

Implementation of the Mayor of Bontang's Circular Letter on the Statement of Physical Land Possession: A Case Study of Bontang Barat District

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter concerning the Statement of Physical Land Control in West Bontang District as an administrative policy instrument in local land governance, which emerged in response to the gap between de facto land control practices in the community and the formal land system that requires proof of de jure ownership. This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive analytical method, where data is obtained through in-depth interviews with village and sub-district officials, community leaders, and residents directly involved in the process of processing the statement of physical land control, supplemented by limited observation and policy documentation studies. Data analysis is carried out through the stages of reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions by maintaining data validity through triangulation of sources and methods. The results of the study indicate that the implementation of the Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter takes place contextually and is greatly influenced by the capacity of implementing officials, bureaucratic discretion, as well as the social context and local power relations that develop in the community. This policy was relatively effective in providing temporary administrative recognition and building social legitimacy for land ownership, but on the other hand, it also gave rise to procedural variations, inconsistent service delivery, and differences in public understanding regarding the legal status of the declaration. This finding confirms that the effectiveness of local land policies is determined not only by the smoothness of the administrative process, but also by the clarity of policy communication, the management of apparatus discretion, and the ability of local governments to integrate local administrative policies with the national land reform system and agenda to realize fair, accountable, and inclusive land governance.

INTRODUCTION

Land governance remains a persistent and complex challenge in many developing urban areas, particularly in regions experiencing rapid spatial transformation and population growth. In Indonesia, issues of land ownership and tenure security are deeply intertwined with historical settlement patterns, administrative fragmentation, and uneven access to formal legal documentation. Urban expansion often occurs faster than the capacity of formal land administration systems to register and certify land rights, resulting in widespread de facto land occupation that lacks de jure recognition. This condition not only generates legal uncertainty for residents but also complicates local government efforts to manage urban development, prevent land disputes, and ensure equitable access to land resources. Within this broader national context, local governments are increasingly compelled to adopt pragmatic administrative instruments to respond to unresolved land tenure issues at the grassroots level (Faboye et al., 2025; Oomen et al., 2022).

The city of Bontang presents a particularly illustrative case of these dynamics. As an urban area shaped by industrial development, economic migration, and spatial reconfiguration, Bontang has experienced sustained growth that places significant pressure on land resources. West Bontang Regency, in particular, has evolved into a heterogeneous urban zone characterized by mixed residential patterns, informal settlements, and long-established communities whose

land occupation histories predate formal urban planning frameworks. Many residents in this area have occupied and utilized land for decades based on social recognition, familial inheritance, or customary arrangements, yet lack formal land ownership certificates issued by the state (Moreda, 2023; Tesfaye et al., 2023). This gap between lived land tenure practices and formal legal recognition has produced administrative ambiguity and heightened vulnerability to land-related conflicts, especially in the context of increasing land values and competing claims.

In response to these conditions, the Mayor of Bontang issued a Circular Letter concerning Statements of Physical Land Ownership as an administrative policy instrument intended to provide preliminary recognition of land occupation (Aprido & Fatimah, 2023; Miptahuddin, 2024). The circular letter functions as a local governance tool designed to document physical control over land by residents who are unable to demonstrate formal legal ownership. While not constituting a definitive legal title, the statement of physical land ownership serves as an interim administrative acknowledgment, verified by local government officials, that affirms a person's factual occupation and use of land. This policy reflects a broader trend in local governance whereby executive discretion is employed to address policy gaps arising from structural limitations in national land administration systems.

The issuance of the circular letter must be understood within the institutional constraints faced by local governments in Indonesia's decentralized governance framework. Although land administration authority largely resides with central government agencies, local governments bear significant responsibility for managing spatial planning, population administration, and local development (Ismeti et al., 2023; B. Zhao & Wang, 2022). This asymmetry often leaves municipalities with limited formal authority over land certification, while simultaneously confronting them with the social and political consequences of unresolved land tenure issues. In this context, the Mayor of Bontang's circular letter represents a strategic effort to navigate institutional boundaries by providing an administrative solution that operates within the local government's discretionary capacity, without directly encroaching upon national land governance mandates.

Despite its pragmatic intent, the implementation of the Mayor of Bontang's Circular Letter raises important questions regarding policy effectiveness, legal certainty, and governance legitimacy. As a non-binding regulatory instrument, a circular letter occupies an ambiguous position within Indonesia's legal hierarchy. Its authority depends less on coercive enforcement and more on administrative acceptance and social compliance. Consequently, the success of such a policy hinges on how it is interpreted, communicated, and implemented by local government officials and how it is perceived and utilized by the community (Aldhi et al., 2025; Uster, 2025). These dynamics make the implementation process itself a critical object of analysis, rather than the policy text alone.

