ASHA PUBLISHING

JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND ECONOMICS



Volume 3, Issue 1, 2026

E-ISSN: 3047-5507
Journal of Social Science and Economics (JOSSE)
https://journal.ashapublishing.co.id/index.php/josse/index

Street-Level Policy Entrepreneurs: Activating Policy Capacity in Local Food Security Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how street-level actors activate policy capacity during the local implementation of Indonesia's food security policy. Existing studies usually explain weak implementation through institutional fragmentation, cross-sector coordination problems, and top-down program design. However, they say less about the micro-practices through which frontline actors keep policy working amid fragmentation. The study adopts a qualitative, embedded, multiple-case design across three districts of South Sulawesi and draws on 50 semi-structured interviews, policy and implementation documents, and limited field observations. The analysis employed theory-driven thematic analysis, combining deductive coding from the policy capacity and street-level policy entrepreneurship literatures with inductive refinement during within-case and cross-case comparisons. The findings show that implementation depends not only on formally available organizational capacity, but also on capacity activated from below by extension workers, village governments, and farmer-group facilitators. These actors re-verified beneficiary lists, reinterpreted targets, aligned village resources with district programs, and built informal coordination across agencies and communities. Under favorable local conditions, such practices moved beyond routine discretion and became street-level policy entrepreneurship. The article contributes to policy implementation studies by showing that analytical, operational, and political capacities are enacted in practice rather than merely stored in formal institutions.

Keywords: Street- level policy enterpreneurs, Policy capacity, Food policy implementation

INTRODUCTION

Food security policies in Indonesia still face a gap between government efforts and results achieved (Ardiansyah, 2023; Rukmana NS, 2020). The government has consistently made food security a national priority through various regulations, cross-sectoral programs, and budget support. However, the achievements of these policies have not been comparable. Indonesia's ranking in the Global Food Security Index is relatively lagging behind Southeast Asian countries, especially in terms of quality, food safety, and resilience to resource risks (Fan et al., 2021). At the regional level, it also shows that the implementation of food policy is still fragmented, coordination between actors is weak, and a top-down approach dominates the implementation of the program (Alwi, 2018, 2022; Alwi & Susanti, 2022).

Food security policy is an inherently cross-sectoral field. It links agricultural production, social protection, food distribution, local development, and community welfare. In decentralized systems, implementation therefore depends on the capacity to integrate actors, information, and resources across organizational and territorial boundaries (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016; Christensen et al., 2019; Galli et al., 2020). In Indonesia, earlier studies have

shown that local food-security implementation is often collaborative in formal design but uneven in practice, with stakeholder alignment and cross-sector coordination remaining fragile (Akbar et al., 2022).

One influential way to explain these implementation problems is through the concept of policy capacity. Policy capacity refers to the competences and capabilities that allow governments to diagnose problems, coordinate action, allocate resources, and sustain implementation across political and organizational settings (Howlett & Saguin, 2018; cet al., 2015; Wu et al., 2015). The framework is useful because it distinguishes analytical, operational, and political dimensions of capacity and directs attention to how policy performance depends on more than legal authority alone. However, the literature often measures capacity through institutional arrangements, staffing, or formal coordination mechanisms. That emphasis risks underestimating how capacities are enacted, improvised, and sometimes substituted in day-to-day implementation work (Aimo & Cuomo, 2025; Christensen et al., 2019; Howlett, 2015a).

A second body of work comes from street-level bureaucracy. Street-level studies show that frontline officials do not simply apply rules. Because they work under uncertainty, resource constraints, and direct interaction with citizens, they interpret policy, exercise discretion, and effectively shape implementation outcomes (Brodkin, 2012; Kholifah, 2013; Lipsky, 2010). In implementation settings characterized by incomplete information and organizational fragmentation, discretion is not a residual phenomenon; it is one of the mechanisms through which policy becomes workable (M. Hill & Hupe, 2014; P. Hill & Hupe, 2013; Hupe & Hill, 2007).

