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Local Government Policies and the Implementation of Multiculturalism in Medan City

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Abstract

Urban diversity has intensified the importance of local governments in translating multicultural principles into concrete governance practices. This study aims to examine how local government policies shape and implement multiculturalism in Medan City, one of Indonesia's most ethnically and religiously diverse urban centers. Using a qualitative case study design, the research draws on policy document analysis and semi-structured interviews with local government officials involved in social, cultural, and community affairs. The methodology enables an in-depth exploration of policy frameworks, institutional roles, and implementation mechanisms related to multicultural governance. The findings show that multiculturalism in Medan City is formally articulated through policy discourses of social harmony, tolerance, and inclusion, yet implemented in a largely pragmatic and sectoral manner. Multicultural practices are most visible in public service delivery, particularly in education and community-based programs, which contribute to everyday intergroup interaction and local social cohesion. However, implementation remains uneven due to fragmented coordination, limited resources, and varying institutional interpretations that prioritize social stability over cultural recognition. Overall, the study highlights that multiculturalism at the local level operates as an incremental governance practice rather than a comprehensive policy regime. These findings underscore the critical role of local governments in mediating diversity and offer insights for strengthening inclusive urban governance in plural societies.

INTRODUCTION

In particular, multiculturalism has become a topical feature of modern societies, especially in urban settings that can be characterized as the result of the migration, historical pluralism, and socio-economic change. Urban centres do not only serve as administrative units; they are also social cultural spheres where ethnically, religiously, linguistically and culturally diverse people come together on a daily level. In this paradigm, multiculturalism is generally understood as a social fact and normative political agenda of recognising, accommodating, and managing cultural diversity in a single political space (Kymlicka, 2012; Modood, 2013). Multiculturalism

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has been becoming increasingly relevant as the phenomena of globalisation and in-country migration are growing, causing more and more contact between different populations and posing some serious questions about social integration, equality, and even government. The researchers have insisted that multiculturalism is not a fabrication of culture but is engrained in the public policy, institutional structure, and relations between states and society (Parekh, 2006; Banting & Kymlicka, 2017). As a result, the role of local governments has been, in turn, a growing focus of scholarly interest, as the local governments are the most proximate part of the state apparatus to various communities and have a direct responsibility of putting national ideals into actual practice.

Indonesia is a particularly relevant situation to study multiculturalism, because it was the first country to legally recognize the notion of diversity through the principle of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity). Indonesia, being a multiethnic, multireligious and multilingual polity has long been faced with the challenge of diversity management and national cohesiveness (Aspinall, 2010). This complexity can be observed in urban centres like the Medan City, where a diverse range of ethnicities, Batak, Malay, Javanese, Minangkabau, Chinese Indonesians and others, live in a variety of religious groups. Earlier studies on multiculturalism in Indonesia have only given more attention to national identity, relations between religions, or conflict management at the macro level (Hefner, 2011; Bertrand, 2010). However, the importance of local governance in establishing the everyday multicultural experience is being predetermined more and more in the recent literature because municipal governance affects education, local services, space planning, and community participation (Hadiz, 2016; Tanasaldy, 2018). Irrespective of this increased focus on the issue, empirical research studies on the local government policies operating to realise multiculturalism within certain urban contexts are quite limited.

One of the main issues of research in the field of multiculturalism is the discrepancy between the normative commitment and practical realization. Even though numerous governments officially subscribe to the principles of diversity and tolerance, their implementation into the practical policy is often uneven and disputed (Joppke, 2004; Vertovec, 2015). The issue is especially acute at the local level, as the institutional capacity of the entity is limited, political rivalry emerges, and the understanding of multicultural principles varies. Local governments in a highly diverse city are faced with conflicting demands of cultural recognition, social integration and efficiency in their administration. The inability to maintain this balance may trigger the social fragmentation, discrimination, or marginalisation of minority groups (Putnam, 2007; Meer & Modood, 2014). Diversity in Medan City has long been a key to cultural enrichment as well as a possible trigger of conflict making it an important case to examine how policy frameworks have responded to the reality of multiculturalism.