West Bontang Regency offers a valuable empirical setting to examine these implementation dynamics in practice. As an area with diverse socio-economic conditions and varying levels of administrative access, West Bontang reveals how a single policy instrument can generate differentiated outcomes across communities (Isdahartati et al., 2024; Sugiardi et al., 2021). The implementation of statements of physical land ownership in this area involves multiple actors, including subdistrict officials, neighborhood leaders, and residents, whose interactions shape the actual functioning of the policy. These interactions are influenced by institutional capacity, bureaucratic discretion, social trust, and local power relations, all of which play a significant role in determining whether the policy achieves its intended objectives or produces unintended consequences.

The importance of examining policy implementation in this context is further underscored by the potential risks associated with misinterpretation of the circular letter (Bullock et al., 2021; Leong & Howlett, 2022). In practice, some residents may perceive statements of physical land ownership as equivalent to formal land titles, leading to false assumptions regarding legal protection and transferability. Such misunderstandings can exacerbate land disputes, particularly in cases of land transactions, inheritance, or overlapping claims. Moreover, inconsistencies in implementation across administrative units can undermine perceptions of fairness and transparency, thereby weakening public trust in local government

institutions. These risks highlight the necessity of analyzing not only the administrative procedures but also the communicative and social dimensions of policy implementation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study situates the implementation of the Mayor of Bontang's Circular Letter within broader debates on policy implementation, street-level bureaucracy, and local governance. Classic and contemporary implementation theories emphasize that policies are not merely executed as designed but are actively interpreted and reshaped by frontline bureaucrats operating under resource constraints and contextual pressures. In the case of West Bontang, subdistrict and neighborhood-level officials exercise considerable discretion in verifying land occupation claims, mediating community expectations, and translating abstract policy directives into concrete administrative actions. Their decisions, shaped by both formal rules and informal norms, significantly influence policy outcomes and equity (Chima Abimbola Eden et al., 2023; Emon & Khan, 2023).

The implementation of this circular letter reflects ongoing tensions between administrative rationality and social legitimacy in land governance. While formal procedures aim to standardize documentation and enhance administrative order, social realities often demand flexibility and contextual judgment. In communities where land tenure is historically embedded in social recognition rather than written documentation, rigid administrative requirements may inadvertently marginalize vulnerable groups. Conversely, excessive flexibility may compromise legal clarity and open opportunities for manipulation. Understanding how local implementers navigate these tensions is essential for evaluating the broader implications of the policy (Farid & Waldorff, 2022; van Duijn et al., 2022).

This study is also relevant in light of Indonesia's broader land reform agenda and ongoing efforts to improve land registration and tenure security. Although national programs seek to accelerate land certification, their implementation at the local level remains uneven and constrained by institutional capacity. Local administrative initiatives such as the Mayor of Bontang's circular letter thus function as complementary mechanisms that fill policy gaps while national reforms are still in progress (Tumanut, 2024). However, without careful design and oversight, such initiatives risk creating parallel systems of land documentation that may complicate rather than simplify land governance.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine the implementation of the Mayor of Bontang's Circular Letter on Statements of Physical Land Ownership in West Bontang Regency as a case study of local policy implementation in land administration. By focusing on the processes, actors, and contextual factors that shape implementation outcomes, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how local governments navigate land tenure challenges within constrained institutional environments (Cord et al., 2022; Fuseini, 2021). Rather than evaluating the policy solely in terms of formal compliance, this study emphasizes the lived realities of implementation and the interactions between policy design, administrative practice, and community response.

Research related to the Mayor's Regulations governing Land Ownership has also been researched by several people, among them are Stefano, (2024) which provides an explanation regarding relocation in various dimensions of social and economic life in society.. Ardiansyah, (2024) The elimination of Land Certificates as proof of land ownership, as regulated in Article 97 of Government Regulation Number 18 of 2021, indicates the need for a re-evaluation of the mechanism for recognizing land rights as a form of evaluation. Study Zefanya & Lukman, (2022) emphasizes how the Supreme Court's decision 3044 K/PDT/2020 provides an explanation of the benchmark for fulfilling physical land ownership through a land ownership statement.

