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Formation of Strategic Provinces on Maritime Borders: A Political Economy Analysis of Natuna-Anambas Proposal

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ABSTRACT

Natuna and Anambas regions occupy a strategic position in Indonesia's maritime border zone and have been prioritized through their inclusion in the National Strategic Project (PSN) agenda. However, despite this recognition, both regions remain highly dependent on central fiscal transfers and are vulnerable to global economic fluctuations, reflecting weak local revenue generation and institutional capacity. This study aims to analyze the potential of establishing the Natuna Anambas as a strategy to strengthen fiscal independence and enhance regional economic governance. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, supported by fiscal policy and political economy analysis, this research draws on secondary data from regional financial reports, BPS statistics, and relevant literature on decentralization and fiscal federalism. The findings reveal that over 70% of regional revenues rely on central transfers, while locally generated income remains below 10%, leading to fiscal fragility and stagnating economic growth. The benefits of national strategic projects have not been equitably distributed due to limited local participation and weak institutional coordination. The study concludes that the proposed formation of a new province can only succeed if accompanied by comprehensive reforms in fiscal management, transparent DBH allocation, institutional strengthening, and diversification beyond extractive industries. The findings highlight the necessity of a multi-level governance framework that aligns national strategic objectives with local needs to promote fiscal autonomy, inclusivity, and sustainable development in Indonesia's maritime border regions.

Keywords: Fiscal Independence, Decentralization, Political Economy, National Strategic

INTRODUCTION

The Natuna and Anambas Islands, located in the northern region of Riau Islands Province, Indonesia, occupy a very strategic position geopolitically and geoeconomically. Their location in the international shipping lane of the North Natuna Sea makes them important not only for national economic interests, but also for national defense and sovereignty. The Indonesian government has affirmed the importance of this region through various regulations, such as Presidential Regulation No. 41 of 2022 which establishes Natuna-Anambas as part of the National Strategic Area (KSN), as well as Presidential Regulation No. 12 of 2025 concerning RPJMN 2025-2029 which includes this region in the list of 77 National Strategic Projects (PSN). This region is projected as a border defense center, Geopark-based energy area, and national blue economy center. However, the strategic recognition from the central government has not been fully reflected in local socio-economic conditions. A glaring

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gap exists between the national development agenda and the region's ability to manage resources and generate growth.

Despite the potential of natural resources such as fisheries and petroleum, the region's macroeconomic indicators show a negative trend. According to BPS data for 2024, while both regions experienced moderate population growth, their economic growth experienced a sharp decline: Natuna's growth fell from 0.85% in 2023 to -3.57% in 2024, and Anambas' growth plummeted from 0.62% to -5.67% in the same period.

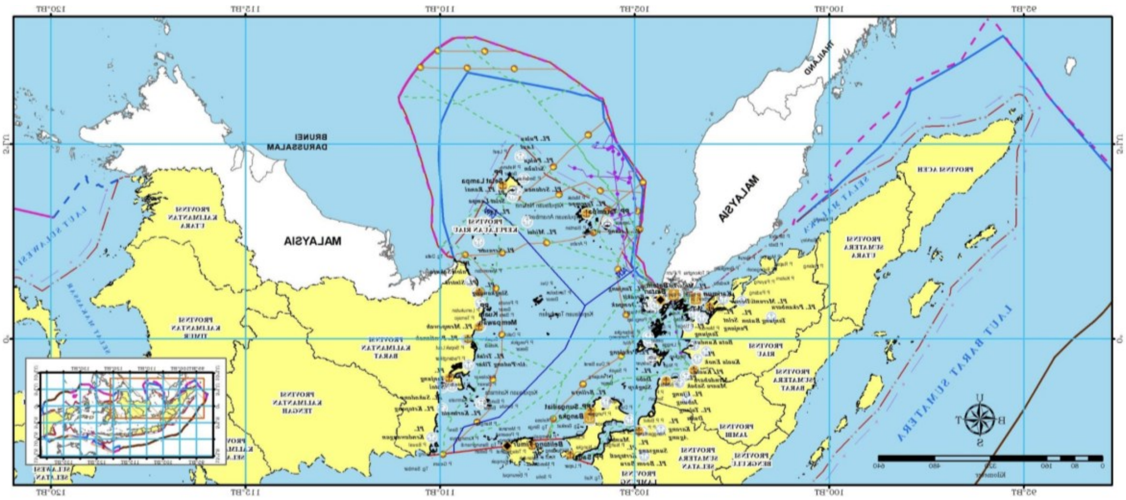

Figure 1. Natuna North Sea Spatial Structure Plan Map
Source: Presidential Regulation No. 41 of 2022

