



## Evaluating Public Policy Interventions for Out-of-School Children from Administrative and Political Perspectives: Evidence from Gorontalo Province

Prasaja Arifiyanto, Rauf A. Hatu, Ismet Sulila, Yanti Aneta

Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, Gorontalo, Indonesia

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### CORRESPONDENCE

Name: Prasaja Arifiyanto  
Email: [prasaja@gmail.com](mailto:prasaja@gmail.com)

### A B S T R A C T

This study aims to evaluate the policy for handling out-of-school children in Gorontalo Province by examining its implementation, governance mechanisms, and contextual challenges at the local level. The research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of key actors involved in education policy implementation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field observations involving provincial and district education officials, school principals, teachers, local government representatives, parents, and children who had dropped out of school. The data were analyzed interactively using stages of reduction, display, and conclusion drawing, with policy evaluation focused on administrative, legal, and political dimensions. The findings indicate that the problem of out-of-school children in Gorontalo Province is most prominent among adolescents aged 16–18 years, particularly during the transition to secondary education. Economic pressure, socio-cultural norms, geographic accessibility, and limited educational infrastructure are key determinants of school discontinuation. From an administrative perspective, weaknesses in data integration and cross-sectoral coordination reduce policy effectiveness. Legally, although the policy framework is relatively strong, weak law enforcement and the absence of clear sanctions limit its coercive power. Politically, formal government support has not been fully translated into responsive and participatory policies for vulnerable groups. In conclusion, the effectiveness of policies addressing out-of-school children in Gorontalo Province depends not only on program availability but also on strengthening governance capacity, legal enforcement, and collaborative, context-sensitive implementation.

### INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right of every citizen and constitutes a central pillar in the development of high-quality and sustainable human resources (Michelsen & Fischer, 2017). Within the framework of a welfare state, education is not merely understood as a public service provided by the state, but also as a strategic social investment that plays a crucial role in promoting social justice, enabling vertical social mobility, and supporting long-term economic development as well as democratic consolidation (Alam, 2025; Malik, 2018). In the Indonesian context, this commitment is constitutionally guaranteed through Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which explicitly affirms that every citizen has the right to education and obliges the state to organize and continuously improve a national education system that ensures equitable access and quality learning outcomes (Madani, 2019; Qureshi et al., 2020; Tibaka & Rosdian, 2018). At the global level, education has likewise been positioned as a core development priority within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education alongside the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all as a foundation for sustainable development (Elfert, 2019; Scavarda et al., 2019).

Despite these strong normative, constitutional, and international commitments, empirical realities indicate that access to education remains uneven and exclusionary for certain population groups (Blessed-Sayah & Griffiths, 2024). Millions of school-age children worldwide continue to experience barriers that prevent them from enrolling in or completing formal education, rendering the phenomenon of out-of-school children (OOSC) a critical indicator of systemic weaknesses in education systems (Gururaj et al., 2021; Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). In

Indonesia, the persistence of OOSC reflects a complex and multidimensional structural challenge that cannot be explained by a single causal factor. A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that economic deprivation, household vulnerability, low levels of parental education, social and cultural norms, geographic isolation, and institutional limitations interact in ways that restrict both initial access to schooling and sustained participation across educational levels (Bhattarai et al., 2024; Botzen et al., 2019; Power et al., 2020). These interrelated constraints are particularly evident in regions with limited infrastructure and weak public service delivery capacity.

National education statistics consistently reveal that adolescents aged 16–18 years constitute the most vulnerable group in terms of school participation and completion (García-Carrión et al., 2018). This age group is characterized by a high risk of dropping out or failing to transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education, which suggests that the policy of 12-year compulsory education has not yet been fully institutionalized in regional governance practices or internalized within public perceptions of educational necessity (Patton et al., 2016). The vulnerability of this cohort is often exacerbated by pressures to enter the labor market early, engage in informal employment, or assume domestic responsibilities, particularly among households facing persistent economic insecurity. As a result, educational discontinuation at this stage poses serious long-term consequences for individual life chances and national human capital formation (Lansford et al., 2016; Renner et al., 2024).

