewer channels through which to become visible to the program. Research on rural knowledge networks shows that program structures can place some producers at the centre of information flows and others at the periphery (Pratiwi et al., 2022). In Jeneponto, the concentration of producers therefore translates into an uneven density of access, which affects which groups are positioned to be identified, verified, and prioritised.

Table 1. Distribution of salt farmers across production centres in Jeneponto Regency, 2024

District (Kecamatan)	Salt farmers (persons)	Share (%)	Position in the production structure
Bangkala	396	63.3	Main production centre
Arungkeke	173	27.6	Secondary centre
Tamalatea	39	6.2	Minor centre
West Bangkala	18	2.9	Minor centre
Total	626	100.0	

Source: Jeneponto Marine and Fisheries Office (2024), processed by the authors.

These findings show that the question of who receives assistance is answered by organisational capital and proximity rather than by need alone. From the perspective of the distribution of values, access to public goods depends on the position actors occupy in relation to the channels through which decisions are made (Lasswell, 1936). The Jeneponto case confirms this proposition, because the beneficiary is produced through two successive filters: formal group membership and informal visibility to officials. It also extends the argument that state rules are reshaped by the social forces through which they are enforced (Migdal, 1988), since the formal requirement of group membership is converted, in practice, into a hierarchy among groups based on activity and contact. The program therefore privileges producers who are already organised and connected, while those who are dispersed in small centres or outside groups remain outside the distributive circle. The Marine and Fisheries Office should establish an open, needs-based registry of all salt farmers, including non-members, with published and easily verifiable eligibility criteria, as simpler and verifiable criteria have been shown to reduce exclusion errors in public transfer programs (Asri et al., 2022).

3.2 What Is Distributed: Collective Assets, Knowledge, and Control

Because the beneficiary is a group rather than an individual, the content of PUGAR assistance takes the form of collective production assets. The assistance distributed in Jeneponto comprises geomembrane sheets, salt storage warehouses, windmill-driven pumping machines, water pumps, the rehabilitation of pond channels, and other production facilities adjusted to group needs. These items target the most constrained stages of production, namely water intake, crystallisation, and post-harvest storage. Geomembrane is the most consequential of these inputs, as lined crystallisation ponds raise both the quantity and the quality of salt (Wiwoho & Prasada, 2024). The material content of the program is thus directly linked to the productivity gains that justify public intervention.

The collective form of these assets, however, raises the question of who controls them once they arrive. Warehouses, windmills, and pumps are durable, high-value goods that cannot be divided among members, so their custody generally rests with the group leader or with the member on whose land they are installed. Geomembrane, by contrast, is a seasonal input

that must be shared across ponds and replaced over time. The distributive value of assistance therefore depends not only on the type of goods received but also on the internal rules governing their use. Farmer groups in South Sulawesi have demonstrated that inclusive collective rules can turn shared resources into broad-based benefits (Sirimorok et al., 2024), but where such rules are weak, control over collective assets reinforces the position of group leaders.

Beyond physical goods, PUGAR also distributes knowledge through training and mentoring, including sending selected farmers to Makassar for training on salt production management and

quality improvement. These opportunities are limited in number and are allocated to farmers considered serious and active, so that capacity accumulates among those already favoured in the selection of beneficiaries. The benefits of agricultural technology depend on its compatibility with farmers' capacities (Abdul-Majid et al., 2024), and the effects of input subsidies vary with local institutional conditions (Ricome et al., 2024). The combination of collective assets and selective training therefore means that the same assistance generates unequal returns across and within groups, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Forms of PUGAR assistance and their distributive implications in Jeneponto Regency

Form of assistance	Production function	Locus of control	Distributive implication
Geomembrane sheets	Lining crystallisation ponds to raise yield and salt quality	Shared among members, seasonal replacement	Benefits depend on internal rules for allocating ponds
Salt storage warehouse	Post-harvest storage to hold salt until prices improve	Group leader or landowner	Strengthens the bargaining position of custodians
Windmill pumping machine	Moving seawater into evaporation ponds	Group leader or pond owner	Concentrates a durable asset in few hands
Water pump	Supplementary water intake	Group, operated by selected members	Access follows proximity to the installation site
Pond channel rehabilitation	Improving water flow to production ponds	Collective infrastructure	Broad benefit when channels serve all ponds
Training and mentoring	Improving production management and quality	Individuals selected by officials	Capacity accumulates among already active farmers

Source: Interviews, observation, and program documents, processed by the authors (2026).

