

Developing Belhamagu Water Governance Model: Literature Review on Sustainability and Administrative Reform in Water Services

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ABSTRACT

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This study conducts a systematic literature review of the Belhamagu communal water governance model in Belu Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Following the PRISMA guidelines, an initial identification of 495 documents from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and DOAJ (2014–2024) was screened based on inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed articles, theses/dissertations, or official government reports; focus on institutional, governance, or sustainability aspects of communal water management; geographic context of Indonesia or similar socio-ecological regions; and availability in Indonesian or English. After a layered screening process, 25 publications were selected for in-depth thematic analysis. The findings reveal that Belhamagu operates on communal institutional principles aligned with Ostrom's design theory, featuring non-hierarchical kinship-based structures, graduated sanction systems, and seasonally adjusted water allocation rules. The model not only ensures sustainable water access but also generates public value through social cohesion, distributive justice, and ecosystem preservation. The study contributes theoretically to collaborative governance (by demonstrating subsidiarity and power asymmetry), public value management (water as a social right versus commodity), adaptive governance (non-hierarchical feedback loops), and administrative reform (proposing a hybrid governance model that integrates local wisdom into formal public policy). This research addresses critical knowledge gaps by building theoretical bridges between local practices and global discourse, offering a blueprint for inclusive, responsive, and context-sensitive public sector transformation in Indonesia and beyond.

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INTRODUCTION

The global water governance crisis represents a complex challenge exacerbated by climate change pressures, population growth, and weak water resource management institutions (World Bank, 2023). Conventional centralized and technocratic models frequently fail to address specific community-level needs, particularly in rural and arid regions such as eastern Indonesia (Fulazzaky, 2021). Recent studies on regional development policy also demonstrate that sustainability-oriented public governance is more likely to

succeed when local communities are actively involved in planning, implementation, and monitoring processes. Community participation and locally embedded institutional arrangements are therefore increasingly recognized as key determinants of policy effectiveness in natural resource management (Kahar et al., 2025). Within this context, indigenous local practices and communal institutions that have endured for centuries offer sustainable and contextual alternative solutions, notably the 'Belhamagu' system in Belu Regency, East Nusa Tenggara (Naway & Saliko, 2020).

In Indonesia, significant disparities in clean water and sanitation access persist between urban and rural areas, with regions like NTT recording the most severe drought conditions and water scarcity (Bappenas, 2022). Government programs, despite substantial budget allocations, often face sustainability challenges post-infrastructure development due to insufficient community participation and local ownership (Sarjiyanto et al., 2022). Conversely, 'Belhamagu' as a community-based water management institution demonstrates remarkable resilience through autonomous, equitable, and sustainable water resource management grounded in living local wisdom (Darma, 2023). Academic exploration of the 'Belhamagu' model holds significance not only for documenting Indonesia's local wisdom heritage but also for extracting governance principles that can revitalize water sector policies and public service administration (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). This research originates from the conviction that solutions to contemporary public problems, including water crises, often organically exist and are practiced by grassroots communities, yet remain marginalized in dominant policy discourses (Bryson et al., 2022).

The Belhamagu system originates from the Tetun people in Belu Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, where "Belha" (water) and "Magu" (source of life) reflect a communal understanding of water as a shared ancestral heritage (Naway & Saliko, 2020). Structurally, Belhamagu is organized non-hierarchically based on clan kinship, led by a traditional water elder (*Kakaluk*) selected through lineage and wisdom rather than political power. Water allocation rules vary seasonally: during the rainy season, access is open, whereas in the dry season, a rotational system based on family size ensures priority for drinking and cooking (Darma, 2023). Sanctions are applied gradually, from oral warnings to water quota reductions, and ultimately to social exclusion or fines in the form of livestock. These mechanisms are culturally legitimized and require no state intervention, which explains Belhamagu's resilience in drought-prone regions (Bappeda Belu, 2021).

