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The Role of the Dayak Customary Council as a Local Policy Entrepreneurs in the Food Estate Agenda in Central Kalimantan

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) as a local policy entrepreneur in the implementation of Indonesia's food estate program in Central Kalimantan. While the national policy has sparked debate regarding its socio-environmental impacts, the influence of indigenous actors on agenda-setting remains underexplored. This study investigates how DAD reframed the food estate as a development opportunity, utilized customary rituals to legitimize land conversion, and strategically aligned with the provincial government. Using a qualitative case study and process tracing methodology, data were gathered through interviews, document analysis, and field observations. The findings demonstrate that DAD performed a dual role as both a cultural mediator and a political actor, skillfully navigating between state interests and indigenous concerns. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of hybrid governance by illustrating how indigenous institutions can act as key policy entrepreneurs in subnational policymaking. It emphasizes the importance of incorporating indigenous governance structures into the policy process. In practical terms, the findings highlight the need for policymakers to engage with indigenous institutions in development projects, ensuring the integration of local knowledge and values. Further research should explore the long-term socio-environmental impacts of such collaborations and how they influence policy outcomes across different regions in Indonesia.

KEYWORDS

policy entrepreneurs, indigenous institutions, hybrid governance, food estate, dayak customary council.

Introduction

In recent years, Indonesia has witnessed an increasing push for large-scale agricultural intensification under the banner of national food security, most notably through the Food Estate program. Initiated as a Strategic National Project (*Proyek Strategis Nasional*), the food estate initiative aims to transform vast land areas in outer islands particularly Kalimantan and Papua into industrial-scale agricultural zones (Marwanto & Pangestu, 2021; Wisnu, 2022). Central Kalimantan has emerged as a key target for implementation, despite its complex socio-ecological landscape, which includes indigenous territories, fragile peatland ecosystems, and overlapping claims between customary and state land governance systems (Anam, 2020; Fadillah et al., 2021; Fannesa Adisty Laksmi, 2025).

Utilizing the food estate program as a case study, the paper points out the effectiveness of Dewan Adat Dayak (DAD) intervention as policy entrepreneurs in promoting the use of cultural symbol in agenda-setting process (Cairney, 2018; Kingdon, 2014; Kisno Hadi, 2021; Petridou & Mintrom, 2021a; Sandi, 2021; Zahariadis et al., 2023). Policy entrepreneurs are those who promote policy change by leveraging their knowledge, skills, policy concepts, reputation, lobbying efforts, and networks, anticipating future benefits (Cohen, 2021).

Policy entrepreneurs can work for or against the government, in positions of power or influence, for or against special interests, or for academic institutions (Kingdon, 2014; Mintrom et al., 2020). Therefore, individuals could hold positions in government, work for bureaucracies, be politicians, advocates for non-governmental organizations, work in the commercial sector, counsel for policy, be active in interest groups, or work on social issues (Behzadifar et al., 2019; Faling & Biesbroek, 2019; Fatonie, 2022; Wicaksono & Wicaksono, 2019). Similar to entrepreneurs, their willingness to risk time, energy, reputation, and even money in the pursuit of a potential reward is what defines them.

The policy has generated significant discussion in both academic and public spheres, particularly regarding its ecological effects, land disputes, and its compatibility with local development objectives in Central Kalimantan (Anto et al., 2023; Fahmid et al., 2022; Muhardiono & Hamdani, 2021; Rakuasa & Latue, 2023; Yeny et al., 2022). However, less attention has been devoted to the political dynamics that enable such a policy to gain local legitimacy. This paper argues that beyond state-centric mechanisms, the advancement of the food estate agenda in Central Kalimantan is inseparable from the role of local policy entrepreneurs, especially those operating from within indigenous institutions. Specifically, this study investigates the role of the Dayak Customary Council (Dewan Adat Dayak/DAD) as a local actor that was actively involved in reframing, legitimizing, and facilitating the implementation of the food estate policy at the subnational level. The central question this study seeks to answer is: How does DAD function as a policy entrepreneur in advancing the food estate policy in Central Kalimantan?

The significance of this research lies in its focus on the intersection between indigenous authority and policy entrepreneurship. The policy entrepreneurship literature has long focused on actors such as bureaucrats, elected officials, and civil society leaders who skillfully couple policy solutions with political opportunities (Anderson et al., 2020; Fatonie, 2022; Frisch-Aviram et al., 2021; Maurya & Mintrom, 2020; Mintrom & True, 2022; Petridou & Mintrom, 2021b). In recent studies have also discussed street-level policy entrepreneurs (Arnold, 2021; Edri-Peer et al., 2023; Frisch Aviram et al., 2021). Yet, little scholarly work has explored how customary institutions especially those rooted in indigenous traditions but embedded in formal political structures may act as policy entrepreneurs in the Southern Asian. The case of DAD presents a unique empirical puzzle: an institution traditionally regarded as cultural and normative, but which has transformed into a powerful political actor with close proximity to the Governor and regional bureaucracies.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on the policy entrepreneurship framework, which highlights how certain actors use their knowledge, networks, and political positioning to advance specific policy agendas (Cairney, 2018; Kingdon, 2014; Mintrom, 2019). DAD's actions will be analyzed using the Multiple Streams Framework, which situates policy entrepreneurs at the intersection of the problem, policy, and political streams to push their preferred solutions onto the formal policy agenda (Kingdon, 2014; Zohlnhöfer et al., 2015). Thus, the framework used in this study analyzes policy entrepreneurship as a practice not only of technical expertise or bureaucratic navigation but also of cultural-symbolic framing, coalition-building across governance types, and strategic political positioning. This extended model is suitable for examining non-traditional policy actors operating at the interface of indigenous governance and state bureaucracy.