More recent scholarship goes further, arguing that some frontline actors do not merely cope with policy pressures; they also act entrepreneurially. Street-level policy entrepreneurs frame problems, broker coordination, mobilize support, and generate implementable solutions from within ongoing policy delivery rather than from agenda-setting arenas alone (Arnold, 2021; Aviv et al., 2021; Cohen, 2021; Cohen & Aviram, 2021; Liu & Wang, 2023). This development is important because it reconnects implementation studies with the broader policy entrepreneurship literature, which has long emphasized problem framing, coalition-building, and strategic action as drivers of policy change (Kingdon, 2011; Mintrom, 2019a, 2019b; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2017; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Petridou & Mintrom, 2021).

Despite these advances, the relationship between policy capacity and street-level policy entrepreneurship remains underexplored, especially in food policy implementation. Studies of food security frequently diagnose fragmentation, targeting problems, and weak coordination. Yet, they rarely explain how implementation continues under such conditions or when local discretion becomes productive rather than merely compensatory. This article addresses that gap by asking three questions: (1) How do street-level actors activate policy capacity in local food-security implementation? (2) Under what conditions does routine discretion develop into street-level policy entrepreneurship? and (3) What are the implications of these processes for decentralized food governance?

METHODS

The study used a qualitative embedded multiple-case design (Yin, 2018). The overarching case was local food-security implementation in South Sulawesi, while three purposively selected districts constituted the primary cases. Within each district, the analysis focused on embedded units occupying different positions in the implementation chain: district food-security offices, extension units, village governments, women's farmer groups/farmer groups, and program beneficiaries. This design made it possible to examine both within-case processes and cross-case variation in how implementation was translated on the ground

Districts were selected purposively on three criteria: their contribution to food production, variation in local institutional capacity, and the complexity of cross-sector coordination. The purpose of case selection was analytic variation rather than statistical representativeness. The design sought districts facing a common policy field but different combinations of organizational capacity, local political support, and implementation constraints. This strategy allowed the study to compare how similar national or district-level programs were translated under different local conditions.

The empirical material comprised 50 semi-structured interviews, policy and implementation documents, and limited field observations. Interview participants were selected through role-based purposive sampling to capture vertical and horizontal variation across the implementation chain. The sample included district officials and staff from food-security-related agencies, subdistrict and village officials, agricultural extension coordinators and field extension workers, leaders or members of women farmer groups/farmer groups, and program beneficiaries. This composition enabled the study to compare how the same program was understood at design, coordination, delivery, and recipient levels. Documentary sources included regulations, technical guidelines, planning documents, implementation reports, and cross-sector coordination materials. Limited observations were used to contextualize how group facilitation, input delivery, and local coordination unfolded in practice.

Data were analyzed through theory-driven thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) The procedure unfolded in five steps. First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were repeatedly read to identify recurring implementation problems, actor roles, and local adaptations. Second, a first cycle of deductive coding was conducted using sensitizing concepts drawn from the literature: analytical capacity, operational capacity, political capacity, productive discretion, network-building, local adaptation, and informal leadership (Arnold, 2021; Cohen & Aviram, 2021; Wu et al., 2015). Third, the coded material was re-examined inductively to capture context-specific practices that the initial framework did not fully anticipate, such as beneficiary re-verification, village fund alignment, commodity clustering, or the use of women farmer groups as implementation platforms. Fourth, codes were grouped into broader themes and compared across the three district cases. Fifth, within-case findings were synthesized into cross-case explanations concerning when discretion remained routine coping and when it developed into entrepreneurial practice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bone, Maros, and Gowa districts represent the food structure of South Sulawesi because they reflect variations in production capacity, socio-economic vulnerability, and regional typologies within the provincial food system. Bone serves as the main production center, contributing the largest share to the province's total rice production, thus reflecting the availability dimension. Maros and Gowa are in the middle production category with semi-urban and peri-urban characteristics, so they represent the dimensions of access and distribution stability. The variation in poverty levels across these three regions further emphasizes that the food problem in South Sulawesi is not only related to aggregate supply capacity but also to households' ability to access food sustainably. Thus, the selection of the three districts allows an analysis of the implementation of food policies that covers the full spectrum of food security dimensions, namely availability, access, stability, and governance, as shown in the following Table 1:

