

The Role of Organizational Culture in Tackling Stunting in Indonesia

Isa Mulatif^{1*}, Des Hanafi²

¹Magister Ilmu Komunikasi, Universitas Al Azhar Indonesia, Indonesia, 0803624017@student.uai.ac.id

²Magister Ilmu Komunikasi, Universitas Al Azhar Indonesia, Indonesia, des.hanafi@uai.ac.id

*Penulis korespondensi, email: 0803624017@student.uai.ac.id

Abstract—This article examines the application of the Cultural Approach to Organizations in addressing stunting cases in Indonesia, focusing on five regions with high prevalence: East Nusa Tenggara, West Sulawesi, Papua, West Papua, and Central Kalimantan. Using a qualitative method that integrates literature review, field observations, and interviews reported in prior studies, the research identifies how local cultural beliefs, traditional rituals, and social norms significantly shape child nutrition and health practices. The findings reveal that early introduction of solid foods, gender-based decision-making, and symbolic food rituals often conflict with recommended health guidelines, contributing to persistent stunting. The study highlights the need for culturally grounded interventions, recommending strategies such as community-based education, involvement of religious and community leaders, culturally adapted nutrition programs, improved healthcare logistics, and multisectoral collaboration. By aligning health initiatives with local cultural systems—including shared meanings, symbols, stories, and rituals—interventions are more likely to be accepted and sustained by local communities. This article contributes both theoretically to the development of the Cultural Approach in public health contexts and practically to policy design for culturally appropriate stunting prevention programs. The study recommends a strategic, inclusive framework to reduce stunting rates by integrating cultural understanding into public health communication and implementation.

Keywords: *Cultural Approach to Organizations, stunting, local culture, cultural intervention, Indonesia.*

This article is licensed under the [CC-BY-SA](#) license.

1. Introduction

Stunting is a condition in which a child's height is significantly below the standard appropriate for their age, primarily caused by chronic malnutrition, repeated infections, and a lack of psychosocial stimulation. As part of the global development agenda, stunting is directly related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 2: Zero Hunger, which emphasizes the elimination of hunger, the achievement of food security and improved nutrition, and the promotion of sustainable agriculture. This goal is illustrated in Figure 1 and further detailed in Figure 2, which outlines the commitment to ensuring year-round access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food, particularly for vulnerable populations (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal2>).

In Indonesia, stunting remains a pressing public health issue affecting millions of children. According to UNICEF, around 27.7% of Indonesian children were stunted in 2022 [1]. This condition not only hinders physical growth but also impairs cognitive development, negatively impacting future learning capacity and

productivity. Moreover, stunting elevates the risk of chronic illnesses later in life, diminishing quality of life and adding economic burdens to families and society at large [2], [3].

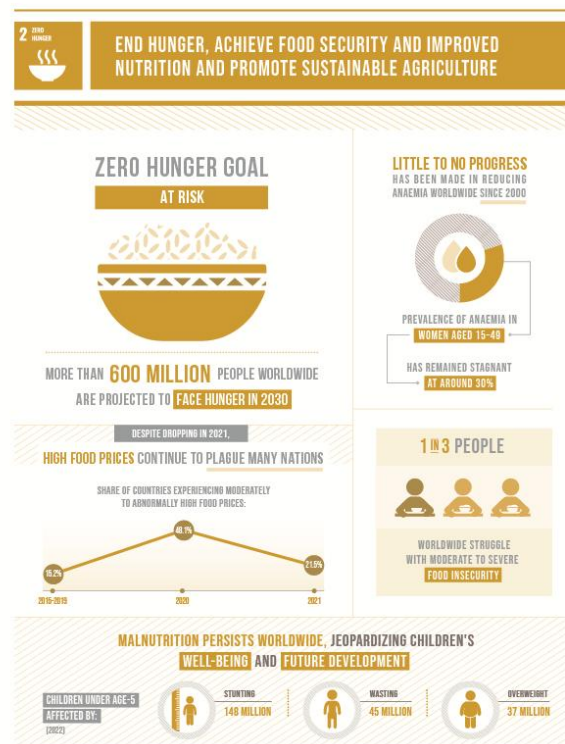
Addressing stunting in Indonesia necessitates culturally responsive strategies. Cultural norms, values, and social practices within communities profoundly influence child nutrition and health [4], [5], [6]. For instance, traditional beliefs about feeding practices and gender roles in household food distribution can either support or hinder adequate nutrition. Therefore, understanding local cultural contexts is essential in designing effective, community-accepted interventions [7], [8].