Another difficulty is associated with the fact that multiculturalism is likely to be analyzed as a symbolic or rhetorical commitment and not as a policy agenda. Many researchers argue that multiculturalism has often degenerated into the mere token recognition of cultural celebrations or tolerance slogans, without the incorporation of such affirmations into regulatory systems or even delivery of services (Banks, 2008; Faist, 2009). This kind of symbolic positioning hides structural inequalities and limits the transformative power of multicultural policies. In reaction, the literature is in support of a governance-based paradigm which puts more emphasis on institutional inclusion, participation, and fair access to resources (Banting & Kymlicka, 2017). These solutions require the involvement of local governments, which hold regulatory power as well as being close to communities. Therefore, ascertaining whether and how the local governments surpass symbolical

multiculturalism is a critical research question that is dealt with in the current research.

Current literature has some generic solutions to the predicament of implementing multiculturalism, including the focus on inclusive policy development and multi-level governance. One of them emphasizes the significance of implementing multicultural values into the governmental functions, such as education, medical care, housing, and the local economy (Kymlicka, 2012; Modood, 2013). The mainstreamed sensitivity of diversity in policy areas of government can make sure that multiculturalism is not segregated as a cultural problem, but it becomes an aspect of normal governance. The other solution that has been extensively debated is intercultural dialogue and community involvement by means of institutionalised forums that can help the minority groups to express their needs and play a role in the decision-making process (Wood and Landry, 2008). These strategies emphasize the importance of the policy coherence and institutional commitment in terms of the translation of multicultural ideals into practice.

More detailed solutions that arise out of the literature are the decentralisation of diversity management and empowerment of the local authorities. According to scholars, local governments are in a better position than central authorities to address context-specific dynamics of diversity because they are better equipped with localised knowledge and are more related to community actors (Scholten & Penninx, 2016). European and Asian cities have been shown to achieve successful multicultural governance with local policies shaped by the cultural context, including culturally sensitive public services, integrated urban planning, and specific social programmes (Zapata-Barrero, 2015; Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011). Also, co-operation between the local governments and the civil society organisations are found to be the most effective way of improving the efficacy of the policies, as it enhances trust building and co-ownership of diversity management (Phillips, 2007). These results suggest that multiculturalism is best achieved when it is operationalised in terms of tangible local policy tools and not theoretical national system models.

Regardless of these findings, the literature also shows that results have wide disparities, implying that place and place, political leadership, and institutional capacity are determining factors. Other works focus on the fact that local authorities can selectively or even exclusionary interpret multiculturalism, based on electoral factors or interest of dominant groups (Joppke, 2017; Tilly, 2005). The Indonesian environment should be seen as decentralisation reforms that have increased local autonomy, yet simultaneously have led to the unequal policy execution between regions (Aspinall, 2014). As opposed to certain local governments which foster inclusivity, others are more concerned with social order or economic development and neglect cultural recognition. Such difference justifies the necessity of case studies that would explore the ways certain local governments make sense of multiculturalism and apply it to their policies.

A review of existing studies indicates that research on multiculturalism in Medan City has primarily concentrated on social relations, identity formation, or historical patterns of coexistence (Suryadinata, 2015; Hoon, 2017). Although these studies provide valuable sociological insights, they tend to underexplore the policy dimension of multiculturalism, particularly the role of local government institutions. There is a noticeable lack of systematic analysis of how municipal policies reflect multicultural principles, how they are implemented across sectors, and how they are perceived by diverse communities. This gap is significant, as policy implementation constitutes the practical interface between state intentions and social realities. Addressing this gap requires an analytical focus on governance processes, policy instruments, and institutional practices at the local level.

