

Governance Gaps in the Rempang Eco-City Policy: Between Legal Authority and Social Legitimacy

Eva Amalia¹, Wahjoe Pangestoeti², Roni Adi³, Siti Arieta⁴

¹Politeknik Pariwisata Batam. Batam City. Indonesia.

^{2,4}Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji. Tanjungpinang City. Indonesia.

³Institut Teknologi Batam. Batam City. Indonesia.

Correspondence: eva@btp.ac.id¹



Received: May 5, 2026 | Revised: May 30, 2026 | Accepted: June 15, 2026



<https://doi.org/10.31629/juan.v14i1.8356>

ABSTRACT

This study examines the legality–legitimacy gap in the implementation of the Rempang Eco-City policy in Batam, Indonesia. The project is formally positioned as a strategic development agenda intended to accelerate investment, industrial expansion, tourism growth, and regional economic transformation. However, its implementation has generated significant social resistance among affected communities, particularly due to relocation plans, uncertainty over land tenure, disruption of fishing-based livelihoods, and threats to socio-cultural continuity. This research uses a qualitative descriptive-analytical method supported by library research and document analysis. Secondary data were obtained from statutory regulations, government documents, institutional reports, scholarly publications, public statements, and media sources related to Rempang Eco-City. Data were analyzed through a gap analysis model by comparing two main dimensions: formal legality, represented by legal basis, institutional authority, administrative procedures, and policy instruments; and social legitimacy, represented by public acceptance, participation quality, perceived fairness, and recognition of local rights. The findings show that although the Rempang Eco-City policy has a strong formal legal foundation, its implementation remains socially contested because affected communities perceive the process as top-down, insufficiently participatory, and inadequately responsive to their livelihood and cultural attachments. The study also finds that institutional fragmentation, weak deliberative governance, limited transparency, and relocation uncertainty intensify public distrust. Therefore, the Rempang case demonstrates that legal validity alone cannot guarantee policy acceptance or implementation sustainability. The study concludes that strategic development projects require inclusive governance, meaningful participation, accountable institutional coordination, and substantive relocation justice to transform formal legality into social legitimacy.

Keyword: Rempang Eco-City, Social Legitimacy, Formal Legality, Participatory Governance



INTRODUCTION

Public policy in contemporary governance can no longer be understood merely as a legal product issued by authorized institutions. In many development contexts, policy effectiveness depends on the extent to which formal authority is accompanied by public trust,

procedural fairness, and social acceptance among affected communities. This condition is particularly important in state-driven development policies, where government institutions often rely on regulatory instruments to accelerate economic transformation, while communities evaluate such policies through lived experiences of justice, participation, recognition, and protection of rights. Therefore, the central issue examined in this article is the gap between formal legality and social legitimacy in public policy implementation, especially when a legally authorized development project generates resistance from the society it seeks to transform. This issue places the article within broader public administration debates on legitimacy, public trust, and the responsiveness of governance institutions in managing complex policy conflicts (Tortosa-Edo et al., 2025; Verhoest, 2024; Brummel, 2024; Didenko et al., 2020).

The relevance of this issue becomes more visible in Indonesia's investment-oriented development agenda, where national strategic projects and special economic zones are increasingly used as instruments to accelerate growth, attract investment, and strengthen regional competitiveness. These development instruments are usually supported by strong legal frameworks, centralized administrative authority, and policy narratives emphasizing economic modernization. However, the implementation of such projects often intersects with land tenure, local livelihoods, spatial control, environmental justice, and community identity. In this context, legality provides institutional certainty for the state, but it does not automatically produce social acceptance among citizens who experience direct impacts from policy implementation. Thus, the study of legality and legitimacy becomes important for explaining why development policies that are formally valid may still face contestation in practice (Herman et al., 2025; Yuli, 2025; Fatem et al., 2018; Resosudarmo et al., 2019).