This article addresses two key questions: (1) how can a cultural approach be employed to reduce stunting in Indonesia, and (2) what are the challenges in implementing culturally grounded stunting interventions? To explore these questions, the article applies the Cultural Approach to Organizations framework and evaluates its relevance in public health initiatives targeting stunting reduction. The objectives of this study are to analyze how this cultural approach is utilized in tackling stunting and to identify strategies that can be effectively applied through this perspective.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS REPORT 2023: SPECIAL EDITION- UNSTATS.UN.ORG/SDGS/REPORT/2023/

Figure 2. SDG Goal 2: Zero Hunger

Theoretically, the article contributes to the advancement of the Cultural Approach to Organizations [9], [10] by demonstrating how the theory can be applied in public health contexts, specifically in addressing child stunting. It expands the academic discourse on the intersection of organizational culture and public health, offering fresh insights into how cultural norms and practices affect health outcomes. By deepening our understanding of cultural determinants in stunting, this article supports the development of more comprehensive theoretical and methodological frameworks in public health and organizational communication.

Practically, the findings provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, NGOs, and local communities in implementing culturally relevant stunting prevention programs. Such programs can leverage community leaders and religious figures to disseminate messages on child nutrition and health, ensuring greater community acceptance. Furthermore, education and empowerment of mothers in line with local cultural practices can enhance program impact. Ultimately, this article seeks to offer strategies that are not only technically sound but also culturally appropriate, thereby improving the success of stunting interventions in Indonesia.

2. Method

This article applies the Cultural Approach to Organizations, a theory developed by Clifford Geertz [9] and Michael Pacanowsky [10], which views organizations and communities as complex cultural systems shaped by shared norms, values, and social practices. This approach emphasizes communication as a central element in constructing and maintaining organizational culture [10]. The theory comprises several key components: shared meaning systems, the use of symbols and stories, rituals and practices, and established norms and values. These components help explain how cultural dynamics influence organizational behavior and, in the context of this study, how they impact child health and nutrition outcomes [4], [5].

The core concepts analyzed in this article include the cultural approach itself—used to understand how local beliefs and social interactions influence behaviors—and the application of this approach to stunting prevention. In the context of stunting, culture shapes feeding practices, health behaviors, and the acceptance of public health interventions [4], [7]. Stunting, defined as a condition where a child's height is significantly below age standards, often results from chronic malnutrition and environmental factors [2], [3], [11]. In Indonesia, the persistence of stunting requires culturally sensitive strategies to ensure interventions resonate with local values and are effectively adopted [1], [12].

To guide this research, a conceptual framework was developed, as illustrated in Figure 3. The framework begins with the identification of the stunting problem and cultural factors affecting child nutrition and care [2], [3], [4]. It then analyzes community cultural components based on the theoretical model, including shared meanings, stories, rituals, and values [9], [10]. Following this, culturally tailored intervention strategies are proposed, focusing on community education, norm shifts, and reinforcement of health-supportive practices [4], [6], [8]. Finally, implementation and evaluation steps are outlined, assessing changes in behavior, child nutrition improvements, and reductions in stunting prevalence.



Figure 3. Conceptual Framework based on the Cultural Approach to Organizations

Table 1. Stunting Prevalence in Five Provinces (2019–2023) [11], [12], [13]

Province	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
East Nusa Tenggara	0.152	0.149	0.147	0.146	0.148
West Sulawesi	0.241	0.237	0.235	0.233	0.239
Papua	0.089	0.088	0.087	0.086	0.087
West Papua	0.091	0.09	0.089	0.088	0.093
Central Kalimantan	0.113	0.112	0.111	0.11	0.111

The data used in this article includes both secondary and primary sources. Secondary data were collected from government reports, academic publications, NGO documents, and statistical data from UNICEF and WHO [11], [12], [13]. Primary data were derived from previously published field research, including in-depth interviews with mothers of young children, healthcare workers, community leaders, and religious figures, as well as direct observations of feeding practices and posyandu (community health post) activities. These include interviews conducted with healthcare workers in NTT (2023) [16] and observations at posyandu events in West Sulawesi (2023) [17].