In response to these persistent challenges, the Indonesian government has implemented a range of policy interventions aimed at expanding access to education and preventing school dropout, including the Smart Indonesia Program (Program

Indonesia Pintar/PIP), the strengthening of equivalency education pathways, and the formulation of the National Strategy for Handling Out-of-School Children (Stranas ATS), which was officially launched in 2020. Stranas ATS represents a comprehensive policy framework that emphasizes accurate and integrated data mapping of out-of-school children, cross-sectoral coordination among relevant government institutions, and collaborative engagement between the central government, local governments, and community-level actors. Conceptually, this strategy reflects a shift toward a more integrated governance approach that recognizes the multifaceted nature of educational exclusion.

However, evidence from the broader literature on public policy implementation indicates that the effectiveness of nationally designed strategies is highly contingent upon the capacity, commitment, and administrative readiness of local governments to translate policy objectives into concrete and context-sensitive actions (Chen, 2017). In the Indonesian education sector, previous evaluations suggest that gaps frequently emerge between policy design and on-the-ground implementation due to fragmented inter-agency coordination, limitations in data integration, uneven fiscal and human resource capacity across regions, and varying levels of political prioritization at the local level. These challenges raise critical questions regarding the actual operationalization of Stranas ATS and its ability to reach the most vulnerable children effectively.

Although existing studies have made important contributions by identifying the determinants of OOSC and assessing specific education programs, much of the current literature remains concentrated on either micro-level socioeconomic factors or isolated program evaluations. There is still a relative scarcity of empirical research that systematically examines the implementation of Stranas ATS at the subnational level, particularly from the perspective of governance, institutional coordination, and policy implementation dynamics. This gap underscores the need for research that not only documents the persistence of out-of-school children but also critically analyzes how national policy frameworks are interpreted, adapted, and executed by local governments in diverse socio-economic and geographic contexts.

Strengthening policy implementation is essential in explaining the effectiveness of public policy interventions for out-of-school children, particularly from administrative and political perspectives in Gorontalo Province. The issue of out-of-school children not only reflects limitations in access to education but also indicates challenges in policy implementation at the local level. In this regard, the policy implementation perspective, emphasizes that implementation is a complex process influenced by interactions among actors, institutional capacity, and socio-political dynamics (Buzogány, A., & Pülzl, 2024) Meanwhile, Michael Lipsky, through the concept of *street-level bureaucracy*, explains that frontline implementers have discretion in executing policies, which may lead to variations in implementation outcomes (Lipsky, 2023).

On the other hand, the collaborative governance approach highlights that the success of policy interventions is not solely determined by the role of government but also by the involvement of multiple stakeholders across sectors. In the context of addressing out-of-school children in Gorontalo, collaboration between local government, communities, and non-governmental organizations is a key factor in enhancing policy effectiveness. This aligns with the ideas of Chris Ansell and Alison Gash, who

emphasize the importance of collaboration in modern governance (Ansell & Gash, 2018), and is further supported by John W. Bryson, who views cross-sector collaboration as a crucial element in public policy implementation (Bryson et al., 2016). Therefore, integrating policy implementation perspectives with collaborative governance provides an important foundation for evaluating the extent to which policy interventions can effectively address the issue of out-of-school children, both from administrative and political dimensions.

Therefore, this research seeks to analyze the implementation of policies for addressing out-of-school children within the framework of Stranas ATS, to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder effective policy execution, and to examine the role of local governments and cross-sectoral collaboration in ensuring sustainable and equitable access to education. By providing an in-depth analysis of policy implementation at the local level, this study is expected to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the literature on education policy and public administration. Furthermore, the findings are anticipated to offer practical insights for policymakers in strengthening the effectiveness of interventions aimed at fulfilling the constitutional right to education, advancing social equity, and supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in Indonesia.