The content of assistance shows that what is distributed through PUGAR is not only equipment, but also control, knowledge, and recognition. The values allocated through politics include material goods as well as skills and deference (Lasswell, 1936), and the Jeneponto case demonstrates that all three are bundled in a single program. Durable assets placed under leaders' custody become resources that consolidate local authority, while selective training transfers skills to those already recognised by officials. This outcome is consistent with the argument that state resources, once they enter local arenas, are appropriated by social actors who use them to strengthen their own position (Migdal, 1988). The productive potential of the assistance is therefore real, but its

distributive effect depends on how collective assets are governed within groups. Assistance packages should be matched to each group's pond conditions and production stage through a technical needs assessment, with priority given to geomembrane-based crystallisation because it has been shown to increase both the quantity and the quality of small-scale salt production (Wiwoho & Prasada, 2024).

3.3 When: Temporal Advantage and Production Volatility

The value of collective assets is time-sensitive, because salt can only be produced during the dry season and equipment that arrives late cannot be used until the following cycle. The timing of PUGAR assistance follows the annual budget

cycle, which moves sequentially through data collection, proposal, verification, determination, and distribution. Within this cycle, groups that are active and maintain communication with facilitators are processed more quickly than others. Time thus becomes a distributive resource: two groups with similar needs may receive the same type of assistance, yet the group processed earlier gains a full production season of use while the other waits.

Temporal advantage begins with information. Notice of available assistance typically reaches salt farmers through the village government, so groups that communicate regularly with village officials learn of opportunities earlier and are able to submit proposals immediately. Groups that are less connected learn later and often miss the proposal window for the current budget year. Research on public spending has shown that the timing of allocations frequently follows political calendars, including election periods (de Haan et al., 2025; Das et al., 2026). In Jeneponto, the temporal pattern is shaped less by electoral cycles

than by proximity to local information brokers, which allows well-connected groups to convert social relations into priority in time.

The significance of timing becomes clearer when it is set against the volatility of salt production. As Table 3 shows, output in Jeneponto rose from 61,000.34 tons in 2018 to 90,000.61 tons in 2019, collapsed to 16,770.39 tons in 2020, remained low in 2021, fell to 801.8 tons in 2022, rebounded to 83,604 tons in 2023, and declined again to 28,033.4 tons in 2024. Such fluctuations mean that the need for assistance peaks in particular years and seasons, while the administrative cycle of PUGAR remains fixed. Livelihood interventions in coastal Indonesia have rarely achieved sustainable results when support has been short-term and disconnected from producers' changing circumstances (Stacey et al., 2021). Assistance that is not synchronised with the production calendar and with years of collapse therefore cannot perform its stabilising function.

Table 3. Salt production in Jeneponto Regency, 2018–2024

Year	Production (tons)	Change from previous year (tons)	Production phase
2018	61,000.34	–	Moderate
2019	90,000.61	+29,000.27	Peak
2020	16,770.39	–73,230.22	Collapse
2021	20,000.00	+3,229.61	Low
2022	801.80	–19,198.20	Collapse
2023	83,604.00	+82,802.20	Recovery
2024	28,033.40	–55,570.60	Decline

Source: Jeneponto Marine and Fisheries Office (2018–2024), processed by the authors.

These findings indicate that the question of when assistance is received cannot be separated from who is positioned to receive it first. Timing is part of the distributive outcome, because the moment at which a value is obtained determines its usefulness to the recipient (Lasswell, 1936). In Jeneponto, early access is secured by groups embedded in communication networks with village officials and facilitators, while others are delayed into later cycles. This pattern supports the view that social forces surrounding the state are able to bend administrative routines in their favour (Migdal, 1988), here by converting

proximity into temporal priority. At the same time, the rigidity of the annual cycle against sharply volatile production shows that the program is organised around the bureaucratic calendar rather than the producers' calendar. The Marine and Fisheries Office, together with village governments and producer groups, should adopt a public annual calendar of proposal and distribution that is completed before the dry-season production cycle and announced simultaneously to all groups, as multi-sector partnerships have been shown to improve both

the accuracy and the timeliness of assistance delivery (Kuntjorowati et al., 2024).

3.4 How: Formal Procedure and Relational Selection

The mechanism of allocation explains how the patterns of beneficiary selection, content, and timing are produced. Formally, PUGAR follows a sequence set by Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries Regulation No. 41 of 2011 and annual technical guidelines: the Marine and Fisheries Office collects data on salt farmer groups, groups submit proposals, the office verifies administrative requirements and field conditions, determines beneficiaries, distributes assistance, and monitors its use. Although the program originates from the central government, the district office holds decisive authority in identifying, verifying, and determining recipients. Community-based programs in Indonesia often remain suboptimal despite adequate regulation because implementation depends on facilitator capacity and village engagement (Widiyanto et al., 2025). The same dependency is evident in Jeneponto, where the formal procedure leaves substantial room for interpretation at each stage.