Ultimately, understanding the implementation of this circular letter is crucial for informing future policy development in land governance at the local level. Insights derived from the West Bontang case may offer valuable lessons for other municipalities facing similar challenges, particularly in contexts where formal land administration systems lag behind urban growth and social change. By illuminating the strengths and limitations of administrative instruments such as mayoral circular letters, this study seeks to contribute to more responsive,

equitable, and legally coherent approaches to land governance in rapidly transforming urban settings.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive analysis approach to deeply understand the implementation process of the Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter concerning the Statement of Physical Land Control in West Bontang District (Villamin et al., 2025). The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meaning, processes, and socio-administrative dynamics that accompany the implementation of land policies at the local level, by positioning policy implementation as a social practice influenced by interactions between actors, bureaucratic discretion, and the local institutional and social context. Research data were obtained through in-depth interviews with government officials at the sub-district and village levels, community leaders, and residents directly involved in the process of processing the statement of physical land control, which were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research objectives. In addition, data were also collected through limited observations of the administrative service process and documentation studies of circulars, administrative archives, laws and regulations and literature related to land and policy implementation. Data analysis was conducted descriptively qualitatively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and interpretive conclusion drawing to identify patterns, themes, and dynamics of policy implementation, while maintaining data validity through triangulation of sources and methods (Bingham, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents empirical findings on the implementation of the Mayor of Bontang's Circular Letter on the Statement of Physical Land Possession in Bontang Barat District as a policy process unfolding within a complex administrative and social context. Policy implementation is not understood merely as the technical application of rules, but rather as a practice involving continuous interactions among implementing officials, local communities, and the social and institutional structures that surround them (Alsharari & Daniels, 2024; Crane et al., 2021). In this context, land policy is positioned as an arena in which the administrative interests of the state intersect with the practical needs of local communities, shaping a dynamic pattern of implementation.

The main focus of the findings is directed toward the dynamics of policy execution at the local level, particularly how the circular letter is implemented by kelurahan and district officials as frontline policy implementers. These officials do not merely function as translators of written regulations into service procedures, but also as actors who adapt policy implementation to local administrative and social conditions. As a result, policy implementation occurs in a contextual manner, where officials' interpretations, the availability of resources, and bureaucratic workload significantly influence the form and quality of services related to the issuance of statements of physical land possession (Ezeudu & Okolie, 2025).

The research findings are further organized into three main sub-themes that represent key dimensions of land policy implementation in Bontang Barat. The first dimension relates to administrative aspects and the role of implementing officials in translating the circular letter into public service practices (Klein et al., 2022; Rosenbloom et al., 2021). This dimension highlights variations in procedures, the exercise of bureaucratic discretion, and differences in institutional capacity that affect the consistency and certainty of service delivery. These variations indicate that policy implementation is not uniform, despite being based on the same regulatory framework.

The second dimension focuses on public perceptions and understanding of the statement of physical land possession as a policy output (J. Li et al., 2022; Merino et al., 2024; Wartmann et al., 2021). The findings show that community members do not always interpret this document uniformly, either in terms of its administrative function or its legal implications. The way residents understand and utilize the statement of physical land possession is strongly influenced by prior experiences, information obtained through both formal and informal channels, and practical needs related to land control and use. The third dimension emphasizes the influence of social context and local power relations in shaping verification processes and the recognition of land possession at

the community level, where local actors play a crucial role in bridging formal policy with social realities.

The organization of the research findings into these three sub-themes aims to provide a more comprehensive and analytical understanding of the implementation of the Mayor of Bontang's Circular Letter as a local policy situated at the intersection of administrative requirements and social realities. Through this thematic approach, the findings not only describe what occurs in practice but also reveal the structural and social factors that influence both the effectiveness and limitations of policy implementation. This presentation of findings serves as an essential foundation for subsequent discussion on policy implications, challenges in land governance, and opportunities for policy improvement at the local level.

Administrative Implementation and the Role of Implementing Officials

Administrative implementation and the role of implementing officials begin with the understanding that land policy implementation is essentially an administrative process carried out through bureaucratic structures at the local level (Burns et al., 2023; Musinguzi et al., 2021; Roengtam & Agustiyara, 2022). The Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter concerning the Statement of Physical Land Control serves as a policy instrument that demands the active involvement of implementing officials, particularly at the sub-district and village levels, as the frontline in public service delivery. Therefore, the discussion in this sub-heading focuses on how this policy is translated into daily administrative practices by officials with direct authority in the service process.

The introduction to this sub-heading also positions implementing officials as strategic actors in determining the direction and quality of policy implementation. In the context of land policy, officials play a role not only as technical implementers but also as interpreters of policy provisions when faced with diverse field conditions. This role makes administrative implementation a space for interaction between formal regulations and bureaucratic practices, where administrative decisions are heavily influenced by the understanding, experience, and capacity of individual implementing officials (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021; Döring, 2021).

The administrative implementation of policies cannot be separated from the institutional conditions and resources available at the local level. Differences in organizational capacity, the number and competence of civil servants, and bureaucratic workloads create variations in how policies are implemented. Therefore, the introduction to this subheading emphasizes that policy implementation is not a uniform process, but rather occurs contextually according to the characteristics of the local bureaucracy implementing it.