In adapting this framework to the Indonesian context where indigenous and state institutions often coexist, the study incorporates insights from hybrid governance theory.

Hybrid governance refers to institutional arrangements where formal state structures and informal/local institutions share authority and legitimacy (Lagurashvili, 2017; Wenner, 2021). The Dewan Adat Dayak (DAD), while rooted in customary authority, demonstrates increasing political agency, especially when aligned with provincial elites.

This study also addresses a notable empirical gap: while a growing number of critiques have examined the socio-environmental consequences of the food estate program, few have analyzed the mechanisms of local political support and legitimation that underpin its implementation. Furthermore, existing policy studies on Indonesia tend to neglect how non-state actors, such as indigenous councils, exercise strategic agency within policy processes (Datta et al., 2016; Holzinger et al., 2019; Kahrisma Nugroho, 2018). This oversight limits our understanding of the hybrid governance arrangements that increasingly characterize development in peripheral regions like Central Kalimantan.

In sum, this study seeks to contribute to the evolving discourse on policy entrepreneurship by illuminating how indigenous institutions can serve as critical enablers of policy legitimacy in contested development contexts. This study provides theoretical implications for understanding local policy entrepreneurs in hybrid governance contexts. It also sheds light on how national policy agendas are localized in multiethnic and multi-authority settings. These issues are particularly relevant for scholars of public policy, especially those focusing on agenda setting in local contexts, the strategic actions of policy entrepreneurs, and the dynamics of Southeast Asian governance.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the role of the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) as a policy entrepreneur in the food estate program in Central Kalimantan. The case study design is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and its aim to understand complex, context-specific processes involving local institutions, political alignment, and cultural legitimacy (Yin, 2003). Central Kalimantan was selected as the primary site due to its status as a major location for the national food estate project and the active involvement of DAD in facilitating and legitimizing the program. This setting provides a rich empirical ground to explore how non-state, indigenous institutions operate within policy processes typically dominated by formal state actors.

Data Collection and Sources

Data were gathered through three primary methods:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including:
 - Leaders and members of Dewan Adat Dayak (DAD)
 - Provincial and district-level officials involved in the Food Estate policy
 - Local NGOs and civil society actors
 - Journalists and academic observers
2. Document analysis, which covered:
 - Policy memos, regulations, and official reports related to the Food Estate
 - Public statements and press releases by DAD and the provincial government
 - Media coverage (2020–2024) on the Food Estate in Central Kalimantan
3. Process tracing, employed to reconstruct the sequence of key events, framing strategies, and coalition-building efforts undertaken by DAD throughout the policy cycle.

This study uses process tracing to uncover how the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) influenced the food estate policy

process in Central Kalimantan. As a method, process tracing enables researchers to identify causal mechanisms behind policy outcomes by examining sequences of events, actor decisions, and critical turning points (Beach, Derek; Pedersen, 2012; Yuda & Larasakti, 2024). In this research, process tracing is used to: Reconstruct the policy timeline, focusing on key events such as adat rituals, public declarations, and coalition building; Identify mechanisms like cultural legitimation and political alignment that contributed to policy acceptance; Test alternative explanations, confirming that local buy-in was only achieved after DAD's active involvement; and Bridge micro-macro dynamics, showing how individual agency influenced broader policy legitimacy in a hybrid governance context.

Through this method, the study provides a detailed, evidence-based account of how indigenous institutions can strategically shape public policy. Collected data were analyzed using pattern matching and temporal mapping to identify: Causal mechanisms linking DAD's actions with policy advancement; How DAD framed the problem and mobilized support; How moments of political opportunity (policy windows) were utilized. Analytical rigor was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing to validate interpretations and reduce researcher bias.

Data Validation and Analysis

To ensure data validity, the following methods were employed:

1. Triangulation: Data from multiple sources, including interviews, documents, and media reports, were cross-verified to confirm consistency and reliability.
2. Member Checking: Selected interviewees were provided with summaries of their responses to validate the accuracy of the recorded information.
3. Peer Debriefing: External experts in policy analysis and indigenous governance reviewed the findings to reduce researcher bias and enhance analytical rigor.

The data were analyzed using pattern matching and temporal mapping to identify causal mechanisms linking DAD's actions with policy outcomes. This analysis helped uncover how DAD reframed the Food Estate policy, mobilized political support, and utilized policy windows to advance the agenda.

Result and Discussion

DAD as a Local Policy Entrepreneur

The findings suggest that DAD exercised entrepreneurial agency by reframing the food estate as a development opportunity for indigenous communities, deploying symbolic narratives to gain public support, and leveraging its political alliance with the provincial government. This form of what we term "entrepreneurship of legitimacy" reflects a broader trend in Indonesian regional politics: the increasing salience of local actors who bridge traditional authority with formal political institutions to shape policy outcomes.

The Dayak Customary Council (Dewan Adat Dayak/DAD), as the representative institution of the Dayak indigenous community in Central Kalimantan, has emerged as an unconventional yet pivotal actor in Indonesia's public policy process particularly in legitimizing and advancing the Food Estate program. Although DAD is not a formal governmental body, it has demonstrated the capacity of a policy entrepreneur, defined as an actor who pushes specific policy alternatives onto the political agenda by exploiting opportunities, building alliances, and shaping favorable narratives.

This study reveals that DAD employed strategies aligning with core elements of policy entrepreneurship theory, as

developed by (Kingdon, 2014) and extended by (Mintrom, 2019; Petridou & Mintrom, 2021a), including problem framing, coalition building, mobilization of political support, and policy window utilization. However, DAD operates in a dual space—navigating both formal political processes and informal socio-cultural spheres imbued with symbolic and identity-based meaning.