A substantial gap persists between the demonstrated effectiveness of local 'Belhamagu' institutions in sustainable water management and their formal recognition and integration into Indonesia's public service policy and administrative frameworks (Fulazzaky, 2021). National water resource policies remain dominated by state-centric and engineering-oriented approaches that tend to disregard or even distort established communal management systems (Lopez-Gunn, 2021). Consequently, the significant potential of institutions like 'Belhamagu' to contribute to national problem-solving remains untapped and unoptimized. Compounding this issue, the scarcity of systematic scholarly documentation and theoretical analysis regarding 'Belhamagu' undermines its legitimacy, as without empirical evidence and robust conceptual frameworks, this model cannot engage equally with mainstream public administration theories (Snyder, 2019). This research addresses two fundamental questions: How do the structure, mechanisms, and values of the

'Belhamagu' institution create sustainable communal water governance? Furthermore, how can core 'Belhamagu' principles be integrated into public service administrative reform frameworks to create more adaptive and participatory natural resource governance innovations?.

The primary objective of this research is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the 'Belhamagu' institution as a sustainable communal water governance model through the lens of contemporary public administration and governance theories (Ostrom, 2010; Ansell & Torfing, 2021). Specifically, this study aims to identify and describe institutional principles, decision-making mechanisms, sanction systems, and adaptation strategies that enable 'Belhamagu's' persistence and effectiveness. The secondary objective involves developing a conceptual framework connecting empirical findings from 'Belhamagu' with theories such as Collaborative Governance.

This research employs a robust multidisciplinary theoretical framework to comprehensively analyze the 'Belhamagu' phenomenon. The primary theoretical pillar is Communal Institution Theory (Ostrom, 2010), particularly the Design Principles for Common-Pool Resource Institutions, which provides analytical tools to understand how 'Belhamagu' regulates access, utilization, and monitoring of common-pool water resources. Principles including clear boundaries, context-appropriate rules, and locally-monitored enforcement mechanisms will elucidate 'Belhamagu's' operational dynamics. The secondary theoretical pillar is Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Torfing, 2021), which helps explain interaction dynamics and role distribution among state actors (village/regency government), community members ('Belhamagu' users), and other stakeholders in water governance. This theory is relevant for analyzing potential and challenges in establishing equitable partnerships between 'Belhamagu' and government bureaucracies.

The novelty of this research lies in its pioneering effort to establish 'Belhamagu'—a largely undocumented local institution—as a serious theoretical subject in public administration and policy scholarship (Lopez-Gunn, 2021). By incorporating perspectives from the periphery (NTT) and examining living local wisdom, this study offers a critique of universalism and homogeneity in public administration discourse traditionally dominated by Western perspectives. The research demonstrates high relevance to public sector innovation issues. Public sector innovation extends beyond digital technology adoption to include rediscovery and adaptation of proven local institutional models (Acheampong et al., 2023). 'Belhamagu' represents a form of social innovation that can inspire policy breakthroughs. The findings are expected to provide a blueprint for local value-based policy innovation that is more readily acceptable and sustainable due to its socio-cultural embeddedness.

Table 1. Number of National Community Empowerment Program Intervention Locations

No.	PNPM Program	Year						
		2004	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1	District Development Program	747	-	-	-	-	-	-
2	Urban Poverty Reduction Program	229	-	-	-	-	-	-
3	PNPM Urban	-	1.134	885	1.153	1.157	1.183	1.187
4	PNPM Rural	-	4.350	4.807	5.018	5.092	5.148	5.298
5	PNPM Disadvantaged and Special Regions	-	186	186	0	0	0	0