Table 1. Comparative Food Security Dimensions and Analytical Configurations across Bone, Maros, and Gowa Regencies

Food Security Dimension	Empirical Indicator (2024)	Bone	Maros	Gowa	Analytical Interpretation
Availability	Rice production (tons)	754,644.66	193,846.58	239,879.43	Bone constitutes the principal rice-producing regency in South Sulawesi, whereas Maros and Gowa occupy an intermediate production position.
	Share of total provincial production (4,818,429.39 tons)	±15.7%	±4.0%	±5.0%	Provincial food production is unevenly concentrated in Bone, with Maros and Gowa serving as secondary supporting zones.
Access	Poverty rate (%)	9.58%	9.65%	6.85%	Bone and Maros display relatively greater structural vulnerability in access terms, while Gowa shows a lower incidence rate but still a considerable absolute burden.
	Poor population (thousand persons)	73.03	34.96	55.13	Access to food is conditioned not only by local production levels but also by household purchasing power and socio-economic capacity.

Stability	Geographic position and territorial typology	Agrarian production center	Peri-urban buffer of Makassar	Semi-urban buffer of Makassar	Maros and Gowa are strategically positioned within regional food distribution networks and urban price-stabilization dynamics.
	Dependence on Bulog logistics (provincial scale)	High (production area)	High (distribution area)	High (distribution area)	Food-system stability is maintained through cross-territorial coordination between production and distribution functions.
Governance	Variation in fiscal and institutional capacity	Strong agrarian village base	Mixed village–urban ward structure	Urban-transition area	The three regencies reflect distinct configurations of food-governance capacity within decentralized institutional arrangements.

Source: Processed based on South Sulawesi documents in 2025 figures

The table above shows that the food problem in South Sulawesi is a multidimensional configuration that includes supply capacity, spatial concentration of production, vulnerability to economic access constraints, logistics stabilization, and differentiation in consumption patterns. The data show that the province has a large rice production base but also faces a variety of socio-economic vulnerabilities and dependence on the country's stabilization mechanisms.

Across the three districts, district food-security offices were most visible in formal planning activities. They compiled food-balance information, used poverty-related data, allocated programs, and coordinated with sectoral agencies. Yet the same empirical material showed that formal design did not automatically translate into effective delivery. Extension coordinators and field extension workers repeatedly had to re-check beneficiary lists, verify prospective farmers and locations, and reconcile official categories with actual household conditions. In several accounts, poverty and stunting registries were described as incomplete or misaligned with field realities, while limited personnel and broad territories made routine supervision difficult. The first empirical pattern, therefore, was a persistent implementation gap between formal targeting rules and local realities. Discretion emerged not as an exception to the system but as one of the mechanisms that made the system operable.

The evidence also showed that frontline actors occupied distinct but unequal positions in this implementation chain. District agencies retained stronger capacity in formal planning and interagency coordination, but field-level actors held the most fine-grained knowledge of commodities, beneficiaries, and village conditions. Extension coordinators described frontline extension workers as the actors who best understood whether a group was active, whether a location was suitable, and whether listed beneficiaries actually matched the intended target category. Village governments, for their part, interpreted food security pragmatically through local budgeting choices, direct assistance, small-scale infrastructure, or community-group support. This means that implementation authority was formally distributed, but implementation intelligence was concentrated much closer to the field. Table 2 condenses these actor-specific patterns.

Table 2: Actor-specific evidence for street-level policy entrepreneurship

Actor group	Evidence from the field material	Interpretation
District food-security offices	Concentrated on food-balance analysis, program allocation, and interagency coordination, but relied on extension actors for micro-targeting and field verification.	Formal design capacity was stronger than micro-implementation capacity.
Extension coordinators/extension units	Treated frontline extension workers as the actors who best knew local groups, target accuracy, and delivery problems; coordinated supervision and reporting.	These units acted as connecting nodes between formal authority and field intelligence.
Field extension workers	Verified prospective farmers and locations, corrected beneficiary mismatches, mentored groups, linked assistance to village support, and in some sites initiated new arrangements such as vegetable banks or commodity clusters.	Frontline discretion became productive and, under favorable conditions, entrepreneurial.
Village governments	Translated food security into village-fund priorities, infrastructure support, direct assistance, or empowerment support depending on local conditions and political choices.	Village political capacity shaped the local translation of policy.
Women farmer groups / farmer groups	Served as the main vehicles for yard utilization, vegetable production, and household food support; became innovative when facilitation and backing were strong.	Collective implementation capacity was derivative and heavily dependent on facilitation quality.