Problem Framing: Constructing the Narrative of Dayak Inclusion

One of DAD's primary contributions lies in its ability to reframe the Food Estate program initially perceived as a top-down and extractive state intervention into a culturally resonant project of Dayak empowerment and food sovereignty. DAD strategically shifted the discourse from "land dispossession" to "economic access and revival of indigenous lands." This reframing was communicated through public declarations, cultural forums, and local media, effectively dampening resistance and consolidating internal support among Dayak communities. It was a strategic move that allowed DAD to assume a central role in shaping how the program would be understood, accepted or contested by local communities.

Rather than opposing the food estate policy, DAD embraced the agenda while actively reshaping its meaning. This process involved invoking a rhetoric of Dayak self-determination, economic empowerment, and ancestral stewardship of land, thereby aligning the state's agrarian expansion goals with local cultural narratives. Through public statements, customary rituals, and strategic language in meetings with government officials, DAD transformed the policy's image from one of environmental and social risk to that of a "sovereign path for the Dayak to thrive within the framework of modernity."

An executive member of DAD stated in an interview:

"For us, it's not about the state coming and taking land. We want to make the food estate a way for Dayak people to be sovereign over their own food. But in our own way, through customary values and local participation." (Interviewee A, DAD Central Kalimantan Executive Board, 22 April 2025)

This sentiment reflects a deliberate reframing strategy that positions Dayak communities not as passive recipients of state policy, but as co-architects of localized development. It demonstrates how narrative agency the ability to construct and circulate alternative interpretations of policy is a central tool of policy entrepreneurs in culturally contested terrains.

Moreover, this reframing found resonance among segments of the indigenous population. A village elder in Kapuas district explained:

"If there was no adat talking, the community would have refused. But since DAD has come and said that this is for the future of their children and grandchildren, people are starting to think again. Especially if customary land is still recognized." (Interviewee B, Village Customary Leader, 17 April 2025)

This highlights that DAD's role in reframing was not merely rhetorical; it had material consequences in shaping community attitudes, paving the way for a more peaceful reception of the food estate program, even amidst growing environmental concerns.

Political Support: Cultural Legitimacy as Political Capital

Unlike conventional policy entrepreneurs who draw upon technical expertise or formal authority, DAD leveraged its cultural legitimacy as political capital. Within the Kalimantan context, traditional authority holds deep societal resonance. DAD enacted this legitimacy through symbolic rituals, formal endorsements, and presiding over public forums signaling cultural approval of the policy. Government events often commenced with indigenous blessings, reinforcing the fusion of cultural and administrative endorsement.

The second key result of this study is DAD's dual navigational capacity: its ability to operate in both state-oriented and adat-based governance systems. This positioning

enabled DAD to perform as a policy translator, interpreting national development agendas in a way that made sense to Dayak cosmologies while simultaneously representing Dayak interests in formal state policy forums.

This navigation required balancing contradictory expectations. On the one hand, the provincial government expected DAD to help socialize and legitimize the food estate program to the grassroots level. On the other hand, DAD bore the cultural responsibility of ensuring that such development did not violate adat principles or threaten community autonomy.

As noted by a senior planner at the Regional Development Planning Agency (Badan Perencanaan dan Pembangunan Daerah Provinsi Kalimantan Tengah):

"The role of DAD is very important because they can bridge between the language of the government and the language of indigenous peoples. If they are not present, many things will be blocked, especially regarding land and the environment." (Interviewee C, Head of Planning Division, Bappeda Kalteng, 24 April 2025)

This bridging role reflects what policy studies have described as the function of intermediary actors in hybrid governance regimes (Meagher et al., 2014). In this capacity, DAD does not simply choose between tradition and modernity, but creates "relational coherence" between otherwise competing normative orders.

However, this strategic duality is not without its risks. Interviews reveal that DAD's close relationship with political elites has also generated internal critiques from Dayak youth and civil society groups. A younger member of DAD's youth wing shared:

"We are worried that DAD is too close to power. If we are not careful, DAD could lose the trust of the grassroots community. We must remain critical, not just a means of legitimization." (Interviewee D, DAD Youth Member, 26 April 2025)

Such ambivalence suggests that DAD's navigational strategy involves a constant negotiation of legitimacy externally with the state, and internally within Dayak society itself. It also illustrates how policy entrepreneurship in indigenous contexts is inherently reflexive, requiring sensitivity not only to opportunities for influence, but also to risks of co-optation and institutional dilution. The fact that DAD has sustained its relevance amid these tensions is a testament to its institutional agility. Through its use of rituals (e.g., *balian tanah* for project blessing), informal consultations, and public forums, DAD maintains its role as cultural gatekeeper while functioning simultaneously as a development enabler.

A central strategy employed by the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) in advancing the food estate agenda was the use of customary authority to legitimize land use changes among indigenous communities. This authority was leveraged to foster compliance and acceptance by presenting DAD's institutional support as a signal of moral approval within communities where state legitimacy remains fragmented or contested, particularly in land and resource governance.

In several sites, DAD leaders were documented performing ritual ceremonies (*balian lewu*, *babukung tanah*) to mark the symbolic endorsement of the food estate land conversion. These rituals conveyed not just spiritual blessing but sociopolitical legitimacy signaling that the project had passed the threshold of adat approval. One community leader in Gunung Mas shared:

"Before there is a big activity such as the opening of a food estate, DAD usually comes first, holding a traditional ritual. If they have given their customary blessing, it becomes a reference for the community to support." (Interviewee E, Village Leader, 18 April 2025)

By combining ritual authority with political signaling, DAD created a mechanism through which contested land use changes could gain broad-based social consent, effectively functioning as an intermediary that transformed top-down policy into culturally acceptable practice. Beyond formal rituals, DAD also employed cultural semiotics the strategic use of symbols, metaphors, and traditional language to shape perceptions and foster local acceptance. This included the deliberate framing of the food estate project as a form of adapted modernization, rather than a disruption of customary life.

