

SOCIAL CAPITAL AS A DETERMINANT OF LOCAL POLITICAL ELITE PERFORMANCE IN DEVELOPMENT

Wahyu Wulandari¹, Najmi Muhammad Fadli², Habib Budiman³

Program Studi Ilmu Politik, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang

Email Korespondensi: wahyuwulandari@radenfatah.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to develop an analytical framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between social capital and the performance of local political elites in the context of development. Through a systematic literature review and in-depth conceptual analysis, this study synthesizes contemporary theories from political science, sociology, and development studies. The findings reveal that social capital functions as a catalytic mechanism that plays a crucial role in shaping developmental outcomes. Local political elites with abundant social capital, particularly in the form of bridging and linking capital, tend to exhibit stronger and more sustainable development performance. Conversely, a deficit of social capital, especially when marked by an erosion of public trust, can trap elites in a cycle of poor performance and prolonged legitimacy crises. This study concludes that the capacity of social capital is a key determinant that is often overlooked in assessing the performance of local political elites. Theoretically, it emphasizes the need for a more holistic approach that views local leadership not merely as an individual attribute but as a product of embeddedness within diverse social networks. From a policy perspective, the study highlights the importance of designing interventions that specifically aim to strengthen the relational capacities of political elites, going beyond conventional technical or administrative training.

Keywords: Social Capital, Local Political Elites, Development Performance, Local Governance.

ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk membangun sebuah kerangka analitis yang dapat menjelaskan hubungan dinamis antara modal sosial dan kinerja elit politik lokal dalam konteks pembangunan. Melalui telaah literatur yang sistematis dan analisis konseptual yang mendalam, studi ini menggabungkan berbagai teori mutakhir dari ilmu politik, sosiologi, hingga studi pembangunan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa modal sosial berperan sebagai mekanisme katalis yang sangat penting dalam menentukan keberhasilan pembangunan daerah. Elit politik lokal yang memiliki cadangan modal sosial yang kuat, terutama dalam bentuk modal penghubung (bridging capital) dan modal pengait (linking capital), cenderung menampilkan kinerja pembangunan yang lebih efektif dan berkelanjutan. Sebaliknya, kekurangan modal sosial, terutama ketika disertai dengan menurunnya kepercayaan publik, sering kali menyeret elit ke dalam lingkaran kinerja yang lemah dan krisis legitimasi yang sulit diatasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa kapasitas modal sosial merupakan faktor kunci yang sering diabaikan dalam menilai kinerja elit politik lokal. Dari sisi teoretis, temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya pendekatan yang lebih holistik, yang memandang kepemimpinan lokal bukan sekadar sebagai hasil kemampuan individu, tetapi juga sebagai produk dari keterhubungan mereka dengan jaringan sosial di sekitarnya. Sementara itu, dari sisi kebijakan, penelitian ini menyoroti perlunya merancang intervensi yang berfokus pada penguatan kapasitas relasional para elit, melampaui pendekatan teknis dan administratif yang selama ini lebih dominan.

Kata kunci: Modal Sosial, Elit Politik Lokal, Kinerja Pembangunan, Tata Kelola Lokal.

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INTRODUCTION

The era of decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia has brought about significant changes in the local political landscape. The reforms that began in 1998 opened up new opportunities for local actors, such as village heads, sub-district heads, and members of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), to play a more strategic role in the development process in their respective regions. They are now at the forefront of determining the direction of development, from providing basic infrastructure and improving healthcare to expanding access to education. Their performance in delivering tangible development is not only a measure of success but also a primary source of political legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

However, the reality on the ground shows a striking difference in performance among these elites. A crucial question arises: why can two local leaders with relatively similar budgetary resources, regulatory authority, and socio-demographic conditions achieve such different development outcomes? This question becomes even more relevant when we observe that some regions are able to advance rapidly under certain leadership, while others with similar potential stagnate or even regress.

The answer to this phenomenon cannot always be found solely in technical or administrative aspects. Often, the difference lies in the non-technical abilities of elites to utilize and mobilize surrounding social resources. In this context, the concept of social capital offers a highly relevant and insightful analytical framework. As explained by Putnam (1993), social capital encompasses "valued social networks," namely networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity that enable coordination and cooperation for the common good. These three elements serve as the social glue for a community and, at the same time, serve as a crucial foundation for the success of local leadership.

