

RECONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL MODALITIES IN TALING CUSTOMS: Cultural Strategies in Policies to Combat *Stunting* in East Flores

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how the Taling customary practice, carried out by Lamaholot women, can be reconstructed as a cultural strategy in stunting prevention policies in East Flores Regency. Using a qualitative approach and ethnographic methods, this study positions Taling as a social modality for women that has not been accommodated in formal policy design but functions effectively in maintaining food security and community solidarity. The Longwe women's empowerment framework was used to evaluate the extent to which indigenous women achieved the five dimensions of empowerment: welfare, access to resources, critical awareness, participation, and control in the local development process. The research was conducted in five villages within Witihamu Sub-district, utilizing participatory observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary studies. The findings show that the local value-based food redistribution system in Taling practice effectively strengthens women's leadership, builds social trust, and creates distribution mechanisms that are responsive to the needs of vulnerable households. However, this social power has not been recognized in the framework of stunting prevention policies, which are still dominated by a technocratic approach. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating social and community structures into local public policy through participatory, adaptive, and culturally based governance models.

Keywords: Taling, Stunting, Women's Empowerment, Public Policy, Food Redistribution.

INTRODUCTION

Stunting is a condition of growth failure due to chronic malnutrition in the first thousand days of life, reflecting nutritional vulnerability, structural poverty, and social inequality (Dewey and Begum, 2011; Black et al. 2013). At the global level, its prevention is generally still dominated by technocratic approaches through nutritional interventions, behavioural change education, and improved access to basic services (Aryeetey et al. 2022). However, recent studies show that in many countries, such as India and Bangladesh, efforts to tackle stunting have begun to focus on involving women in decision-making, food management, and access to economic resources, which have proven to be key factors in sustainably reducing the prevalence of stunting (Kumar, 2020).

In Indonesia, various cross-sectoral strategic policies have emphasised the importance of women's roles in stunting prevention programmes (Saputri et al., 2020). However, this involvement is generally still instrumental and limited to domestic tasks, such as nutrition education and child growth monitoring, without real access to decision-making

spaces or resource management at the community level (Martony, 2023). This disparity suggests that although normative recognition of women's roles has been incorporated into policy documents on stunting, its implementation at the grassroots level does not yet fully reflect genuine empowerment (Charda et al., 2023).

In East Flores Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, the prevalence of stunting in children aged 0–59 months reached 18.7% in 2022, stagnated in 2023, and increased to 20% in 2024 (Picauly et al. 2022; SH Inang 2025). Local governments have made various efforts to reduce this rate, one of which is through the Gerobak Cinta convergence programme, which focuses on providing supplementary food for infants under two years of age (Kumanireng, 2021). This programme is considered capable of reducing the prevalence of stunting in East Flores Regency in the short term (Kelen 2023).

However, the study's results show that the technocratic approach in the Gerobak Cinta programme has been ineffective and has failed to address the sustainability dimension of stunting prevention. To date, there has been no programme that explicitly accommodates women's empowerment in stunting prevention efforts. Programmes such as *Gerobak Cinta* tend to position the community as beneficiaries, with limited involvement from local elites and Lamaholot women's groups, whose roles are confined to the domestic sphere (Lamawuran et al. 2023). As a result, women's groups play a more passive role as recipients rather than agents of change, making it challenging to achieve programme effectiveness and sustainability. In fact, the Lamaholot community in East Flores has a social system that inherently places women as pillars of food security and community solidarity, one of which is through the *Taling* customary practice.

In Lamaholot society, the *Taling* custom serves as a mechanism for food redistribution led by women and passed down across generations (Bebe, 2018). This tradition regulates the circulation of food between households, strengthens clan solidarity, and provides a forum for the community to learn about nutrition and food processing together. Women play a central role as recorders, managers, and coordinators of distribution—demonstrating a participatory and egalitarian form of leadership in maintaining household and community food security. Thus, *Taling* represents a social modality rooted in local cultural values and informal social control mechanisms. Although proven effective, this social structure is still not formally recognised in stunting mitigation policies.