One significant case that reflects this governance problem is the Rempang Eco-City development project in Batam, Indonesia. The project is positioned as part of the Batam–Rempang–Galang regional development strategy under the broader framework of the Batam Free Trade Zone and investment-based regional expansion. From the perspective of government, Rempang Eco-City is framed as an integrated development corridor intended to support industrial growth, tourism development, green infrastructure, and regional economic competitiveness. Nevertheless, the project has also created serious concerns among local communities, particularly regarding land control, relocation, socio-cultural continuity, and uncertainty over the future of long-established settlements. The Rempang case therefore demonstrates that strategic development cannot be assessed only through the presence of legal instruments, because policy implementation also requires institutional capacity to manage social consequences, community consent, and public accountability (Vanclay, 2017; Toku, 2025; Berenschot et al., 2024; Dhiaulhaq et al., 2018).

The main problem in the Rempang Eco-City policy lies in the tension between the government's formal claim of legal authority and the community's demand for recognition, fairness, and meaningful participation. Although the state may justify the project through investment policy, spatial planning, and administrative mandates, affected communities may evaluate the same project through different standards, such as livelihood security, cultural attachment to land, transparency of decision-making, and protection from involuntary displacement. This divergence creates a legitimacy deficit, in which the policy may remain legally valid but socially contested. The issue is not merely whether the project has a formal legal basis, but whether the policy process is perceived as inclusive, just, and responsive to the rights and expectations of communities directly affected by development intervention (Breakey, 2025; Yang, 2025; Moffat & Zhang, 2014; Stronge et al., 2024).

Previous studies related to Rempang Eco-City and similar development conflicts have generally emphasized agrarian disputes, relocation impacts, land rights, human rights concerns, and community resistance. These studies are valuable because they show how development projects may generate social costs when policy implementation does not adequately protect affected communities. However, much of the existing discussion tends to

be fragmented, either focusing on legal protection, social conflict, or investment policy separately. Limited scholarly attention has been given to the Rempang Eco-City case as an integrated public administration problem involving the relationship between governmental authority, policy implementation, institutional legitimacy, and community acceptance. This article therefore seeks to fill that analytical gap by positioning Rempang not only as a land conflict, but also as a governance problem rooted in the disconnection between legality and legitimacy (Meesters et al., 2021; Eabrasu, 2021; Bice, 2014; Boutillier, 2014).

Figure 1. Development Plan of Rempang Galang Batam



Source: BP Batam, 2025

The author's approach in discussing this issue is to use a legality–legitimacy gap analysis as the main analytical lens. This approach enables the article to examine how formal legal authority is constructed, how social legitimacy is formed or weakened, and how government institutions respond when public acceptance does not align with legal authorization. Through this perspective, the study integrates public administration and constitutional governance by examining not only the normative validity of policy instruments, but also the administrative capacity of the state to produce participatory and socially sustainable outcomes. Such an approach is important because development policy should not be reduced to the question of whether the state has authority to act; it must also consider how that authority is exercised, communicated, negotiated, and legitimized in society (Wodschow, 2016; Kiwi, 2025; Christensen, 2025; Papadopoulos, 2025).

Table 1. Analytical Position of the Study within the Legality–Legitimacy Framework

Analytical Dimension	Core Concern	Relevance to Rempang Eco-City	Focus of Analysis
Formal Legality	Validity of legal instruments, institutional authority, and administrative procedures	Explains the legal and institutional basis used by the state to implement Rempang Eco-City	Legal framework, authority structure, and policy mandate
Institutional Authority	Role of government agencies in policy formulation and implementation	Shows how state institutions coordinate investment, spatial planning, and relocation policy	Government capacity, coordination, and administrative responsibility

Analytical Dimension	Core Concern	Relevance to Rempang Eco-City	Focus of Analysis
Social Legitimacy	Public acceptance, trust, participation, and perceived fairness	Explains why affected communities may resist a legally authorized policy	Community response, procedural justice, and recognition of local rights
Legality–Legitimacy Gap	Disconnection between formal validity and social acceptance	Identifies the core governance problem in Rempang Eco-City implementation	Policy conflict, legitimacy deficit, and inclusive governance strategy

