



The Relationship Between Social Assistance Policy and Recipient Behavior in Poverty Alleviation Programs in Limboto District, Gorontalo Regency

Rini Eka Saputri Oktaviani Paputungan *, Ellys Rachman, Rukiah Nggilu

Postgraduate Bina Taruna University, Indonesia

*Email (corresponding author): riniapaputungan41@gmail.com

Abstract. Poverty remains one of the most persistent development challenges in Gorontalo Regency, where poverty rates have consistently exceeded the national and provincial averages over the past five years. This study examined how social assistance policy and recipient behavior jointly relate to poverty alleviation outcomes in Limboto District. A quantitative survey design was employed, with 99 respondents drawn through proportional random sampling from a population of 920 beneficiaries of the Contribution Assistance Program (PBI) across three villages. Data were collected via Likert-scale questionnaires and analyzed using multiple regression. The results show that social assistance policy accounts for approximately 38.9% of the variance in poverty alleviation outcomes, and recipient behavior accounts for 39.1%, indicating that both variables carry roughly equal weight. When examined together, social assistance policy and recipient behavior jointly explain 41.7% of the variation in poverty alleviation, with the remaining 58.3% attributable to other factors. All three relationships are positive and statistically significant. These findings suggest that effective poverty alleviation cannot rest on policy design alone it also depends on how beneficiaries engage with and respond to the assistance they receive. Strengthening targeting accuracy, ensuring consistent program delivery, and fostering productive recipient behavior are therefore complementary, not competing, priorities.

Keywords: Social Assistance Policy; Recipient Behavior; Poverty Alleviation; Gorontalo; PBI

1. Introduction

Poverty is rarely reducible to a single cause. At its core, it denotes an inability to meet basic needs food, healthcare, education, shelter but its roots extend into low incomes, limited labor market access, poor infrastructure, inadequate capital, and structural disadvantages that compound across generations (Hartomo & Aziz, 2019). In developing countries like Indonesia, these multiple dimensions interact in ways that make poverty both stubborn and, without the right interventions, self-reinforcing.

National poverty data from BPS Indonesia (2023) show that the poverty rate declined from 9.22% in 2019 to 9.36% in 2023 a downward trajectory interrupted only by the COVID-19 shock of 2020, when the figure climbed to 10.19% before gradually recovering. While this overall trend is encouraging, it masks substantial regional disparities. Gorontalo Province has consistently maintained poverty rates well above the national average, and within the province, Kabupaten Gorontalo has ranked among the poorest districts throughout this period.

Table 1. Poverty Rate (%) by Region in Gorontalo Province, 2019–2023						
No.	Region	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
1	Gorontalo Province	15.52	15.22	15.61	15.42	15.15
2	Kota Gorontalo	5.45	5.59	5.93	5.73	5.64
3	Kabupaten Gorontalo	18.06	17.56	17.89	17.71	17.48
4	Kabupaten Boalemo	18.87	18.57	19.00	18.74	18.38
5	Kabupaten Pohuwato	18.16	17.62	18.08	17.87	17.64
6	Kabupaten Bone Bolango	16.12	15.81	16.30	15.05	15.51
7	Kabupaten Gorontalo Utara	16.95	16.88	17.23	17.24	17.03

Source: BPS Indonesia, 2023

As Table 1 shows, Kabupaten Gorontalo's poverty rate has ranged from 17.48% to 18.06% between 2019 and 2023 consistently the third highest in the province, behind only Kabupaten Boalemo and Kabupaten Pohuwato. Within Kabupaten Gorontalo, Limboto District concentrates a significant share of this poverty. Data from BPS (2023) show that the district had 23,184 residents in poverty in 2021, declining to 21,744 by 2023 a reduction, but one that still leaves substantial portions of village populations below the poverty line.