## METHOD

This research uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach. This qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the realities of policies addressing out-of-school children through exploring the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of actors directly involved in the formulation and implementation of education policies (Denzin, 2017). The phenomenological method is used to explore how policies are understood, interpreted, and implemented by policy implementers and target groups within a specific social context.

The research location was determined in Gorontalo Province, focusing on two regions: Gorontalo City and Pohuwato Regency. This location selection was based on differences in regional characteristics and School Participation Rates (APS), particularly among the secondary school-age group. These differences allow for a comparative analysis of the implementation of policies addressing out-of-school children in regions with relatively high educational attainment and areas with more complex out-of-school problems.

The informants were selected purposively, based on their involvement, knowledge, and experience with the policies under study. Informants included officials from the Gorontalo Provincial Education and Culture Office, officials from district/city Education Offices, school principals, teachers, village or sub-district government officials, as well as parents and children who had dropped out of school. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the data obtained were relevant and information-rich, in line with the objectives of the qualitative research (M. Q. Patton, 2022).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, documentation studies, and field observations. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore informants' perspectives and experiences regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of policies to address out-of-school children. The documentation study included analyses of laws and regulations, regional planning and budgeting documents, performance reports from relevant agencies, and appropriate education

statistics. Field observations were conducted to obtain an empirical picture of the condition of the educational environment, the accessibility of academic services, and the implementation practices of local policies.

Data analysis was conducted interactively and continuously through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, as outlined (Miles, Huberman, 2016). The policy evaluation analysis framework refers to a public policy evaluation approach that emphasizes three main dimensions: administrative, legal, and political. Data validity is maintained through source and method triangulation techniques to ensure the credibility and reliability of research findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Vulnerability of the Secondary Education Transition as a Determinant of Children Not Going to School

The problem of children not attending school in Gorontalo Province is primarily concentrated among the secondary school-age group, particularly those aged 16–18. Although access to basic education is relatively equitable and school participation rates in this age group are high, the transition from primary to secondary education remains a critical point at which students are prone to dropping out (Bakari & Sidik, 2025). This situation indicates that the expansion of access to basic education has not been fully accompanied by adequate support mechanisms to ensure the continuity of schooling into secondary education, as found in various national studies on the vulnerability of the secondary education transition (Balbachevsky et al., 2019).

This study found that family economic factors are among the main reasons children do not continue their education beyond the primary level. Limited family income forces children to engage in financial activities, either helping their parents work or earning their own income. Furthermore, indirect education costs, such as transportation, school supplies, and other support needs, remain a significant burden for low-income families. These findings align with research by Sparrow et al., (2020), which confirmed that economic barriers remain the primary determinant of children not attending school in areas with relatively high poverty rates. Distance and accessibility to schools also play a significant role, particularly in rural areas with limited transportation and road infrastructure.

In addition to economic and geographic factors, this study also revealed social and cultural factors that influence the sustainability of children's education. The perception of some communities that do not yet consider secondary education a strategic need contributes to the high rate of children not attending school. In some cases, secondary education is seen as less relevant to the family's short-term economic needs, leading to children being pushed into work or marriage at a young age. This phenomenon reinforces previous findings that the low social value of secondary education remains a challenge in implementing the 12-year compulsory education policy.

Spatially, Pohuwato Regency shows a higher percentage of children not attending school than Gorontalo City. Limited educational infrastructure, difficult-to-reach geographic conditions, and higher poverty rates are major factors undermining the sustainability of education in the region. These conditions indicate that policies to address out-of-school children in areas with rural, complex geographic characteristics require a different, more adaptive approach, as emphasized in the literature on area-based education policies (Chaniago et al., 2024)

In contrast, Gorontalo City benefits more from adequate educational facilities and infrastructure, shorter school distances, and better accessibility to academic services. The supportive urban environment and broader availability of information also contribute to reducing the number of out-of-school children. These findings suggest that regional context significantly influences the effectiveness of out-of-school policy implementation, making uniform policies potentially ineffective if not tailored to local conditions (Dunn, 2018; Hupe & Hill, 2016).