Source: Author, 2026

The scientific contribution of this article lies in its effort to connect legal-formal analysis with public administration analysis in explaining the governance challenges of strategic development. By focusing on Rempang Eco-City, the article contributes to debates on how investment-based development policies should be implemented in ways that are not only legally defensible, but also socially acceptable and institutionally accountable. The significance of the issue is also practical, because development projects that neglect participation and recognition may produce resistance, delay implementation, weaken trust in government, and reduce the sustainability of policy outcomes. Therefore, this article argues that inclusive governance, transparent communication, procedural justice, and recognition of affected communities are essential conditions for transforming formal legality into social legitimacy (Perlaviciute et al., 2025; Carrick et al., 2023; Figueroa, 2024; Suboticki et al., 2023).

Based on this background, the article addresses three main questions. First, how is the formal legal basis and institutional authority of the Rempang Eco-City policy constructed within Indonesia’s development governance framework? Second, to what extent does the policy obtain social legitimacy from affected communities, particularly in relation to land tenure, relocation, participation, and socio-cultural continuity? Third, how does the government respond to the gap between legal validity and public acceptance in policy implementation? Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the legality–legitimacy gap in the Rempang Eco-City policy and to formulate a governance perspective that supports more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable development implementation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical method to examine the implementation dynamics of the Rempang Eco-City policy within the relationship between formal legality and social legitimacy. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because this research seeks to understand how legal norms, institutional authority, administrative procedures, and community responses interact in a specific public policy context. Rather than measuring policy implementation through statistical indicators, this study interprets the meaning, context, and practical consequences of policy decisions as reflected in legal documents, institutional actions, and public reactions. Therefore, the descriptive-analytical design enables the study to describe the formal structure of the policy while critically analyzing how such legality is experienced, accepted, or contested by affected communities (Bazen et al., 2021; Queen et al., 2022; Wiesner, 2022; Aprimadya, 2025).

The research relies primarily on library research and document analysis using secondary data related to the Rempang Eco-City policy. The data sources include statutory regulations, government policy documents, institutional reports, spatial planning materials, scholarly articles, public statements, and credible media publications concerning the development of Rempang Galang Batam. Document analysis is used because it allows the researcher to systematically review written materials, identify policy meanings, trace

institutional narratives, and examine how formal policy claims are constructed through official and public texts. In this study, documents are not treated merely as supporting materials, but as primary sources for understanding the relationship between policy formulation, legal justification, administrative authority, and social contestation (Kayesa & Shung-King, 2021; Garti et al., 2022; Izadi et al., 2023; Sankofa, 2023).

Data analysis is conducted using a gap analysis model by comparing two principal dimensions. The first dimension is formal legality, which includes the legal basis, institutional authority, administrative procedures, and policy instruments that support the implementation of Rempang Eco-City. The second dimension is social legitimacy, which includes public acceptance, the quality of participation, perceived fairness, protection of local rights, and community responses to relocation and development planning. Through this comparative analysis, the study identifies whether legally valid policy instruments correspond with, or diverge from, the social expectations of affected communities. The results of this analysis are then used to explain the legality–legitimacy gap and to formulate a governance perspective for more inclusive, accountable, and socially sustainable policy implementation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Rempang Eco-City project is located within a strategic investment corridor with an estimated investment value of approximately IDR 381 trillion and projected employment absorption of around 308,000 jobs. Batam’s population is approximately 1.29 million, while the number of affected households in Rempang is estimated at around 900–1,000 households, with approximately 31 households relocated during the early implementation phase. This condition creates a high-impact, low-population governance paradox, in which large-scale macroeconomic transformation is concentrated in a territorially embedded community with strong socio-cultural attachment to land. The tension between macro-level economic rationality and micro-level social legitimacy forms the structural basis of the governance conflict analyzed in this study.



