

## Leading the Charge: Overcoming Barriers to Innovation in Indonesian Local Government Agencies

<sup>1</sup>Nur Annisa Ali, <sup>2</sup>Muh Akmal Ibrahim, <sup>3</sup>Muhammad Yunus

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Public Administration, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia.

### KEYWORDS

leadership, innovation, public sector, local government, developing countries

### ABSTRACT

Innovation has become increasingly crucial for public sector organizations to improve service delivery and address complex societal challenges. However, implementing innovations in the public sector is often hindered by various internal and external barriers. Leadership has been identified as a key factor influencing the success of innovation implementation, yet there is limited research on this topic in developing countries. This qualitative study examines the role of leadership in overcoming barriers to innovation in three local government agencies in Pangkep Regency, Indonesia: the Health Agency, Education Agency, and Environment Agency. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine key informants purposively sampled based on their involvement in implementing innovations. Observational data and document analysis supplemented the interviews. Data was analyzed using interactive model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Triangulation was employed to ensure trustworthiness. The findings reveal that effective leadership behaviors, such as setting a clear vision, fostering a supportive climate, and building collaborative networks, are crucial for overcoming barriers to innovation. However, leaders also face challenges related to bureaucratic rigidity, resource constraints, and resistance to change. The study highlights the need for leadership development interventions and supportive policies to enhance the capacity of public sector leaders to drive and sustain innovations. The findings contribute to the limited research on public sector innovation in developing countries and provide practical insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote local government innovations.

### Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving and complex world, innovation has become a critical component for organizational success and survival (Syed Mohamad et al, 2023; Abraheem, 2023; Eapen and Finkenstadt, 2024). This is particularly true for public sector organizations, which face increasing pressures to improve service quality, efficiency, and responsiveness to citizens' needs (Hartley, 2005; Canel, & Luoma-Aho, 2018; Liu & Zhang, 2024). However, implementing innovations in the public sector is often challenging due to various internal and external barriers, such as bureaucratic rigidity, risk aversion, resource constraints, and political pressures (Mulgan & Albury, 2003; Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Torvinen & Jansson, 2022; Criado et al, 2023)

Leadership has been identified as a key factor influencing the success of innovation implementation in organizations (Damanpour & Schneider, 2009; Malek, Almarri, 2024; Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024; Rehan et al, 2024). Leaders play a crucial role in shaping organizational culture, setting strategic directions, allocating resources, and motivating employees to embrace change (Fernandez & Rainey, 2017; Sharma & Sharma, 2022; Ahsan, 2024; Asif et al, 2024). In the public sector context, effective leadership is essential for navigating the complex political and institutional environments, building collaborative networks, and mobilizing support for innovations (Ricard et al, 2017; Bolden et al, 2019; Onyango, 2024; Joel & Oguanobi, 2024).

Previous research has examined the impact of leadership on innovation in various public sector settings, such as local governments (Andrews et al, 2021; Thøgersen, 2022), healthcare organizations (Alsaqqa, 2023; Beaulieu et al, 2023; Mostepaniuk et al, 2023), and education institutions (Babbar & Gupta, 2022; Serafini et al, 2022; Fia et al, 2022). These studies have highlighted the importance of transformational leadership behaviors, such as visioning, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation, in fostering a climate conducive to innovation.

However, most of these studies have been conducted in Western contexts (Blessin et al, 2022; Hambleton & Howard, 2012). There is a need for more research on leadership and innovation in developing countries, where public sector organizations often face additional challenges such as limited resources, weak institutions, and high levels of uncertainty (Baimenov & Everest-Phillips, 2015; Farazmand, 2004).

Indonesia, as the world's fourth most populous country and the largest economy in Southeast Asia (World Bank, 2021), provides an interesting context for studying public sector innovation. Since the implementation of decentralization reforms in 1999, local governments in Indonesia have gained more autonomy and responsibility for delivering public services (Buehler, 2011). This has created opportunities for local innovation, but also challenges in terms of capacity building, coordination, and accountability (Smoke, 2015).

