

## UNVEILING THE HIDDEN REALITY BEHIND THE STUNTING BUDGET

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### ABSTRACT

This study unveils the phenomenon of the stunting budget in Gorontalo Province by comparing two districts with different dynamics: Boalemo Regency (the lowest stunting prevalence) and Pohuwato Regency (the highest stunting prevalence), to capture actors' experiences across the input, process, and output stages of policy. Using Husserl's transcendental phenomenological approach, this qualitative study uncovers the meaning of stakeholders' subjective experiences in managing the stunting budget. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and observation with informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling, comprising local government elements (the regional government, the regional legislature, and the regional planning agency), the health office, community health centre staff, and beneficiary communities, supported by secondary data such as stunting statistics and regulations. The findings show that the stunting budget functions as an arena of public governance, so that policy success cannot be measured merely by document completeness and budget absorption, but is determined by the system's capacity to translate allocations into well-targeted, socially impactful services. Boalemo Regency faces dominant challenges related to limited field human resources and the risk of efficiency-driven reallocation, while Pohuwato Regency faces dominant challenges related to structural fiscal constraints, its wide geographic area, governance change, and the need for consistent data and precisely targeted assistance. This study recommends strengthening substantive accountability through context-based allocation formulas, binding cross-sector convergence, and oversight that tests the accuracy of benefits rather than mere document compliance.

**Keywords:** *Stunting Budget; Public Governance; Transcendental Phenomenology; Noema-Noesis; Substantive Accountability; Gorontalo.*

## INTRODUCTION

Stunting is a condition of impaired growth in children caused by prolonged chronic malnutrition, which the World Health Organization (WHO) identifies as a form of malnutrition that hampers children's cognitive development, increases the risk of disease, and lowers productivity in adulthood. The Indonesian government has placed the reduction of stunting among its national priorities, with a target of reducing it to below 14% by 2024, as set out in the 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). This target is supported by substantial health-budget allocations; however, the Indonesian Ministry of Health (2022) reported that the national stunting prevalence remained at 24.4%, while the average rate of decline over the past eight years was only 1.3% per year far below the 2.7% per year required to achieve the target.

The problem lies not only in the size of the budget but also in its governance. President Joko Widodo once highlighted the misalignment of stunting-budget use in one region, where IDR 6 billion of a IDR 10 billion budget was in fact absorbed by official travel and meetings (Nugraheny, 2023). This phenomenon reflects the concept of budgetary slack in public budgeting theory, namely the allocation of funds that are not fully directed towards programme objectives due to weak accountability and transparency in the budgeting process.

Gorontalo Province offers a relevant context for examining this phenomenon. According to a press release from the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Cultural Affairs, stunting prevalence in Gorontalo remains relatively high, so that the province has been urged to prioritise the reduction of extreme poverty simultaneously with the handling of stunting. Data from the 2022 Indonesian Nutritional Status Survey (SSGI) and the 2024 Indonesian Health Survey (SKI) reveal contrasting dynamics between districts in Gorontalo: Boalemo Regency recorded a sharp decline from 29.9% (2022) to 6.3% (2024), whereas Pohuwato Regency experienced fluctuation, rising from 6.4% (2022) to 18.4% (2023) before falling to 13.7% (2024). This contrast in dynamics makes the two regencies an appropriate locus for comparing actors' experiences in managing the stunting budget.

A locally grounded, phenomenology-based study of the stunting budget allows rich perspectives to emerge from programme implementers and communities (Indriana et al., 2024), something rarely revealed in formal reports. This study therefore employs a transcendental phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1970), which focuses on the pure consciousness of the experiencing "I", to uncover the meaning of stakeholders' subjective experiences across the input, process, and output stages of stunting-budget management in Boalemo and Pohuwato Regencies.

On this basis, the research questions are as follows: (1) how do stakeholders perceive the input of stunting-budget management in Gorontalo; (2) how are stunting budgets allocated and utilised; and (3) how can the output of stunting-budget utilisation be optimised? In line with these questions, the study aims to identify stakeholders' perceptions of the input, the allocation and utilisation process, and the factors that can optimise the output of the stunting budget in Gorontalo. The study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on public-budget policy and public health, while also offering practical recommendations for regional policymakers so that stunting-budget management becomes better targeted and more impactful.