Table 2. Number of Poor Residents by Village in Limboto District, Kabupaten Gorontalo, 2021–2023

No.	Village	2021	2022	2023
1	Tenilo	1,503	1,419	1,372
2	Bolihuangga	2,120	2,078	2,001
3	Hunggaluwa	3,088	2,992	2,857
4	Kayubulan	2,545	2,541	2,518
5	Hepuhulawa	1,512	1,467	1,415
6	Dutulanaa	1,475	1,438	1,380
7	Hutuo	2,473	2,480	2,354
8	Bulota	1,524	1,529	1,418
9	Malahu	575	583	582
10	Biyonga	1,306	1,232	1,126
11	Bongohulawa	1,045	1,005	943
12	Kayumerah	1,043	965	920
13	Polohungo	1,442	1,403	1,341
14	Tilihuwa	1,533	1,544	1,517
	Total	23,184	22,676	21,744

Source: BPS Indonesia, 2023

The Indonesian government has responded to persistent poverty through a range of social assistance programs. In Limboto District, the three principal schemes in operation are the Family Hope Program (PKH), the Non-Cash Food Assistance (BPNT), and the Contribution Assistance Program (PBI). Of these, PBI is by far the most widely received 82% of the 33,152 beneficiaries in the district fall under this scheme (BPS, 2023). The distribution of assistance across the district's villages is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Type and Number of Social Assistance Recipients by Village in Limboto District

No.	Village	PKH	BPNT	PBI	Total	(%)
1	Tenilo	112	225	1,506	1,843	6
2	Boliuangga	198	395	2,647	3,239	10
3	Hunggaluwa	334	667	4,469	5,470	16
4	Kayubulan	115	229	1,536	1,880	6
5	Hepuhulawa	64	128	856	1,048	3
6	Dutulanaa	162	324	2,173	2,659	8
7	Hutuo	292	584	3,914	4,790	14
8	Bulota	94	188	1,260	1,542	5
9	Malahu	37	75	500	611	2
10	Biyonga	86	171	1,145	1,401	4
11	Bongohulawa	63	125	839	1,027	3
12	Kayumerah	317	632	4,238	5,187	16
13	Polohungo	74	147	985	1,206	4
14	Tilihuwa	76	152	1,021	1,250	4
Total		2,024	4,040	27,088	33,152	100
(%)		6	12	82	100	

Source: BPS Indonesia, 2023

Despite the scale of these programs, early observations in Limboto District identified several recurring problems. Assistance frequently failed to reach its intended recipients, with evidence of both inclusion errors households receiving benefits they were not entitled to and exclusion errors genuinely poor households missing from beneficiary lists. Allegations of corruption and nepotism in distribution were not uncommon. At the same time, behavioral observations among recipients raised separate concerns: some households appeared to adopt poverty-mimicking behavior to qualify for assistance; others resisted being removed from beneficiary rolls even after their circumstances improved; and a portion used the assistance for purposes inconsistent with program objectives.

These twin challenges policy design and implementation on one side, recipient behavior on the other frame the central research question of this study: how strongly does each factor relate to poverty alleviation outcomes, and do they operate independently or in combination? Drawing on Winarno's (2017) policy framework, which conceptualizes policy as purposeful action directed toward specified goals, and on behavioral theories of social assistance utilization, this study tests three hypotheses: (H1) social assistance policy is positively and significantly associated with poverty alleviation; (H2) recipient behavior is positively and significantly associated with poverty alleviation; and (H3) social assistance policy and recipient behavior jointly have a positive and significant relationship with poverty alleviation outcomes in Limboto District.

This study also speaks to global development priorities, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), Target 1.3 on implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems for all, and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), Target 10.4 on adopting fiscal, wage, and social protection policies to progressively achieve greater equality. By examining how social assistance policy quality and recipient behavior jointly shape poverty alleviation outcomes, this research offers empirical evidence relevant to strengthening social protection systems and reducing inequality in line with these global commitments.

While previous studies have examined social assistance programs primarily at the national level or focused on a single scheme such as PKH (e.g., Florentin, 2021; Lestari & Talkah, 2020), this study is novel in its comparative attention to three concurrently operating programs PKH, BPNT, and PBI within Limboto District, an under-researched region, and in its simultaneous modeling of both policy quality and recipient behavior as joint predictors of poverty alleviation outcomes. This dual-predictor approach provides context-specific, actionable evidence for program design in similarly under-resourced districts.