The integration of *Taling* into stunting prevention programmes at the local level has the potential to facilitate policy implementation by utilising the existing networks of solidarity and social trust among Lamaholot women. The *Taling* system inherently upholds the principles of equitable food distribution and shared social responsibility—two governance principles that are essential for achieving nutritional security. The recognition and institutionalisation of such customary practices in district-level development planning will strengthen the contextual relevance, community participation, and sustainability of public health programmes. For local governments, strengthening empowerment models such as *Taling* requires adaptive and inclusive policy instruments—namely, policies that support women's leadership, local resource management, and inter-household collaboration. Such

efforts will transform cultural capital into public value, placing the agency of indigenous women at the foundation of community-based health governance.

Assessing the extent to which these practices reflect transformative empowerment requires an analytical framework capable of assessing structural and multi-level changes in women's social roles. The women's empowerment framework developed by Longwe provides a relevant analytical lens for assessing women's agency in stunting mitigation policies (Longwe 2002; Amoah and Mensah 2023). This framework encompasses five levels of empowerment: welfare, access to resources, participation in decision-making, conscientization of gender inequalities, and control over resources and development processes. Through this framework, this study examines the extent to which Lamaholot women act as agents of social transformation in *Taling* practices, rather than merely implementing government programmes.

The global discourse on stunting is still dominated by a technocratic approach that focuses on nutritional interventions (Corrêa et al. 2023; Gabain, Ramsteijn, and Webster 2023), behavioural education (Leroy et al. 2014; Iversen et al. 2021) and the provision of basic services (Bridgman and von Fintel 2022; Balza et al. 2025). However, few global studies have examined culture-based approaches to assessing the sustainability of stunting prevention policies. Studies on stunting from a cultural perspective are more commonly found in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. Several studies in Indonesia have highlighted the potential of local practices, such as the *Hedole Dole* tradition in Wakatobi, which has been shown to boost the immune system of toddlers (Udu et al. 2019), *Me Bu Geteng* in Bireuen, which is integrated with the PMT programme (Yunanda, Chalid, and Meliza 2022), and the *Bu'a Oring* tradition in East Flores, which emphasises cooperation and deliberation in community-based stunting prevention (Lamawuran et al. 2023).

However, most of these studies still focus on spiritual aspects, social values, or nutritional interventions. Studies that specifically analyse how culture can function as a social mechanism to encourage active participation by women, particularly through collective food management and resource redistribution, are still minimal.

This research presents empirical, theoretical, and methodological innovations by making the *Taling* custom the main object of analysis. Empirically, this study is the first to examine *Taling*—a Lamaholot customary mechanism meaning "to add/contribute" and carried out through the provision of food between households—as *a social infrastructure for women* that functions effectively in food redistribution and meeting the nutritional needs of vulnerable households. *Taling* is implemented in a structured manner: the oldest women lead the giving process, record the flow of exchanges, manage food storage, and determine allocations for households in need, so that this mechanism functions as a community logistics system based on customary norms and kinship solidarity. Theoretically, this research makes a new contribution by integrating Longwe's empowerment framework to demonstrate how the five dimensions of women's empowerment—well-being, access, participation, critical awareness, and control—are formed through the practice of *Taling*. This approach has not been utilized in previous cultural or stunting studies. Methodologically, the use of

ethnography enables the detailed mapping of actors, processes, and social relations that support Taling practices. These findings also demonstrate the potential of Taling as a community-based stunting intervention model that local governments in East Nusa Tenggara can adapt through participatory governance rooted in women's leadership and local cultural legitimacy.

Based on this background, the main question in this study is: How can the reconstruction of women's social modalities in the Taling tradition be adapted into a community redistribution strategy for sustainable stunting prevention in East Flores Regency?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods to explore Taling customs in Lamaholot society, particularly in relation to women's social roles and collective strategies for stunting prevention. This method allows for a deep understanding of cultural dynamics and social relations in everyday life, (Creswell 2018) Including symbolic meanings, food management, and social control exercised by women through *Taling*.

The study was conducted in Witihamas Subdistrict, East Flores Regency, an area where the practice of *Taling* is still active and stunting rates are relatively high. Five villages were selected purposively: Sandosi, Balaweling, Weranggere, Watoone, and Pledo, representing relevant geographical and social diversity. The primary informants consisted of women who practised *Taling*, mothers with stunted children, traditional leaders, health cadres, village officials, and officials from the P2KBP3A Office and the East Flores Health Office. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in the issues of *Taling* and stunting.

