

REVIVING THE ECONOMY OF THE KONAWA COMMUNITY THROUGH THE EASE OF VISA POLICY

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Abstract. *In the administration of President Joko Widodo, downstreaming is a concept that is projected to create jobs and improve the regional economy. In order for downstreaming to succeed, it is necessary to transfer science and technology from foreign investors and workers to the Indonesian people with the support of the ease of visa policy. This research aims to evaluate the role of the current ease of visa policy in facilitating the entry of foreign investment into Indonesia to foster job creation and entrepreneurship. This research was conducted using a qualitative approach; the data collection method used interview techniques and participant observation. The interviews were conducted by selecting respondents from residents living around PT VDNI and local workers and staff representatives from PT VDNI. Participant observations were conducted using the author's experience working as an immigration official, with assignments at home and abroad from 2006 until the present day. Supporting data in the form of official letters related to investor and foreign worker licenses were taken from the local immigration office located in Kendari city. The primary and secondary data obtained were then subjected to reduction, classification, and triangulation processes. The ease of visa policy improves the economies of residents by creating new jobs via foreign investment. The results of this research highlight the effectiveness of implementing ease of visa policies for foreign investors and workers.*

Keywords: *visa policy; immigration visa; community's economy; downstreaming; economic revival.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *vizų politika; imigracinė viza; bendruomeninė ekonomika; „pasroviui“ koncepcija, ekonominis atgimimas.*

Introduction

The Government of Indonesia has established a National Strategic Project policy featuring a downstreaming program. National strategic projects are policies issued by the central government to be implemented at every level of government from central to regional, and include measures addressed towards strategic business entities in order to encourage economic growth and equitable development for the welfare of regional communities (Tri-ramdhani et al. 2020; Setiadi, Nurcahyo, and Farizal 2021; Isvara et al. 2023; Aji and Khudi 2021). The downstreaming program is projected to boost both the national and regional economies (Ragimun and Rosjadi 2020). Downstreaming takes place by reducing raw material exports and requiring domestic industries to be able to provide added value from these raw materials by processing them into semi-finished or finished materials so that, at the same time, jobs for local communities are created (Rumadan 2024; Patunru 2023; Neilson et al. 2020; Daranin et al. 2023; Safriyana et al. 2018; Anas et al. 2022).

Downstreaming has seen Indonesia take on many foreign investors and workers (Husin et al. 2023). For instance, nickel mining and smelter construction in Indonesia involves tens of thousands of people each year. In 2019, the number of workers in this industry reached as high as 21,000, of whom 13% were foreign (Rosada, Wibisana, and Paksi 2023). Furthermore, based on data retrieved from the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, PT Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park (IMIP) in Central Sulawesi recorded 11,000 foreign workers in September 2023, while PT Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry (VDNI) and PT Obsidian Stainless Steel (OSS) in Southeast Sulawesi employ more than 2,000 foreign workers annually.

The regulation and supervision of foreign workers are closely related to visa policy in Indonesia, as visa policies specifically regulate the movement of foreigners within a country's borders (Czaika, Erdal, and Talleraas 2023; Ostrand and Statham 2022). The supervision of foreign workers is carried out under the government's authority to regulate the mobility of foreigners and benefit from their activities (Burnett and Chebe 2020). At the micro level, the more foreign investment, the more benefits obtained by the community due to their work, with the emergence of various business fields (Hafiluddin, Patunru, and Patunru 2022).

In response to the benefits of foreign investment, the Directorate General of Immigration issued an ease of visa policy, including an electronic visa with a faster and more accurate application process. Ease of visa policies can also raise the pace of innovation

and economic performance in the private sector (Capoani, Chabert, and Izzo 2024). The Directorate General of Immigration has thus made a breakthrough in the effort to ease the issuance of electronic visas for foreigners. This visa effectively cuts the bureaucracy of visa processing from several stages to just one stage through an online service directly connected to the visa department at the Directorate General of Immigration. This shows the strategic role of Indonesian immigration in supporting national economic policy (Grundy-Warr, Peachey, and Perry 1999).

However, the impact of the ease of visa policy for foreigners on local communities is not yet clear. Thus far, visa facilities have been synonymous with various facilities providing ease of entry permits for those seeking to enter Indonesia, intended for foreign investors and business partners in the country (Sumadinata, Achmad, and Riyadi 2022). President Joko Widodo has often emphasized in various state meetings the importance of attracting foreign investment with ease of business licensing, including regarding immigration. Especially in the field of visa policy, the President wants the visa approval process for foreign investors and workers to be accelerated so as not to hinder other business processes. In addition to electronic visas, Indonesia has issued a new policy on visa convenience in the form of the Golden Visa, which provides many incentives for large investors ranging from long-stay permits lasting from 5 to 10 years to the right to own property and other assets in Indonesia (Bahri 2023).

