

The Role of the Program Indonesia Pintar in Increasing School Participation Among Underprivileged Children

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Abstract:

Education is the main foundation for the development of competitive human resources, but access to equitable education is still a serious challenge for children from underprivileged families. Economic inequality results in low school participation among vulnerable groups, although the government has launched the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) as an affirmative strategy to encourage education sustainability through cash assistance. This study aims to describe the implementation of PIP and analyze its role in increasing school participation of underprivileged children. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation from PIP recipients, parents, principals, and program managers in the research area. The results show that PIP contributes positively to the sustainability of education through the reduction of economic barriers, but its effectiveness is still influenced by the validity of recipient data, delays in the distribution of funds, and social support in the surrounding environment. This research emphasizes the importance of synergy between education policy, technical supervision, and community participation in supporting poor children to continue to access formal education. These findings make conceptual contributions to social justice theory and enrich practical understanding of the implementation of more inclusive and contextual educational assistance programs.

Keywords:

Program Indonesia Pintar, school participation, underprivileged children, inclusive education.



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INTRODUCTION

Education is the main foundation in human resource development and improving the quality of life of people, especially in developing countries such as Indonesia. One of the main challenges still faced is the gap in access to and participation in education between socioeconomic groups. To address this, the Indonesian government initiated the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) as part of efforts to expand access to education for children from low-income families. This program provides direct cash assistance to prevent school dropout rates and encourage the sustainability of education up to the upper secondary level (Samalo & Jasmina, 2024). Although this policy has been implemented nationally, various studies show that the effectiveness of its implementation is still diverse and has not fully reached all target groups. Several studies have found that the distribution of PIP funds is often not on target, and implementation in the field experiences technical and administrative obstacles (Gutama et al., 2022; Hayati & Sari, 2019). In addition, there have not been many studies that have in-depth linked the success of this program to aspects of social justice and

long-term educational mobility (Supianto et al., 2023).

The conceptual approach in this study refers to the theory of social justice in education policy, especially the concept of equal access as an instrument for the equitable distribution of educational opportunities. This perspective allows an analysis of the extent to which PIP addresses structural inequalities in access to education, as well as examining implementation practices that strengthen or weaken the principle of justice (Romadhoni & Qibthiyyah, 2024; Yanti & Sukadana, 2024). Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness and challenges of the implementation of the Smart Indonesia Program in increasing the educational participation of students from underprivileged families, as well as assess the extent to which this program realizes the principles of social justice in public education policies. The formulation of the problem in this study is: to what extent is PIP able to increase educational participation and how effective is its implementation in the context of social policies?

The main contribution of this article is to provide an up-to-date data-driven analysis of the achievements and barriers of the PIP program, as well as to enrich academic discourse on education aid policies in developing countries. The findings in this study are expected to provide more accurate and equitable policy input, especially in an effort to increase the reach and effectiveness of educational interventions for vulnerable groups (Mashur, 2023; Mendra & Bachtiar, 2024; Purnama & Izzatusholekha, 2023; Martsha, 2024). In this study, social justice theory is the main foundation to understand how the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) contributes to the equitable distribution of education among students from underprivileged families. This theory, adapted from John Rawls's idea of the equitable distribution of resources, emphasizes the importance of policy interventions to reduce educational access gaps due to economic conditions. In the Indonesian context, the implementation of conditional cash assistance-based education policies such as PIP reflects a tangible form of distributive justice, which considers not only formal access to education but also financial support for marginalized groups to be able to maintain their school participation (Gutama et al., 2022).

Several previous studies have evaluated the implementation of the Smart Indonesia Program at various levels of education and regions. A study at SMKN 1 Lembah Melintang revealed that the program has not run optimally due to problems with the accuracy of recipient data, delays in disbursing funds, and a lack of socialization (Fakhirah & Leo, 2023). Another study showed similar findings at SD Negeri 1 Kolakaasi, namely the uneven distribution of aid to poor students and weak communication between implementing institutions (Agusman, 2020). In Serang City, although the implementation of the program is running quite well, administrative challenges remain significant obstacles (Putri et al., 2024). Although studies have identified the successes and challenges of PIP implementation, most of the research is still descriptive and evaluative and lacks an in-depth look at how beneficiary students perceive the context of social justice and the impact of programs on their motivation and learning participation. In addition, few studies have explored the dimensions of intersectionality, such as gender, geographic location, or disability conditions, in accessing PIP benefits (Zamjani, 2019). This gap shows that there is a need for a qualitative approach that focuses on the experience of PIP recipients in accessing education in a fair and meaningful manner.