2. Methods

This study employs a quantitative survey design. The choice of quantitative methods reflects the research objective: to estimate the strength and direction of relationships between measurable constructs social assistance policy quality, recipient behavior, and poverty alleviation outcomes across a defined population of program beneficiaries.

The study population comprised all PBI (Contribution Assistance Program) recipients in three villages of Limboto District, Kabupaten Gorontalo, totaling 920 individuals. Sample size was determined using the Slovin formula, yielding 99 respondents at a 10% margin of error. Respondents were selected through proportional random sampling, ensuring representation proportional to each village's share of the total beneficiary population.

The study focused exclusively on PBI recipients because this program accounts for the large majority of social assistance beneficiaries in Limboto District (82% of the district's 33,152 recipients, compared to 6% for PKH and 12% for BPNT; see Table 3), making it the most representative single scheme through which to examine the joint influence of policy and behavior on poverty alleviation. Because the sample does not include PKH or BPNT recipients, the findings should not be generalized to those programs without caution; participants in PKH and BPNT may differ in eligibility criteria, conditionalities, and behavioral incentives, which could alter the strength or direction of the relationships identified here.

Data were collected through structured questionnaires employing a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 'Never' = 1 to 'Always' = 5 for positive items, reversed for negative items). The questionnaire covered three constructs: (1) Social Assistance Policy, assessed through items relating to targeting accuracy, program socialization, consistency of delivery, and responsiveness to beneficiary needs; (2) Recipient Behavior, capturing productive use of assistance, compliance with program conditions, and self-improvement orientation; and (3) Poverty Alleviation Outcomes, measured through household-level indicators of economic improvement, reduced dependence on assistance, and increased access to basic services.

Before analysis, instrument validity was confirmed through item-total correlation ($r > 0.30$) and reliability through Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha > 0.70$). Data analysis proceeded in four stages: (1) descriptive statistics to characterize the sample; (2) simple regression to test H1 and H2 individually; (3) multiple regression to test H3; and (4) coefficient of determination (R^2) to quantify the proportion of variance in poverty alleviation explained by each predictor and both together. Statistical processing was performed using SPSS.

Ethical considerations included full anonymity of respondents, voluntary participation, and informed consent obtained prior to questionnaire administration. Data were collected in 2023 with approval from the Bina Taruna University Postgraduate Research Committee.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Relationship Between Social Assistance Policy and Poverty Alleviation (H1)

The regression analysis for the first hypothesis produced a positive and statistically significant relationship between social assistance policy and poverty alleviation outcomes ($p < 0.05$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.389$) indicates that social assistance policy accounts for approximately 38.9% of the variance in poverty alleviation in Limboto District. In practical terms: when social assistance programs are well-designed, accurately targeted, and consistently implemented, measurable improvements in poverty indicators follow. This finding is consistent with H1 and aligns with the broader literature on conditional cash transfers in Indonesia.

Research by Arfandi Rizki Zul (2022) found that social assistance programs in Indonesia collectively reduced poverty by 1.19% and inequality by 0.00561 Gini points in 2018. At the program level, the Study Program Incentive (PIP) showed the largest absolute impact on poverty reduction, while PKH was found to be the most efficient per unit of expenditure. BPNT, by contrast, showed weaker efficiency in reducing poverty, though it remains important for food security. These distinctions are relevant to Limboto District, where PBI dominates the assistance landscape (82% of recipients) and PKH and BPNT together account for only 18%.

The positive coefficient confirms that more effective social assistance policy translates into better poverty alleviation outcomes. However, the interpretation requires care. A policy framework grounded in Winarno (2017) highlights that policy effectiveness depends not only on the initial design but on goal achievement, institutional integrity in implementation, and organizational adaptability over time. At each of these dimensions, the social assistance programs in Limboto face ongoing challenges.

Targeting remains the most frequently cited problem. Wahyuni (2021) documented that in Indonesian districts during the pandemic period, inter-agency coordination was insufficient, data updating was slow, and the resulting mismatch between beneficiary lists and actual poverty conditions allowed both inclusion and exclusion errors to persist. Balqis et al. (2020) found similar discrepancies in a study of BPNT in Banjarnegara: beneficiary data from the central Integrated Welfare Database often did not reflect current on-the-ground conditions. In Limboto, observations at the start of this research identified comparable issues: some households on the beneficiary list no longer met poverty criteria, while genuinely vulnerable families remained unlisted.