## METHOD

This is a qualitative study using the transcendental phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1970) as its principal method for uncovering the deepest meaning of informants' experiences of the stunting-budget phenomenon in Gorontalo Province. This approach requires the researcher to perform epoché (bracketing), that is, to set aside preconceptions and prior knowledge so that the phenomenon can be understood as it is directly experienced by the subjects, comprising the regional government, the regional legislature (DPRD), the regional planning agency (Bappeda), the health office, community health centre staff, and beneficiary communities.

The research focused on two locations with contrasting dynamics: Pohuwato Regency (once cited as a leading example of stunting handling thanks to cross-sector involvement in 2022) and Boalemo Regency (showing the most consistent downward trend in stunting in recent years). The research subjects comprised three groups: policymakers (Bappeda, DPRD, and the Regent), programme implementers (the health office and community health centre cadres), and beneficiaries (parents of stunted children and recipients of programme assistance). The research was conducted throughout 2024-2025, reviewing experiences and data from 2021 to 2023, the period of intensive implementation of the stunting-convergence programme in both regencies.

Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews and observation, with informants determined through purposive and snowball sampling on the basis of their position, experience, and direct involvement in the planning, implementation, and utilisation of the stunting budget. Secondary data comprised stunting statistics (SSGI 2022 and SKI 2024) and relevant regulatory documents. Data analysis followed the stages of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), comprising: (a) data reduction and horizontalisation, that is, arranging each informant statement as an equally valued unit of meaning without preconception; (b) identification of thematic findings at the input, process, and output stages; (c) imaginative variation, that is, examining the structures and conditions that make the experience possible; (d) formulation of the essence of the phenomenon (textural-structural essence), which combines what is experienced (textural) and how that experience is shaped by structure (structural); and (e) construction of the noema and noesis structures of meaning to explain the stunting budget as the object that appears and the way the actors experience it.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *1. Thematic Findings Based on Phenomenological Reduction*

Phenomenological reduction yielded nine essential themes across the input, process, and output stages. At the input stage, the Resources theme shows that Boalemo interprets adequacy as a matter of human resources and field-officer incentives, whereas Pohuwato interprets it as a matter of structural fiscal capacity and a wide geographic area that raises outreach costs. The Information theme shows that Boalemo is stronger on “document locking” (strategic plan/regional government work plan), whereas Pohuwato is stronger on “openness” through publication and stunting deliberation forums. The Values theme reveals that Boalemo wrestles between prioritisation commitment and efficiency pressure, whereas Pohuwato wrestles between dependence on central budgets and changes in the management pathway since 2023. The Actors theme affirms that input is formed by a chain of roles regional government–Bappeda–DPRD–health office–field officers which is prone to weakening if one non-health regional agency (OPD) fails to act on an equal footing.

At the process stage, the Budget Preparation theme shows that Boalemo is more stable in its formal procedures, whereas Pohuwato has undergone procedural changes that demand new coordination. The Budget Execution theme shows that Boalemo is vulnerable to sudden reallocation/efficiency measures, whereas Pohuwato faces the complexity of cross-agency coordination. The Budget Oversight theme shows layered oversight in both regencies; however, the intensity of the DPRD's political oversight may weaken because of a logic of trust, particularly in Pohuwato.

At the output stage, the Policy Outcome theme shows that indicators and audits may improve, but the precision of benefits determines the true quality of the results; Pohuwato faces criticism regarding the suitability of assistance following the change in governance. The Social Impact theme shows that Boalemo stands out in improving basic household determinants, whereas Pohuwato stands out in impact as a long-term human-capital investment that requires consistent data evidence. Overall, both regencies affirm that the accountability of stunting programmes strengthens when input, process, and output are consistently connected and culminate in benefits that are genuinely felt.

## **2. Imaginative Variation**

The imaginative-variation stage no longer asks “what is experienced” but rather examines “how that experience is possible” by tracing the structures and power relations that shape budgeting practice. The results show that the stunting-budget phenomenon in both regencies is shaped by nine relatively stable structures: resource capacity, information legitimacy, fiscal resilience, actor interdependence, procedural stability, cohesion of cross-sector convergence, the verification logic of oversight, the communication of assistance design, and the continuity of impact evidence. Boalemo Regency stands out in the dynamic of “implementation resilience amid budget shocks and human-resource constraints”, whereas Pohuwato Regency stands out in the dynamic of “cross-sector convergence amid fiscal constraints, geographic challenges, and governance change”. This imaginative variation affirms that substantive accountability arises when input, process, and output interlock within a single stable and well-targeted system.