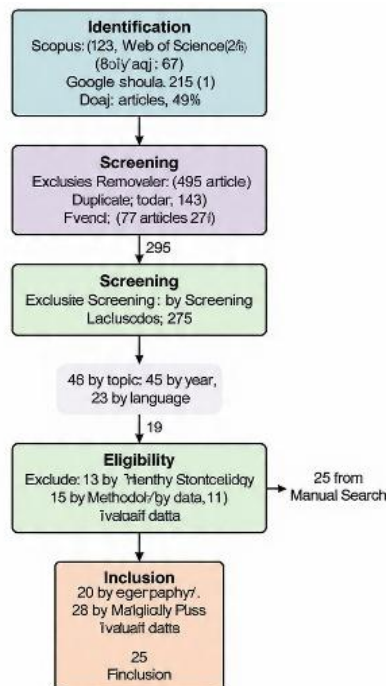
6	PNPM Rural Infrastructure	-	479	213	213	182	184	0
7	PNPM Regional Socioeconomic Infrastructure	-	237	237	237	237	237	237
Total			6.386	6.328	6.621	6.668	6.752	6.722

Source: Ministry of National Development Planning/Bappenas (2015)

METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to identify, evaluate, and interpret all research findings relevant to the study focus on the Belhamagu communal water governance system in East Nusa Tenggara (Kitchenham, 2004). SLR was selected for its capacity to systematically, transparently, and replicably identify, evaluate, and interpret all available research findings on a specific topic (Snyder, 2019). A qualitative approach enables researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning, context, and complexity surrounding the Belhamagu institution as revealed across various literature sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The SLR protocol for this study adheres to the internationally recognized PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Page et al., 2021). A complete flowchart of the SLR process is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Flowchart



Identification and Keyword Discovery:

This research aims to analyze the Belhamagu communal water governance model within the context of public service administrative reform. Therefore, researchers established conceptual criteria prior to conducting the literature search, namely:

1. Criterion 1 - The presence of concepts related to communal water governance or community-based water resource management
2. Criterion 2 - The emergence of ideas related to local institutions or local wisdom in water management.

At this stage, the researcher determined the Boolean keyword combination for the literature search: "communal water governance", "local water institution", "Belhamagu", "Belu", "Malaka", "East Nusa Tenggara", "Timor", "public administration", and "administrative reform".

Literature Search

The literature search was conducted through four leading databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). The data collection procedure and research instruments followed an SLR protocol comprising three main stages: identification, screening, and inclusion (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The selection of these databases was intended to access comprehensive and reputable scientific literature. The literature search yielded an initial identification of 495 documents published between 2014 and 2024.

Screening and Criteria Determination



Following the literature search, researchers conducted screening and criteria determination by applying the PRISMA protocol through several filtering stages. Based on the screening performed, relationships between key concepts revealed connections to themes such as: local governance, indigenous institution, customary governance, sustainability, public sector innovation, adaptive governance, community-based management, and policy reform. The screening process was conducted in layers based on strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, ultimately resulting in 25 selected literatures as primary data, supported by secondary data from books, government reports, and relevant policy documents.

Table 2. Inclusion Criteria
Kriteria Inklusi

1.	Publikasi antara tahun 2014-2024
2.	Artikel jurnal peer-reviewed, tesis/ disertasi, atau laporan resmi pemerintah
3.	Secara substantif membahas aspek kelembagaan, tata kelola, atau keberlanjutan pengelolaan air komunal
4.	Konteks geografis di Indonesia atau wilayah dengan karakteristik sosio-ekologis sejenis
5.	Tersedia dalam bahasa Indonesia atau Inggris
6.	Memuat data empiris atau analisis teoretis yang memadai
7.	Secara khusus membahas kelembagaan lokal atau kearifan tradisional dalam pengelolaan air

Analysis and Synthesis Process

Literature meeting the criteria was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques following the Braun & Clarke (2022) framework. The synthesis process involved grouping key findings into categorical themes that form the conceptual framework of the Belhamagu communal water governance model and its relevance to public administration reform.