Against this background, this study aims to analyze local government policies and the implementation of multiculturalism in Medan City. The primary objective is to examine how multicultural principles are articulated in municipal policy frameworks and how they are operationalized in practice. By focusing on Medan City as a case study, this research seeks to contribute to the broader literature on multicultural governance in diverse urban contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia. The novelty of this study lies in its explicit focus on policy implementation at the local level, bridging the gap between normative discussions of multiculturalism and empirical analysis of governance practices. The scope of the study is limited to local government policies and institutional mechanisms related to cultural diversity, social inclusion, and community engagement, providing a focused yet comprehensive examination of multiculturalism as practiced in Medan City.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine local government policies and the implementation of multiculturalism in Medan City. A qualitative design is particularly appropriate for this research because multiculturalism is a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in institutional practices, policy narratives, and everyday governance processes. Qualitative methods enable an in-depth exploration of meanings, interpretations, and policy dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on how multicultural principles are articulated and enacted at the local government level, this study seeks to generate contextualized and interpretive insights into multicultural governance within a diverse urban setting.

The research is structured as a case study, with Medan City serving as the primary unit of analysis. Case study research is widely used in public policy and governance studies to investigate complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). Medan City was selected due to its high level of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, as well as its strategic role as a major urban center in Indonesia. This case provides a critical opportunity to analyze how multiculturalism is translated from normative commitments into local policy frameworks and administrative practices. The case study design allows for a holistic examination of policy formulation, implementation, and institutional interactions related to multiculturalism.

Research Design and Analytical Framework

The research design integrates policy analysis with interpretive governance perspectives. Policy analysis focuses on examining formal policy documents, regulations, and programs related to cultural diversity, social inclusion, and community relations, while the interpretive approach emphasizes how these policies are understood and enacted by local government actors. This combination reflects the view that policy implementation is not a linear process but a negotiated and interpretive practice shaped by institutional norms, actor perceptions, and socio-political contexts (Hill & Hupe, 2014). The analytical framework draws on multiculturalism theory, particularly recognition-based and governance-oriented perspectives, which emphasize institutional accommodation, inclusion, and participation (Kymlicka, 2012; Modood, 2013).

Data Sources and Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from multiple sources to enhance analytical depth and credibility. Primary data consist of official policy documents issued by the Medan City Government, including local regulations (*Peraturan Daerah*), mayoral decrees, strategic planning documents, and sectoral policy guidelines related to social

cohesion, cultural affairs, education, and community empowerment. Document-based research is a widely recognized method for policy studies, as official documents provide insights into formal priorities, policy rationales, and governance structures (Bowen, 2009). These documents were systematically collected from government archives, official websites, and relevant local government offices.

In addition to document analysis, the study incorporates semi-structured interviews with key informants involved in policy formulation and implementation. Informants include local government officials from relevant departments, such as social affairs, cultural affairs, education, and community development, as well as representatives of local advisory bodies concerned with social harmony. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives while maintaining a consistent focus on core research themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews were designed to elicit insights into how multiculturalism is interpreted by policymakers, how policies are implemented in practice, and what challenges are encountered in managing diversity at the local level.

To complement institutional perspectives, the study also draws on secondary data from academic publications, policy reports, and previous empirical studies on multiculturalism and local governance in Indonesia and comparable contexts. These sources provide theoretical grounding and comparative insights that inform the interpretation of empirical findings (Banting & Kymlicka, 2017; Scholten & Penninx, 2016). The integration of multiple data sources enables methodological triangulation, which strengthens the robustness of qualitative research by cross-validating findings across different types of evidence (Denzin, 2012).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis techniques. Policy documents were analyzed through qualitative content analysis to identify explicit references to multicultural principles, such as cultural recognition, inclusivity, participation, and equality. This process involved systematic coding of textual data to capture policy objectives, instruments, and implementation mechanisms (Schreier, 2012). Attention was given to both manifest content, such as explicit policy statements, and latent content, such as underlying assumptions and normative orientations toward diversity.