On the other hand, the reduced role and lack of involvement of local communities in forming immigration policy is the main reason why the impact of immigration policy on residents is often overlooked. Today, it can be observed that immigration policy has always favored the upper classes closer to the center of power. Previous research conducted by Napatipulu et al. (2020) shows negative sentiment regarding the presence of foreign workers in Southeast Sulawesi. While the aforementioned research only focused on exploring local people's perceptions of foreign workers in the region, this paper focuses more on the economic impact of ease of visa policies on the local community. This serves to illustrate the context of this study.

The downstreaming program is a clear example of how the central government's target of boosting the national economy requires a reformulation of immigration policy that is more accommodative and responsive to the needs of foreign investors and workers (Anas et al. 2022; Patunru 2023). Local communities, such as those in Konawe, Southeast Sulawesi, do not fully understand the role and function of immigration institutions; they only know that the function of immigration is limited to making passports for them to use to work as informal workers abroad. When PT VDNI was established as a government-appointed partner to execute the nickel downstreaming program, some local communities only saw the welcoming of many foreigners as a threat to their welfare. Others enjoy regional economic growth through the emergence of various new business units and jobs, such as house rentals, restaurants, health clinics, transportation services, and the provision of goods and services needed by PT VDNI.

As described above, this phenomenon cannot be separated from the role of immigration institutions that have failed to focus on educating and reaching the communities of the regions. Education is essential in order to open the mindsets of residents regarding the potential of the ease of visa policy as a welfare-enhancing system that can positively impact the emergence of new economic activities that previously did not exist (Czaika and Neumayer 2017; Neumayer 2010; 2006; 2004).

This research is therefore fundamental, considering that ease of visa policies positively impact the growth of local communities' economic activities. In addition, this research helps understand the public perspective that arises from the impact of implementing an ease of visa policy.

Research Method

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach; the data collection method used interview techniques and participant observation. The interviews were conducted by selecting respondents from residents living around PT VDNI and local workers and staff representatives from PT VDNI. Participant observations were conducted using the author's experience working as an immigration official from 2006 until the present day, with assignments at home and abroad.

Supporting data in the form of official letters related to investor and foreign worker licenses were taken from the local immigration office located in Kendari City. Furthermore, the primary and secondary data were subjected to the reduction, classification, and triangulation stages. The data collection period was 2021 to 2023.

Results and Discussion

In-depth interviews were conducted with six respondents, including a local who works to supply sand to a foreign company as a community representative with lower income. Two respondents, one of whom owns a restaurant and the other owns a rental property, served as representatives of the community with middle income. Two employees of PT VDNI and an immigration official at the Kendari Class I Immigration Office were also consulted.

An interview guide was created, which is beneficial in describing the experiences and understanding of informants regarding the effectiveness of the ease of immigration policy in supporting downstream programs in Konawe. The results of the in-depth interviews were then analyzed to identify similar patterns in statements and thoughts on the policy. Data reduction and grouping was based on what informants had experienced and understood.

Data were grouped into four critical aspects, namely: the process of rational public policy formulation; public participation in the implementation of public policies; public acceptance of policies and their contribution to welfare; and the socialization of immigration visa facilities for investors and foreign workers involved in the downstreaming program. From the results of this grouping, three major themes emerged: understanding the economic conditions of residents before and after the downstreaming program in Konawe; the value of community experience and expectations of the downstreaming program in Konawe; and the excellent impact of government interaction with the community in implementing the ease of immigration policy in the downstreaming program in Konawe.

The first theme – understanding the economic conditions of residents before and after the downstreaming program in Konawe – illustrates the awareness of the Konawe community regarding the improvement of the condition of residents' economic activities after the implementation of the downstreaming program with the entry of foreign investment and workers through PT VDNI. According to the statements of respondents, key to this theme were the construction of asphalt and concrete roads for access to company sites from villages, planning for the construction of schools and scholarships as well as health and clean water facilities for local workers, and other economic benefits such as the proliferation of boarding houses and restaurants along the road to the mining site.

A sand supplier observed that the condition of the community after the nickel mining project is very different from how it was before. With the entry of foreign companies here, the supplier has experienced increased demand for sand shipments, reaching 30 trucks daily. Before, although there was a company here, demand was sometimes as low as just one truck per day. Many people now work with the supplier, even though they also work in the mining company, and there are even some members of the Indonesian Army and Police, as well as village officials, who have started sand shipping businesses.