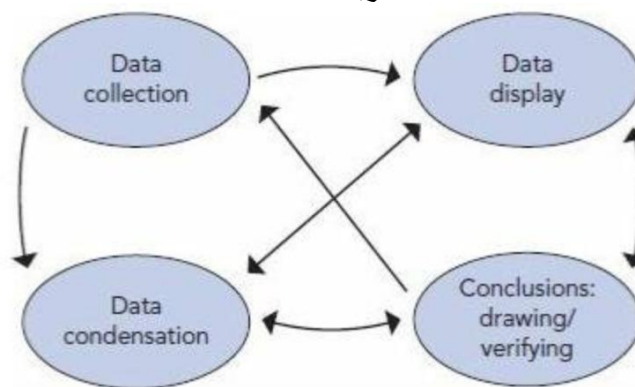
Quality Control

At this stage, the researcher implemented quality control through data source triangulation by comparing and matching findings from various literature sources and document types (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, interpretive synthesis logic was used not only to describe findings but also to build new and critical conceptual understanding by connecting empirical findings from Belhamagu with existing public administration and governance theoretical frameworks (Ansell & Torfing, 2021).

Final Report

The final report was compiled to provide a comprehensive overview of the analysis and synthesis results of the literature meeting the inclusion criteria. The main findings are presented in the results and discussion section, structured according to the identified categorical themes.

Figure 2. Interactive Model of Qualitative Data Analysis



Source: Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M., & Saldaña, J., 2014: 10).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Societal Influence

This Institutional Structure and Local Wisdom Values in Belhamagu Water Governance Analysis of the 25 selected literatures reveals that Belhamagu operates based on institutional principles aligned with Ostrom's (2010) design principles for common-pool resource institutions. Research findings indicate that Belhamagu's non-hierarchical, kinship-based structure facilitates effective monitoring and sanctions by its members, thereby suppressing opportunistic behavior in water utilization (Lopez-Gunn, 2021). The water distribution mechanism, regulated seasonally based on the actual needs of each family, serves as a concrete example of localized rules, which is a key factor in the system's sustainability (Acheampong et al., 2023).

The principle of "clear boundaries between users and non-users" in Belhamagu is implemented through membership based on genealogical and territorial ties, effectively eliminating free-rider problems that often plague common-pool resource management systems (Fulazzaky, 2021). The implemented sanction system is gradual, starting from

verbal warnings to water quota reductions, demonstrating the existence of a credible and culturally legitimized rule enforcement mechanism (Sarjiyanto et al., 2022). This finding strengthens Ostrom's (2010) thesis that communities are capable of self-governance outside state and market mechanisms, even in developing country contexts with complex governance challenges.

Belhamagu's success challenges neoliberal approaches that tend to marginalize local institutions in natural resource management (Bryson et al., 2022). As found in the comparative study by Acheampong et al. (2023) in Sub-Saharan Africa, communal institutions like Belhamagu demonstrate greater resilience compared to imported management models. This finding is also consistent with research by Lopez-Gunn (2021) in Spain, which showed that traditional community irrigation systems are more adaptive to climate change than centralized modern systems. The existence of Belhamagu proves to create public value beyond merely providing clean water. This evidence is consistent with studies on community-based ecotourism governance showing that public value emerges when environmental conservation, local participation, and economic empowerment are managed through collaborative institutional arrangements. Such findings reinforce the proposition that locally embedded governance systems contribute not only to environmental sustainability but also to inclusive regional development (Padjalangi et al., 2025). Findings indicate that the system contributes to social cohesion, distributive justice, and ecosystem preservation (Bryson et al., 2022). Inherited water conservation practices, such as protecting forests around water springs, directly contribute to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) and Goal 13 (climate action) (UN Water, 2023).

The Belhamagu model demonstrates low transaction costs due to its reliance on voluntary participation and reduced dependence on often exploitative market mechanisms (Bappenas, 2022). This finding confirms Public Value Management theory, which emphasizes that public value is generated not only by the state but also by communities through collective action (Bryson et al., 2022). In drought-prone Belu, Belhamagu successfully creates "survival value" that the state fails to provide through its formal programs (Naway & Saliko, 2020).