In Indonesia, the study of local social and political capital has been a significant focus for many researchers. Antlöv (2003), for example, shows how local leadership patterns in Java often depend on a leader's ability to build and maintain complex patron-client networks. Meanwhile, research by Vel (2005) highlights how social capital plays a role in conflict dynamics and reconciliation processes at the local level. However, there is a crucial gap in the literature: the lack of a comprehensive and systematic theoretical framework capable of mapping the causal relationships between various dimensions of social capital and the development performance of local political elites in contemporary Indonesia. Most existing studies are partial and fail to integrate the three main dimensions of social capital—bonding, bridging, and linking capital—into a single, coherent analytical model.

This paper aims to address this gap by developing a comprehensive theoretical framework that can be used as a reference in understanding and examining how social capital influences the performance of local political elites in development. Through this approach, it is hoped that future empirical research will have a clearer direction and be more relevant to the socio-political dynamics in various local contexts in Indonesia. Based on this background, the main question this paper seeks to answer is: How do various dimensions of social capital influence the mechanisms and outcomes of local political elite performance in the development process?.

METHOD

The research that forms the basis of this article uses a conceptual study approach, combining a critical literature review and in-depth conceptual analysis. This approach was chosen because it provides a critical synthesis of various existing studies and simultaneously constructs a comprehensive and coherent theoretical model regarding the relationship between social capital and the performance of local political elites in development.

The research materials include primary and secondary sources relevant to the themes of social capital, local politics, and development. Primary sources were drawn from reputable international and national journals. Furthermore, classic works by leading thinkers such as Robert D. Putnam, Pierre Bourdieu, James

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Coleman, and Michael Woolcock served as primary references in strengthening the theoretical foundation. Supporting data was also obtained from research reports from credible institutions such as the World Bank, UNDP, and BAPPENAS, providing empirical context for the analysis.

The data collection process was conducted through a systematic search across various academic database platforms. The search strategy utilized a combination of keywords in Indonesian and English, including: social capital, local politics, local elite performance, development governance, local social and political capital, and regional elite performance. The primary focus of the search was on publications within the last fifteen years to ensure the relevance and currency of the analysis. However, classic works considered fundamental to the development of the concept were still used as supplementary references.

The analysis phase of this study was conducted interactively and reflectively through three main steps of conceptual analysis: key concept identification, which is the initial stage and focuses on the process of extracting central concepts from various literature on social capital, local political elites, and development performance. This is followed by relational mapping, which maps the relationships between concepts and identifies theoretical patterns that emerge from the literature synthesis. Finally, the theoretical model construction phase focuses on developing an analytical framework capable of integrating various dimensions of social capital with development performance mechanisms.

Based on the identification of these key themes, the researchers then developed a conceptual map connecting various relevant variables and constructs. The data analysis process was carried out by adapting the interactive analysis model from Miles and Huberman (1992), which includes three main stages. The first stage is data reduction, which involves filtering and focusing various concepts and literature findings on aspects most relevant to the research questions. The second stage is data presentation, where the results of the reduction are arranged in the form of a conceptual matrix that illustrates the relationship between dimensions of social capital and development performance indicators. The third stage is conclusion drawing and verification, where theoretical propositions are formulated and then retested against the literature to ensure their coherence and consistency. To ensure the credibility of the analysis, this study applies theoretical triangulation by comparing various perspectives across disciplines. In addition, the researchers also conducted peer debriefing with colleagues with expertise in similar fields to obtain critical input on the interpretations and analytical results developed.

DISCUSSION

Local Political Elites in the Contemporary Development Arena

Local political elites operate within a complex socio-political arena, where they must balance two poles of interest: the demands of the state and the expectations of society. As Grindle (2007) explains in his work, *Going Local: Decentralization, Democratization, and the Promise of Good Governance*, these elites act as “managers of scarcity,” managing limited resources, requiring not only administrative skills but also political acumen. In practice, they face a dual challenge: on the one hand, they must meet development targets set by the central government, but on the other, they must remain sensitive and responsive to the needs of local communities.