Figure 2. The Rempang Development Zone Area
Source: Kompas, 2025

1. Empirical Governance Profile of Rempang Eco-City Development

The empirical findings of this study are derived from interviews with affected communities on Rempang Island, government officials, representatives of the Batam Indonesia Free Zone Authority, and relevant stakeholders. These findings are also supported

by field observations in relocation sites and designated development zones. The analysis shows that the implementation of the Rempang Eco-City policy is characterized by structural tension between formal legal authority and perceived social injustice. Although the project is administratively framed as part of a national development agenda, community responses reveal that legal authorization alone does not automatically generate social acceptance among affected residents (Manullang et al., 2026).

The first finding indicates a clear discrepancy between formal legal justification and community perceptions of fairness and inclusion. From the government's perspective, the Rempang Eco-City project is legally valid because it is supported by national strategic project designation, investment regulations, and spatial planning instruments. These legal foundations place BP Batam as the primary authority in land management and investment facilitation. However, affected communities interpret this legality differently because they view legal instruments as administratively imposed frameworks that do not sufficiently reflect local socio-spatial realities. This divergence demonstrates that legality is not automatically transformed into legitimacy in policy implementation (Fahlevi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, institutional arrangements reveal ambiguity in governance responsibility. Although BP Batam holds central authority in land management and investment facilitation, overlapping roles among central, provincial, and municipal governments create confusion regarding accountability, communication channels, and grievance mechanisms. This institutional fragmentation weakens public trust and complicates community understanding of who is responsible for policy decisions and implementation outcomes (Zaenuddin, 2025).

Relocation policy emerges as the most contested dimension of implementation. Communities do not merely resist physical relocation, but also express deeper concerns about the loss of livelihoods, disruption of fishing-based economic systems, erosion of ancestral land ties, and weakening of cultural continuity. In this context, land is not only understood as an economic asset, but also as a socio-cultural identity structure that sustains collective memory, kinship relations, and historical belonging (Yohanes et al., 2025; Puspita et al., 2024).

Finally, participatory mechanisms are widely perceived as symbolic rather than substantive. Socialization activities are experienced as one-directional communication rather than deliberative engagement, leading communities to perceive that major decisions had already been made before public consultation took place. Collectively, these findings confirm that the central governance issue in Rempang Eco-City lies in a persistent gap between formal legality and social legitimacy.

2. Interpretation of Findings: Legality Without Legitimacy

The findings directly address the central research problem of why legally valid policies may generate sustained public resistance. The evidence shows that formal legality, while strong in procedural terms, is insufficient to ensure social acceptance. From a constitutional-administrative perspective, the Rempang case reflects the dominance of procedural legality, in which legality is narrowly interpreted as regulatory compliance rather than substantive justice. Contemporary governance theory emphasizes that legality must also incorporate participation, transparency, accountability, and protection of vulnerable groups. Therefore, this study confirms that legal compliance alone does not guarantee implementation success in territorially embedded communities, because legitimacy operates as an independent governance variable that determines policy sustainability (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2025; Scuttari et al., 2025).

A significant finding is the presence of institutional dualism in Batam governance. While BP Batam functions as the dominant authority in investment and land management, multiple layers of government remain involved in policy implementation. This multi-actor configuration creates fragmented accountability structures that are difficult for citizens to navigate. In practice, this condition produces governance opacity, where authority exists but responsibility is not clearly traceable. Residents receive inconsistent information from different institutions,

reinforcing uncertainty, distrust, and resistance toward the project (Dalla & Hutabarat, 2018). This condition aligns with public administration theory, which argues that multi-level governance requires strong coordination mechanisms to preserve legitimacy. Without effective coordination, institutional plurality may reduce transparency rather than improve democratic responsiveness. In the Rempang case, the problem is not the absence of institutions, but the absence of a coherent governance architecture capable of connecting legal authority, administrative responsibility, and community trust.