Similarly, a restaurant owner near the mine observed the same phenomenon: in the past, this area of the village was a forest, and very few residents wanted to live there. After the nickel company arrived, this place became lively, and the respondent's restaurant was the first to exist near the mine. The monthly turnover of the restaurant can be as high as hundreds of millions of IDR (1 USD = ~16,000 IDR) from the employees in this company who work from morning to night.

One PT VDNI employee confirmed this, stating that they were not from the local village. They first came here because of a call to work on clearing land to build this mine, before becoming an employee. The conditions after the existence of this mine are very different from before. According to the respondent, residents derive significant economic benefits because of land acquisition, and many have opened businesses and provide services to meet the needs of the workers here.

A statement that strengthens this fact was also conveyed by an immigration official from the Kendari Class I Immigration Office, who explicitly stated that before the existence of this nickel mine, many residents worked as sand miners, earning an average of 50,000

IDR per day and often looking for work outside the Konawe area. After the mine was established, residents were guaranteed jobs and increased their income. As a result, residents built small stalls selling household appliances, making this a small-scale economic area. In addition, the construction of housing/boarding houses for mine workers is increasingly rife, and many other regional residents come to the area to earn an income.

The second theme – the value of community experience and expectations of the downstream program in Konawe – includes the importance of the experience felt by the Konawe community regarding the existence of the downstream program and what interactions occur within it. The experiences of citizens interacting with companies and the government were uncovered through interviews and the observations of companies and local settlements. Residents' knowledge of the company's future development plans has brought new hope and enthusiasm to the people of Konawe. The respondents appreciate these plans because they benefit from them, improving their family's economic standing and making them proud of their region both nationally and internationally.

However, the jealousy of some parties who are not positively affected often provokes several actions against the sustainability of the downstream program by involving masses from outside the Konawe area. The community around the project stated that the existence of nickel companies and foreign workers should not be politicized for particular interests because the Konawe community did not reject or demonstrate against these phenomena. One local community leader said that several demonstrations had been carried out by residents from outside the Konawe district pitting local workers against foreign workers at the mining company.

The final theme – the excellent impact of government interaction with the community in implementing ease of immigration policies in the downstream program in Konawe – highlights the positive impact on the surrounding community that has been created by establishing communication with the government regarding the implementation of policy in the region. The Konawe community highly appreciates the efforts of the local government; in this case, districts, sub-districts, villages, and immigration institutions have provided explanations on all matters related to this downstream program, including immigration facilities and services for foreign workers. The essence of this theme is the benefits that stem from the development of a participatory culture that emphasizes the involvement of policy-affected communities in implementing policies that concern many people's lives.

People will remember how the government consulted them in order to determine important matters concerning their welfare. They will be motivated to be more involved in the economic development of their area and will eventually feel connected to the company and the local government. This is evidenced by the willingness of a rental property entrepreneur to give up four hectares of land to be used for an access road from the village to the mine, provided that all of his children were accepted as employees at the company.

In addition, the owner of a restaurant close to the mine also highlighted positive interactions, reporting that their relationship with the village and sub-district government was

no problem. Many village and sub-district employees have opened businesses due to the existence of this project, and those who do not approve of the company are generally from outside the territory. This form of interaction will significantly impact the region's economic progress in the future. Therefore, this phenomenon is expected to form a good public perception of similar government programs and policies.

The impact of the ease of visa policy, which the local community has not felt, is likely more caused by the lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the strategic role of immigration institutions in supporting every effort from the central and regional governments to stimulate local economies. According to the statements made by the spokesperson from the Directorate General of Immigration, its office's representative in each region must be more active and educative in explaining the role and function of immigration. This is important because national news often shows the negative aspects of foreigners working in downstreaming projects, including in Konawe. Issues regarding the wage gap and local sentiment are often used as a subject of protest and debate by certain groups that oppose the downstreaming program.

On the one hand, the concept of a policy being evidence-based can be used as an instrument to ensure its usefulness. This concept involves analyzing a policy through three lenses: political judgment, professional practice, and scientific research (Head 2008, 2013). From the political perspective, it is clear that the downstreaming program of the Joko Widodo regime is its main policy direction. The reality of professional practice on the ground proves that the existence of this program, with the support of the ease of visa policy, drives the economic activity of residents. Finally, from the academic perspective, this paper demonstrates how the ease of visa policies contributes to the growth of employment and entrepreneurship in local communities.

On the other hand, local communities' reduced role and lack of involvement in formulating immigration policies is also one of the causes of limited community insight in the regions. The central government, through its supporting agencies such as the Directorate General of Immigration and its representative offices, can liaise with residents before ratifying an immigration policy. In the future, feedback from people affected by the policy will then be a valuable consideration when facing the rejection of a new immigration policy and increasing its usefulness so that the community understands it and feels its benefit. In a democratic society, everyone must see public policies as representing a consensus between public service providers and the people, as service receivers (J. V. Denhardt and Denhardt 2007, 2015; R. B. Denhardt and Denhardt 2000).