The fiscal architecture of social assistance adds another layer of complexity. The Ministry of Finance (Kementerian Keuangan, 2023) has acknowledged that targeting errors represent one of the most significant efficiency losses in the national social protection system. Addressing them requires not just better data, but faster updating cycles, clearer grievance mechanisms, and stronger accountability at the village level. Kusnasari et al. (2021) suggest that machine-learning-based classification of poverty eligibility could improve targeting accuracy substantially. A tool that, while not yet widely deployed in Gorontalo, represents a feasible reform direction.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the overall finding is positive: social assistance policy, when functioning reasonably well, does contribute meaningfully to poverty reduction in Limboto. The gap between what is achievable and what is currently achieved is largely a gap in implementation quality, not in program design per se.

3.2. Relationship Between Recipient Behavior and Poverty Alleviation (H2)

The second hypothesis is also supported. Recipient behavior shows a positive and statistically significant relationship with poverty alleviation outcomes ($R^2 = 0.391$, $p < 0.05$). Notably, the coefficient of determination is marginally higher than that of social assistance policy, suggesting that at least within this sample what recipients do with the assistance they receive carries slightly more explanatory weight than how the policy is structured.

This finding resonates with a recurring tension in the social protection literature: the question of whether assistance programs should prioritize structural change (improving policy) or behavioral change (influencing how recipients respond). The evidence here does not resolve that tension, but it does confirm that both dimensions matter and that recipient agency is not negligible.

Shihab (2020) argues that poverty is partly a consequence of passive attitudes a reluctance to take initiative or seek out productive opportunities. From this perspective, assistance programs that fail to cultivate recipient agency may address immediate material deprivation without tackling the behavioral patterns that sustain poverty over time. Field observations in Limboto District support aspects of this concern: some recipients used assistance primarily for consumption rather than as seed capital for income-generating activities; others resisted data updates that would have removed them from beneficiary lists following household income improvements.

These observations should not be taken as evidence of individual moral failure. Behavior is shaped by context by the information available, the incentives in place, the social norms operating in a community, and the structural opportunities that do or do not exist. Soerjono (2020) reminds us that social control mechanisms norms, values, and community expectations play a foundational role in shaping individual conduct. When those mechanisms are weakened or when community standards around program use are ambiguous, deviant behaviors become more likely.

Hermawan et al. (2021) propose a three-step framework for improving recipient behavior: first, creating enabling conditions that allow community potential to develop; second, strengthening that potential through practical access to resources, training, and institutional support; and third, actively protecting vulnerable recipients from exploitation or structural disadvantage. Applied to Limboto, this framework implies that improving recipient behavior is not simply a matter of behavioral messaging it requires building the capacity and conditions under which productive behavior becomes genuinely possible.

Lestari and Talkah (2020) extend this argument by emphasizing the importance of local institutional capacity: community organizations, cooperative structures, and peer learning networks that translate individual assistance into collective economic activity. Where such institutions are strong, assistance tends to be used more productively; where they are absent, individual behavior tends to be more consumption-oriented. Strengthening these local structures rather than simply policing individual recipient choices appears to be the more sustainable path to behavioral improvement.

3.3. Joint Relationship of Social Assistance Policy and Recipient Behavior with Poverty Alleviation (H3)

When both predictors are entered simultaneously into the regression model, the combined R^2 rises to 0.417 meaning that social assistance policy and recipient behavior together explain 41.7% of the variance in poverty alleviation outcomes. The joint relationship

is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming H3. The remaining 58.3% of variance reflects factors not captured in this study, including macroeconomic conditions, local labor market dynamics, infrastructure quality, and household-level variables such as education and health status.