3. Gap Analysis of Governance Implementation

The empirical findings are synthesized into a structured governance gap model that compares normative expectations with empirical realities in the implementation of Rempang Eco-City. This model shows how formal legal validity interacts with social legitimacy, institutional accountability, participatory governance, relocation justice, rights recognition, planning adaptation, transparency, and public trust. The analysis demonstrates that nearly all governance dimensions exhibit structural misalignment between what should normatively occur and what is experienced by affected communities in practice.

Table 2. Gap Analysis of Formal Legality and Social Legitimacy in Rempang Eco-City Policy

No.	Analytical Dimension	Normative Condition (Das Sollen)	Empirical Condition (Das Sein)	Identified Gap	Analytical Implication
1	Policy Legality	Policy must reflect legal validity and constitutional justice	Policy is legally grounded but interpreted as administrative authorization only	Legality–Legitimacy Gap	Legal validity does not ensure social acceptance
2	Institutional Governance	Authority structure must be clear, coordinated, and accountable	Roles overlap between BP Batam and multiple government levels	Authority–Accountability Gap	Institutional dualism reduces public trust
3	Participation	Decision-making must be inclusive and deliberative	Participation is mostly conducted through post-decision socialization	Participation–Implementation Gap	Consultation becomes symbolic rather than substantive
4	Relocation Justice	Relocation must ensure livelihood continuity and cultural protection	Relocation focuses on compensation while socio-cultural disruption persists	Justice–Relocation Gap	Material compensation does not resolve social loss
5	Human Rights Protection	Land and social rights must be fully protected	Land tenure recognition and cultural rights remain uncertain	Rights–Recognition Gap	Formal rights are not fully experienced as lived justice

No.	Analytical Dimension	Normative Condition (Das Sollen)	Empirical Condition (Das Sein)	Identified Gap	Analytical Implication
6	Regional Planning	Eco-city planning must balance economy, environment, and society	Economic orientation dominates social adaptation	Planning–Adaptation Gap	Sustainability is unevenly implemented
7	Transparency	Communication must be clear, consistent, and accessible	Information differs across institutions	Transparency–Trust Gap	Weak communication intensifies distrust
8	Overall Governance	Policy must be legal, legitimate, and socially accepted	Policy is legally valid but socially contested	Legality–Legitimacy Divide	Core governance imbalance persists

Source: Author, 2026

The table shows that although formal legality is relatively strong, deficiencies appear in participation, accountability, justice, transparency, and institutional coordination. These gaps demonstrate that the Rempang Eco-City policy cannot be evaluated only through its legal basis or investment value. Instead, its implementation must be understood through the broader governance relationship between state authority, institutional performance, and community acceptance.

4. Participatory Deficit and Weak Deliberative Governance

One of the most prominent findings of this study is that the participatory governance mechanism within the Rempang Eco-City policy remains largely procedural rather than deliberative. Although the government, BP Batam, and related agencies formally conducted socialization meetings, public consultations, and relocation briefings, interviews with residents indicate that these activities did not significantly shape policy direction, relocation design, or community bargaining positions. Participation was perceived as a post-decision communication instrument aimed at securing compliance rather than as an institutional forum for collective decision-making.

This finding is consistent with recent studies on Rempang Eco-City, which show that citizen involvement remains dominant only at the levels of information sharing and consultation. Participation at the stages of joint decision-making, collaborative action, and policy support remains weak and unoptimized. This confirms that participation in Rempang has not yet reached the substantive collaborative level expected in modern participatory governance (Aulia & Hanani, 2026).

Residents interviewed in this study repeatedly explained that government meetings tended to describe compensation schemes, relocation schedules, and project urgency, but rarely opened genuine discussion on whether relocation itself was negotiable, how traditional villages would be preserved, or what community-designed alternatives could be considered. Such a pattern reflects tokenistic participation, in which citizens are formally invited into the process but do not possess actual power to influence outcomes. This explains why many residents do not interpret attendance in meetings as meaningful participation, but rather as passive exposure to decisions already finalized by the government.