The poverty rate showed mild improvement, falling from 5.25% to 5.04% in Natuna and from 6.95% to 6.67% in Anambas, (BPS Kabupaten Anambas Islands, 2025; BPS Kabupaten Natuna, 2025)but the rise in the poverty line and decline in purchasing power suggest that these achievements are not enough to overcome the economic challenges . This phenomenon suggests that the benefits of PSN and fiscal decentralization policies have not been successful in promoting sustainable economic growth in the region (Sofilda et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the fiscal challenges faced by local governments are fundamental. Budget realization reports show that most of the regional expenditure is absorbed to finance personnel expenditure, while allocations for infrastructure and economic development are very limited (BPK Representative of Riau Islands Province, 2024; Faidillah, 2025; Putri et al., 2019). Recurrent fiscal deficits and low institutional capacity signal a dissonance between national strategic aspirations and local governance capacity. This paradox illustrates the inefficient design of fiscal and institutional governance in the prevailing decentralized system (Oates et al., 2014).

Starting from this condition, this study aims to examine how the proposal to establish the Natuna-Anambas province can be a solution in bridging the gap between national strategic planning and economic reality and creating fiscal independence. Using a political economy approach within the framework of decentralized governance, this article examines fiscal independence, economic growth, and the use of PSN policies simultaneously to evaluate the feasibility and potential for regional expansion. Relying on secondary data from BPS, regional budget reports, and relevant academic literature, this article contributes to the study of regional political economy by highlighting the relationship between national policies and local capacity in the context of decentralization. This study is expected to provide policy recommendations based on local needs that are more adaptive in realizing inclusive and sustainable economic growth in border regions.

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METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to understand the dynamics of fiscal dependency and local economic development challenges in the Natuna and Anambas regions. This design was chosen because it is suitable for exploring complex and contextual phenomena, especially related to the relationship between national strategic policies, the structure of fiscal decentralization, and regional capacity in achieving fiscal independence. The main focus of this study is to explore the extent to which fiscal dependence on the central government affects the ability of regions to implement development, and how the proposal to establish the Natuna-Anambas Province could potentially be a solution to strengthen fiscal capacity and local economic growth.

To explain these dynamics, this study integrates three main theoretical frameworks. First, the theory of fiscal federalism is used to analyze the division of fiscal authority between the center and the regions, and how this structure affects resource allocation and local policy effectiveness. Second, the resource curse theory explains why natural resource-rich regions such as Natuna and Anambas experience economic stagnation when fiscal institutions and resource management are not optimized. Third, the local political economy approach is used to assess the gap between the national strategic agenda and local governance capacity, including in the context of decentralization and regional expansion.

Data collection was conducted through documentation studies of various secondary sources, including data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), Local Government Budget Realization Reports (APBD), regulatory documents such as Presidential Regulations and policies related to National Strategic Projects, as well as relevant scientific articles and policy studies. This data was analyzed thematically by identifying patterns, relationships, and tensions between fiscal structure, budget management, and regional economic conditions. In addition, this study also conducted a policy analysis of the Natuna-Anambas Province expansion narrative.

This analysis includes an exploration of the documents, normative arguments, policies, and political-economic context behind the proposal. This approach aims to critically assess whether regional expansion can be an instrument to strengthen fiscal independence, or instead reproduce the same structural dependencies in a new administrative format. The evaluation of potential fiscal independence is done by reviewing a number of indicators, such as the composition of revenues, and dependence on transfers from the central government.