A literature review supported the contextual and theoretical grounding of the study. Relevant works include research on cultural influences on child nutrition [5] and foundational theories of culture by Geertz [9], which frame how communities generate shared meanings. The article focuses on the five-year period between 2019 and 2023 to analyze longitudinal patterns in stunting prevalence and the outcomes of various intervention strategies. During this period, the study conducted a four-stage process: (1) collecting and analyzing annual reports and national health data [11], [12], [13]; (2) synthesizing results from field-based studies between 2019 and 2023 [16], [17]; (3) identifying cultural themes and behavioral patterns related to stunting; and (4) preparing a comprehensive analysis and recommendation plan based on the findings.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study, derived from field observations and interview data, reveal the strong influence of local cultural practices on stunting prevalence in five Indonesian provinces: East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), West Sulawesi, Papua, West Papua, and Central Kalimantan. In NTT, the early introduction of solid foods to infants is a common practice, driven by the belief that early feeding accelerates physical strength. However, such practices often disregard established health recommendations and result in nutrient-deficient diets that fail to meet children’s developmental needs. In West Sulawesi, traditional rituals dictate the type of food offered to children during ceremonial events. For example, infants are given specific foods believed to protect them from spiritual harm, despite the lack of nutritional value. In Papua and West Papua, access to nutritious food and basic health services is hindered by geographic isolation and underdeveloped infrastructure. Many rural communities rely on low-nutrition staples such as sago and salted fish, which do not support optimal child growth [18]. Meanwhile, in Central Kalimantan, patriarchal social norms limit the role of women in household decision-making regarding nutrition. Often, male heads of families determine what children eat, regardless of the mother’s knowledge of nutritional balance and child development needs [19].

These region-specific observations were categorized using the components of the Cultural Approach to Organizations, which provides a framework for understanding the cultural dimensions of health behavior [9], [10]. In terms of the shared meaning system, communities like those in NTT collectively believe that early weaning and solid food introduction improve growth, despite medical evidence to the contrary. Symbols and stories, especially in West Sulawesi, reinforce cultural beliefs around ritual feeding and traditional customs. Rituals and daily practices, such as those in Papua, often prioritize culturally significant foods over balanced diets. Finally, norms and values—particularly patriarchal structures in

Central Kalimantan—shape who holds authority over food choices, thus influencing children’s nutritional intake.

The overall finding from this analysis is that cultural beliefs, rituals, and social structures have a significant impact on stunting in children. These cultural elements shape community responses to public health interventions and must therefore be considered in the design and implementation of any strategy aimed at reducing stunting. The use of the Cultural Approach to Organizations helps identify how cultural systems—comprising communication, shared understanding, and symbolic practices—influence behaviors related to nutrition and child care [4], [6].

This discussion supports the relevance of using cultural perspectives to inform health interventions, especially when addressing complex issues such as stunting. The theory advanced by Geertz and Pacanowsky highlights that interventions which align with cultural logic are more likely to be accepted by communities [9], [10]. In NTT, for instance, education campaigns could use traditional storytelling methods to communicate modern health knowledge in culturally acceptable ways. In West Sulawesi, religious and community leaders might adapt symbolic rituals to reinforce healthy nutrition practices. In Papua and West Papua, addressing geographic and logistical challenges requires mobile health services and local food innovation. In Central Kalimantan, empowering women with culturally grounded health education may help shift patriarchal norms that restrict maternal influence on child nutrition.

The findings of this study also contribute to the global discourse on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 2: Zero Hunger. This goal seeks to end hunger and ensure access to nutritious food for all people, especially vulnerable populations such as infants and young children [14]. Addressing stunting through culturally informed approaches aligns with the SDG target of eliminating malnutrition and achieving measurable improvements in child health outcomes.

Supporting literature further emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity in health programs. Geertz’s (1973) foundational work on culture in organizations [9], Smith and Doe’s (2022) study on cultural influences on child nutrition [5], and Anderson and Brown’s (2020) findings on community-based health interventions [6] all underscore the need to integrate cultural knowledge into health strategies. White and Green (2019) found that involving local leaders in nutrition education significantly improved children’s food intake in rural areas [8], demonstrating the practical value of culturally embedded programs.

To enhance the effectiveness of stunting interventions, this study proposes several culturally oriented strategies. Community education and empowerment are crucial and should involve respected local leaders and religious figures in nutrition awareness campaigns. Interventions must be adapted to cultural contexts—for example, using traditional narratives and symbolism to convey messages about balanced diets. Health workers and posyandu volunteers must also receive training in cultural sensitivity to better engage with communities. Logistical innovations such as mobile health units and nutrition apps can improve service accessibility in remote areas. Finally, multi-sectoral collaboration is needed, involving agriculture, education, and health sectors to ensure an integrated and sustainable response to stunting. By respecting and incorporating local culture into health strategies, public health programs can become more effective, inclusive, and resilient.