This study focuses on three local government agencies (OPD) in Pangkep Regency, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia: the Health Agency, Education Agency, and Environment Agency. These agencies have been actively implementing innovation programs to improve service delivery and address local problems. For example, the Health Agency has introduced a "Healthy Boat for Happy Islands" program to provide healthcare services to remote island communities. The Education Agency has launched a "Smart Guard" initiative to improve the quality of education through teacher mentoring and training. The Environment Agency has developed a "Martabak Telor" (Eggroll) program to promote waste reduction and recycling.

By examining the role of leadership in overcoming barriers to innovation implementation in these agencies, this study aims to contribute to the limited research on public sector innovation in developing countries. The findings can provide valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote innovation in local governments, not only in Indonesia but also in other similar contexts. The study can also inform leadership development programs and training interventions to enhance the capacity of public sector leaders to drive and sustain innovations.

## **Method**

This qualitative descriptive study explores how leadership impacts innovation implementation at local government agencies in Pangkep Regency, Indonesia. Nine key informants, purposively sampled based on their roles in implementing innovations at the Health, Education, and Environment agencies, participated in semi-structured interviews. Observational data and document analysis supplemented the interviews. Data was collected over 40 days and analyzed concurrently using Saldana, (2011). interactive model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

To ensure trustworthiness, three types of triangulation were employed: 1) source triangulation, cross-checking data across informants; 2) technique triangulation, comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documents; and 3) time triangulation, gathering data at different timepoints. By using rigorous methods and triangulation, this study aims to provide robust insights into how leadership shapes the success of public sector innovations, informing practical recommendations for enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability.

## **Result and Discussion**

Adaptation has become a crucial aspect in implementing innovation within Regional Government Organizations (OPD) in Pangkep Regency. This importance stems from adaptation enabling OPDs to effectively respond to various challenges and environmental changes that emerge during the innovation process. Adaptation can be likened to an organism's ability to adjust to its new environment for survival. Similarly, for organizations, adaptation becomes key for innovation to continue and deliver optimal benefits despite facing dynamic situations.

The three OPDs that became the focus of this research—the Health Office, Education Office, and Environmental Office—demonstrated varied adaptation approaches aligned with their innovation characteristics and the challenges they faced. These differences indicate that there is no "one size fits all" adaptation strategy. Each OPD needs to design an adaptation approach that fits their respective contexts.

To better understand adaptation, we can use the analogy of learning to ride a bicycle. When first learning to cycle, we face various challenges such as maintaining balance, coordinating hand and foot movements, and navigating uneven terrain. Initially, we might fall several times and feel frustrated. However, through continued practice and technique adjustment, we gradually master cycling skills. We learn from mistakes, try new approaches, and eventually can cycle smoothly across various terrains.

The adaptation process in innovation mirrors this bicycle learning experience. OPDs will face various challenges and constraints when implementing innovation, such as employee resistance, resource limitations, or lack of stakeholder support. However, through continuous adjustment and improvement, OPDs can find effective ways to overcome these obstacles. They might need to modify socialization strategies, strengthen inter-unit collaboration, or implement more flexible management systems. Each challenge becomes an opportunity to learn and grow, allowing innovation to continue developing.

Although these three OPDs showed different adaptation approaches, several valuable lessons can be drawn. First, adaptation requires active commitment and involvement from all parties,

both leadership and innovation implementers. Without strong and consistent support, adaptation efforts will struggle to succeed. Second, communication and collaboration become key to aligning different goals and perspectives between units. By building mutual understanding and synergy, OPDs can more easily adapt to change. Third, adaptation is not a one-time process but rather a continuous effort that needs ongoing evaluation and refinement. OPDs must remain open to learning, both from successes and failures, to enhance their adaptive capacity.

The Pangkep Regency Health Office has demonstrated strong commitment in improving healthcare access for island communities through the Healthy Boat Happy Islands Program (PSPB). This program represents a significant breakthrough in addressing unique geographical challenges in North Liukang Tupabbiring District, where 16 scattered islands face limited access to healthcare facilities and personnel. Through PSPB, the Health Office strives to bridge this gap and ensure that every citizen, regardless of their residential location, can enjoy their fundamental right to quality healthcare services.