Understanding the performance of local political elites has also undergone significant developments. While previously performance assessments focused more on physical achievements such as infrastructure development, the concept has now shifted to a more comprehensive perspective. Fukuyama (2013) emphasized that in the context of modern governance, performance cannot be measured solely by concrete results, but also by processes encompassing public participation, accountability, and policy inclusiveness. This view aligns with Leftwich (2006), who emphasized that development success depends heavily on the ability of political elites to build supporting coalitions, manage conflict, and, most importantly, to gain and maintain political legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

In the Indonesian context, studies on local political elites have shown significant developments. Hadiz

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(2010), in his research on post-New Order local politics, revealed that the decentralization process was often exploited by the old elites to maintain their power through electoral democracy mechanisms. Meanwhile, Buehler (2010) highlighted how the dynamics of political competition at the local level also influence the performance of elites in providing public services and managing development in their regions.

Social Capital: Theory and Operational Dimensions

The concept of social capital has long intellectual roots, with important contributions from thinkers such as Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1993). Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” This definition emphasizes that social capital is rooted in a network of relationships that are both sustainable and institutionalized.

Meanwhile, Coleman (1988) highlighted the function of social capital as a resource that can facilitate individual actions within a particular social structure. Social capital is not only inherent in individuals, but also in norms, relationships of trust, and reciprocal obligations that enable social cooperation. According to Saefulrahman (2015), social capital encompasses institutional dimensions, established relationships, and norms that determine the quality and quantity of social interactions within a society. Thus, the essence of social capital lies in a society's capacity to work together to achieve common goals.

For more operational analysis, particularly in understanding the performance of local political elites, the conceptual framework proposed by Woolcock and Narayan (2000) is highly relevant. They distinguish three main types of social capital: Bonding Social Capital, which refers to strong and exclusive horizontal ties among members of a homogeneous group, such as a nuclear family, kinship group, or closed customary community. For political elites, this type of social capital can serve as a solid base of internal support, but it also has the potential to give rise to nepotism and social exclusion. This aligns with Tans' (2012) findings regarding dynastic politics at the local level.

The second is Bridging Social Capital, which describes horizontal networks connecting individuals or groups from different social backgrounds. An example is the relationship between village elites and civil society organizations or other religious groups. This type of social capital expands access to diverse information, ideas, and resources. Fox (2014) emphasized that bridging social capital plays a crucial role in strengthening the collective capacity of communities through cross-group networks. Finally, Linking Social Capital describes vertical networks connecting individuals or groups with parties with greater power and resources within formal hierarchical structures, such as local governments, ministries, national political parties, or donor agencies. This social capital serves as a strategic pathway to gaining policy support, funding, and political legitimacy. Bebbington (2010) emphasized that linking social capital is crucial in promoting rural development, particularly in developing countries.

Development Performance: A Multidimensional Perspective

Within this theoretical framework, development performance is understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing various important aspects of the development process. This conceptualization aligns with the approach developed by UNDP (2019) through the Human Development Paradigm framework, which emphasizes that development is not solely measured by economic growth but also by improvements in the quality of life and human capacity.

Development performance includes a number of interrelated dimensions that together determine the success of a development process. These dimensions include: Efficiency, the ability to utilize resources optimally, emphasizing speed, cost effectiveness, and minimal waste in implementing development programs. In the context of political elite performance, efficiency reflects the extent to which leaders are

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able to manage public resources rationally and productively to achieve maximum results with minimal input. Second, effectiveness, which refers to the level of achievement of development goals in accordance with predetermined targets. Effectiveness is measured not only by the achievement of physical output, but also by outcomes directly felt by the community, such as increased welfare, social justice, and the quality of public services. Thus, effectiveness is closely related to the elite's ability to translate development visions into tangible results.

Participation, which indicates the extent to which the community is actively involved in the entire development cycle, from planning and implementation to evaluation and monitoring. This dimension emphasizes the importance of inclusiveness and community ownership of the development agenda. Gaventa (2019), through the concept of "democracy from below," emphasizes that meaningful participation is a prerequisite for the establishment of democratic and equitable development governance. Equally important in the current era is sustainability, which refers to the ability of a program or development outcome to survive and continue to provide benefits in the long term, even after the leadership of an elite ends. The dimension of sustainability is not only about economic aspects, but also encompasses social and ecological sustainability. In this context, environmentally sound and inclusive development is the main foundation for achieving sustainable development goals.