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, themes, and interpretations related to multicultural policy implementation. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for examining perceptions, experiences, and institutional practices, as it allows researchers to move from descriptive coding to more abstract analytical categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed an iterative process, in which initial codes were refined and grouped into broader themes reflecting policy interpretation, implementation challenges, and institutional responses. This iterative approach facilitated continuous engagement with the data and ensured that analytical categories were grounded in empirical evidence.

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research is essential, particularly in policy-oriented studies. This study applies several strategies to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability. First, data triangulation was employed by combining document analysis, interviews, and secondary sources, thereby reducing reliance on a single data source and strengthening the consistency of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, prolonged engagement with policy documents and interview data enabled a nuanced understanding of the institutional context and policy processes in Medan City.

To enhance analytical transparency, the coding and thematic analysis procedures were documented systematically, allowing for traceability between raw data and analytical interpretations. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the research process, with careful consideration of the researcher's positionality and potential biases in interpreting policy narratives and interview accounts (Finlay, 2002). These measures contribute to the methodological rigor and reliability of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Policy Frameworks and the Formal Articulation of Multiculturalism

Table 1. Summary of Policy Documents Analyzed

Document Type	Year	Key Focus	Explicit Reference to Diversity	Operational Mechanism	Analytical Note
Local Regulation on Social Harmony	2021	Social stability & order	Indirect	Mediation forums	Stability-oriented framing
Mayor Decree on Cultural Events	2022	Cultural celebration	Implicit	Annual festivals	Symbolic recognition
Strategic Development Plan (RPJMD)	2021–2026	Inclusive development	General mention	Sectoral programs	No clear multicultural framework
Education Policy Guideline	2023	Character education	Tolerance discourse	School programs	Embedded but not explicit

The analysis of local government policy documents indicates that multiculturalism in Medan City is articulated primarily through regulatory, strategic, and programmatic instruments rather than through a coherent and explicit policy framework. Local regulations and mayoral decrees consistently foreground social harmony, tolerance, and cultural diversity as normative principles of urban governance. While this reflects alignment with national ideals such as *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and the broader decentralization agenda, the emphasis remains largely symbolic. Multiculturalism is framed as a moral aspiration rather than a clearly defined governance objective supported by operational mechanisms, measurable indicators, or enforcement strategies.

At the discursive level, policy texts position diversity simultaneously as a social fact and a potential source of instability that must be managed institutionally. This framing echoes comparative findings from other multicultural urban contexts, where diversity is acknowledged not as a political right or structural condition but as a governance challenge requiring administrative coordination (Kymlicka, 2012; Modood, 2013). In Medan, this perspective privileges order and stability over substantive inclusion, suggesting a risk-averse approach in which cultural differences are tolerated insofar as they do not disrupt social cohesion or administrative control.

Strategic planning documents further reveal that multiculturalism is embedded implicitly rather than articulated as an explicit policy commitment. The absence of the term "multiculturalism" in key planning instruments signals a deliberate choice to subsume diversity under broader concepts such as social cohesion, community resilience, and inclusive development. While this approach allows flexibility and avoids political sensitivity, it also limits conceptual clarity. As a result, multicultural objectives become diffuse and vulnerable to inconsistent interpretation across sectors and administrative units.

This indirect operationalization is consistent with previous research showing that local governments often address multicultural issues through fragmented sectoral interventions rather than comprehensive strategies (Banting & Kymlicka, 2017). In Medan City, multicultural considerations are most visible in education, social welfare, and community empowerment policies. However, the lack of cross-sector coordination and formal integration mechanisms weakens policy coherence, reducing multiculturalism to a supplementary concern rather than a guiding principle of urban governance.

Institutional Roles and Policy Implementation Mechanisms

Findings from document analysis and interviews demonstrate that the implementation of multiculturalism in Medan City is characterized by a fragmented yet interconnected institutional arrangement. Multiple local government agencies, including departments responsible for social affairs, cultural development, education, and public order, are involved in translating policy objectives into practice. However, rather than being governed through a single authoritative body, multiculturalism is administered through dispersed responsibilities that rely heavily on informal coordination.