3. Conclusion

This article analyzed the application of the Cultural Approach to Organizations [9], [10] in addressing stunting in five Indonesian provinces with high prevalence: East Nusa Tenggara, West Sulawesi, Papua, West Papua, and Central Kalimantan. The study found that local cultural beliefs and practices significantly influence feeding behavior and child healthcare, which in turn impact stunting rates. Elements such as traditional rituals, shared beliefs, and gender norms shape how communities perceive

and manage child nutrition. Recognizing these cultural dimensions is essential for the design of effective stunting reduction programs. Interventions that are culturally aligned are more likely to be accepted and sustained by local communities. Therefore, by incorporating cultural insights into program planning and implementation, public health efforts can achieve higher levels of community engagement and intervention success in reducing stunting in Indonesia.

References

- [1] UNICEF Indonesia, *Laporan Tahunan UNICEF Indonesia 2022*, Jakarta, Indonesia: UNICEF, 2022.
- [2] R. Fitri, N. Huljannah, and T. N. Rochmah, "Program Pencegahan Stunting di Indonesia: Systematic Review," *Jurnal Media Gizi Indonesia*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 171–185, 2022.
- [3] H. Rahman, M. Rahmah, and N. Saribulan, "Upaya Penanganan Stunting di Indonesia: Analisis Bibliometrik dan Konten," *Jurnal Khatulistiwa*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 158–172, 2023.
- [4] D. Lestari and R. Wijaya, "Implementasi Pendekatan Budaya dalam Program Penanganan Stunting di Pedesaan," *Jurnal Gizi dan Pembangunan*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 89–98, 2019.
- [5] J. Smith and A. Doe, "Cultural Influences on Child Nutrition," *Journal of Public Health*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 245–260, 2022.
- [6] B. Anderson and T. Brown, "Effective Health Interventions in Culturally Diverse Communities," *Global Health Review*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 311–328, 2020.
- [7] S. Suryanto, "Analisis Pengaruh Budaya Lokal terhadap Kesehatan Anak di Indonesia," *Jurnal Kesehatan Masyarakat Indonesia*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 123–135, 2020.
- [8] P. White and C. Green, "Community-Based Nutrition Education Programs: A Comparative Study," *International Journal of Nutrition and Health*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 182–195, 2019.
- [9] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- [10] M. Pacanowsky and N. O'Donnell-Trujillo, "Organizational Communication as Cultural Performance," *Communication Monographs*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 126–142, 1983.
- [11] World Health Organization (WHO), *Global Nutrition Report*. Geneva, 2023.
- [12] UNICEF, *State of the World's Children Report*. New York, 2023.
- [13] Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, *Laporan Tahunan Kesehatan Indonesia*. Jakarta, 2023.
- [14] United Nations, *Sustainable Development Goals*, Accessed: Jun. 18, 2025.
- [15] M. A. Sugianto, "Analisis Kebijakan Pencegahan dan Penanggulangan Stunting di Indonesia," *Jurnal Ekonomi, Manajemen, Bisnis, dan Sosial*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 197–209, 2021.
- [16] S. Suropto, T. Keban, and S. Pamungkas, "Indigeneous Public Administration: A Review and Deconstruction of the Idea, Concept, and Theory of Government and Governance," *Jurnal Borneo Administrator*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 305–318, 2021, doi: 10.24258/jba.v17i3.932.
- [17] F. Siddik, *Optimalisasi Program Penanganan Stunting oleh Dinas Kesehatan Kabupaten Majene Provinsi Sulawesi Barat*, Tesis, Institut Pemerintahan Dalam Negeri, Jan. 2024.
- [18] B. F. Wenno, *Implementasi Program Bapak Bunda Asuh Anak Stunting dalam Penanganan Stunting di Kabupaten Kepulauan Yapen Provinsi Papua*, Tesis, Institut Pemerintahan Dalam Negeri, Jatinangor, Indonesia, 2025.
- [19] N. K. Komara, C. Chuchita, E. Oksal, and Z. Pereiz, "Peningkatan Pengetahuan Stunting pada Ibu di Posyandu Kelurahan Habaring Hurung Palangka Raya," *Martabe: Jurnal Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat*, vol. 7, no. 7, 2024.