Through this approach, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between national policies, regional fiscal structures, and local development effectiveness. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of the literature on fiscal decentralization and regional political economy, as well as provide policy recommendations based on local context and needs to promote more inclusive and sustainable economic growth in strategic border areas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Fiscal Transfer Dominance And Regional Dependency: The Challenge Of Natuna-Anambas Fiscal Independence

Fiscal decentralization in Indonesia aims to strengthen regional independence in financing development and providing public services (Sofilda et al., 2023). However, the fiscal reality in Natuna and Anambas shows a very high dependency on transfer funds from the central government. Based on the 2024 Regional Budget Realization Reports, more than 74% to 79% of the two regions' total revenue comes from central transfers, specifically the General Allocation Fund (DAU), Revenue Sharing Fund (DBH), and Special Allocation Fund (DAK). In contrast, the contribution of locally generated revenue (PAD) is still very low, only ranging from 3% to 11%, while other sources of revenue range from 1% to 22%.

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Table 1. Revenue Realization of Natuna-Anambas 2021-2024

Category	2021 (Rp)	2022 (Rp)	2023 (Rp)	2024 (Rp)	Target 2025 (Rp)
NATUNA					
Regional Original Revenue (PAD)	42,430.22	66,678.87	97,926.94	67,636.83	128,858.64
Transfer Revenue	662,952.52	813,001.27	1,045,719.15	771,944.54	1,043,414.92
Other Legitimate Revenue	196,014.07	109,595.13	189,806.92	132,334.14	7,726.44
Total Revenue Realization	901,397.44	989,275.27	1,333,453.01	971,925.51	1,180,000.00
Total Expenditure Realization	952,614.02	1,016,634.84	1,174,503.85	1,132,790.13	
ANAMBAS					
Regional Original Revenue (PAD)	32,254.94	29,686.66	29,362.24	18,512.18	53,491.32
Transfer Revenue	624,335.48	783,315.19	851,583.26	518,828.92	828,820.94
Other Legitimate Revenue	188,553.71	11,552.15	117,424.77	75,720.42	168.89
Total Revenue Realization	845,143.19	824,553.99	998,370.28	613,061.54	882,480.96
Total Expenditure Realization	807,470.91	865,767.98	980,270.18	N/A	—

Source: BPS and Regional Budget Realization Report 2021-2024 (in Millions)

This disproportionate dependency creates structural vulnerabilities in the regional financial system. When there is a decline in the value of central transfers, as recorded in 2024, regional fiscal capacity is significantly compromised. Natuna's transfer revenue decreased from IDR1.045 billion in the previous year to IDR771.9 million, while Anambas contracted from IDR851.5 million to only IDR518.8 million. These declines indicate high sensitivity to external changes, both in the form of central fiscal policy and fluctuations in commodity prices, particularly oil and gas.

In the transfer revenue structure, DAU is the dominant component with a portion of 39% to 62% of total revenue, followed by DBH of natural resources (16%-39%) and DAK (7%-17%). Meanwhile, DBH from taxes only contributes minimally (0%-10%). This imbalance is ironic for natural resource-rich regions such as Natuna and Anambas. For example, in 2024, Natuna received oil and gas DBH of Rp111.4 billion and Anambas Rp76 billion, far below the distribution received by its parent province, Riau Islands, which received Rp121 billion. This imbalance shows that although the two regions contribute significantly to national revenues

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in terms of production, they have not received a proportional allocation of DBH (Ginanjar et al., 2025; Lewis, 2023).

Table 2. Composition of Natuna-Anambas Transfer Revenue 2021-2024

Category	2021 (Rp)	2022 (Rp)	2023 (Rp)	2024 (Rp)
NATUNA				
Tax Sharing Revenue	60,785.05	—	132,059.53	52,050.23
Non-Tax Sharing Revenue / Natural Resources	104,492.09	314,644.95	332,808.15	160,068.76
General Allocation Fund	390,697.49	390,559.26	407,458.41	427,577.57
Special Allocation Fund	106,977.89	107,797.06	173,393.06	132,247.91
Total Transfer Revenue	662,952.52	813,001.27	1,045,719.15	771,944.55
ANAMBAS				
Tax Sharing Revenue	60,678.49	55,604.93	56,757.98	37,431.41
Non-Tax Sharing Revenue / Natural Resources	109,438.61	193,673.10	310,029.74	118,543.21
General Allocation Fund	368,303.16	368,244.67	383,849.20	324,129.90
Special Allocation Fund	86,215.22	65,090.05	100,946.35	38,724.41
Total Transfer Revenue	624,635.48	682,612.75	851,583.27	518,828.93

Source: BPS and Regional Budget Realization Report 2021-2024 (*in Millions)

This inequality in fiscal sharing can be traced back to the system stipulated in Law No. 1 of 2022 on Financial Relations between the Central and Regional Governments. Although this law was designed to reduce fiscal imbalances between regions (Hamidi et al., 2021), the DAU calculation mechanism, which is based on regional fiscal needs and capacity, creates uncertainty. DAU volatility leads to inconsistent revenue streams, making it difficult for regions to design stable and sustainable medium-term development policies.