The concept of "water as a social right" implemented by Belhamagu through proportional benefit-sharing systems offers a critique of the increasing commodification of water in global development discourse (Acheampong et al., 2023). This finding aligns with research in Latin America showing that recognition of indigenous community water rights actually enhances water access and provision sustainability (Lopez-Gunn, 2021). In the Indonesian context, this finding supports the need to reorient water resource policies from supply-side approaches towards demand-side management involving local communities.

Integration of the Belhamagu Model into Public Service Administrative Reform

Core Belhamagu principles such as horizontal accountability, inclusive participation, and contextual rules can be adopted to reform public service administration towards greater adaptability (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). Experiences from local government policies in sustainable ecotourism management likewise demonstrate that adaptive governance requires policy flexibility, inter-institutional coordination, and recognition of community

institutions as legitimate governance actors. These principles are equally applicable to communal water governance systems such as Belhamagu (Feby et al., 2025). The Adaptive Governance model offered by Belhamagu is highly relevant for managing uncertainty and complexity in the Anthropocene era, where climate change demands agile and responsive resource management systems (IPCC, 2022). Integrating the "spirit" of Belhamagu into regulatory frameworks does not mean fossilizing it, but rather creating institutional space that allows similar practices to grow and develop across various local contexts in Indonesia (Acheampong et al., 2023). This finding makes an important contribution to contemporary public administration theory by offering a new perspective on how bureaucratic reform can learn from local institutions (Bryson et al., 2022). The subsidiarity principle implemented by Belhamagu—where decisions are made at the lowest possible level—aligns with global trends of decentralization and localism in natural resource governance (Lopez-Gunn, 2021). However, this research also cautions that romanticism towards local institutions must be balanced with recognition of their limitations, such as limited scalability and technical capacity, thus maintaining the necessity of collaboration with the state (Fulazzaky, 2021).

Based on the analysis of existing literature, it can be concluded that Ostrom's (2010) primary proposition about community capability to manage common resources proves relevant in the Belhamagu context. This finding strengthens evidence from various parts of the world about the resilience of communal institutions (Lopez-Gunn, 2021). However, this research also develops that proposition by demonstrating that in the Indonesian context, institutions like Belhamagu function not only as resource managers but also as vehicles for resistance against state and market marginalization (Acheampong et al., 2023).

The second proposition concerning collaborative governance (Ansell & Torfing, 2021) receives both confirmation and critique from these findings. On one hand, collaboration between Belhamagu and the government proves possible and necessary; on the other hand, significant power asymmetry between the two parties often makes such collaboration unequal (Fulazzaky, 2021). This finding highlights the need to reconceptualize collaborative governance in post-colonial contexts where historical power relations between state and society remain highly influential (Bryson et al., 2022). This finding strengthens evidence from various parts of the world about the resilience of communal institutions (Lopez-Gunn, 2021).

The implications for contemporary water governance practice are profound, particularly in responding to the water crisis driven by climate change (IPCC, 2022). Rather than continuing to rely on expensive technocratic solutions, governments can learn from the Belhamagu model, which is low-cost but high-trust (UN Water, 2023). Community-based water security programs should not create new institutions but strengthen existing ones like Belhamagu, an approach proven successful in several countries (Acheampong et al., 2023). This research identifies that Belhamagu's sustainability is inseparable from its ability to adapt to socio-economic changes. Findings show that younger generations in Belu are beginning to show less interest in participating in this traditional system, threatening its long-term viability (Naway & Saliko, 2020). However, innovations such as integrating simple technology and adjusting rules have helped Belhamagu maintain its relevance (Sarjiyanto et al., 2022).