Through speeches, radio broadcasts, village forums, and banner displays, DAD deployed terms like: "*kedaulatan pangan adat*" (customary food sovereignty), "*tana lewu kahayan bisa mamangun haruai*", roughly translated as "our ancestral land will build prosperity" and "*panginan lewu*" (food of the people), linking the initiative with Dayak concepts of communal welfare.

These linguistic choices served to soften resistance and helped shift the narrative from dispossession to opportunity. A provincial official familiar with DAD's communications strategy noted:

"When the government talks about food estate, the language is technical and rigid. But when DAD speaks, people feel closer. They use traditional terms that evoke a sense of pride in being Dayak." (Interviewee F, Provincial Communications Bureau, 21 April 2025)

This strategy is reflective of what calls "discourse coalitions" where legitimacy is constructed not just through facts or institutions, but through the circulation of resonant narratives, metaphors, and symbolic forms that people recognize as their own (McCoy, 2017; Weible & Sabatier, 2009).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that DAD's policy entrepreneurship is marked by a distinctive combination of cultural authority, narrative agency, and political maneuvering. By reframing the food estate as an opportunity aligned with adat values and by skillfully navigating the space between state logics and customary norms, DAD has been able to influence the agenda-setting process in ways that are both subtle and strategic. In doing so, DAD expands our understanding of who can be a policy entrepreneur and under what conditions. It shows that in peripheral, postcolonial governance settings, customary institutions can actively shape public policy not only through resistance, but also through participation, reinterpretation, and negotiation. This aligns with previous findings in policy entrepreneurship literature regarding non-traditional actors in governance.

Coalition Building: Forging Political and Social Alliances

The research found that DAD actively engaged in coalition building beyond ethnic or ideological lines. It forged alliances with provincial bureaucrats, youth organizations, moderate civil society groups, and sympathetic political actors. These alliances were pragmatically formed to broaden the legitimacy base and strategically suppress dissent. Members of DAD were included in consultative policy forums, ensuring that indigenous perspectives were institutionally embedded in the policy process.

To reinforce its position as both cultural authority and development actor, DAD engaged in public declarations and formal collaborations with the provincial government. In a widely publicized event in early 2022, DAD leaders stood side by side with the Governor of Central Kalimantan to announce their official support for the food estate program, invoking both developmental goals and adat values.

The partnership was formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), outlining DAD's role in: Mediating land conflicts, Conducting public outreach in adat-based communities, Monitoring the cultural impacts of land transformation, Recommending compensation mechanisms in line with local customs. These public and institutionalized

gestures deepened the impression that the policy had Dayak endorsement, lending a form of civic-moral legitimacy that *"The presence of DAD in the public declaration sends a message that this is not just an elite project. There is participation from traditional leaders, who are considered the guardians of Dayak morals and identity."* (Interviewee G, Secretariat of Regional Government, 25 April 2025)

Yet, such partnerships were not without criticism. Several community members expressed concern that DAD's closeness to power risked blurring the boundaries between representation and co-optation. As noted by a Dayak academic based in Palangka Raya:

"DAD must maintain a critical distance. If they are too accommodating to state interests, they could lose their position as protectors of indigenous peoples." (Interviewee H, Lecturer and Civil Society Advocate, 20 April 2025)

These critiques highlight the delicate balancing act that DAD must perform. Its legitimation strategies are effective in securing community compliance and government trust, but they also expose the institution to risks of credibility erosion among its base. DAD's success in legitimizing the food estate agenda lies not in formal legal authority but in its cultural capital and strategic performance of legitimacy. Through ritual enactment, symbolic framing, and institutional partnerships, DAD constructed a legitimacy scaffolding that enabled the state's controversial development project to gain a foothold in contested indigenous spaces.

These strategies demonstrate that policy legitimacy in hybrid governance contexts is not imposed, it is negotiated, performed, and ritualized. In this negotiation, institutions like DAD are not merely passive cultural vestiges; they are active political entrepreneurs who shape the contours of development in postcolonial, pluralistic societies.

Political Alignment and the Use of Policy Windows

DAD's policy entrepreneurship was significantly bolstered by political proximity to the provincial governor, who publicly supported the Food Estate initiative. This alliance provided access to key decision-making channels and enhanced DAD's credibility as a mediator between state and community. The COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified national concerns around food security, created a critical policy window. DAD seized this moment to frame its support as aligned with national resilience narratives, while safeguarding indigenous interests.

The strategic influence of the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) in advancing the food estate policy in Central Kalimantan cannot be separated from its close political alignment with the Governor's office. Unlike traditional policy entrepreneurs who operate from outside the locus of executive authority, DAD's leadership particularly its chairman holds a dual identity: both as a cultural figurehead of the indigenous Dayak population and as a political ally embedded in provincial power structures.

At the time of the food estate rollout, the Chair of DAD also maintained close personal and political ties with the Governor, being a trusted advisor on adat affairs and a long-time supporter of the Governor's electoral campaigns. This relational proximity allowed DAD not only to act as a cultural legitimizer but also as a back-channel political broker, bridging formal governmental authority with customary institutions. A staff member from the Governor's protocol office noted:

"DAD leaders are not only traditional leaders, but also part of the Governor's inner circle. They often have direct discussions, even before the program is announced to the public." (Interviewee I, Staff of Provincial Government, 26 April 2025)

This proximity offered DAD a strategic advantage: access to early drafts of policy decisions, inclusion in consultative

purely bureaucratic tools could not achieve. According to a staff member from the Regional Secretariat: meetings, and the ability to influence both the content and the rollout of the food estate agenda. Unlike civil society organizations or even district-level customary leaders, DAD operated within the inner circle of executive provincial politics, giving it unique leverage in shaping the contours of implementation. This form of alignment exemplifies what policy theory identifies as institutional embeddedness, where actors gain policy influence not simply through lobbying or protests, but by being structurally situated within or adjacent to decision-making bodies (Howlett et al., 2017).