## **3. The Essence of the Phenomenon (Textural-Structural Essence)**

The formulation of essence combines the textural layer (what is experienced) and the structural layer (how that experience is shaped). At the input stage, the essence of resources lies in the relationship between funds, human resources, and the cost of regional outreach, which weighs more heavily on Pohuwato; the essence of information lies in the continuity of data flows and the firmness of programme boundaries, not merely publication; the essence of values lies in the relationship between policy priorities and the stability of financing sources; and the essence of actors lies in the functional interconnection among actors rather than the dominance of any single party. At the process stage, the essence of preparation is procedural consistency and role clarity; the essence of execution is budget stability and equality across agencies; the essence of oversight is the balance among reporting systems, internal control, and consistent political control. At the output stage, the essence of policy outcomes is the alignment among programme design, the social context of recipients, and service capacity; the essence of social impact is the meeting of the experience of benefit and the strength of data evidence.

The synthesis of essence shows that substantive accountability arises when the system binds three things at once: resource adequacy proportional to the regional burden, consistent information flows as evidence, and genuine cross-sector coordination in implementation and oversight. Boalemo displays an essence of programme resilience amid allocation shocks and human-resource constraints, whereas Pohuwato displays an essence of managing convergence under limited fiscal conditions, a challenging geography, and governance change.

## **4. The Noema and Noesis of the Stunting-Budget Phenomenon**

Within Husserl's phenomenological framework, noema refers to the object of experience as presented in the actor's consciousness (documents, figures, programmes, reports, results), whereas noesis refers to the way the subject experiences, judges, and gives meaning to that object. Noema-noesis analysis explains not only “what happens” but also “how the stunting budget becomes meaningful” for each actor.

The noema of the stunting budget appears in three forms: (1) as a formal input package in the form of planning and budgeting documents (strategic plan, regional government work plan, work-and-budget plan, and regional budget) that must be entered into documentation in order to be legally valid; (2) as a cross-sector implementation system in the form of concrete programmes and activities (nutrition interventions, supplementary feeding/milk, community health centre services, sanitation, and social support); and (3) as output and evidence of success read through indicators, target achievement, audit regularity, and benefits felt by the community, even though these benefits are not always well targeted.

The noesis of the actors is divided into four patterns of meaning. Technocratic noesis (Bappeda and planning actors) experiences the budget as something that must be locked in through data and documents. Political-legitimising noesis (DPRD) experiences the budget as legitimacy that must be approved and maintained, so that oversight may shift into trust once commitments are deemed to have been agreed. Technical-service noesis (the health office and field officers) experiences the budget as real working capacity in the field. Social-welfare noesis

(the community) experiences the budget as a benefit that must be felt in the household, judged by the suitability of assistance to needs rather than by absorption or audits.

The noema-noesis relationship shows that the stunting budget becomes an arena where various logics of meaning meet: documents are shaped by technocratic noesis, cross-sector programmes by service noesis, while results and impact are shaped by both social-welfare and political noesis. When technocratic and political noesis dominate, accountability tends to halt at procedural compliance; when service and social noesis are strengthened, accountability moves towards the substantive, because it is measured by targeting accuracy and felt impact. Boalemo Regency stands out in the noesis of “implementation resilience” amid human-resource constraints, whereas Pohuwato Regency stands out in the noesis of “convergence within a changing structure”. Substantive accountability of the stunting budget is thus realised only when noema (documents, programmes, results) and noesis (the way of experiencing) interlock within a single system that maintains financing stability, data consistency, cross-sector coordination, and precision of benefits for vulnerable households.

### 5. Synthesis of Seven Key Findings

The phenomenological analysis of the actors' experiences in Boalemo and Pohuwato Regencies yields seven interrelated key findings, as visualised in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Visualisation of the Research Findings on the Stunting-Budget Phenomenon in Gorontalo Province

First, the stunting budget functions as an “arena of governance” rather than a mere financial instrument. The budget cannot be understood only as regional-budget figures, but as an arena that brings together the national mandate, regional priorities, fiscal capacity, and power relations among actors. This finding is consistent with Public Budgeting Theory (Wildavsky, 1986), which holds that budgeting is a political-administrative process laden with negotiation, evident in how stunting priorities are maintained or adjusted when efficiency pressure and changes in budget allocation occur.