Through this introduction, the subheading "Administrative Implementation and the Role of Implementing Officials" aims to provide an initial framework for understanding how the Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter is operationalized within the West Bontang District government administration system. The emphasis on administrative aspects and the role of implementing officials is expected to provide insight into the internal bureaucratic factors that influence policy effectiveness and serve as a basis for analyzing the empirical findings presented in the following section.

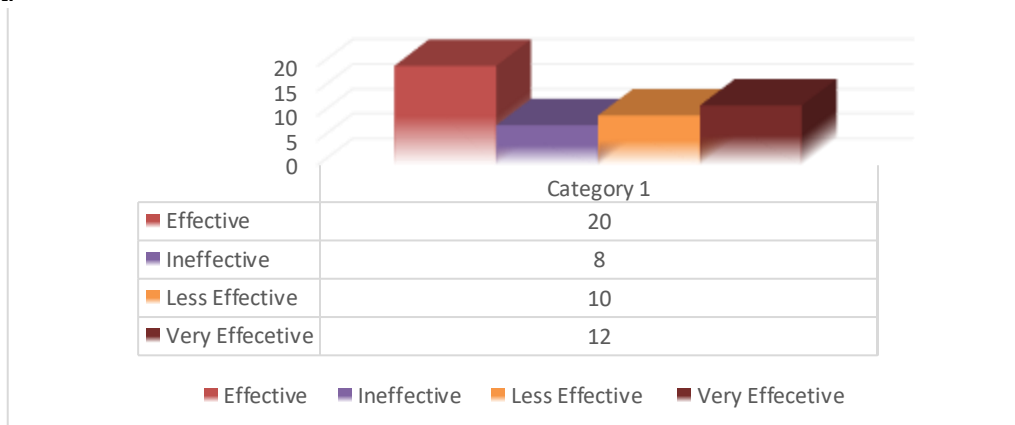


Figure 1. Assesment of Administrative Implementation and Role of Officials
Source: Data Processed by the Author 2026

Figure 1 visualizes the distribution of public perceptions regarding the effectiveness of government officials in administrative implementation, specifically regarding the implementation of the Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter concerning Statements of Physical Land Control. This graph shows four main categories: "Very Effective," "Effective," "Less Effective," and "Ineffective," with varying numbers of respondents in each category. The data presented shows that the majority of respondents placed the government officials' effectiveness in the "Effective" category, with twenty respondents. This indicates that the majority of the public believes the implementing government officials have performed adequately in implementing land administration policies. This assessment indicates that, although there is still room for improvement, the government officials have been able to carry out administrative procedures and interact with the public in accordance with their functions and responsibilities.

The second most common category is "Very Effective," with twelve respondents, indicating that a number of residents believe the government officials have exceeded basic service expectations. This assessment reflects the public's confidence in the government officials' ability to carry out administrative mechanisms, including document verification, issuing statements of physical land control, and providing clear information regarding procedures. The existence of this category indicates that officials not only carry out formal administrative duties but also provide services that are considered high-quality and responsive to community needs, thus fostering positive perceptions and social legitimacy for the implemented policies (Jawad et al., 2021).

The "Less Effective" category, with ten respondents, indicates that some members of the public perceive the effectiveness of officials to be below optimal standards. This assessment may stem from public experiences with unclear procedures, perceived slow service times, or limited information received during the land ownership declaration process. The existence of this category emphasizes that policy implementation is not entirely uniform, and the quality of official service can be influenced by a number of factors such as human resource capacity, workload, or variations in procedures at the village and sub-district levels. In other words, the perception of "Less Effective" indicates that despite the policy's implementation, there are administrative challenges that require further attention.

The final category, "Ineffective," had eight respondents, indicating that a small portion of the public considered policy implementation to be very ineffective. This perception may reflect the public's direct experience with significant obstacles in administrative procedures, such as inconsistent verification processes, unclear information regarding issued documents, or lack of coordination between bureaucratic units in processing applications. Although the number of respondents in this category is smaller than in the other categories, its presence remains significant as a signal that some segments of the public still experience obstacles in accessing administrative services. This suggests that the effectiveness of policy implementation depends heavily on the interaction between officials and citizens, as well as the officials' ability to translate policy provisions into socially acceptable practices (Talukder, 2025).

This graph shows the distribution of perceptions, with the majority leaning toward the positive categories, namely "Effective" and "Very Effective," reflecting that officials play a central role and are relatively successful in operationalizing administrative policies at the local level. These results emphasize the importance of officials as key actors in policy implementation, as the effectiveness of administrative services depends not only on written regulations but also on their ability to adapt procedures to the community's social conditions, provide clear information, and ensure the administrative process runs smoothly. However, the presence of the "Less Effective" and "Ineffective" categories indicates uneven service quality that requires improvement, both in terms of policy socialization, staff training, and standardization of administrative procedures.