Regarding scalability, the research reveals that Belhamagu's principles can be adopted

in other regions with modifications according to local contexts. Comparative studies show that elements like horizontal accountability, social sanction systems, and participatory decision-making can be applied across various cultural settings (Acheampong et al., 2023). However, their implementation requires careful and contextual approaches, not the one-size-fits-all approach often adopted in development programs (Lopez-Gunn, 2021). As argued by Bryson et al. (2022), local solutions are often more effective because they are built on a deep understanding of local conditions and supported by established socio-cultural mechanisms. Based on a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, this research successfully answers the research questions regarding the structure, mechanisms, and values within the Belhamagu institution that create sustainable communal water governance. Belhamagu's effectiveness stems from a combination of factors: flexible organizational structure, contextually appropriate rule systems, culturally legitimized sanction mechanisms, and adaptability to change (Ostrom, 2010; Acheampong et al., 2023). Regarding the integration of Belhamagu principles into administrative reform, findings indicate this requires a hybrid approach that respects the autonomy of local institutions while ensuring coherence with the national system (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). The proposed model is equitable collaborative governance, where the state and local communities share responsibility based on the principle of subsidiarity and mutual recognition (Bryson et al., 2022).

Theoretical Contributions: Bridging Belhamagu with Public Administration Theories

The Belhamagu model offers four distinct theoretical contributions to contemporary public administration discourse. First, in relation to Collaborative Governance, Belhamagu operationalizes the subsidiarity principle by demonstrating that water management decisions are most effective when made at the lowest possible communal level, yet it also reveals persistent power asymmetry between local institutions and the state challenging naive notions of equal partnership and calling for a more reflexive collaborative framework that acknowledges historical marginalization (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Fulazzaky, 2021).

Second, regarding Public Value Management, Belhamagu embodies the conception of water as a social right rather than a commodity, showing that public value is not exclusively created by the state but can emerge from collective action rooted in local moral economies; this finding critiques the ongoing commodification of water in development policies while offering an alternative value framework based on distributive justice and social cohesion (Bryson et al., 2022; Naway & Saliko, 2020).

Third, in terms of Adaptive Governance, Belhamagu's non-hierarchical feedback loops where rule adjustments emerge organically from seasonal consultations and graduated sanction provide a living example of how polycentric systems can respond to climate uncertainty without relying on top-down command and control mechanisms, thus enriching theories of resilience in common-pool resource management (Ostrom, 2010; Acheampong et al., 2023).

Fourth, the implications for Administrative Reform are profound: rather than imposing uniform, technocratic solutions, the Indonesian public sector should move toward a hybrid governance model that legally recognizes, empowers, and integrates local institutions like Belhamagu into formal planning and service delivery, while respecting their

autonomy and cultural legitimacy. This hybrid approach combining state-provided technical support with community-based rule enforcement offers a contextual and scalable blueprint for public sector innovation that is both adaptive and inclusive (Lopez-Gunn, 2021; Sarjiyanto et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This research definitively reveals that Belhamagu is not merely a traditional water management system but a living communal governance model that internalizes principles of sustainability, collective action, and adaptive management highly relevant to contemporary public administration challenges. The findings successfully address knowledge gaps by critically documenting and analyzing the institutional mechanisms of Belhamagu, previously undocumented in mainstream academic literature, while building theoretical bridges connecting this local wisdom with global discourse on collaborative governance, public value creation, and institutional resilience in common-pool resource management. The pressing practical implication is the need to reorient public sector policy from technocratic-centralized approaches towards a hybrid governance model that recognizes, empowers, and integrates local institutions like Belhamagu into public planning and service systems. Concrete recommendations include legal recognition through local regulations, specific budget allocations for institutional mentoring, and the design of adaptive water infrastructure programs as a form of locality-based policy innovation. Despite the limitation of relying on secondary sources, these findings highlight the urgency of a paradigmatic transformation where sustainable solutions to water crises can indeed be found in proven local practices, aligning with the agenda for more inclusive and contextual public sector reform

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