Within this room, informal relational criteria operate alongside formal requirements. Salt farmers are expected to be friendly toward facilitators, to greet them and invite them to stop by when they pass the ponds, because facilitators

who are not received in this way tend to conclude that the farmers do not need assistance. Sociability thus becomes an unwritten indicator of need, and facilitators' attention, which determines field verification and follow-up, is allocated through everyday reciprocity. This practice resembles the way residents draw on social position and personal connections to claim resources from the state (Agbalajobi et al., 2025) and the persistence of socially embedded brokerage in Indonesian local politics (Rusta & Kartini, 2026). The mechanism therefore rewards relational skill as much as productive need.

The village government adds a further relational layer by acting as the first channel of information between the program and farmer groups. The allocation mechanism thus runs through a chain of village officials, facilitators, and the district office, in which each link favours groups that are already active and connected. Clientelistic environments in Indonesian districts have been shown to weaken the delivery of public services (Lewis & Dong, 2025), and participatory internal governance is what enables farmer organisations to adapt and to secure benefits for their members (Kusnandar et al., 2023). In Jeneponto, groups with strong internal organisation and external connections accumulate assistance over successive cycles, while weaker groups fall further behind, as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Formal procedure and observed practice in the allocation of PUGAR assistance

Stage	Formal provision	Observed practice	Distributive consequence
Data collection	District office records salt farmer groups, pond area, and capacity	Records rely on groups that are active and known to officials	Unregistered and inactive producers remain invisible
Proposal	Submitted collectively through KUGAR	Information arrives through village officials; connected groups submit first	Early and repeated proposals by connected groups
Verification	Administrative and field checks by the district office and field coordinator	Field visits follow facilitators' relations with groups	Sociability operates as an unwritten criterion
Determination	District office decides recipients under technical guidelines	Perceived seriousness and activity weigh in decisions	Discretion favours visible and trusted groups

Distribution and monitoring	Assets handed to groups; use monitored and mentored	Assets held by leaders; training for selected individuals	Accumulation of assets and skills among the already advantaged
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Source: Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries Regulation No. 41 of 2011, interviews, and observation, processed by the authors (2026).

The mechanism of allocation reveals that PUGAR assistance is distributed through a formal procedure that is operated by relational selection. The question of how values are distributed concerns the methods and practices through which some actors secure advantages over others (Lasswell, 1936), and in Jeneponto these practices include activity, visibility, sociability, and early access to information. The findings strongly support the proposition that the capacity of the state to implement its rules depends on the social forces that mediate those rules (Migdal, 1988), as the district office, facilitators, village officials, and group leaders jointly transform a standardised national procedure into a locally negotiated allocation. The resulting mechanism is not openly partisan, but it is cumulative, because each cycle strengthens the groups that were favoured in the previous one. Village-level verification forums involving elected representatives of all salt farmer groups, together with publicly posted lists of proposals and recipients, should therefore be institutionalised, as organised community monitoring of intermediaries has been shown to improve the provision of public goods (Paniagua, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

The allocation and distribution of PUGAR assistance in Jeneponto Regency operate as a political process rather than a neutral administrative routine. Eligibility has moved from individual need to group membership, and among groups the effective beneficiaries are those that are active, visible, and connected to officials and facilitators. What is distributed includes durable collective assets, seasonal inputs, and training opportunities, whose control and benefits tend to concentrate among group leaders and already favoured farmers. Timing advantages accrue to groups that receive information early through village authorities, while the fixed annual

program cycle is poorly aligned with the sharp volatility of salt production. The allocation mechanism combines a formal national procedure with informal relational criteria, such as sociability and perceived seriousness, which cumulatively reproduce unequal access among salt farmers.

The program improves production capacity for some groups, but its benefits will remain unevenly shared unless the rules of access are made transparent and inclusive. Three measures are central: a needs-based registry of all salt farmers with clear eligibility criteria, a public distribution calendar synchronised with the dry-season production cycle, and open village-level verification with published lists of recipients. This study is limited to a single regency and to qualitative evidence from selected informants. Further research should compare allocation patterns across salt-producing regions and combine qualitative analysis with beneficiary-level data on the frequency, value, and productivity effects of assistance received by different groups.

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Author Declaration

The authors declare that this manuscript is original work, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. The authors declare no conflict of interest. All authors contributed to the conception, data collection, analysis, and writing

of this manuscript and approved the final version for submission.

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