The analysis of this graph demonstrates that public perception of staff effectiveness is a crucial indicator in assessing the implementation of administrative policies. The dominant positive category confirms that the majority of the public benefits from the administrative process, while the negative category highlights weaknesses that could be the focus of evaluation and improvement (Nishimura et al., 2021). Thus, this graph not only provides a quantitative overview of the distribution of public perceptions but also serves as a basis for further analysis of the factors influencing the effectiveness of administrative implementation and the role of implementing staff in the context of land policy in West Bontang District.

Public Perception and Understanding of the Statement of Physical Control of Land

This subheading discusses how the public understands and interprets the statement of physical land ownership as part of the implementation of land policy in West Bontang District. Public understanding of this document is a crucial factor in assessing the policy's effectiveness, as differing perceptions will influence how they use it in their daily lives (Dwipayanti et al., 2021; Vu & Lim, 2022). This introduction aims to provide an initial framework for examining the relationship between administrative policies and the experiences of the public as direct beneficiaries of those policies.

The statement of physical land ownership is essentially an administrative document that serves as temporary recognition of land ownership by a particular individual or group. However, the extent to which this document is correctly understood by the public is greatly influenced by the level of policy socialization, prior experience in managing land administration, and information obtained through formal and informal channels (Abab et al., 2022; Wicaksono et al., 2025; Woo et al., 2023). These differences in understanding often give rise to diverse interpretations, ranging from viewing the document as proof of legal ownership to understanding it as a temporary administrative document that needs to be accompanied by an official certificate.

In the context of policy implementation, public perception cannot be separated from the social interactions that occur during the document processing process. Communities accustomed to obtaining information through village officials or specific community leaders tend to develop different understandings than those who obtain information through personal experience or social media. Therefore, community perception and understanding are important indicators for local governments to assess the extent to which policies have been well-socialized and appropriately accepted at the community level.

By understanding community perceptions and understanding, the findings section of this study aims to identify factors influencing the interpretation of land administration documents and their implications for land tenure practices. Emphasis on this aspect allows for a more in-depth analysis of barriers and opportunities in policy implementation and provides a basis for recommendations that can strengthen policy effectiveness at the local level. This introduction serves as a foundation for presenting empirical findings related to how communities assess and utilize statements of physical land tenure in their daily lives.

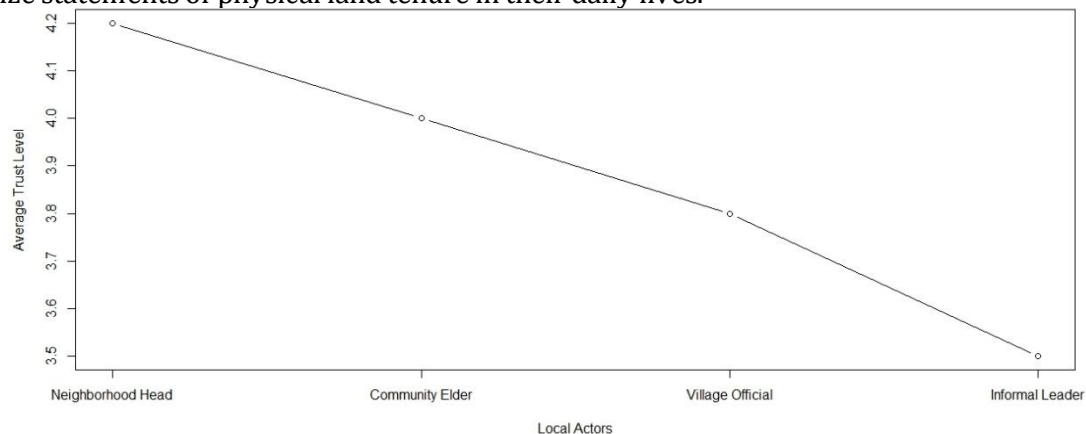


Figure 2. Trust in Local Actors in Land Verification Processes

Source: Data Processed by the Author

The figure 2 illustrates the distribution of public perceptions regarding the level of legitimacy of the physical land possession verification process in the implementation of the Mayor of Bontang's Circular Letter in West Bontang District. This visualization reflects how the community evaluates the extent to which the administrative process carried out by sub-district and village governments is considered valid, trustworthy, and aligned with the social realities experienced by residents. By presenting variations in perception categories, ranging from very high to low legitimacy, the figure provides empirical insight into the relationship between administrative policy and social acceptance at the local level.