Source: Thematic Analysis, 2026

The empirical distinction between routine discretion and entrepreneurial action was visible across the three districts. In some cases, extension workers used discretion only to solve immediate delivery problems, such as checking beneficiary lists, adjusting training schedules, or clarifying group membership. These actions helped maintain implementation, but they did not substantially alter the coordination structure of the program. In other cases, discretionary action developed into policy entrepreneurship. This pattern appeared when extension workers connected beneficiary verification with commodity mapping, linked district assistance to village-budget support, activated women farmer groups as implementation platforms, and introduced arrangements such as vegetable banks or commodity clusters. These interventions changed the practical environment of implementation because they combined local diagnosis,

resource mobilization, and cross-actor coordination. The evidence therefore shows that entrepreneurial action begins when discretion moves beyond administrative adjustment and produces new implementation pathways.

Not all discretionary action was entrepreneurial. A substantial part of frontline discretion consisted of routine coping: adjusting schedules, compensating for missing data, clarifying group membership, and informally bridging organizational delays. Entrepreneurial action became visible when actors used that discretionary space to reshape the implementation environment itself. Extension workers did not merely accompany the Sustainable Food Yard and input-support programs; in some sites they initiated or strengthened women farmer groups, mapped locally viable commodities, linked district programs to village support, and introduced implementable arrangements such as vegetable banks or commodity clusters. Village governments complemented these efforts by redirecting village resources, legitimizing group-based activities, and matching district initiatives with locally acceptable priorities. These actions exceeded routine rule adaptation because they created new pathways through which programs could function on the ground.

Seen through the lens of the literature, these practices fit the profile of street-level policy entrepreneurship. Frontline actors were not operating from formal agenda-setting positions, yet they framed immediate problems, connected fragmented actors, and mobilized support around workable local solutions. Their entrepreneurial role was especially visible where local knowledge, discretionary room, and relational backing from village or district authorities coincided. Where those conditions were absent, implementation remained closer to everyday coping. The distinction matters because it shows that entrepreneurial street-level action is not simply about personal initiative; it depends on whether the surrounding institutional environment leaves enough room for adaptation and enough support for adaptation to endure (Arnold, 2021; Arnold et al., 2024; Liu & Wang, 2023).

Re-reading the empirical material through policy capacity clarifies how these practices activated capacity from below. Analytical capacity was strongly enacted by frontline actors who mapped target areas, verified prospective farmers and locations, assessed group readiness, and interpreted agroecological constraints. Operational capacity was visible in mentoring farmer groups, supervising assistance, coordinating input distribution, and aligning village resources with district programs. Political capacity emerged in the relational work required to keep programs moving negotiating legitimacy for target adjustments, linking district offices to village governments, and building support among hamlet leaders, farmer groups, and local beneficiaries. District agencies retained important design and coordination roles, but the practical activation of all three capacities depended heavily on actors positioned closest to the field. Capacity, in other words, was not only stored in formal organizations; it was enacted through situated implementation work. Table 3 reorganizes the evidence through the three dimensions of policy capacity.

Table 1: Activation of policy capacity across the implementation chain

Actor group	Analytical work	Operational work	Political work	Main constraint
District agencies	Compile food and poverty-related data; map availability and distribution	Allocate programs and coordinate sectoral agencies	Maintain interagency relations and formal authority	Weak translation into village-level delivery without frontline verification
Extension coordinators / units	Read field reports and verify target inconsistencies	Monitor delivery and direct field extension work	Bridge district offices, extension workers, and village administrations	Human-resource limits reduce outreach and follow-up
Field extension workers	Map target areas, assess group readiness, verify beneficiary lists, read agroecological fit	Mentor groups, supervise inputs, organize training, and keep delivery routines functioning	Build working relations among agencies, villages, and farmer groups	Large territories, incomplete data, and dependence on local support
Village governments	Interpret needs in light of poverty, infrastructure, and local priorities	Allocate village resources, support small infrastructure, and facilitate groups	Provide legitimacy and coordinate with hamlets and local actors	Translation depends on local political commitment
Farmer groups / KWT	Interpret guidance with external support	Run yard-based production and group activities	Depend on support from extension workers and village authorities	Limited autonomous capacity without sustained facilitation