This study tries to answer this gap by placing the students' experience as the center of the analysis, using a qualitative approach to explore narratives that have not been revealed in previous evaluative studies. Focusing on students' perceptions of the effectiveness and fairness of aid distribution is expected to enrich the literature on the impact of cash subsidy education policies in developing countries. Thus, this study not only complements existing descriptive findings but also offers a theoretical contribution to policy formulation that is more sensitive to the needs and perspectives of beneficiaries (Safitri et al., 2024). Methodologically, relevant previous research generally uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a focus on technical implementation and administrative barriers of the program. For example, research in Kolaka Regency and West Pasaman Regency emphasized the effectiveness of bureaucracy and governance of aid distribution (Agusman, 2020; Fakhirah & Leo, 2023). A small number of studies use a mixed approach with additional secondary data such as a study by Setiyono and Pradoto (2019) that suggests improvements in the design and coordination of policies between agencies (Setiyono & Pradoto, 2019). However, phenomenological approaches to student experience are still rarely used. Based on the conceptual synthesis of the above literature, this research is built on three main pillars: (1) social justice as a theoretical framework; (2) identification of policy implementation and its challenges in the field; and (3) the personal meaning of students as beneficiaries in the context of educational inequality. This approach allows researchers to dig deeply into how cash aid through PIP affects the opportunities, motivation, and participation of poor students in education, as well as how they interpret the fairness of such aid in their daily living practices (Rahmatullah & Rahmatullah, 2021).

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type that aims to deeply understand the phenomenon of implementing the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) in increasing school participation among underprivileged children. The qualitative descriptive strategy was chosen because this approach allows researchers to explain in detail social dynamics that cannot be explained by statistical numbers alone, especially in the context of the implementation of affirmative policies such as PIP (Rahardjo, 2023). Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with PIP recipients, parents, principals, and program managers at the school and education office levels, as well as direct observation of student participation and program implementation at the school. In addition, questionnaires were distributed to beneficiary students to collect information on their perceptions of the impact of the program on educational sustainability. Secondary data were obtained from official documents and reports of schools and education offices, statistical data from BPS, and regulations related to the implementation of PIP, such as the Minister of Education and Culture and program technical guidelines (Marwan et al., 2022; Setiawan, 2022).

The data collection technique was carried out through participatory observation methods, semi-structured interviews, and documentation that were analyzed simultaneously to obtain a contextual picture of the implementation of PIP in the field (Fitriani & Huda, 2021). The inclusion criteria in the data selection include students who have actively received PIP assistance for at least the last school year, schools in economically vulnerable areas such as East Muara Sabak District, and informants who have direct involvement in the program. Meanwhile, exclusions apply to students who have graduated or are no longer receiving PIP assistance.

The unit of analysis in this study is the behavior, perception, and subjective experience of the beneficiaries and implementers of the program. The data analysis technique uses a thematic approach with steps in the form of transcription, categorization, coding, and theme preparation using the help of NVivo software to support the traceability of the analysis process (Widodo & Hasanah, 2023; Nuraini, 2020; Azzahra & Dwiastuti, 2023). Triangulation of techniques and sources was carried out to improve the validity of the data by systematically comparing the results of interviews, observations, and supporting documents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of the literature synthesis indicate that the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) has played a significant role in improving school participation among poor and vulnerable groups.