The food estate program, initiated in the context of post-pandemic recovery and national food security concerns, opened a policy window a moment of institutional fluidity in which new ideas and actors can enter the policy arena (Kingdon, 2014; Zahariadis, 2016). DAD's close political positioning allowed it to act as an agile policy entrepreneur, taking advantage of this window to insert adat legitimacy into the development narrative. As part of this access, DAD was able to: Influence the geographic targeting of food estate sites to ensure some alignment with customary land use patterns; Advocate for adat-sensitive approaches to land clearing, compensation, and labor recruitment; Secure a role in monitoring community responses to project activities. A DAD executive board member confirmed:

"We are given space to give input in the planning. But more importantly, we can get in early even before the program reaches the community. So, we can manage the communication to avoid rejection." (Interviewee J, DAD Central Kalimantan Board, 22 April 2025)

This proactive positioning contrasts with typical scenarios in which indigenous institutions are relegated to reactive or oppositional roles. In this case, DAD became an insider, albeit a culturally distinct one, shaping both the tempo and tone of the program's local implementation.

This reflects (Mintrom, 2019) proposition that successful policy entrepreneurs possess access to decision-making venues and can mobilize networks of influence. In the DAD case, the venue was not just institutional (government offices) but also relational and affective rooted in trust, cultural capital,

Table 1. DAD Strategies as Policy Entrepreneur

Entrepreneurial Strategy	Empirical Evidence from Field	Function in Policy Process
Problem Framing	DAD framed food estate as a tool for Dayak economic sovereignty (<i>kedaulatan pangan adat</i>)	Shaped perceptions, reduced resistance
Cultural Legitimation	Used rituals, adat ceremonies and public endorsements to symbolize support	Conferred symbolic approval on government actions
Network Building	Formed alliances with bureaucrats, Dayak youth organizations and select NGO's	Broadened support base, created informal coalitions
Elite Alignment	Close political ties between DAD's leader and the Governor of Central Kalimantan	Enabled access to decision-making arenas
Policy Window Utilization	Leveraged Covid-19 and food security concerns as rationale to push the program forward	Timed messaging with national agenda on food resilience

Source: Research Analysis Result (2025)

Table 2. Process Tracing of DAD’s Role as a Policy Entrepreneur in the Food Estate Agenda

Phase	Year	Key Events	DAD’s Role	Causal Mechanism Identified	Supporting Evidence
1. Policy Emergence	2020	National food estate policy launched as post-COVID recovery program by central government.	Not yet involved. Passive observer.	Policy lacks local legitimacy; no indigenous consultation.	Policy documents; media coverage; absence of DAD in initial planning.
2. Local Adaptation & Alignment	2021	Governor begins implementation in Kapuas & Pulang Pisau; political alignment with DAD initiated.	Strategic alignment with provincial elites; initial public support.	Political ties create access to policy windows.	Interview with DAD leadership; MoU drafts; media statements.
3. Cultural Legitimation	2021–2022	DAD performs adat rituals and reframes food estate as beneficial for Dayak communities.	Reframing policy using adat narratives and rituals.	Cultural legitimacy mobilized to reduce community resistance.	Photos and transcripts of rituals; community interviews.
4. Coalition Building	2022–2023	Partnerships with local gov’t agencies and use of cultural symbols in public media.	Public advocacy, coalition expansion with local stakeholders.	DAD acts as intermediary, translating state goals into acceptable discourse.	MoUs; public broadcasts; DAD-published materials.
5. Institutional Consolidation	2023–2024	Criticism arises over food estate outcomes; DAD reinforces position as cultural authority.	Defends legitimacy and counters critique as 'outsider interference'.	DAD’s dual role becomes both leverage and source of tension.	Interviews with Dayak youth, activists; DAD public responses.

and political familiarity. Yet, this insider status is also politically fraught. While it provides policy leverage, it raises normative questions about co-optation, accountability, and representativeness. As one Dayak academic and civil society advocate warned:

“DAD’s closeness to the political elite can be beneficial for influence, but also dangerous. If they are too close, who will criticize policies if there are irregularities? DAD should not lose its integrity.” (Interviewee K, Political Scientist, 27 April 2025)

Such critiques are important reminders that political positioning is both an opportunity and a constraint. It enhances influence, but it may also erode credibility if not balanced with independent checks on power.

The case of DAD illustrates that cultural institutions can gain exceptional policy traction when their leadership is strategically positioned within broader political networks. The alignment with the Governor’s office allowed DAD to act swiftly and decisively as a policy entrepreneur leveraging policy windows (critical moments when political, problem, and policy streams align to enable change), shaping narratives, and embedding adat perspectives into state-led development.

However, this positioning also reveals the complex trade-offs inherent in hybrid governance. When customary institutions operate too closely within state power, they risk becoming part of the machinery they once existed to balance or critique. The sustainability of DAD’s influence, therefore, will depend on its ability to maintain critical autonomy while remaining politically engaged (see [Table 1](#)).

Between 2020 and 2024, several milestones illustrate DAD’s strategic engagement:

- In 2020, DAD led a major indigenous ritual to symbolically inaugurate the Food Estate project;
- From 2021–2022, DAD was at the forefront of grassroots outreach and public communication;
- In 2023, it established an "indigenous monitoring team" to oversee socio-cultural impacts;
- In 2024, during a politically sensitive year, DAD endorsed the incumbent governor, making the Food Estate a platform of political continuity and ethnic representation.