Second, the strength of a stunting programme is determined by the ratio of funds, human resources, and territory, rather than by the budget's nominal value alone. Boalemo Regency stands out for its limited field human resources,

whereas Pohuwato Regency stands out for its structural fiscal constraints together with the challenges of a wide territory and a dispersed population that raise the cost of service outreach. This finding extends the logic of Performance-Based Budgeting (PBB) (LeCroy, 2021) by affirming that performance measurement needs to take regional context and service burden into account so that evaluation is not biased in favour of more easily reached areas.

Third, data and information serve as legitimacy capital; however, without data consistency, accountability easily becomes merely “apparent”. Boalemo emphasises the consistency of planning documents, while Pohuwato emphasises public transparency through deliberation forums and reporting systems. Yet both approaches display the same ambivalence: strong documentation does not automatically guarantee impact if the design of assistance lacks precision, thereby reinforcing the distinction between administrative accountability and substantive accountability (Robinson & Last, 2009).

Fourth, cross-sector convergence is often strong on paper but fragile in practice. The implementation burden tends to revert to the sectoral level, falling on the health office, when non-health agencies fail to act on an equal footing. The change in the management pathway in Pohuwato since 2023 has the potential to strengthen convergence, but it also risks generating coordination fragmentation if the arrangement of roles and data integration is not carried out rigorously consistent with Wildavsky's (1986) view that policy convergence demands genuine coordination mechanisms and incentives rather than mere policy statements.

Fifth, layered oversight is already in place through technical monitoring and evaluation, internal control, and audits; however, political oversight by the DPRD may weaken owing to a logic of trust among actors, so that accountability risks halting at administrative compliance. This finding underscores the need to shift the orientation of oversight from “checking document completeness” to “checking benefit accuracy”, in keeping with the demands of performance-based budgeting.

Sixth, output policy is two-faced: indicators and audits may function well administratively, yet their benefits are not necessarily precise in meeting the needs of target families. In Boalemo, output is more strongly read in improvements to basic determinants and directly felt services; in Pohuwato, output appears strong in integrated programmes but is sensitive to the precision of assistance following the governance change. Criticism of non-targeted spending (Nugraheny, 2023) finds its confirmation in the field: a policy that “exists” is not enough without being present as a direct intervention felt by families.

Seventh, the noema-noesis structure explains the gap between “orderly documentation” and “accurate benefit”, as elaborated in the preceding section. Differences in noesis among actors explain why a policy may appear successful on the administrative horizon yet be judged insufficiently accurate on the horizon of family welfare (Olfah, 2023).

Overall, these seven findings affirm that the accountability of stunting budgeting cannot be built through document compliance alone, but must be built through a system that binds input, process, and output to outcomes and social impacts genuinely felt by vulnerable families.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the stunting budget in Gorontalo Province functions as an arena of public governance that brings together the policy mandate, the political dynamics of budgeting, fiscal capacity, human resources, information systems, and cross-sector coordination, so that its success cannot be measured solely by document completeness and budget absorption. Budget adequacy is determined by the ratio of funds, human resources, and territory, so that its effectiveness cannot be standardised across regencies: Boalemo faces dominant challenges related to limited field human resources, whereas Pohuwato faces challenges related to structural fiscal constraints and a wide territory. Data and information serve as legitimacy capital, but substantive accountability is achieved only when data are consistent and traceable. Cross-sector convergence that is strong on paper is often fragile in

practice, political oversight risks weakening because of a logic of trust, and output policy that appears administratively sound is not necessarily precise in meeting the needs of target families. The noema-noesis structure explains that the gap between “orderly documentation” and “accurate benefit” stems from differences in the way actors experience the same budget.

On the basis of these findings, the study makes three principal recommendations across the input, process, and output stages of policy. At the input stage, regional governments need to formulate context-based allocation formulas (context-based budgeting) and to standardise a minimum share of directly targeted expenditure. At the process stage, a binding cross-agency convergence contract is required, with periodic targets and evaluations, together with strengthened coordination when governance changes occur. At the output stage, benefit audits and tests of the suitability of assistance to families' real needs are required, along with the strengthening of impact evidence through data synchronised among actors, as well as an equity approach for vulnerable families and areas. For future research, it is recommended that equity-based performance-based-budgeting indicators be developed and that phenomenological policy studies of noesis conflict among actors be deepened as a source of programme distortion.

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