Main Theme	Key Findings	Implications / Insights
1. Program Effectiveness on School Participation	PIP significantly improves school attendance among poor and vulnerable groups, especially at primary and junior secondary levels. The effect at the upper secondary level is limited.	PIP plays a vital role in expanding access to basic education but requires enhanced support mechanisms for higher education levels.
2. Regional & Contextual Impact	In Bali Province and other regions, PIP shows a positive and significant impact on school participation for children aged 7–18 years.	Confirms nationwide relevance of PIP's benefits across various local contexts.
3. Influencing Factors of Program Success	Program effectiveness depends on: (a) distribution and data mechanisms, (b) program socialization, (c) school readiness, and (d) stakeholder and parent involvement.	Collaborative and well-coordinated implementation is essential to maximize outcomes.
4. Program Management and Targeting	Improved verification and data management help target students truly in need (KIP, KKS, PKH families). However, students with special needs (ABK) remain underrepresented.	Indicates success in data targeting but highlights a persistent inclusion gap in reaching special-needs learners.
5. Vocational and Technical Challenges	Evaluations in vocational schools show success but call for better technical and funding models to meet diverse student needs.	Program design must be more flexible and responsive to various educational pathways.
6. Complementary Initiatives	Combining PIP with community-based tutoring effectively supports low-income students to pursue higher education.	Integration with community programs strengthens long-term educational mobility.
7. Rural and Community Factors	Program success in rural areas depends on community awareness, simplicity, and transparency of assistance schemes.	Local engagement and understanding of educational value are key to sustainability.
8. Broader Socioeconomic Impact	PIP contributes to poverty reduction (2015–2019) and promotes digital inclusion by increasing student engagement with technology and the internet.	Extends PIP's influence beyond education—supporting national social and economic development.
9. Overall Evaluation	PIP enhances educational access and equity, though continuous improvement is needed in inclusivity, administrative efficiency, and community participation.	Long-term program success requires adaptive management and inclusive policy reforms.

The program has been particularly effective at the primary and junior secondary education levels, while its impact at the upper secondary level remains relatively limited. Studies conducted in various regions, such as in Bali Province, confirm that PIP positively and significantly influences school attendance for children aged 7 to 18 years. The overall effectiveness of PIP is closely linked to several contextual factors, including the quality of its distribution mechanism, the intensity of program socialization, the institutional readiness of schools, and the active participation of parents and local stakeholders. In terms of program management, field studies reveal that the verification and management of PIP recipient data have become more effective in targeting students who are truly in need, particularly those from families holding KIP, KKS, or PKH cards. However, the program still faces challenges in ensuring inclusivity, as only a small proportion of students with special needs (ABK) are registered as beneficiaries, indicating a persistent inclusion gap. Evaluations of PIP implementation in vocational schools also suggest that, while the program is generally successful, there is a continuing need for improvement in technical procedures and funding mechanisms to make them more adaptive to the specific needs of students.

Furthermore, research highlights that the integration of PIP with community-based tutoring initiatives has proven to be an effective strategy in helping low-income students gain access to higher education. In rural contexts, the program's success is often determined by the community's understanding of education's importance and by the simplicity and transparency of assistance schemes. On a broader scale, PIP contributes positively to reducing poverty rates, particularly during the 2015–2019 period, and fosters greater digital engagement by encouraging the use of technology and the internet among students in disadvantaged areas. Overall, the findings suggest that while PIP has made a meaningful impact on educational access and social equity, continuous improvements in inclusivity, administrative systems, and community engagement remain essential to maximizing its long-term effectiveness.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) plays a significant role in increasing school participation for children from poor families, especially in rural areas and vulnerable groups. These findings are in line with the original goal of the study, which highlighted the link between poverty and access to education. Theoretically, these results confirm an education-based welfare intervention model that states that conditional cash transfers can break the intergenerational poverty chain through improved access and sustainability of education (Susilo & Wahyudi, 2020). From the perspective of social inclusion, the effectiveness of PIP is also reflected in its ability to reach marginalized groups such as children with special needs, even with various technical implementation obstacles (Zamjani, 2019).