Theoretically, this phenomenon illustrates the so-called resource-rich region paradox, also known as the resource curse. When fiscal institutions are weak and the design of revenue sharing is unfair, producing regions remain poor and dependent on the central government (Simandjuntak, 2017). Within the framework of the theory of fiscal federalism and state rescaling, the problems of Natuna and Anambas can be understood as the failure of the decentralization system to provide adequate fiscal autonomy to the regions to manage their economic potential independently.

Therefore, in the context of Natuna and Anambas, the proposed formation of a new province is important to be studied in depth. Expansion can serve as a form of institutional restructuring that provides opportunities for greater fiscal access, including the possibility of increasing the DBH portion and strengthening PAD through greater resource management authority. However, expansion alone is not enough.

The success of fiscal independence still depends on revenue distribution reforms, strengthening regional fiscal institutions, and local economic diversification strategies that are not solely dependent on extractive commodities. Thus, the establishment of Natuna-Anambas Province will only be meaningful if accompanied by fundamental changes in the national fiscal allocation system and improved local governance capacity.

2. Limited Fiscal Capacity in Driving the Local Economy: an Evaluation of The Effectiveness Of Fund Transfers

Economic conditions in the Natuna and Anambas regions in recent years have shown symptoms of continued stagnation, characterized by low GDP growth and weakening productive sectors. BPS data notes that in 2024, Natuna experienced an economic contraction of -3.57%, down from 0.85% in 2023. Anambas experienced an even deeper decline, from 0.62% to -5.67% in the same period. This decline occurred mainly in leading sectors such as fisheries, agriculture, and trade. The fisheries sector fell by 4% in 2024, while Anambas experienced a 6% decline in the same period. Despite its great potential, it has not been able to become the main driver of the local economy.

Fisheries production in both regions has declined, and supporting infrastructure such as processing and distribution facilities are still minimal. Similarly, Natuna's agricultural sector increased by only 1.2% in 2023 and Anambas experienced a 0.5% decline in agricultural production in the same year, indicating stagnant growth due to limited technology, market access and policy support. As a result, PAD did not grow significantly, and dependence on DBH from natural resources continued without any real contribution to improving people's welfare.

One of the underlying causes of the economic contraction is the high fiscal dependence on transfers from the central government, which limits the capacity of regional fiscal management. The revenue structure of Natuna and Anambas regions is dominated by the General Allocation Fund (DAU), Revenue Sharing Fund (DBH), and Special Allocation Fund (DAK), while Regional Original Revenue (PAD) only contributes between 3% and 11% of total revenue. This dependency makes both regions highly vulnerable to external fiscal pressures such as changes in national policies and fluctuations in global commodity prices, especially oil and gas.

This limited fiscal capacity hampers the regions' ability to finance strategic investments needed to strengthen the real sector. This prolonged fiscal dependency creates a cycle of fiscal and economic stagnation. Fiscal constraints lead to minimal development spending, which in turn weakens regional economic growth. Weak economic growth has an impact on low PAD and DBH revenues, so that regions are again dependent on fluctuating central transfer funds. In the long run, this pattern reinforces structural vulnerability and reduces the ability of local governments to control the direction of local economic development independently.

Theoretically, this situation reflects the characteristics of the resource curse phenomenon where natural resource wealth does not automatically promote prosperity if it is not supported by strong fiscal institutions (Auty, 1995). In the context of Natuna and Anambas, despite being oil and gas producing regions, the portion of transfer revenue, especially in DBH received, remains limited and disproportionate.