As one official from the Regional Planning Agency explained:

> *"There is no single department specifically responsible for multiculturalism. Each office runs its own programs according to its mandate, and coordination usually happens only when a specific issue emerges." (Informant 2, Regional Planning Agency)*

Similarly, an official from the Regional Secretariat noted:

> *"We collaborate across departments, but there is no formal structure that integrates all diversity-related initiatives into one comprehensive framework." (Informant 4, Regional Secretariat)*

This decentralized arrangement reflects a governance model in which collaboration substitutes for centralized authority, a pattern commonly observed in local-level diversity management (see Peter Scholten and Rinus Penninx). While such flexibility allows each agency to address multicultural issues within its sectoral mandate, it simultaneously dilutes strategic direction and weakens institutional coherence.

Interviews further indicate that no agency assumes clear leadership in defining or advancing multicultural objectives. As a result, implementation priorities vary significantly across institutions and are shaped more by administrative routines than by a shared policy vision. One senior official acknowledged:

> *"Multiculturalism is not formulated as a standalone policy priority. It is embedded within our regular programs, so naturally each department interprets it differently." (Informant 1, Governance Division)*

Beyond structural fragmentation, implementation practices are strongly influenced by how local officials interpret multiculturalism in practical terms. Rather than viewing it as a rights-based or recognition-oriented framework, many officials frame it primarily as an administrative responsibility centered on maintaining social stability. An official from the Public Order Department stated:

> *"Our main concern is preventing conflict. If relations between groups remain peaceful, we consider that a successful outcome." (Informant 3, Public Order Department)*

This pragmatic orientation aligns with governance perspectives emphasizing discretion and problem-solving in policy implementation (see Michael Hill and Peter Hupe). However, such an approach risks narrowing multiculturalism to conflict

management rather than promoting deeper forms of social inclusion and institutional recognition.

Consequently, implementation mechanisms tend to emphasize mediation, facilitation, and informal coordination among community actors. Officials described regular dialogue forums and ad hoc coordination meetings as key instruments for managing diversity-related issues. As one informant explained:

> *"When tensions arise, we bring community leaders together and facilitate dialogue. That is usually effective in resolving immediate problems." (Informant 5, Social Affairs Department)*

While these mechanisms are effective in responding to short-term tensions, they do not systematically address structural inequalities or long-term questions of representation. The absence of formalized legal mandates or measurable indicators related to cultural recognition limits the transformative capacity of multicultural governance.

Inter-agency collaboration therefore emerges as both a functional strength and a structural weakness. On the one hand, flexibility allows rapid response to emerging issues. On the other hand, unclear institutional leadership generates ambiguity in accountability and policy direction. Similar dynamics have been observed in decentralized governance contexts (e.g., Edward Aspinall; Ricard Zapata-Barrero). In Medan City, this ambiguity contributes to uneven implementation across sectors and administrative levels, ultimately constraining the effectiveness of multiculturalism as a sustained and coherent governance strategy.

Multicultural Practices in Public Service Delivery

The findings suggest that multiculturalism in Medan City is most visibly translated into practice through public service delivery, particularly in education and community-based social programs. However, rather than operating as a clearly articulated multicultural policy framework, these practices are embedded within broader administrative routines. Interviews indicate that schools are encouraged to promote tolerance and mutual respect, yet implementation depends largely on institutional initiative rather than standardized evaluation mechanisms.

An official from the Education Department explained:

> *"We encourage schools to promote tolerance through character education and extracurricular activities. However, there is no specific multicultural curriculum. It is integrated into existing subjects and school initiatives." (Informant 8, Education Department)*

This suggests that multicultural principles are incorporated implicitly rather than formally institutionalized. While this approach aligns in part with the multicultural education framework developed by James A. Banks, particularly in terms of content integration and inclusive learning environments, there is limited evidence of systematic monitoring, teacher training reform, or structured assessment mechanisms. As another informant acknowledged:

> *"Implementation depends a lot on school leadership. Some principals are proactive in organizing intercultural activities, while others focus mainly on academic performance indicators." (Informant 9, Education Office)*

This variation indicates that multicultural education practices are contingent on local leadership rather than embedded within a uniform institutional mandate.