The dominance of the "legitimate" perception category indicates that the majority of community members view the land possession verification process as an acceptable mechanism

with a reasonable degree of administrative validity. This finding suggests that although the circular letter does not constitute a formally binding legal instrument within the national legal hierarchy, it nevertheless gains social recognition through its implementation within familiar local administrative procedures. Residents' direct interactions with village officials, neighborhood leaders, and sub-district authorities play a crucial role in shaping the belief that the issued document holds administrative value and practical utility for everyday needs (Utomo et al., 2024; N. Zhao et al., 2024).

The presence of a substantial "very legitimate" category further reflects a high level of public trust in local actors involved in the verification process. This perception is generally held by residents who experience relatively smooth administrative procedures, receive adequate explanations from officials, and observe the involvement of community leaders as a form of social endorsement of land possession claims. In this context, legitimacy is not understood solely as formal legal validity, but rather as a product of social interaction that generates a sense of fairness, certainty, and recognition.

However, the existence of the "less legitimate" and "not legitimate" categories indicates that policy implementation has not been uniformly perceived across all segments of the community. These negative perceptions are often associated with residents' experiences of inconsistent procedures, limited transparency in the verification process, or excessive reliance on endorsements from specific local actors. Such conditions suggest that administrative legitimacy may be weakened when community members perceive subjectivity or unequal treatment in bureaucratic practices.

The figure also highlights how the legitimacy of local policy implementation is strongly influenced by social context and local power relations (Crossley et al., 2021; Egner & Heinelt, 2022). In practice, recognition of physical land possession is shaped not only by documentary requirements but also by the extent to which land claims are socially acknowledged within the community. When social validation mechanisms align with administrative procedures, perceptions of legitimacy tend to strengthen. Conversely, when discrepancies arise between social recognition and administrative decisions, public confidence in the process diminishes.

From a governance perspective, the distribution of perceptions shown in the figure demonstrates that the circular letter functions as a relatively effective administrative instrument for addressing limitations within the formal land administration system. Nevertheless, its effectiveness remains highly contextual and dependent on the capacity of implementing officials and the quality of policy communication to the public. The legitimacy generated through this process is largely practical in nature, emerging from residents' everyday experiences in accessing public services rather than from formal legal norms alone (Amankwaa & Gough, 2022; Eneqvist et al., 2022).

Analytically, the figure underscores that the success of local land policy implementation cannot be assessed solely through procedural compliance, but must also consider levels of public trust and social acceptance. The variation in perceptions revealed by the visualization serves as an important indicator of areas requiring improvement, particularly with regard to procedural standardization, transparency, and the reduction of reliance on personal or informal networks. Thus, the figure functions not merely as a statistical description, but as a reflection of the broader socio-administrative dynamics that shape the legitimacy of land governance in West Bontang District.

Social Context, Local Power Relations, and the Legitimacy of Land Possession Verification

The social context and local power relations shape the implementation of land ownership declarations in West Bontang District. Beyond formal administrative procedures, land ownership verification is closely tied to community structures, informal authority, and social recognition patterns that influence whose land claims are recognized and considered legitimate. These findings highlight that policy implementation operates not only within a bureaucratic framework but also within socially constructed norms that determine access to administrative recognition.

Research findings indicate that neighborhood leaders, community elders, and informal local figures play a crucial role in the physical land ownership verification process. Their testimony and support often serve as crucial references for sub-district and village officials when assessing land claims, particularly in cases where formal documentation is limited or absent (Timoty Ezra Simanjuntak et al., 2025). In practice, the credibility of applicants' claims is often evaluated based

on social recognition within the community, length of residence, and perceived moral standing, rather than solely on administrative completeness. This suggests that the implementation of the circular letter relies heavily on socially embedded validation mechanisms.

However, the involvement of local power relations also creates variation in how the verification process is conducted. In some cases, individuals with stronger social networks or closer ties to local leaders experienced smoother administrative processes, while others faced greater scrutiny or delays. This dynamic suggests that while the policy aims to provide equitable administrative recognition, its implementation is not entirely neutral and may reflect existing social hierarchies within communities. This situation underscores the importance of understanding policy implementation as a negotiated process shaped by formal rules and informal power structures (Aivalli et al., 2025; Z. Li et al., 2026).

From a governance perspective, reliance on social legitimacy serves a dual function. On the one hand, it increases policy acceptance and reduces resistance, as community-based verification aligns administrative decisions with local realities. On the other hand, it creates potential risks associated with subjectivity, inconsistency, and exclusion, particularly for vulnerable groups with weaker social capital. The findings suggest that administrative legitimacy in land governance is constructed through a delicate balance between procedural compliance and social trust, not simply through legal formalism.