### Administrative Weaknesses in Data Integration and Cross-Sector Coordination

From an administrative perspective, the policy for addressing out-of-school children in Gorontalo Province has a relatively straightforward institutional structure and planning framework. The regional government, through the Gorontalo Provincial Education and Culture Office, plays a leading role in formulating and coordinating secondary education policies, supported by regulatory instruments, regional planning documents, and education budget allocations that comply with statutory provisions. This demonstrates the regional government's administrative commitment to making the issue of out-of-school children a key component of the regional development agenda.

However, this study found that the policy's administrative effectiveness still faces several fundamental weaknesses, particularly in data integration and cross-sector coordination. The out-of-school children database has not been fully integrated vertically down to the village and sub-district levels, and horizontally across regional agencies involved in education, such as the social services office, the population office, and village governments. This limited data integration leads to inaccurate targeting of intervention programs, delays in handling cases involving out-of-school children, and potential program overlap between agencies, which emphasize that high-quality data and information systems are key prerequisites for effective policies to address out-of-school children (Dyer & Echessa, 2019).

Furthermore, cross-sectoral coordination in policy implementation still tends to be administrative and procedural, and has not yet developed into planned, sustainable, substantive collaboration. Coordination between agencies is often limited to formal forums, such as coordination meetings and routine reporting, without clear and measurable follow-up mechanisms. From a public administration perspective, this reflects weak collaborative governance in the implementation of cross-sectoral public policies (Woldesenbet, 2018).

These limited data integration and cross-sectoral coordination indicate that the challenge of policies addressing out-of-school children in Gorontalo Province lies not in the absence of administrative structures, but instead in the capacity of policy governance to effectively consolidate actors, resources, and information. Therefore, strengthening integrated data systems and cross-sector coordination mechanisms is an essential prerequisite for increasing the effectiveness of policies for handling out-of-school children at the regional level.

### Weaknesses in Law Enforcement in Policies Addressing Out-of-School Children

The addressing of out-of-school children in Gorontalo Province has a relatively strong legal basis through Regional Regulation Number 5 of 2019 concerning the Implementation of Education. This regional regulation normatively affirms the

regional government's obligation to guarantee access to education up to the secondary level as part of the implementation of the 12-year compulsory education policy. Furthermore, this regional regulation aligns with the national legal framework, such as Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System and Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government, which establish education as a mandatory government affair within basic services.

However, research shows that the normative strength of this regulation has not been fully matched by effective implementation on the ground. Weak law enforcement mechanisms and the absence of firm sanctions for parties who fail to fulfill their educational obligations have led to policies addressing out-of-school children tending to be persuasive and normative. In practice, regional governments prioritize appeals and outreach approaches over the implementation of binding legal instruments. This situation creates a gap between legal norms (*das sollen*) and the reality of policy implementation (*das sein*), a classic problem in public policy enforcement (Avelino, 2021).

The absence of clear sanctions also impacts the policy's weak coercive power against non-governmental actors, particularly parents or guardians who allow children to discontinue education. This study found that local government officials tend to hesitate to implement legal instruments due to social and cultural considerations, often compromising law enforcement to maintain social stability. This finding aligns with *Berbés-Blázquez et al.*, (2016), which emphasizes that the social context and power relations often influence law in practice.

From a public policy perspective, weak law enforcement indicates that education regulations function more as administrative guidelines than as effective control instruments. However, the policy literature emphasizes that regulatory effectiveness is primarily determined by explicit norms, consistent implementation, and adequate sanctions and oversight mechanisms (Howlett & Ramesh, 2015; Hill & Hupe, 2014). Therefore, strengthening the legal framework, particularly its enforcement mechanisms and proportionate sanctions, is an essential prerequisite for improving the effectiveness of policies to address out-of-school children at the regional level.