Meanwhile, fiscal decentralization has not succeeded in providing sufficient fiscal flexibility to local governments to develop new economic bases. Only regions that have a level of independence above 50% have a positive impact on transfer revenues (Sofilda et al., 2023). The concepts of asymmetric decentralization and state rescaling offer a framework for thinking that strengthening fiscal capacity and local economic management authority should be an integral part of the border region development strategy (Brenner, 2004).

Under these conditions, fiscal policy reform and economic diversification strategies are urgently needed. The utilization of DAU and DAK should no longer be administrative or routine, but directed to support economic infrastructure development, human resource capacity building, and value-added creation in leading sectors such as fisheries, agriculture, and tourism. Without such strategic interventions, fiscal transfers from the center will only serve as a short-term buffer without building long-term economic independence.

Furthermore, these conditions indicate the need for a comprehensive institutional and fiscal restructuring, including through the option of forming a new province that gives greater fiscal autonomy to the Natuna and Anambas regions. With a more independent government structure and more fiscal space, the potential of local resources can be optimized directly and sustainably. Therefore, economic vulnerability due to fiscal dependency is not only a technical budgetary problem, but also an issue of institutional design in the decentralization system that needs to be reviewed in depth.

3. Role of National Strategic Projects In Strengthening Border Governance

Natuna and Anambas regions have been designated as part of the National Strategic Project (PSN), positioning them as priority areas in the national defense agenda and natural resource-based economic development. As a strategic border area in the North Natuna Sea, the presence of maritime infrastructure, ports, and energy networks in the region reflects not only economic interests, but also geopolitical and national defense dimensions. However, the implementation of PSN in this region has not yet had a positive impact on local economic growth or on strengthening regional fiscal capacity.

Investments in PSN projects have so far been more oriented towards national interests, such as strengthening defense positions, than towards empowering the local economy. Diversification of the local economy has not made significant progress. Dependence on the oil and gas sector remains dominant, while other sectors such as fisheries, agriculture and ecotourism have not received proportional attention. This condition shows that the infrastructure built through PSN has not been fully connected to the strategy of improving the economic welfare of local communities.

This inequality is exacerbated by the lack of involvement of local communities in the planning and implementation of strategic projects. Unsymmetrical decentralization has the potential to lead to uneven resource allocation and marginalization of local actors in the decision-making process (Fitrani et al., 2005). In Natuna and Anambas, this is reflected in the lack of capacity building and vocational training programs that allow local communities to be actively involved in the economic value chain of PSN projects. As a result, local people are more often spectators than actors in the process of economic transformation of their own region.

In this context, strengthening the capacity of local communities is an urgent need. Skills training programs, entrepreneurship support, and integration of local industries into the PSN ecosystem can increase community participation in value-added economic activities. For example, training in sustainable fisheries or ecotourism can open up new business opportunities that reduce dependence on oil and gas. In this way, the economic benefits of national investments are not only enjoyed by a handful of big players, but also spread to local fishermen, farmers and MSME players.

In addition to community empowerment, the success of PSN in supporting the local economy also depends on fiscal certainty and governance reform. Currently, the flow of funds from oil and gas extraction has not proportionally flowed to the regions. Inequality in the distribution of Revenue Sharing Funds (DBH) means that Natuna and Anambas remain dependent on fluctuating DAU and DAK. Reforming the DBH formula in favor of producing regions is an important requirement so that PSN investment also becomes an instrument to strengthen regional fiscal independence (Lewis, 2023; Simandjuntak, 2017).

A multi-level governance approach needs to be adopted so that national strategic priorities can be balanced with local economic needs. Local governments need to have a greater role in planning and managing PSN projects, including in forming partnerships with the private sector. The public-private partnership (PPP) model can be utilized to expand investment into agriculture, renewable energy and green tourism sectors, which are in line with the spirit of the blue economy and sustainability.

In other words, the success of national strategic projects cannot only be measured by macro indicators or infrastructure achievements, but also by the extent to which they generate long-term economic impact, strengthen local fiscal capacity, and reduce development inequality. Therefore, an institutional and fiscal framework is needed that allows regions such as Natuna and Anambas to manage their economic potential more independently and adaptively. It is within this framework that the proposed establishment of the Natuna-Anambas Province needs to be positioned as a long-term strategy that can resolve this paradox.