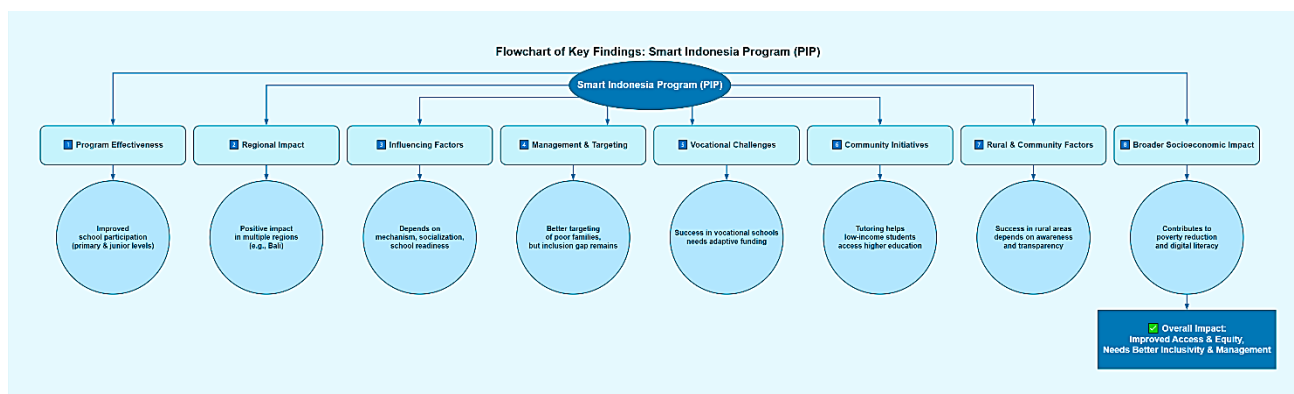


Figure 1. The cycle of Smart Indonesia Program (PIP)

When compared to the findings of previous studies, these results show alignment with the literature that confirms the contribution of educational assistance programs to increasing primary and junior high school participation rates (Martsha, 2024). However, there is a contrast with the effectiveness of the Family Hope Program (PKH) which actually shows a decrease in participation at the high school level, indicating that program design and technical implementation have a great influence on its impact (Romadhoni & Qibthiyah, 2024). This research makes an important contribution to expanding the understanding of the interaction between education policy and social welfare programs in the context of developing countries. In the context of the SDGs, PIP demonstrates an integrated strategy that addresses the issue of "No Poverty" and "Quality Education" simultaneously (Rahmatullah & Rahmatullah, 2021).

However, it is necessary to recognize that there are limitations in the implementation of PIP, especially related to target inaccuracy, data verification barriers, and the lack of digital literacy of beneficiaries (Putri et al., 2024). Some regions also face challenges in distributing aid efficiently due to differences in capacity between local institutions (Fadzlan et al., 2021). Therefore, strengthening cross-sector coordination and optimizing integrated data is crucial to ensuring the accuracy of program targets. On the other hand, this study provides important recommendations for policymakers to redesign PIP schemes to be more inclusive and responsive to the special needs of beneficiaries, especially in 3T areas and communities with special needs (Riq & Yuningsih, 2020). For practice development, these results encourage better integration between PIP and other programs such as BOS, as well as school involvement in the verification and distribution process. This is in line with the findings that synergy between education programs is able to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the implementation of educational welfare programs (Pradana, 2017). The practical implications of these findings demand strengthening the role of local governments as technical implementers and increasing the digital literacy capacity of the community. Meanwhile, for the future research agenda, it is recommended to explore longitudinal exploration of the sustainability of post-aid school participation, as well as a study of the impact of PIP on learning outcomes and long-term social mobility (Sandra et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the field findings, it can be concluded that the Smart Indonesia Program (PIP) has played an important role in encouraging increased school participation of children from underprivileged families, especially in areas with high levels of socio-economic vulnerability. This program has succeeded in reducing the economic burden on families through adequate education and cash assistance, as well as contributing to the sustainability of student attendance in school. The implementation of the program at the school level shows that targeted distribution, school involvement, and consistent monitoring are key factors in supporting program effectiveness. However, the implementation of PIP in the field still faces a number of challenges, such as inaccurate beneficiary data, delays in the distribution of funds, and a lack of intensive assistance to recipient families.

This article makes a theoretical contribution by integrating social justice frameworks, educational participation, and social capital to understand the dynamics of PIP implementation in the context of inclusive education. In addition, the practical contribution of this article lies in the identification of good practices in the implementation of the program and recommendations for the optimization of affirmative policies that are more adaptive to local conditions. In addition, this study enriches the literature on education-based social interventions in developing countries and opens up space for dialogue on the design of public policies oriented towards justice and equitable access to education. For further research, it is recommended that a more in-depth exploration be carried out on the sustainability aspects of school participation after PIP intervention has stopped, as well as its impact on the academic achievement and long-term social mobility of beneficiaries. Research can also broaden the scope of study areas by taking into account geographical and cultural diversity and involving collaborative approaches between researchers, education practitioners, and policymakers to build more holistic and contextual models of interventions.

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