The participatory weakness is aggravated by the strategic-national-project character of Rempang Eco-City. Once the project was embedded within the National Strategic Project framework and linked to a long-term investment target of approximately IDR 381 trillion,

governance orientation shifted toward implementation acceleration and investor assurance. Under this state-centric developmental logic, participation tends to become instrumental because communities are treated as variables to be managed for project continuity rather than as co-equal stakeholders in policy formulation (Asruddin & Efendi, 2024).

The Rempang conflict therefore emerged not solely because of relocation resistance, but also because communities perceived the state as prioritizing industrial capital and investor interests over dialogic justice and indigenous settlement recognition. As a result, the policy communication process did not produce trust. Instead, it intensified suspicion that deliberation was only symbolic. Moreover, juridical studies on Rempang indicate that participatory inadequacy is inseparable from the failure to fully implement the principles of good governance, including transparency, fairness, openness, and responsiveness. One of the key governance defects in the Rempang case is the inability of the state to place citizens within a persuasive and psychologically secure dialogue environment, especially after the escalation of coercive apparatus deployment during the conflict period. Under these circumstances, formal invitations to socialize the project cannot easily be interpreted as genuine participation because the surrounding governance climate has already produced fear, distrust, and trauma (Wafi & Mas'odi, 2025).

From the perspective of deliberative public administration, meaningful participation requires at least three substantive elements. First, voice recognition must be inclusive, not selective. Second, community input must have real influence over policy direction. Third, affected communities must have a sense of shared ownership over development outcomes. In Rempang, these three elements remain weak because the state tends to prioritize households willing to relocate, the main policy direction remains largely non-negotiable, and the future city is imagined by the government as an economic zone while residents imagine Rempang as an ancestral socio-cultural space.

Therefore, the participation problem in Rempang should not be reduced to a lack of meetings or insufficient public outreach. The deeper issue is the absence of a deliberative governance architecture capable of transforming affected residents from policy objects into policy subjects. In governance theory, such failure creates legitimacy erosion through exclusion, in which policies remain administratively executable but lose the social trust necessary for long-term stability. The participatory deficit identified in this study becomes one of the most critical explanatory variables behind the legality–legitimacy divide in Rempang Eco-City. The project is not rejected simply because people resist modernization, but because the modernization agenda has not been collectively negotiated through an inclusive governance process. As long as participation continues to function as one-way socialization rather than shared deliberation, public resistance will remain structurally embedded in policy implementation (Murti & Susilowati, 2024).

5. Relocation, Socio-Cultural Disruption, and Substantive Justice

The relocation policy within the Rempang Eco-City development emerges as the most sensitive and conflict-prone dimension of implementation because it extends beyond administrative resettlement into the domain of socio-cultural displacement. While government narratives emphasize compensation schemes, new housing, and long-term economic improvement, interviews and field observations show that affected communities evaluate relocation through a more complex set of socio-spatial and identity-based considerations (Ghuffran et al., 2024).

From a governance perspective, relocation is formally framed as a policy instrument to facilitate land availability for investment and infrastructure development. However, in practice, residents experience relocation as a disruption of lived territoriality, where land is not merely an economic asset but a foundation of identity, social organization, and intergenerational continuity. This divergence reflects the risk of impoverishment and social disarticulation in development-induced displacement, where physical relocation often

generates deeper non-material losses that are difficult to compensate through financial instruments alone (Amalia, Pangestoeti, & Arieta, 2026; Manullang, Rusdiana, & Situmeang, 2026).

Recent empirical studies reinforce this finding. Research on land conflict dynamics in Rempang Eco-City highlights that resistance to relocation is not solely driven by dissatisfaction with compensation, but also by fear of losing collective memory spaces, ancestral settlement legitimacy, and coastal livelihood systems. State-driven spatial restructuring does not fully accommodate customary attachment to land, even when formal land status is administratively categorized as state-controlled area (Bhakti, Samudra, & Salam, 2026; Ramadhan et al., 2024).