It is time for Indonesia's immigration institution to abandon old patterns in carrying out its duties as a public servant. These old patterns include excessive emphasis on the hierarchical system of power, authority that is too narrow and compartmentalized, and rigid managerial practices. Of course, foreign investors will not be suitable sources of such immigration service mechanisms. In the modern era, society is more in need of public sector managerial patterns with flexible, adaptive, consensual policies (Hsieh and Liou 2018;

Entwistle and Martin 2005; Kekez, Howlett, and Ramesh 2018; Eriksson et al. 2020).

Away from the policy-making area, the lack of public awareness regarding the impact of an immigration policy is also caused by the limitations of the regional community itself. Most people in Konawe only attend elementary school, experiencing all of the limitations surrounding road and building infrastructure and supporting facilities such as water, electricity, and access to technology. The multiplier effect of the ease of visa policy has brought significant outcomes to the lives of these residents. Hence, immigration policies play a decisive role in rural economic development.

The welfare approach used as the basis for the implementation of the ease of visa policy has not been fully understood by the Konawe community. The missing link stems not only from the two internal and external factors mentioned above, but also from the communication pattern of the local immigration office, which does not touch on the sustainable benefit of implementing the immigration policy. While the ease of visa scheme is beneficial for foreign investors and workers, local people also indirectly enjoy it in the form of job creation and various new business possibilities.

Conclusions

- The findings of this study suggest a favorable correlation between the implementation of the ease of visa policy and its resultant positive impact on the local community's economy.
- The influx of foreign workers under the ease of visa policy serves as a catalyst for economic growth within the region, primarily through the creation of employment opportunities and the transfer of technological knowledge.
- Consequently, the infusion of foreign labor not only addresses local labor demands, but also enhances the productivity and innovation capacity of the indigenous workforce.
- These observations underscore the significance of informed policy decisions in fostering regional development. As such, this research holds implications for the formulation and refinement of future visa policies aimed at promoting economic prosperity at the local level.
- Nonetheless, it is necessary to highlight a limitation of this study, wherein the examination of the per capita income of the Konawe community before and after the implementation of the downstreaming program remains unexplored. This aspect warrants further investigation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socioeconomic implications of such initiatives on the local populace.

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KONAVĖS BENDRUOMENĖS (INDONEZIJA) EKONOMIKOS GAIVINIMAS TAIKANT PAPRASTĄ VIZŲ POLITIKĄ

Anotacija. Indonezijos prezidento Joko Widodo administracijoje vystoma ir įgyvendinama koncepcija „pasroviui“, kuri, tikimasi, sukurs darbo vietas ir pagerins žmonių ekonominį gyvenimą regionuose. Norint sėkmingai dirbti būtina, kad mokslas ir technologijų pasiekimai bei patirtys būtų perimami iš užsienio investuotojų ir suteikiami naudotis Indonezijos žmonėms, todėl turi būti remiama vizų režimo supaprastinimo politika. Šiuo tyrimu siekiama įvertinti dabartinę vizų režimo supaprastinimo politiką, palengvinančią užsienio investicijų patekimą, naujų darbo vietų kūrimą ir verslumą. Šis tyrimas buvo atliktas taikant kokybinį metodą, duomenų rinkimo metodą, interviu metodą ir dalyvių stebėjimą. Pokalbis buvo atliktas atrinkus gyventojus, gyvenančius aplink PT VDNI, ir vietinius darbuotojus bei personalo atstovus iš PT VDNI. Dalyvių stebėjimai buvo atlikti atsižvelgiant į autorius kaip imigracijos pareigūno, dirbusio Indonezijoje ir užsienyje, patirtį nuo 2006 m. iki dabar. Patvirtinantys duomenys iš oficialių laiškų, susijusių su investuotojų ir užsienio darbuotojų licencijomis, yra paimti iš vietinės imigracijos tarnybos, esančios Kendari mieste. Be to, gauti pirminiai ir antriniai duomenys praėjo redukavimo, klasifikavimo ir trianguliacijos etapus. Supaprastinta vizų politika užsienio investicijų atžvilgiu gerina gyventojų ekonominį gyvenimą, nes sukuria naujų darbo vietų. Šio tyrimo rezultatai palaiiko teiginį, kad vizų supaprastinimo politikos įgyvendinimo efektyvumas padeda užsienio investuotojams ir darbuotojams.

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