#### Administrative Weaknesses in Data Integration and Cross-Sector Coordination

From a political perspective, the policy for addressing out-of-school children in Gorontalo Province demonstrates relatively strong political support from the local government and the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), particularly in education budgeting. This support is reflected in the consistent allocation of the education budget, which normatively meets the minimum requirements mandated by laws and regulations. In the context of budgetary politics, the local government's support for the education sector demonstrates a formal political commitment to making education a regional development priority.

However, this study reveals that this political support has not yet been fully translated into policies responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups, particularly children from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds. Local political dynamics, including differing interests among political actors and a tendency toward short-term policy orientation, affect the consistency and sustainability of programs to address out-of-school children. In some cases, education policies are geared more toward meeting

administrative and symbolic targets than addressing substantive issues at the grassroots level. This finding aligns with Grindle (2017), assertion that the political context and the interests of the actors involved strongly influence the success of public policy.

Furthermore, limited public participation in policy formulation and evaluation processes also weakens the responsiveness of education policies. This study found that public involvement, including from civil society organizations, parents, and local communities, remains sporadic and has not been institutionalized in policy decision-making mechanisms. Yet, public policy literature emphasizes that public participation is a crucial prerequisite for creating inclusive and equitable policies (Ansell & Gash, 2018).

From a governance perspective, weak public participation and the dominance of elitist policy processes can lead to policies that are less sensitive to the needs of vulnerable groups. This situation suggests that formal political support alone is insufficient to ensure the effectiveness of policies addressing out-of-school children. Strengthening mechanisms for public participation and political accountability are needed so that education policies reflect not only the interests of political actors but also the real needs of the community (Sonnenfeld et al., 2024).

#### Determinants of Children Not Going to School in Gorontalo Province

Economic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors are the main reasons children do not attend school in Gorontalo Province. Family economic pressure is the dominant factor pushing children out of the formal education system, especially at the secondary level. Limited household income causes families to prioritize meeting short-term basic needs over long-term educational investments. In this context, children are often positioned as a family economic resource, either by assisting parents in the informal sector or by working independently to supplement the family income (Moussié & Alfes, 2018).

In addition to economic factors, socio-cultural aspects also play a significant role in influencing the sustainability of children's education. The practice of early marriage is still found in several regions, particularly in rural areas, and has a direct impact on the interruption of children's education, especially girls (Ilyas et al., 2020). Early marriage not only limits children's access to formal education but also reinforces the cycle of poverty between generations. Furthermore, a widespread perception persists among some communities that secondary education does not provide direct and tangible economic benefits, making it less relevant than working or starting a family at a young age (Olu-Owolabi et al., 2020).

Environmental factors and regional conditions also exacerbate children's vulnerability to dropping out of education. Limited transportation, relatively long school distances, and inadequate infrastructure are structural barriers, particularly for children living in remote areas. A social environment that is less supportive of educational continuity, such as a lack of role models and weak social oversight of school participation, also increases the risk of children dropping out of the education system (Radey, 2018). These findings indicate that the problem of children dropping out of school cannot be resolved through a sectoral approach alone. More comprehensive and integrated policies are needed that focus not only on educational aspects but also on the family's economic dimension, changing social norms, and continuous improvement of the educational environment.

## CONCLUSION

This research confirms that the issue of out-of-school children in Gorontalo Province is a multidimensional public policy issue, most vulnerable during the transition phase of secondary education, particularly in the 16–18 age group. Family economic factors, sociocultural norms, and limited access to the environment and the region are intertwined in pushing children out of the formal education system. This situation indicates that the success of expanding access to basic education has not been fully accompanied by effective policy mechanisms to ensure the continuity of education through to the secondary level.

From a policy evaluation perspective, this research found that the main weakness lies in policy governance. Administratively, limited integration of out-of-school data and weak cross-sectoral coordination hamper the targeting and effectiveness of policy interventions. From a legal perspective, despite a relatively strong legal basis, weak law enforcement and the absence of clear sanctions have led to policies that are more normative and persuasive. Meanwhile, from a political perspective, formal local government support for the education sector has not been fully translated into policies responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups, and community participation in policy formulation and evaluation remains limited.

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