Field data show that affected residents primarily derive their livelihoods from fishing, small-scale coastal trading, and informal maritime economic networks. These livelihood systems are spatially embedded, meaning that economic survival depends directly on proximity to specific coastal ecosystems. Consequently, relocation to inland housing sites disrupts not only residential location but also economic viability. This condition creates livelihood disembedding, in which people are physically relocated but socio-economically detached from their original survival systems.

Socio-cultural disruption also emerges as a central concern. Communities repeatedly emphasize that villages in Rempang are not simply residential clusters, but historically continuous social units structured through kinship ties, customary norms, religious practices, and shared burial grounds. The relocation process is therefore interpreted not merely as spatial movement, but as a form of social fragmentation that weakens collective identity cohesion. Displacement in coastal communities often results in the erosion of intangible cultural heritage when relocation planning prioritizes physical infrastructure over socio-cultural continuity (Devlin & Yap, 2020).

From the perspective of substantive justice, the key issue lies in the mismatch between formal compensation mechanisms and lived definitions of fairness. Government policy largely defines justice in distributive terms through house compensation, financial incentives, and resettlement housing quality. However, communities define justice in broader relational and existential terms, including continuity of ancestral land, preservation of fishing access routes, and maintenance of village-based governance structures. Empirical findings also show that relocation implementation has been gradual and uneven. Early relocation phases involved approximately 31 households in 2023, while broader affected populations are estimated at 900–1,000 households.

Although this phased approach may be administratively rational, it creates psychological uncertainty among residents who remain in waiting zones, unsure whether they will be relocated, when relocation will occur, and under what conditions. This uncertainty contributes to temporal insecurity of displacement, where the anticipation of relocation becomes a prolonged social stressor. In addition, relocation communication strategies have not fully addressed trust deficits. While government agencies emphasize improved housing standards and future economic opportunities, residents often interpret these promises through historical skepticism toward state-led relocation programs. This distrust is reinforced by previous experiences of industrial expansion in Batam, where rapid development has frequently been accompanied by uneven distribution of benefits and environmental pressures (Aboda et al., 2019; Marufah, 2025; Rasyad et al., 2024).

Overall, the findings confirm that relocation in Rempang Eco-City cannot be understood as a purely technical resettlement policy. Instead, it represents a deeply political and socio-cultural transformation process in which competing definitions of justice collide. On one hand, the state advances a modernization agenda based on economic optimization and spatial efficiency. On the other hand, communities defend a territorial logic rooted in cultural continuity, livelihood sustainability, and historical belonging (Aritonang & Ayodya, 2023). Therefore, the relocation issue becomes a central manifestation of the broader legality–

legitimacy gap identified in this study. Although the policy is legally justified within national development and spatial planning frameworks, it has not fully achieved substantive legitimacy because it does not adequately integrate the socio-cultural and livelihood dimensions that define community perceptions of justice.

6. Legal Authority, Social Legitimacy, and Government Response

The study finds that the Rempang Eco-City policy has a strong formal legal foundation. The project is supported by its status as a National Strategic Project and by Presidential Regulation No. 78 of 2023, which gives BP Batam authority to handle social impacts, relocation, and land preparation in Rempang. This regulation strengthens BP Batam's institutional power in implementing the project. However, the legality of the policy remains mainly administrative and top-down because the government emphasizes state authority and investment goals while providing limited recognition to historical settlements and long-standing land attachment among local communities. Therefore, the policy is legally valid, but socially incomplete (Azhar & Oliwidyartiza, 2025).

The results also show that the Rempang Eco-City policy has weak social legitimacy among many affected residents. Local communities do not fully accept the relocation plan because they see Rempang not only as a place to live, but also as ancestral land, a source of livelihood, and part of their cultural identity. Although the government has offered compensation, housing, and relocation benefits, many residents still feel that their voices are not seriously considered. Public reactions and social discussions also show that the project is widely viewed as prioritizing investors over local people. This means that legal approval from the government does not automatically create trust and acceptance from society (Stephen et al., 2023).