[Table 2](#) shows that customary institutions can play an effective role as policy drivers, particularly when integrated into hybrid governance structures that combine informal cultural legitimacy with formal political influence. DAD’s ability to articulate local values within the language of national development demonstrates a unique form of entrepreneurial agency one that challenges the traditional boundaries between state and society. Theoretically, this case expands policy entrepreneurship literature by incorporating symbolic-cultural capital and informal political networks as critical resources. In a country like Indonesia, where indigenous institutions retain strong societal roots, overlooking these actors may result in blind spots in policy design and implementation. Therefore, this research suggests that customary institutions are not merely stakeholders or cultural relics; they are dynamic political actors capable of shaping national policy agendas.

Coalition Mapping and Strategic Narratives

A central dimension of DAD’s effectiveness as a policy entrepreneur lies in its capacity to build and sustain strategic coalitions that span bureaucratic, cultural, and civil society domains. Unlike policy processes in urban or technocratic contexts where coalition-building often relies on institutional

bargaining or evidence-based lobbying, the dynamics in Central Kalimantan are deeply intertwined with identity politics, customary authority, and informal networks of power. This section unpacks the nature of the coalitions DAD formed and how narrative strategies were employed to shape perceptions, mitigate resistance, and align diverse actors toward the advancement of the food estate agenda.

The research reveals that DAD's coalition-building strategy involved three key constituencies:

- **Provincial Government Bureaucrats and Political Elites:** The relationship between DAD and the Governor of Central Kalimantan is pivotal. As the Chairman of DAD concurrently held a politically strategic position closely aligned with the provincial leadership this facilitated trust and opened access to formal policy discussions. DAD's narrative of "adat-led development" appealed to provincial officials seeking a culturally grounded legitimacy for a nationally imposed agenda.
- **Dayak Youth and Civil Society Groups:** Organizations such as *Pemuda Adat Dayak* and other youth-led movements were mobilized not merely as supporters but as amplifiers of DAD's discourse. Their involvement served both to rejuvenate the customary narrative and to give it a more modern, developmental outlook. Notably, these groups played a bridging role in reaching younger indigenous communities that might otherwise view state-led agrarian programs with skepticism.
- **Village-Level Customary Leaders (Damang and Mantir Adat):** DAD actively engaged lower-tier customary leaders to localize the food estate narrative. These actors, embedded within their respective communities, became conveyors of legitimacy, especially in areas experiencing contestation over land. Through routine customary dialogue (*dialog adat*) and community rituals, they helped frame the food estate not as land expropriation, but as an opportunity for cultural and economic revival.

These coalitions, while not formalized into legal or institutional frameworks, operated on mutual interest, narrative alignment, and symbolic recognition. The involvement of non-state and subnational actors highlights a broader pattern of hybrid governance, wherein legitimacy is not derived solely from statutory authority, but from moral, cultural, and representational power.

DAD's coalition success was reinforced by its deliberate use of strategic narratives compelling storylines that resonate emotionally and culturally with multiple audiences. This narrative construction served both symbolic and instrumental functions: it reduced the dissonance between state-led agrarian reform and indigenous values, and it offered a rhetorical framework that positioned DAD as a defender of both tradition and progress.

Three core narrative themes emerged:

- **Development without uprooting roots (*Membangun tanpa mencabut akar*):** This phrase became emblematic of DAD's position that economic modernization could proceed without erasing customary identity. It was featured in speeches, ceremonies, and local media, reinforcing the message that food estate was not a colonial imposition but a cultural transformation.
- **Food sovereignty through custom (*Kedaulatan pangan berbasis adat*):** Here, DAD reframed the food estate not merely as a response to national food insecurity, but as an opportunity for Dayak communities to reclaim economic control over their ancestral lands. This provided an empowering frame for indigenous farmers and countered narratives of dispossession.
- **Custom as enabler, not obstacle, to development (*Adat untuk pembangunan, bukan penghalang pembangunan*):** This directly addressed the often-implicit bias in bureaucratic discourse that sees tradition as backward.

DAD reversed this framing, arguing that customary systems offer ready-made institutions for dispute resolution, land governance, and social trust—key prerequisites for successful agrarian development.

Through these narratives, DAD not only mobilized support but also neutralized potential opposition. Opposing voices, including environmental NGOs and land rights activists, were portrayed not as enemies, but as outsiders who failed to understand the internal logic of adat-based governance. This strategy proved effective in maintaining unity within the coalition while also avoiding direct confrontation with state critics.

Beyond initial policy endorsement, the coalition served as a buffer against backlash, especially during periods of tension such as land disputes or environmental degradation claims. When criticisms arose about the ecological impacts of food estate land clearing, DAD deployed its network of customary leaders to mediate conflicts at the village level and provide moral justification through traditional land use rituals (*manugal* and *nyahadek tanah*).

Moreover, the coalition's resilience was rooted in reciprocal legitimacy: the provincial government needed DAD to maintain grassroots stability and secure electoral support among Dayak constituencies; DAD, in turn, needed state endorsement to strengthen its institutional authority in a rapidly modernizing governance landscape. This interdependence sustained the coalition beyond short-term policy windows, embedding it within the political fabric of Central Kalimantan.

Constraints and Ambivalences in DAD's Role

While the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) demonstrated agency as a policy entrepreneur and effectively built alliances to promote the food estate agenda, its role was not without tension, contradiction, and limitation. As a traditional institution navigating a modern policy environment, DAD faced complex challenges that raised questions about representation, legitimacy, and long-term alignment with indigenous interests. This section explores those constraints and ambivalences to provide a balanced understanding of DAD's policy entrepreneurship.

Representational Tensions: Who Speaks for Whom?