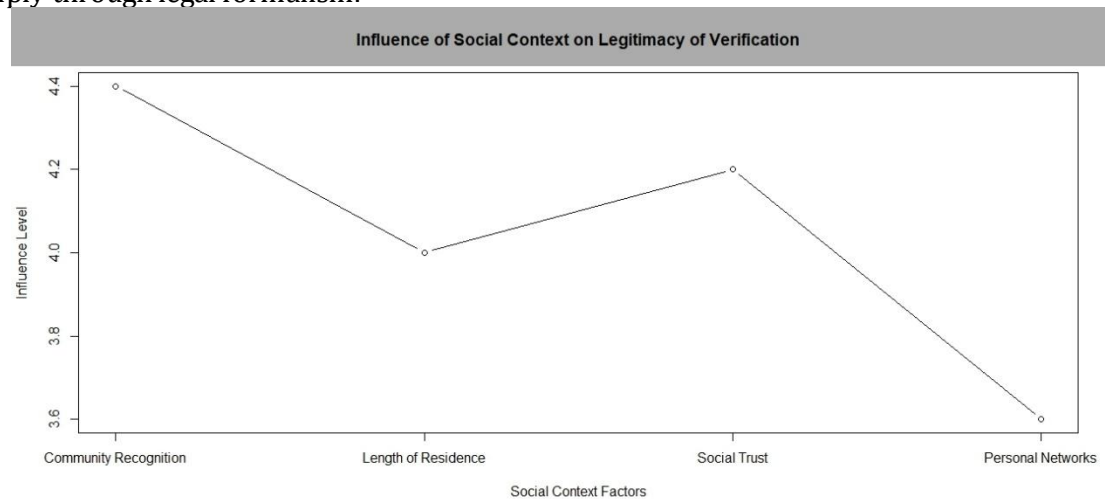


Figure 3. Influence of Social Context on Legitimacy of Verification
Source: Data Processed by the Author 2026

The graph figure 3 illustrates how social context and local power relations shape the perceived legitimacy of land possession verification within the implementation of the Mayor of Bontang's Circular Letter. Rather than depicting legitimacy as a purely administrative or legal outcome, the visualization emphasizes that legitimacy emerges through interactions between community actors, social recognition, and bureaucratic practices. By presenting differences in legitimacy scores associated with various local actors and social factors, the graph provides an empirical representation of how land governance operates within a socially embedded administrative environment.

The relatively high legitimacy scores associated with neighborhood heads and community elders indicate that these actors play a central role in mediating between formal administrative requirements and local social realities. Their proximity to residents and familiarity with the history of land occupation position them as trusted sources of information and verification. In many cases, their acknowledgment functions as an informal guarantee that a land claim is socially recognized, even when formal documentation is incomplete. This finding reflects the continued importance of localized authority structures in shaping administrative outcomes, particularly in contexts where formal land tenure systems remain fragmented or inaccessible.

Village and sub-district officials also appear as significant actors in the legitimacy construction process, although their scores are comparatively lower than those of community-based figures (Istriyani, 2024). This pattern suggests that while bureaucratic authority remains important, it is often perceived as more distant and procedural. Residents tend to evaluate the

legitimacy of verification not only on the basis of official signatures or stamps, but also on whether the process resonates with their lived experiences and social interactions. As a result, administrative authority gains greater legitimacy when it aligns with local knowledge and community validation.

The graph further demonstrates that broader social context factors, such as community recognition, length of residence, and social trust, exert a strong influence on how legitimacy is perceived. High scores for community recognition and social trust indicate that land possession verification is closely tied to collective acknowledgment rather than individual claims alone. In practice, long-term residence and sustained participation in community life often serve as implicit evidence of legitimate land control. These social markers reduce uncertainty and reinforce the perception that the verification process reflects actual land use realities rather than abstract legal norms.

At the same time, the presence of personal networks as a factor with a lower but still notable influence reveals the ambivalent role of informal relations in policy implementation. On one hand, personal networks can facilitate access to information and smooth administrative processes. On the other hand, excessive reliance on such networks may raise concerns about fairness, transparency, and unequal treatment. The graph captures this tension by showing that while personal connections matter, they are not the dominant source of legitimacy compared to broader forms of social recognition and trust.

From an implementation perspective, the visualization underscores that legitimacy is produced through a negotiated process involving both state and non-state actors (Clément et al., 2021). The administrative act of issuing a statement of physical land possession becomes meaningful only when it is supported by social validation mechanisms. This finding aligns with implementation theories that emphasize the discretionary role of frontline bureaucrats and the influence of local context in shaping policy outcomes. In this case, officials do not merely apply standardized procedures, but also rely on social cues and community input to assess the credibility of land claims.