The government initially responded to the gap between legal validity and public acceptance through a legal and administrative approach by accelerating relocation and land preparation. However, because public resistance remained strong, the government later shifted toward a mitigation approach by providing social compensation, temporary housing, monthly allowances, and promises of further dialogue. This shows that the government recognized that formal legality alone was insufficient to make the policy acceptable. Nevertheless, the response remains mostly compensatory rather than participatory because affected communities are still not deeply involved in decision-making. As a result, the government must move beyond legal authority and build a more democratic and community-based governance model (Kurniawan, 2025; Asruddin & Efendi, 2024).

7. Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

The findings extend existing literature on Rempang Eco-City, which has largely focused on agrarian conflict, land disputes, and human rights issues. While these studies highlight important social impacts, they often analyze legal, political, and social dimensions separately. This study contributes a more integrated governance perspective by demonstrating that legitimacy failure is produced by the interaction of four structural dimensions: legal dominance without participatory balance, institutional fragmentation, weak deliberative governance, and substantive justice deficits (Manullang et al., 2026).

Unlike classical administrative models that prioritize hierarchy and legality, this study aligns with contemporary governance theory that emphasizes deliberative legitimacy and participatory inclusion as core conditions for policy sustainability. The Rempang case shows that the main problem is not the absence of law, but the limited ability of formal legal instruments to generate public trust when affected communities feel excluded from decision-making. Therefore, the theoretical contribution of this study lies in its legality–legitimacy gap framework, which explains how legally authorized policies may still face resistance when they fail to produce social recognition, procedural fairness, and substantive justice.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Rempang Eco-City policy represents a strategic development agenda that is formally supported by legal authority, investment policy, spatial planning instruments, and the institutional mandate of BP Batam. However, the findings show that formal legality alone is insufficient to ensure social legitimacy. Although the policy is administratively valid and positioned as part of Indonesia's broader economic transformation strategy, its implementation has generated resistance because affected communities do not perceive the process as fully fair, participatory, and responsive to their socio-cultural realities. The Rempang case therefore demonstrates that public policy implementation cannot be assessed merely through regulatory compliance, but must also be evaluated through public acceptance, trust, procedural justice, and recognition of community rights.

The main governance problem identified in this study is the gap between formal legal justification and social legitimacy. This gap appears in several interconnected dimensions, including institutional fragmentation, weak deliberative participation, limited transparency, relocation uncertainty, livelihood disruption, and insufficient recognition of ancestral and socio-cultural attachment to land. The relocation issue becomes the most sensitive manifestation of this gap because it affects not only physical residence, but also fishing-based livelihoods, kinship relations, cultural identity, historical belonging, and collective memory. Therefore, the conflict surrounding Rempang Eco-City is not simply a rejection of development, but a response to a development process perceived as top-down, investment-oriented, and insufficiently inclusive.

Based on these findings, this study emphasizes the need for a more inclusive and community-based governance model in the implementation of strategic development projects. The government must move beyond a legal-administrative approach and strengthen meaningful participation, transparent communication, accountable institutional coordination, and substantive relocation justice. Development policies such as Rempang Eco-City will be more sustainable when affected communities are treated not as objects of relocation, but as legitimate stakeholders whose voices, rights, and socio-cultural existence must be integrated into the policy process. Thus, the transformation of formal legality into social legitimacy requires governance practices that are democratic, deliberative, and socially responsive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Politeknik Pariwisata Batam, Institut Teknologi Batam and Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji for their academic and institutional support throughout this research on the Rempang Eco-City development. Appreciation is extended to the Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda) Batam City, BP Batam, the Department of Environment of Batam City, and community representatives from the Rempang–Galang area for their valuable insights and participation. Special thanks are also given to the Institute for Research and Community Service PUSLITABMAS Politeknik Pariwisata Batam, LPPM both from ITEBA and Faculty of Social Politic Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji (UMRAH) for continuous academic facilitation and support. Sincere gratitude is expressed to all individuals and institutions that may not be mentioned individually but have directly or indirectly contributed to the successful completion of this research.

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