Beyond formal education, multiculturalism is also operationalized through community-based programs such as dialogue forums, interfaith meetings, and cultural festivals. These initiatives reflect what Steven Vertovec describes as everyday

multiculturalism, further elaborated by Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham, where routine social interactions serve as sites for managing diversity.

A Social Affairs official described the approach:

> *"We regularly facilitate dialogue forums involving religious and community leaders. The aim is to maintain communication so that misunderstandings can be resolved early." (Informant 5, Social Affairs Department)*

Similarly, a Cultural Affairs representative stated:

> *"Cultural festivals are organized to celebrate diversity and encourage interaction between different ethnic communities. These events help build familiarity and reduce prejudice." (Informant 6, Cultural Affairs Office)*

While these programs promote interaction and symbolic recognition, interviews reveal uncertainty regarding their long-term structural impact. One informant critically reflected:

> *"The activities are effective in bringing people together temporarily, but changing deeper perceptions and inequalities requires more sustained engagement." (Informant 4, Regional Secretariat)*

This observation highlights a key analytical tension. Although everyday interaction fosters coexistence, it does not necessarily transform underlying power relations or institutional inequalities. Without sustained policy integration and measurable inclusion targets, multicultural practices risk remaining facilitative rather than transformative.

Another significant finding concerns uneven implementation across neighborhoods. Interviews reveal that areas with active community organizations and strong local leadership benefit more from multicultural initiatives, whereas other neighborhoods experience limited engagement. As one official explained:

> *"In areas where community leaders are active, programs run smoothly and participation is high. In other areas, it is more difficult to mobilize people." (Informant 7, Community Development Office)*

This unevenness can be interpreted through the lens of social capital theory, particularly the distinction made by Robert D. Putnam between bonding and bridging social capital. In neighborhoods characterized by strong bridging ties across groups, multicultural initiatives appear more effective. However, in areas dominated by bonding networks within homogeneous communities, participation tends to be limited.

Furthermore, disparities are not solely attributable to social capital but also reflect differences in administrative capacity and resource allocation. As another informant noted:

> *"Some districts have better coordination and more resources. Others depend heavily on voluntary participation, which makes continuity difficult." (Informant 2, Regional Planning Agency)*

Taken together, these findings indicate that multicultural practices in public service delivery operate incrementally and unevenly. They foster everyday interaction and symbolic inclusion but lack comprehensive institutionalization. While these initiatives contribute positively to social cohesion, their effectiveness depends on local leadership, available resources, and community engagement. Without stronger integration into formal policy frameworks, multicultural governance in Medan City remains pragmatic and adaptive rather than strategically transformative.

Perceptions of Multiculturalism among Local Government Actors

Understanding how multiculturalism is implemented at the local level requires attention not only to formal policy frameworks but also to the subjective interpretations of policy actors. In governance studies, implementation is widely recognized as an interpretive process in which actors translate abstract policy ideas into concrete administrative practices. The meaning attributed to a concept such as multiculturalism therefore plays a decisive role in shaping how it is prioritized, operationalized, and evaluated within institutional settings. Rather than functioning as a fixed normative doctrine, multiculturalism is interpreted differently depending on professional responsibilities, institutional mandates, and practical governance concerns.

Within the context of Medan City, interviews reveal that multiculturalism does not carry a single, uniform meaning among local government officials. Instead, it is understood through multiple lenses that reflect both administrative pragmatism and normative commitments. These differing interpretations influence how policies are designed, which programs receive attention, and how success is defined in practice.