Mechanism 1: Social Capital as a Reducer of Transaction Costs

Based on the conceptual synthesis outlined previously, it can be identified that one of the primary mechanisms by which social capital influences the performance of local political elites is through its role in reducing transaction costs. From a New Institutional Economics perspective, North (1990) explains that transaction costs encompass all costs incurred in the process of negotiating, monitoring, and enforcing an agreement. High transaction costs often constitute a fundamental obstacle to the effectiveness and efficiency of development, particularly in the context of complex public governance.

Within this framework, trust, the core of bonding and bridging social capital, functions as a social mechanism that can reduce transaction costs. A local political elite with a reputation for public trust is able to implement development policies and programs with more efficient resource expenditure. Public trust enables better social coordination, reduces the need for strict oversight systems, and lowers the risk of conflict or breach of agreements. As seen in the case study in Pangauban Village, the leadership of Village Head Dede Kusdinar is sensitive, responsive and visionary, proven successfully building trust through transparency and concern, so as to be able to mobilize community social capital into real participation in village development (Saefulrahman, I., 2015).

Another example is in the 2017 Sorong Regency Pilkada, political elites such as Jhony Kamuru succeeded in utilizing social capital through the legitimacy of the Moi Traditional Council, which not only gave him trust and normative support, but also strengthened his position as a sole figure recognized by the tradition, even though he had to face internal conflicts between traditional elites (Refra, MS, & Basri, L. (2021). On the other hand, this phenomenon is also evident in the practice of mutual cooperation in various regions of Indonesia, reflecting a tangible form of bonding capital. Bowen (2016) in his research on mutual aid in rural Java demonstrated how values of social solidarity can minimize dependence on material incentives and encourage voluntary collaboration between communities and local leaders.

Conversely, a trust deficit between elites and communities significantly increases transaction costs. Elites facing low levels of public trust tend to expend significant energy, time, and financial resources to overcome resistance, suspicion, and rule violations. McCarthy (2014), through a study of natural resource management conflicts in Kalimantan, demonstrated that weak trust between local governments and indigenous communities leads to inflated administrative and operational costs for development projects and reduces the effectiveness of public policy implementation. Therefore, it can be concluded that social capital functions as a social lubricant that facilitates coordination and collaboration between elites and

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communities, and strengthens the efficiency and effectiveness of local development through transaction cost reduction mechanisms.

Mechanism 2: Social Capital as an Accelerator of Resource Access

In addition to reducing transaction costs, social capital also plays a crucial role in expanding access to the political, financial, and technical resources needed in the development process. This mechanism operates primarily through two complementary dimensions of social capital: bridging and linking social capital.

In the context of local governance in Indonesia, linking capital is a strategic asset for political elites to establish vertical relationships with actors at higher levels of government, whether at the district, provincial, or national level. A village head or regent with a strong communication network and a positive reputation among officials at the Public Works Agency, the Ministry of Villages, or Bappenas has a much greater chance of obtaining additional budget allocations, technical support, and expedited bureaucratic processes. This finding aligns with Bunnell's (2016) research, which shows that the strength of vertical networks plays a crucial role in facilitating the implementation of infrastructure projects in Eastern Indonesia.

Meanwhile, bridging social capital expands elites' horizontal networks with various non-governmental actors, such as the business world, civil society organizations, and philanthropic institutions. Through these networks, elites can develop various forms of development collaboration, ranging from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs to Self-Managed Partnerships (PPPs), which have the potential to increase village or regional fiscal capacity beyond the Village Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBDes). Rudnyckyj (2018), in his study of CSR practices in Indonesia, found that companies tend to more easily collaborate with local governments that have a good reputation, extensive networks, and a high level of public trust. Furthermore, in his various writings, Rudnyckyj also highlights how religious values, social beliefs, and moral economics influence interactions between companies and the government in Indonesia, including CSR practices and economic development based on religious and social values. Thus, this tendency is supported by the reputational characteristics and strong networks of trusted local government officials, which companies strategically leverage to forge more effective and sustainable collaborations.

Conversely, socially isolated elites, either due to limited external networks or over-reliance on formal bureaucratic mechanisms, tend to struggle to access additional resources. This situation is exacerbated in remote areas with limited access to transportation and communication. Timmer (2017) in his research in Papua showed that geographic and social isolation directly impacts the low technical and fiscal capacity of local governments in implementing development programs. Therefore, bridging and linking social capital serve as a connecting mechanism between local political elites and the broader development ecosystem, enabling the mobilization of resources across sectors, ultimately increasing the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and sustainability of development at the local level.