Source: Thematic Analysis, 2026

The contrast between Bone and Maros illustrates the contextual nature of this process. In Bone, implementation was comparatively active but burdened by questionable beneficiary data, too few extension workers, and the wide territorial scope of assistance. Even under those constraints, several villages displayed stronger entrepreneurial action because extension workers could connect commodity mapping, group activation, and village support. Maros showed a different problem constellation. There, the core issue was not simply activity volume but the fit between program design and agroecological conditions, the transparency of coordination, and the accuracy of targeting. Accounts from Maros emphasized the need for data integration, clearer coordination, and a shift from input-heavy intervention toward education and empowerment. Across the three cases, the contrast between Bone and Maros made one

broader point clear: entrepreneurial implementation is more likely when actors possess local diagnostic knowledge, some workable discretionary space, and relational support across institutions.

These findings make three theoretical contributions. First, we extend the policy-capacity literature by showing that analytical, operational, and political capacities are not merely institutional stocks; they are also enacted capacities that depend on situated interpretation and relational work(Howlett, 2015b; Wu et al., 2015). Second, they strengthen the emerging literature on street-level policy entrepreneurship by showing that entrepreneurial practices are not confined to agenda-setting episodes. They also arise during policy delivery when implementers reframe problems, mobilize local resources, and build informal coordination around existing programs(Cohen & Aviram, 2021; Edri-Peer et al., 2023). Third, the findings raise an accountability implication. When implementation depends heavily on discretionary and relational work, evaluation systems focused solely on procedural compliance will miss much of what keeps programs functioning. This supports calls to rethink accountability in ways that better capture the adaptive work of frontline implementation (P. Hill & Hupe, 2013; Hupe & Hill, 2007).

A more balanced interpretation is necessary. Street-level policy entrepreneurship should not be understood as an entirely positive solution to fragmented food-security governance. The same discretionary space that enables frontline actors to correct targeting errors, mobilize village support, and create locally workable arrangements can also generate governance risks. Expanded discretion may produce inconsistent program delivery, unequal treatment of beneficiaries, opaque target adjustment, and excessive dependence on individual extension workers or village officials. These risks become more serious when adaptive practices are not documented, reviewed, or translated into shared procedures. Entrepreneurial discretion therefore has a dual character. It can activate analytical, operational, and political capacity from below, but it can also expose weaknesses in formal accountability systems. The central governance issue is not whether discretion should be removed, but how adaptive discretion can be bounded, recorded, supervised, and institutionalized.

To clarify the central mechanism emerging from the findings, the empirical analysis can be read as a bottom-up process of policy activation. The evidence shows that food-security implementation did not proceed in a linear manner from formal design to field delivery. Instead, implementation was shaped by recurring triggering conditions at the local level, including inaccurate targeting data, mismatch between official categories and household realities, limited personnel, and wide service areas. Under these conditions, frontline actors exercised discretion not merely to cope with implementation pressures, but to adapt policy in ways that made delivery workable in practice. This adaptive work, in turn, activated policy capacity from below by enabling analytical, operational, and political capacities to be enacted through situated field practices. Figure 1 summarizes this process.