The graph also reveals potential vulnerabilities within the implementation process. When legitimacy is heavily dependent on social context and local power relations, there is a risk that certain groups may be disadvantaged, particularly newcomers, marginalized residents, or those with weaker social ties. While community-based verification enhances acceptance and reduces conflict in many cases, it may also reproduce existing social hierarchies. Thus, the visualization highlights the need for balance between social sensitivity and procedural safeguards in land administration.

DISCUSSION

Within the broader framework of public policy implementation, particularly land policy at the local level, which faces limited formal authority and complex social realities. The implementation of the Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter concerning the Statement of Physical Land Control demonstrates that non-legislative administrative policies can serve as pragmatic instruments in bridging the gap between de facto land control practices and the de jure land law system. However, the effectiveness of these policies is not solely determined by policy design but is heavily influenced by the dynamics of implementation on the ground.

Findings related to administrative aspects and the role of implementing officials reinforce the view that policy implementation is a contextual process and is never entirely neutral. Village and sub-district officials, as frontline implementers, have considerable discretion in interpreting and implementing the provisions of the Circular Letter (Hasniati, 2022). This discretion arises in response to limited resources, varying social conditions, and the need to maintain social stability. In this context, officials function not only as technical implementers but also as mediators between administrative demands and the social realities of residents. These findings align with the street-level bureaucracy perspective, which emphasizes that public policy is ultimately shaped by the day-to-day practices of implementing officials.

Findings regarding public perception and understanding indicate that policies are not always understood in accordance with their normative intent. The Statement of Physical Land Ownership is perceived in various ways, ranging from being merely a temporary administrative document to being considered legally binding proof of ownership (Bhujel & Rahulamathavan,

2022; Jennings, 2024; Olsen, 2022). This variation in understanding reflects the limitations of the policy socialization process and the strong practical need of the community for certainty of land ownership. In the context of communities that have long occupied and managed land without formal certificates, the existence of any administrative document tends to be viewed as a source of legitimacy, even if legally limited.

The social dimensions and local power relations revealed in the research findings further confirm that the legitimacy of land policies does not stem solely from formal state authority. Social recognition, recommendations from neighborhood leaders, and an individual's position within the community's social structure play a crucial role in the land tenure verification process. In practice, policy legitimacy is constructed through negotiations between government officials and local non-state actors. This situation demonstrates that the state is not entirely coercive but operates through existing social mechanisms at the community level.

Reliance on local social mechanisms and power relations also carries problematic implications. The findings indicate the potential for unequal administrative treatment, particularly for residents with weaker social capital. In such situations, legitimacy built through social recognition risks reproducing existing social hierarchies. Therefore, while a community-based approach can increase policy acceptance and minimize open conflict, it still requires oversight and standardization of procedures to ensure it does not compromise the principles of justice and accountability.

The results of this research enrich the discourse on land governance in Indonesia, particularly at the local government level. The Bontang Mayor's Circular can be understood as a form of local policy orchestration that attempts to fill the gap in formal regulations with flexible administrative instruments (Tabuga, 2023). This flexibility is both a strength and a weakness of the policy. On the one hand, the policy is able to respond quickly to the real needs of the community; on the other hand, the unclear legal position has the potential to lead to misunderstandings and future conflicts if not integrated with the national land system.

This discussion also demonstrates that the success of land policy implementation cannot be measured solely by the level of public satisfaction or the smoothness of administrative procedures. Success must be understood more substantively, namely the extent to which the policy provides certainty, protects vulnerable groups, and does not create false legal expectations. In this context, the Circular Letter needs to be clearly positioned as a temporary administrative instrument that is complementary, not substitutive, to the formal land certification process.

This discussion confirms that the implementation of the Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter reflects adaptive yet fragile land governance practices. Adaptive because it is able to adjust to local social realities, but fragile because it is highly dependent on the quality of the apparatus, social relations, and community understanding. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of strengthening the capacity of civil servants, clear policy communication, and integrating local policies with the national land reform agenda so that similar policies can contribute sustainably to fair and inclusive land governance.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Bontang Mayor's Circular Letter concerning the Statement of Physical Land Control in West Bontang District is a pragmatic and contextual administrative policy in response to the limitations of the formal land system. This policy is relatively effective in providing temporary administrative recognition of land control and building social legitimacy at the local level through the role of implementing officials, community actors, and social recognition mechanisms. However, its implementation shows procedural variations, differences in community understanding, and a significant dependence on social relations and bureaucratic discretion, which have the potential to create uncertainty and inequality in administrative treatment. Therefore, the success of this policy is determined not only by the smoothness of service, but also by the clarity of its legal position, the quality of policy socialization, and the ability of local governments to balance administrative flexibility with the principles of accountability and justice, while integrating it with the national land reform system and agenda.

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