A recurring issue in the field data was the extent to which DAD's endorsement of the food estate policy truly reflected the voices of Dayak communities at large. Although DAD holds formal cultural authority, several local civil society organizations and village-based leaders raised concerns about the selective nature of representation. Critics argued that DAD's centralized structure enabled elite decision-making that may not always capture grassroots perspectives, especially those of communities directly impacted by land use changes.

This points to a representational ambivalence: while DAD claims to be the cultural custodian of the Dayak people, the internal diversity of Dayak subgroups and local political fragmentation means that no single institution can fully embody a unified voice. In several food estate sites, particularly in Pulang Pisau and Kapuas regencies, customary objections were recorded despite DAD's public support—revealing a gap between institutional endorsement and lived community sentiment.

Co-optation and Political Proximity

Another critical constraint concerns DAD's political alignment with the provincial government, especially the Governor's office. While proximity to power gave DAD access to policy influence, it also raised the risk of co-optation where traditional authority is instrumentalized to secure state agendas at the expense of indigenous autonomy. Several interviewees described DAD's role as "too close" to the ruling elite, potentially compromising its neutral position as a

guardian of community interests. This raises normative questions about the limits of entrepreneurial legitimacy: at what point does policy entrepreneurship become complicity in top-down policymaking? In aligning with electoral interests, DAD's strategic silence on issues like environmental degradation and forced relocation further reinforced perceptions that it had sacrificed critical oversight for political favor.

Institutional Fragility and Legal Ambiguity

Despite its social authority, DAD lacks a formal legal mandate to influence land-use decisions or enforce accountability mechanisms in state-led projects. Its status is largely symbolic, recognized in local regulations but not fully integrated into national policymaking frameworks. This institutional fragility limits DAD's capacity to intervene in cases of rights violations or policy failures. The ambiguity also extends to resource allocation. While DAD received political recognition, it did not gain sustainable funding or institutional infrastructure to monitor the socio-economic impacts of the food estate. This resulted in dependency on ad hoc collaborations, often driven by political cycles rather than long-term community development goals.

Cultural-Ecological Trade-offs

One of the most ethically and environmentally complex dimensions of DAD's involvement lies in its navigating of trade-offs between cultural symbolism and ecological sustainability. In legitimizing the food estate, DAD performed traditional ceremonies (e.g., "menugal tanah") to sanctify the development. However, these symbolic acts were at times in tension with the actual environmental outcomes, such as deforestation, peatland degradation, and biodiversity loss. Environmental NGOs accused DAD of greenwashing the program by lending cultural legitimacy to projects that may be ecologically harmful. While DAD claimed that development was necessary for food sovereignty, the long-term sustainability of these land transformations remains contested. Thus, DAD's entrepreneurship also carries an ambivalence between preservation and modernization, between upholding heritage and enabling transformation.

Reflexivity and Internal Debate

Interestingly, within DAD itself, the research uncovered internal debates and reflexive critiques about the long-term impacts of the food estate policy. Some younger DAD members and affiliated youth organizations expressed concern that the institution was being used to depoliticize indigenous resistance and silence dissenting voices. These internal dialogues suggest that DAD is not a monolithic entity but a contested political space where generational, ideological, and strategic differences coexist. This internal heterogeneity could offer opportunities for institutional learning and course correction, but it also underscores the complexity of mobilizing customary institutions as singular policy actors.

While DAD has successfully operated as a strategic policy entrepreneur, its role is layered with constraints and contradictions. Its effectiveness stems not only from its cultural legitimacy and political alliances but also from its willingness to perform entrepreneurial functions within structurally limiting conditions. At the same time, DAD's legitimacy is under continuous negotiation, externally with state actors and communities, and internally within its own institutional frameworks. These ambivalences highlight the need to view policy entrepreneurship in non-Western and hybrid governance contexts not as linear or unidimensional, but as fluid, contested, and shaped by multiple layers of identity, power, and politics.

Redefining Policy Entrepreneurship in Local Contexts Beyond Technocrats and Bureaucrats: Adat Institutions as Credible Policy Actors

The dominant literature on policy entrepreneurship has largely emphasized the role of technocrats, bureaucrats, and political elites in navigating institutional constraints and exploiting policy windows (Béland et al., 2016; Herweg et al., 2022). These actors are typically portrayed as possessing the strategic foresight, insider access, and networking capacity to push ideas through crowded and often contested policy processes.

However, the findings from this study challenge this metropolitan and institutionalist bias by offering empirical evidence that customary institutions such as the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) can act as credible and influential policy entrepreneurs, especially within the plural governance ecosystems of Indonesia's peripheral regions. The case of the food estate program in Central Kalimantan illustrates that policy entrepreneurship is not a monopoly of formal state actors, but may emerge from culturally embedded institutions that wield moral legitimacy, symbolic authority, and strategic political connections.

DAD's strategic involvement in the food estate policy process through narrative reframing, ritual legitimation, political alliances, and grassroots mediation demonstrates a unique form of policy entrepreneurship that operates outside bureaucratic norms but inside relational and cultural structures. This type of actor is often overlooked in policy process theory, which tends to assume secular, formal, and rational-legal domains as the exclusive site of entrepreneurial activity.

Thus, this study extends the conceptual horizon of policy entrepreneurship by foregrounding hybrid actors in hybrid governance systems, particularly in postcolonial and decentralized settings where indigenous institutions retain significant authority. It affirms that the analytical category of "policy entrepreneur" must be context-sensitive not only adaptable to political opportunity structures but also embedded in local epistemologies, rituals, and relational networks.

The research question at the heart of this article is answered through four interlocking findings:

1. Narrative Framing

DAD reframed the food estate not as a threat, but as a development opportunity aligned with adat principles. This rhetorical reframing converted state policy into a locally palatable project, embedding it within Dayak values such as food for the people (*panginan lewu*) and communal well-being (*kesejahteraan bersama*).