Interview findings demonstrate that local government actors hold diverse and sometimes competing perceptions of multiculturalism, which directly shape policy implementation priorities. A dominant perspective frames multiculturalism primarily as a tool for conflict prevention and social order maintenance. In this understanding, diversity is viewed less as a matter of rights or institutional recognition and more as a governance challenge requiring careful management. This security-oriented orientation aligns with interpretations of diversity governance discussed by Christian Joppke, where multicultural policies are justified insofar as they contribute to stability and public order.

An official from the Public Order Department explained:

> *"In a city as diverse as Medan, our main concern is preventing conflict. Multicultural programs are important as long as they help maintain harmony and avoid social tension." (Informant 3, Public Order Department)*

Similarly, a governance official noted:

> *"We focus on ensuring that different communities coexist peacefully. If there is no conflict, that means the policy is working." (Informant 1, Governance Division)*

These statements indicate that for many actors, the effectiveness of multicultural governance is measured primarily by the absence of unrest rather than by indicators of institutional inclusion or representation. Diversity management is therefore embedded within a stability-oriented administrative logic.

At the same time, a smaller group of interviewees articulated a more normative and recognition-based understanding of multiculturalism. Their views resonate with theories developed by Bhikhu Parekh and Will Kymlicka, which emphasize the democratic importance of acknowledging cultural differences within institutional structures. A representative from the Social Affairs Department stated:

> *"Multiculturalism should not only be about preventing problems. It should ensure that every group feels recognized and has access to decision-making processes." (Informant 5, Social Affairs Department)*

This coexistence of security-oriented and recognition-oriented interpretations reveals that multiculturalism within local government institutions is shaped by institutional logic rather than ideological uniformity.

Challenges in Implementing Multicultural Policies

While previous sections demonstrate that multicultural practices are present within various sectors of local governance, their implementation remains neither comprehensive nor structurally consolidated. Understanding the limitations of multicultural governance requires moving beyond formal commitments and examining the institutional, fiscal, and political constraints that shape policy execution in practice. Interviews reveal that although there is no explicit resistance to diversity, the operationalization of multicultural principles is constrained by structural fragmentation, limited resources, and fluctuating political commitment.

One major challenge is the absence of a clearly articulated and integrated multicultural policy framework. Although diversity-related initiatives exist across education, social affairs, cultural programs, and community development, they are not unified under a coherent strategic vision. This fragmentation limits coordination and weakens long-term planning. As one planning official explained:

> "There is no master framework specifically guiding multicultural policy. Each department has relevant programs, but they are not systematically connected." (Informant 2, Regional Planning Agency)

Another informant noted:

> "Coordination depends heavily on informal communication. Without a formal umbrella policy, programs sometimes overlap or leave gaps." (Informant 4, Regional Secretariat)

This condition reflects broader findings in the literature. Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka argue that local multicultural governance often suffers from sectoral fragmentation when diversity is not embedded within an overarching institutional design. In Medan City, multiculturalism functions more as a cross-cutting theme than as a formally institutionalized policy domain.

A second major challenge concerns resource constraints. Interviewees consistently emphasized limitations in budget allocation, staffing, and technical expertise. While multicultural initiatives are acknowledged as important, they are frequently deprioritized in favor of infrastructure, economic development, or urgent social welfare programs.

An official from the Social Affairs Department stated:

> "When budgeting decisions are made, programs directly related to poverty reduction or basic services usually come first. Diversity programs are important, but they are not always seen as urgent." (Informant 6, Social Affairs Department)

Similarly, a Cultural Affairs representative explained:

> "We do not have specialized staff focusing solely on diversity management. Officers handle multiple responsibilities, which limits program continuity." (Informant 5, Cultural Affairs Office)

These resource constraints affect not only program scale but also sustainability. Without stable funding and dedicated personnel, multicultural initiatives risk becoming periodic events rather than sustained governance strategies. This concern resonates with the argument advanced by Thomas Faist that diversity policies without adequate institutional backing tend to remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Political dynamics further complicate implementation. Interviews reveal that leadership orientation significantly influences policy prioritization and continuity. Although there is no overt opposition to multicultural principles, institutional

commitment fluctuates depending on political agendas and administrative transitions.