Adaptation has become key to PSPB's success in addressing the specific needs of island communities. The Health Office has taken appropriate steps by developing clear technical guidelines as a reference for healthcare workers in service delivery. These guidelines ensure that services provided meet established quality standards while considering specific field conditions. Additionally, active socialization to the community has become an important strategy to enhance understanding and trust in this program. Through a proactive and communicative approach, the Health Office strives to build close relationships with the community and encourage them to utilize available healthcare services.

However, the adaptation implemented by the Health Office through PSPB still faces challenges regarding community awareness in seeking early medical treatment. This phenomenon indicates a persistent gap between healthcare service availability and community behaviour in utilizing these services. Multiple factors may contribute to this situation, such as limited understanding of the importance of early disease detection, fear of social stigma, or economic constraints that cause people to delay seeking treatment. Facing these challenges, the Health Office needs to strengthen more proactive and innovative health education efforts. Education should extend beyond merely providing information; it must be capable of transforming community perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours toward health. A more personal, participatory approach aligned with local cultural contexts may be key to reaching the hearts and minds of the community. Through close collaboration between healthcare workers, community leaders, and other stakeholders, health education can become a transformative social movement.

Ultimately, the success of the Health Office's adaptation through PSPB will be measured by the extent to which this program can sustainably improve community health status in island regions. The journey toward meaningful change is indeed challenging and requires time. However, with strong commitment, innovative approaches, and active involvement from all parties, PSPB has great potential to become an inclusive healthcare service model that responds to community needs. Every small step taken today, every careful adaptation made, will become a solid foundation for a better health future for all communities in Pangkep Regency, particularly in previously marginalized island regions.

Meanwhile, the Education Office, through its Smart Guard (Garda Pintar) innovation, focuses on comprehensive technical guidance for supporting teachers. Adaptation is implemented

through pretests, module discussions, post-tests, and regular workshops at the district level to ensure understanding and support for teachers. However, confusion in implementing innovation in the field indicates that the adaptation process still needs improvement. Additionally, in the Pleasant PAUD to Elementary School Transition Movement, the Education Office has undertaken a paradigm shift by eliminating literacy and numeracy tests and implementing a more inclusive learning approach. Close collaboration among all education stakeholders becomes key to this adaptation.

However, as in any voyage, there are always waves and storms to face. In this context, the confusion experienced by teachers in implementing innovation in the field is a challenge that must be addressed wisely. This confusion may arise from several factors, such as material complexity, gaps between theory and practice, or limitations in time and resources available to teachers. Facing these challenges, the Education Office needs to strengthen the adaptation process with several improvements. Like a captain who must adjust sail direction according to wind and current conditions, the Education Office must also be flexible in adjusting its technical guidance approach.

The innovation adaptation efforts undertaken by the Pangkep Regency Education Office, both through the Smart Guard program and the Pleasant PAUD to Elementary School Transition Movement, represent crucial steps in improving educational quality in the region. By continuously strengthening adaptation processes, collaboration, and support for education stakeholders, the Education Office can become a beacon illuminating the path toward a brighter educational future for Pangkep Regency's children.

On the other hand, the Environmental Office's Martabak Telor innovation initially demonstrated adaptation based on community feedback. When participation declined, socialization was increased as a form of adjustment. However, this innovation heavily depended on its primary innovator. After the innovator's retirement, despite efforts to involve new employees and collaborate with local communities, the innovation lost momentum due to a lack of human resources who deeply understood the innovation. This indicates that adaptation failed to run optimally due to dependence on a single individual.

This occurred due to insufficient human resources (HR) with deep understanding of the innovation. Like a recipe mastered only by a master chef, when the chef departs, successors lack sufficient knowledge and skills to replicate the expertise. In the Martabak Telor innovation context, existing HR lacked deep understanding of the innovation's philosophy, strategy, and implementation techniques. They might understand certain aspects but did not master the innovation's essence and spirit.