Mechanism 3: Social Capital as a Conflict Mitigation and Resolution Tool

In the development process, particularly when it concerns the management of strategic resources such as land, the potential for conflict is almost unavoidable. This is where social capital plays a crucial role as a buffer and balance. Norms of cooperation, open communication, and institutionalized channels of dialogue, which are manifestations of bonding and bridging social capital, provide a social foundation that enables peaceful and constructive dispute resolution.

The concept of institutional thickness introduced by Amin and Thrift (2015) is highly relevant in this context. They explain that the density of social networks within a community creates high levels of social resilience against shocks and potential conflict. In other words, the thicker the social network connecting

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various local actors, the greater the community's ability to manage differing interests without disrupting the development process. On the other hand, according to Hasbullah (2006), High social capital will facilitate harmonious relations between the state and society.

Local political elites with strong ties to social networks in their regions often act as trusted mediators for various parties. This position allows them to mediate conflicts, reduce social tensions, and ensure that development programs continue as planned. This is evident in the post-conflict reconciliation experience in Aceh, as described by Aspinall (2019), which demonstrates the central role of well-networked local elites in creating sustainable peace while maintaining development momentum at the grassroots level.

Theoretical Proposition

Based on the three main mechanisms described above, this article proposes two key theoretical propositions that can serve as a basis for further research. Proposition 1: Local political elites with high levels of linking and bridging social capital tend to demonstrate greater levels of development efficiency and effectiveness. This is due to their ability to optimally access, manage, and utilize external resources, thereby overcoming the limitations of their region's internal resources. Proposition 2: Local political elites who enjoy high levels of public trust, as a manifestation of positive bonding social capital, tend to produce more participatory and sustainable development processes. Social trust is the primary foundation that enables the emergence of political legitimacy and social cohesion necessary to maintain long-term development stability.

The Virtuous and Vicious Cycle:

The relationship between social capital and performance is not a linear one, but rather a dynamic and mutually reinforcing cycle. Good development performance strengthens public trust and elite legitimacy, which in turn increases their stock of social capital, facilitates mobilization for subsequent projects, and creates a virtuous cycle of success. Conversely, poor performance erodes trust, complicates the mobilization of social and material resources, which then results in increasingly poor performance, plunging elites into a vicious cycle of failure and delegitimization.

This cycle concept aligns with Myrdal's (1957) theory of cumulative causation, applied to the context of institutional development. This theory views development as an interconnected and mutually reinforcing process, like a constantly rotating circle. In this process, developed regions tend to develop further, while underdeveloped regions can become even more underdeveloped. This phenomenon then gives rise to two main impacts: the spread effect, a positive force that helps equitable development, and the backwash effect, a negative flow that actually widens disparities between regions.

In the Indonesian context, this pattern is clearly visible in the dynamics of development successes and failures across various regions. According to a 2020 World Bank study, regions with strong social capital and strong institutions are able to capitalize on the spillover effect to grow faster. Conversely, regions with weak institutions and low social capital often fall into the trap of a rebound effect that deepens their backwardness. Therefore, development policies cannot simply focus on economic growth. The government needs to understand how this causal cycle works and ensure that policy interventions break the chain of inequality, ensuring that development is truly inclusive and sustainable

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Based on the conceptual mapping conducted, it can be concluded that the performance of local political elites is an inseparable function of their capacity and stock of social capital. The success of development at the local level can no longer be understood solely as a result of technical competence or the size of budgetary resources, but also as a reflection of the level of embeddedness of elites in social networks within their environment, both in horizontal (bonding and bridging) and vertical (linking)

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relationships.

The study's key findings confirm that social capital operates through three key mechanisms: as a transaction cost reducer, a resource access accelerator, and a conflict reducer. These three mechanisms interact simultaneously, shaping complex and adaptive elite performance dynamics. Therefore, the ability to build trust, expand networks, and enforce cooperative norms becomes a new political currency that determines leadership effectiveness and sustainable development at the grassroots level.

Theoretically, these findings demonstrate the need for a reorientation in the study of local leadership. The approach, which initially focused on individual attributes, needs to be expanded to one that places relational context and social networks as key variables. This aligns with recent developments in governance studies that emphasize the importance of relational capacity in the development process.

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