One senior official observed:

> *"If the mayor emphasizes social cohesion and inclusion in the annual agenda, programs receive stronger support. But when leadership priorities shift, attention to diversity may decrease." (Informant 1, Governance Division)*

Another informant added:

> *"There is general agreement about maintaining harmony, but multiculturalism is not always framed as a strategic political priority. It depends on the administration." (Informant 3, Public Order Department)*

This vulnerability to political change aligns with broader debates on the fragility of multicultural policies in shifting political climates, as discussed by Nasrullah Meer and Tariq Modood. In Medan City, multicultural governance remains pragmatically accepted but strategically contingent.

Taken together, these challenges reveal that multiculturalism at the local level operates within structural and political constraints that limit its institutional depth. The absence of an integrated framework, restricted resources, and fluctuating political commitment collectively constrain the development of a coherent and sustainable multicultural governance regime. Rather than reflecting ideological resistance, these limitations stem from administrative structure, fiscal prioritization, and political pragmatism.

Outcomes and Implications for Social Cohesion

Despite the institutional and coordination challenges identified earlier, the findings indicate that local government policies have contributed positively to social cohesion in Medan City, particularly at the community level. Evidence from interviews and document analysis suggests that multicultural initiatives have supported relatively peaceful intergroup relations and encouraged everyday cooperation across ethnic and religious boundaries. These outcomes resonate with empirical research showing that diversity, when governed through inclusive and responsive frameworks, does not necessarily undermine social cohesion (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2005; Wood & Landry, 2008).

At the community level, multicultural interventions appear most effective in informal and participatory settings, such as community forums, interfaith dialogues, and neighborhood-based programs. These spaces enable direct interaction among diverse groups and foster trust through sustained engagement rather than formal regulation alone. The effectiveness of such initiatives suggests that relational governance mechanisms can compensate, to some extent, for the absence of a comprehensive multicultural policy framework.

However, the positive effects of multicultural policies are neither uniform nor guaranteed across the city. The findings reveal significant variation in policy outcomes depending on local social dynamics, leadership capacity, and the presence of active community organizations. In areas with strong local facilitation, multicultural initiatives translate into meaningful participation and inclusion. In contrast, communities with weaker institutional support or limited civic infrastructure remain marginal to policy implementation.

This uneven impact underscores the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to multicultural governance. The results support the argument that effective multiculturalism requires adaptive and context-sensitive policy design that responds to local conditions rather than standardized administrative templates (Zapata-

Barrero, 2015). Without such adaptability, policies risk reinforcing existing inequalities by benefiting communities that are already better positioned to engage with government programs.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how local government policies shape and implement multiculturalism in Medan City, revealing that multicultural governance at the municipal level is largely pragmatic, sectoral, and embedded within existing administrative frameworks rather than articulated as a comprehensive policy regime. The findings demonstrate that local policies formally endorse diversity through discourses of social harmony, tolerance, and inclusion, yet their implementation is primarily driven by institutional interpretations focused on social stability and conflict prevention. While multicultural initiatives in education and community-based programs have contributed positively to intergroup interaction and local-level social cohesion, their effectiveness remains uneven due to fragmented policy coordination, resource constraints, and fluctuating political commitment. These results underscore the importance of institutional capacity, inter-agency coordination, and leadership continuity in translating normative multicultural principles into meaningful governance practices. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence from a Southeast Asian urban context, highlighting the central role of local governments as key mediators between national diversity ideals and everyday multicultural realities. By foregrounding policy implementation rather than normative discourse, this research extends multiculturalism scholarship toward governance-oriented analysis. Future research could build on these findings through comparative studies across Indonesian cities or by incorporating community perspectives to further assess the social impacts of local multicultural policies.

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