4. Natuna-Anambas Province Expansion as A Strategy for Fiscal Independence

Regional expansion initiatives have great potential to strengthen fiscal and institutional autonomy, but their success is highly dependent on local governance capacity. In Indonesia, the post-reform wave of new provincial formation (since 2001) has often failed to achieve development goals due to structural weaknesses in local accountability and technical capacity (Fitrani et al., 2005; Hamidi et al., 2021). Even provinces with special autonomy such as West Papua, which receive larger transfer revenues, have yet to show tangible improvements in the welfare of their people. This is the result of governance that is prone to corruption and lack of transparency (Lewis, 2023).

The abundance of natural resources can have different welfare implications due to government policies (Sachs & Warner, 1995). An in-depth understanding of the performance of the economic system that impacts the economic growth of regional institutions is needed because government policies are the key to successful economic growth (North, 1990). With great potential in managing marine and energy resources and supporting national stability, the fiscal and institutional challenges faced by local governments exacerbate their dependence on fiscal transfers from the central government (Simandjuntak, 2017).

Theoretically and empirically, administrative expansion can be called a catalyst for fiscal decentralization if and only if it is accompanied by the strengthening of local institutions. In a cross-province study in Indonesia, it was shown that although many regions were able to record fiscal surpluses, dependence on central transfers remained high and fiscal instability was still pervasive (Li & Seifert, 2015).

This emphasizes that "revenue does not equal autonomy" if fiscal management functions and capacities have not been adequately developed. Supporting this, other developing country contexts have found that high fiscal autonomy without strong governance deepens inequality and budget allocation efficiency (Digdowiseiso, 2023). In Natuna-Anambas, the potential of marine and energy resources will only become real capital if accompanied by fiscal institutions that are able to ensure the distribution of DBH in accordance with regional contributions and manage PAD independently.

Key factors in designing the division of Natuna-Anambas Province towards fiscal independence are the need for DBH formulation by ensuring fair proportion commitments based on resource value, digitizing budget management and transparent public audits to strengthen fiscal oversight, improving employee competencies in fiscal planning, oversight and management and avoiding dependence on oil-gas-based investments by creating PPP models in the fisheries, ecotourism and renewable energy sectors. This will strengthen local value chains and create new sources of PAD.

The division of Natuna-Anambas Province can be a structural solution to the problems of fiscal dependency and local economic stagnation, provided it is designed as a comprehensive process. Administrative changes must be accompanied by reforms in fiscal management, institutional capacity building, transparency, and economic diversification based on local potential. Without these elements, the history of national expansion shows that our changes will only create new dependent provinces rather than independent ones. With a systematic and gradual approach, this division is not just a symbolic answer, but a real foundation for a new province that is independent, sustainable and competitive in line with national strategic goals and the local needs of Natuna-Anambas.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the fiscal and economic challenges in Natuna and Anambas stem from structural dependency on central government transfers, limited institutional capacity, and the weak linkage between national strategic policies and local development needs. Despite their strategic position and abundant natural resources, both regions continue to experience stagnation in key economic sectors, revealing the inadequacy of fiscal decentralization mechanisms in fostering real autonomy and sustainable growth. The findings confirm that fiscal inequality and volatility have constrained regional governments' ability to manage development independently, resulting in a paradox between resource abundance and economic vulnerability.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the implementation of National Strategic Projects (PSN) in Natuna and Anambas remains primarily oriented toward national interests rather than inclusive local empowerment. The lack of community participation, fiscal fairness, and institutional integration limits the effectiveness of PSN in driving local economic transformation. Without structural reform in revenue distribution and stronger governance, PSN investments risk reinforcing existing inequalities instead of reducing them. Therefore, strengthening fiscal institutions, local capacity, and multi-level governance becomes essential to ensure that strategic national investments yield equitable and sustainable regional benefits.

Finally, the proposed establishment of the Natuna-Anambas Province offers a potential structural solution to these challenges, but only if it is accompanied by comprehensive fiscal reform, institutional strengthening, and economic diversification. Administrative expansion must go beyond symbolic rearrangement by ensuring transparent fiscal management, local accountability, and community-driven development. If implemented through a coherent and participatory framework, the new province could serve as a model for fiscal independence and sustainable development in Indonesia's border regions. Conversely, without these critical reforms, the province risks replicating the same dependency and inefficiency patterns under a new administrative label.

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