Consequently, adaptation efforts became suboptimal. Like a dish losing its main ingredient, the Martabak Telor innovation also lost key elements that made it initially successful. Collaboration with local communities and new employee involvement were insufficient to replace the primary innovator's role. An important lesson from this case is that innovation should not be too dependent on a single individual. Like a restaurant aiming for longevity, innovation must have a strong system and solid team to maintain sustainability. This requires more systematic efforts in developing HR capacity and building systems that support innovation.

Findings from these three OPDs highlight that innovation adaptation in Pangkep Regency's three Regional Government Organizations—Health Office, Education Office, and

Environmental Office—is influenced by several key factors. Commitment and active involvement from all parties, both leadership and innovation implementers, become important aspects in adaptation success. This aligns with Rogers' (2014) innovation diffusion theory, which emphasizes the importance of change agents in promoting and facilitating innovation adoption. Research by Pratama et al. (2020) also supports these findings, showing that transformational leadership positively influences public sector innovation implementation effectiveness.

Furthermore, effective communication and collaboration between organizational units become key to aligning different goals and perspectives. Malone & Crowston's (2003) coordination theory explains that good coordination requires clear communication, information sharing, and activity synchronization between interconnected parts. Studies by Tangel et al (2024). also support this aspect's importance, finding that good internal communication and cross-sector cooperation positively correlate with local government innovation success.

However, dependence on specific individuals can become a barrier to innovation sustainability, as seen in the Environmental Office's Martabak Telor innovation case. This finding aligns with the innovation capacity concept proposed by Honadle (1981), referring to an organization's ability to continuously innovate and adapt dynamically, regardless of individual changes within it. Research by Andhika et al, (2018).) also reveals that innovation capacity development in Indonesia's public sector remains constrained by several factors, such as lack of documentation, budget limitations, and high employee rotation.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this research demonstrate that innovation adaptation in three Regional Government Organizations (OPD) of Pangkep Regency is influenced by several key factors, including commitment and active involvement from all parties, effective communication and collaboration between units, and innovation capacity that is not overly dependent on specific individuals. Although each OPD demonstrated different adaptation approaches according to their context, these factors consistently emerged as aspects that play crucial roles in the success of innovation adaptation in the public sector. The consistency of these findings across different organizational contexts suggests their fundamental importance in public sector innovation processes.

Based on these research findings, several strategic recommendations emerge for improving innovation adaptation in public sector organizations. First and foremost, OPDs need to actively involve and garner commitment from all relevant parties, both leadership and innovation implementers, to support the adaptation process. This involvement should be systematic and sustained, ensuring that all stakeholders understand their roles and responsibilities in the innovation journey. Leaders must demonstrate visible support while implementers should be empowered to contribute their insights and experiences to the adaptation process. Additionally, OPDs must strengthen communication mechanisms and inter-unit collaboration to align different goals and perspectives in innovation implementation. This involves establishing regular forums for dialogue, creating clear channels for feedback, and developing shared understanding across organizational boundaries. Effective collaboration mechanisms should be institutionalized to ensure sustained coordination despite personnel changes.

Furthermore, OPDs need to develop more systematic innovation capacity that is not overly dependent on specific individuals. This can be achieved through proper documentation, human

resource capacity building, and strengthening innovation culture. Organizations should create knowledge management systems that capture both explicit and tacit knowledge, implement comprehensive training programs, and foster an environment that encourages continuous learning and experimentation. Local governments also need to provide adequate support in terms of policy, budget, and infrastructure to enable OPDs to optimize innovation adaptation. This support should be reflected in strategic planning documents, resource allocation decisions, and the development of enabling infrastructure that facilitates innovation implementation.

For future research directions, scholars are encouraged to develop a conceptual framework or innovation adaptation model more specific to Indonesia's public sector context, taking into account the unique characteristics of administrative systems, cultural aspects, and challenges faced. Such research could explore how local wisdom and cultural values influence adaptation processes, how bureaucratic structures affect innovation implementation, and how different types of public organizations navigate adaptation challenges. This would contribute to building a more nuanced and contextually relevant understanding of public sector innovation in Indonesia. Through this comprehensive approach to innovation adaptation, public sector organizations can enhance their capacity to deliver improved services and respond effectively to evolving public needs and expectations.

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