The fact that the combined R^2 (0.417) is only modestly higher than either individual R^2 (0.389 for policy; 0.391 for behavior) points to meaningful overlap between the two predictors. This is not surprising: the quality of social assistance policy shapes the context within which recipient behavior unfolds. When policies are poorly targeted or erratically delivered, they create perverse incentives dependency behavior, strategic poverty, and resistance to graduation from assistance. Conversely, well-designed programs that include training components and clear graduation pathways tend to produce more productive recipient behavior (Dartanto et al., 2021).

Among the three main social assistance programs operating in Limboto, PKH has consistently shown the strongest impact on poverty reduction at the national level, partly because it is conditional linking cash transfers to health and education behaviors and partly because it explicitly targets the lowest-income deciles. Florentin (2021) found that PKH increased household consumption expenditure by 16% among recipient families. By contrast, BPNT functions primarily as a food security instrument and has a shorter-term horizon. Supit and Lumingkewas (2023) frame conditional cash transfers as investments in human capital that can, over time, break intergenerational poverty cycles particularly when they support school-age children in accessing quality education.

Noerkaisar (2021) and Piliang (2023) both point to the structural dimension of poverty: low human development indices, imperfect markets, and capital constraints create self-reinforcing cycles that require more than one-off transfers to break. Ridha et al. (2021) found that combining social assistance with community-based micro-enterprise support produced stronger poverty alleviation outcomes than assistance alone. This suggests a complementarity between the two approaches that the present study's findings also support: policy and behavior interact, and addressing one while neglecting the other limits overall impact.

Bappenas (2020) identifies three systemic weaknesses that prevent social assistance from reaching its potential: inaccurate and incomplete beneficiary data, administrative bottlenecks that slow disbursement, and a lack of integration between different programs. These structural weaknesses not only reduce program effectiveness directly but also shape recipient behavior indirectly when people experience unpredictable or inequitable distribution, trust in the program erodes and adaptive behaviors (including dependency and strategic manipulation of eligibility criteria) become more common. Fadhli and Nazila (2023) similarly found that program effectiveness depends on three evaluative dimensions: goal attainment, institutional integrity, and organizational adaptability all of which are weaker where data systems and inter-agency coordination are underdeveloped.

The implication is straightforward but not easy to act upon: sustainable poverty alleviation requires a coherent strategy that simultaneously strengthens policy quality and shapes the conditions for productive recipient behavior. Neither can fully compensate for the absence of the other, and neither is sufficient on its own.

This study set out to examine whether social assistance policy and recipient behavior each relate meaningfully to poverty alleviation outcomes in Limboto District, and whether they do so jointly. The evidence, drawn from 99 beneficiaries of the PBI program across three villages, answers all three questions affirmatively.

Social assistance policy explains 38.9% of the variance in poverty alleviation outcomes. Recipient behavior explains 39.1%. Together, they account for 41.7%. Each relationship is positive and statistically significant, meaning that improvements in either dimension are associated with better poverty alleviation outcomes and that improvements in both simultaneously are somewhat more effective than improvements in either alone.

These results carry practical implications for program administrators and policymakers in Kabupaten Gorontalo. On the policy side, the priority should be improving targeting accuracy through more frequent and participatory data updates, reducing administrative delays in disbursement, and strengthening inter-agency coordination between village governments, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and DTKS data managers. On the behavioral side, the focus should not be on punishing unproductive behavior, but on creating the conditions through local capacity building, cooperative support structures, and vocational training linked to assistance programs under which productive behavior becomes the rational default.

The 58.3% of variance not explained by the two predictors in this study is a reminder that social assistance policy and recipient behavior, however important, do not operate in isolation. Macroeconomic conditions, infrastructure, human capital endowments, and community social capital all influence poverty outcomes and must be part of any comprehensive poverty alleviation strategy. Future research would benefit from a mixed-methods approach that combines the statistical patterns identified here with deeper qualitative inquiry into how beneficiaries experience the programs, what shapes their behavioral responses, and which contextual factors most consistently mediate or moderate the policy-behavior-outcome relationship.

Conclusions

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A limitation of this study is that the sample was drawn exclusively from PBI recipients; although PBI represents the dominant social assistance scheme in Limboto District, the

findings may not fully generalize to PKH and BPNT recipients, whose program designs involve different conditionalities and incentive structures.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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