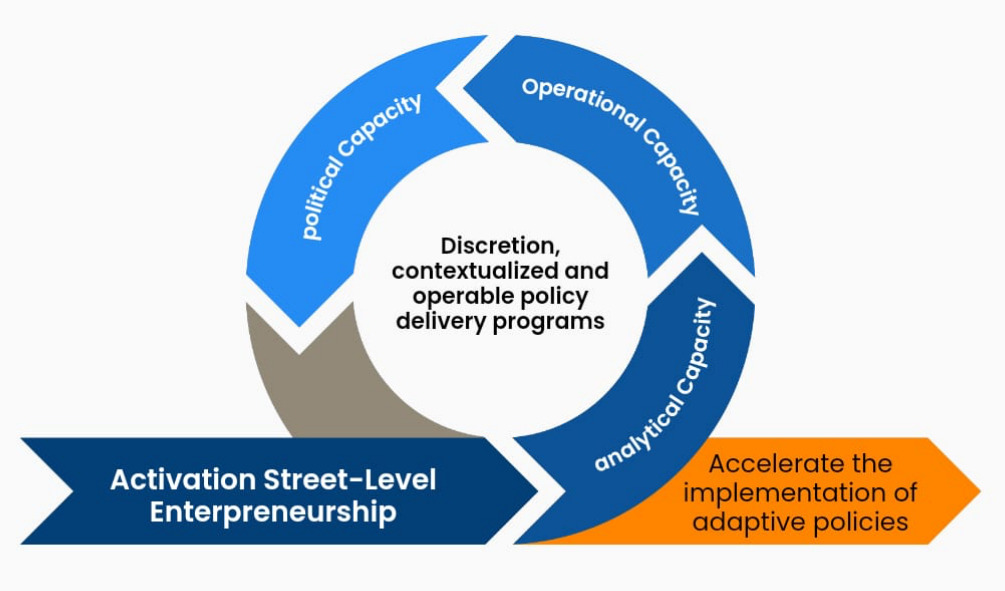


Figure 1: Mechanism of Policy Activation from Below in Decentralized Food Security Governance
Source: Author's Processing

As illustrated in Figure 1, the activation of policy from below follows a sequential yet relational logic. Triggering conditions generate implementation pressures that cannot be resolved through formal rules alone. These pressures open space for street-level discretion, through which frontline actors verify, adjust, and reinterpret policy in relation to concrete local conditions. Discretion then develops into adaptive implementation work when actors translate policy into feasible practices, coordinate informally across institutional boundaries, and align programs with local needs. Through this process, policy capacity is activated not only as a formal institutional resource but also as an enacted capacity embedded in everyday implementation. The outcome is a form of policy delivery that is more context-sensitive, operationally feasible, and socially grounded. The figure therefore reinforces the argument that effective implementation depends not solely on top-down design, but on the adaptive and relational work of frontline actors in the field.

The study has limitations, these findings also raise a sustainability concern. Many entrepreneurial practices depended on personal initiative, local trust, and informal networks. Their continuity cannot be assumed when key extension workers, village officials, or group facilitators are transferred, replaced, or lose local support. Beneficiary re-verification, village-resource alignment, and group mentoring may disappear if these practices remain tacit knowledge rather than institutional routines. This condition qualifies the article's main argument. Street-level policy entrepreneurship can compensate for weaknesses in formal design, but it cannot substitute for institutional capacity. Its long-term value depends on whether local innovations are documented, shared across units, supported by supervision, and incorporated into repeatable administrative procedures. Because it is based on three district cases in one province, the findings support analytical rather than statistical generalization. The study also focuses on implementation processes rather than on longitudinal outcome measurement. Future research could extend the analysis through process tracing, more explicit outcome indicators, or comparative work across provinces and policy sectors. Even so, the present findings demonstrate why food-security implementation cannot be understood solely through formal design. It must also be read through the everyday practices of actors who translate, negotiate, and sometimes reinvent policy on the ground.

CONCLUSION

The article shows that policy capacity is activated from below. Analytical, operational, and political capacities were enacted through target verification, contextual problem diagnosis, mentoring, interorganizational liaison, and local legitimacy-building. However, the productive role of entrepreneurial discretion also carries accountability and sustainability risks. When adaptive practices remain undocumented and dependent on individual initiative, food-security implementation may become uneven across villages and vulnerable to personnel change. Improving local food-security implementation therefore requires more than additional programs or new regulations. It requires better data integration, sufficient extension support, transparent procedures for beneficiary adjustment, peer learning among frontline workers, and village-level institutional backing. For scholarship, the study offers a framework for linking policy capacity to street-level policy entrepreneurship while showing that entrepreneurial discretion must be assessed through both performance and accountability lenses.

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