2. Ritual and Symbolic Legitimacy

DAD employed adat rituals to ritually endorse land use change. This legitimized the project in the moral-spiritual universe of Dayak communities, where political consent is often granted through ceremonial and symbolic cues rather than legal documents.

3. Political Mediation

DAD served as a bridge between provincial political elites and grassroots communities. Its leadership's proximity to the Governor enabled early access to policy windows and the capacity to influence program design and community outreach strategies.

4. Cultural Authority and Risk Containment

By leveraging its trusted position within the Dayak community, DAD was able to mediate potential conflict, soothe anxieties over land dispossession, and create the appearance of indigenous participation thus stabilizing the implementation phase.

Together, these findings confirm that DAD functions as a culturally grounded, politically networked, and narratively agile

policy entrepreneur one that reflects the institutional reality of policymaking in Indonesia's peripheries.

Risk of Co-optation vs Strategic Pragmatism

One of the central theoretical tensions in the analysis of non-state actors in policymaking is the risk of co-optation. When indigenous or community-based institutions align closely with state agendas, particularly those involving land conversion and environmental risk, they run the risk of losing their autonomy, legitimacy, and representational integrity (Kahrisma Nugroho, 2018; Li, 2014).

The DAD case reflects this dilemma in real time. On one hand, DAD's involvement in the food estate program could be interpreted as a form of strategic pragmatism a calculated engagement with state actors to secure influence, voice, and potential benefits for their communities. On the other hand, their deep entanglement with elite politics exposes them to internal critiques, especially from younger Dayak generations and civil society actors who view their proximity to power as compromising the integrity of adat leadership.

This tension reveals the ambivalence of policy entrepreneurship in hybrid governance regimes. Unlike in technocratic settings where policy entrepreneurs are often celebrated for their innovation and persistence, customary entrepreneurs must navigate a triple accountability: to the state, to their community, and to the moral codes of their tradition.

Rather than resolving this tension, this study suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of indigenous political agency one that recognizes the blended rationalities at play. Customary institutions like DAD do not operate within the dichotomy of "resistance vs. collaboration." Instead, they move fluidly between registers of negotiation, ritual, consent-making, and strategic accommodation.

Toward a Postcolonial Reframing of Policy Process Theory

This study also contributes to theory-building by proposing a postcolonial reframing of policy entrepreneurship. Mainstream policy process theories such as the Multiple Streams Framework or the Advocacy Coalition Framework presume stable institutions, transparent deliberative arenas, and standardized actor roles (Kingdon, 2014; Sabatier & Weible, 2007). These assumptions do not hold in settings like Central Kalimantan, where governance is hybrid, legitimacy is plural, and authority is contested.

The DAD case illustrates that in postcolonial and peripheral contexts: Policy processes are not linear but ritualistic, relational, and episodic; Policy windows are not always technical openings but moments of symbolic convergence; Entrepreneurs are not always institutional insiders, but sometimes charismatic outsiders who operate on the margins of formal legality. This suggests the need to incorporate ethnographic sensibilities and anthropological insights into policy studies particularly in understanding how institutions like DAD govern, persuade, and perform legitimacy in ways that are not reducible to bureaucratic logic.

The case of the Dayak Customary Council forces us to reconsider who counts as a policy entrepreneur and what counts as policymaking. It demonstrates that indigenous institutions, when strategically situated and culturally authoritative, can shape policy agendas in profound ways often more durably than formal actors. Rather than viewing

these roles through the lens of co-optation or resistance, we must begin to recognize the agency, adaptability, and layered accountability of customary actors operating in complex governance terrains. In doing so, we move closer to a more inclusive and context-sensitive theory of policy entrepreneurship, one that acknowledges the moral, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of policy action in the Southeast Asia Governance.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the Dayak Customary Council (DAD) plays a strategic role as a policy entrepreneur in the implementation of Indonesia's food estate program in Central Kalimantan. By reframing state policy into culturally resonant narratives, mobilizing symbolic legitimacy, and aligning politically with provincial leadership, DAD effectively influenced agenda-setting at the local level. Theoretically, the research broadens the scope of policy entrepreneurship by demonstrating that customary institutions, not just bureaucratic elites, can shape policy trajectories especially in Central Kalimantan contexts. Empirically, it shows how indigenous institutions can mediate between state and society, facilitating smoother development interventions. The study's novelty lies in identifying DAD's dual role as both cultural mediator and political actor within the specific context of food estate implementation in Central Kalimantan. However, limitations include reliance on elite interviews and the absence of broader community perspectives, which may affect representativeness. This study offers key insights for policymakers and customary actors. Policymakers should recognize the importance of involving indigenous institutions like DAD in the policy process, especially in regions where they hold significant local influence. This inclusion can enhance local legitimacy and ensure smoother implementation of development projects. Additionally, forming strategic alliances between state actors and customary institutions is vital to navigate the complexities of hybrid governance. Such alliances should be based on mutual respect and the acknowledgment of each party's unique role, avoiding mere political co-optation of indigenous groups. For customary institutions, the study highlights the importance of leveraging cultural legitimacy to influence policy agendas. DAD's use of traditional rituals and culturally resonant framing demonstrates how cultural authority can be a powerful tool in policy entrepreneurship, allowing them to maintain their values while engaging in political processes. This study suggests several areas for future research. Comparative studies across different regions of Indonesia or Southeast Asia could provide a deeper understanding of how indigenous institutions influence policy processes in diverse socio-political contexts. Long-term research could examine the impact of indigenous institutions' involvement in state-led development projects, particularly whether such engagements lead to sustained benefits or a loss of autonomy and cultural integrity. Lastly, exploring the role of indigenous youth and civil society in influencing the policy process could shed light on their contributions to balancing power dynamics between state actors and traditional leadership.

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