Data collection was conducted using four techniques: (1) participatory observation in the implementation of *Taling*; (2) in-depth interviews to explore the experiences and understanding of informants; (3) focus group discussions (FGD) to gather collective views; and (4) documentation studies from posyandu archives, PMT programme reports, and stunting data from relevant agencies. Data analysis was conducted thematically, including transcription, reduction, coding, categorisation, pattern identification, triangulation, and contextual interpretation, to capture the social relations, women's roles, and cultural meanings of *Taling* practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Stunting Management Policy in East Flores: Evaluation of Gerobak Cinta and its Implications for Women's Empowerment

East Flores Regency was once in an alarming position on the national stunting map. Based on data from the Health Office, the prevalence of stunting in this region consistently has high figures, namely 35.01% in 2015, 34.9% in 2016, and 33.55% in 2017. This trend continued into 2018, with a rate of 32.23%, and 2019, at 31.07%. Every year, more than 4,900 toddlers are recorded as suffering from chronic growth disorders.

In response, the local government introduced an innovative policy to combat stunting called Gerobak Cinta (*Movement to Share Love for Children*). This programme was born out of a collective spirit to combat stunting through an approach based on the values of love, solidarity, and cooperation. The programme targets infants aged 6–9 months who are part of the vulnerable 1,000 Days of Life (HPK) group, providing them with nutritious supplementary food for 90 days through targeted interventions. The food is prepared from local ingredients, including sorghum, moringa, and quail eggs, which are not only highly nutritious but also reflect the potential of local resources. In the initial stage, the programme was funded by the Health Operational Assistance Fund (BOK) and the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD). However, after national policy mandated the convergence of stunting programmes into village planning, funding was transferred entirely to the Village Fund.

The implementation of the programme involved cross-sectoral actors, including posyandu cadres, health workers, PKK mothers, and village governments. In the field, the cadres were tasked with ensuring food distribution, nutrition education, and assistance to target families. The spirit of cooperation was evident in this collective involvement, although not all villages showed the same level of commitment to the sustainability of the programme.

In terms of achievements, Gerobak Cinta showed positive results in the early stages of its implementation. The prevalence of stunting fell significantly from 31.07% in 2019 to 22.07% in 2020. Unfortunately, this downward trend did not continue consistently. The stunting rate stagnated at 22.06% in 2021, fell to 18.7% in 2022, but rose again to 20% in 2024. The results of the evaluation by the NTT Provincial Stunting Working Group and academic studies show that this programme has not been able to address the challenges of long-term sustainability. Specifically, this fluctuating pattern indicates that the initial success of Gerobak Cinta was highly dependent on the intensity of food aid distribution, rather than on strengthening the community's social structure. The main criticism of this programme lies in its technocratic approach and its treatment of women as passive implementers. Compared to the findings of this study, the Taling customary practice offers a more sustainable model because it relies on women's leadership, kinship solidarity, and food redistribution mechanisms that are deeply rooted in the local culture.

Interviews revealed that one of the leading causes is the policy and budgeting structures at the village level. Although Gerobak Cinta has become a national priority, its implementation at the village level still depends heavily on the commitment of the village head and his staff. In some areas, the issue of stunting is not included in village development priorities or receives only a tiny portion of the budget compared to physical expenditures, such as infrastructure. This imbalance makes programme implementation uneven and prone to discontinuation when it is not fully supported politically and administratively.

Beyond structural barriers, challenges also arise from cultural aspects and community consumption habits. Not all parents understand the importance of PMT and its nutritional content. Some reject the food because they are unfamiliar with ingredients such as sorghum or do not know how to prepare it. Community participation is often merely a

formality, as the approach emphasises administrative reporting rather than building understanding rooted in the daily experiences of residents.

This situation also contributes to the low level of women's involvement in decision-making. Despite women's role as primary caregivers for children, their involvement in programme planning is minimal. Women are often positioned as technical implementers, such as cooks or attendants at integrated health service posts, without access to strategic decision-making spaces, including village deliberations or budget planning. Interviews and field observations indicate that deliberative forums are still predominantly led by men, including those from the village government and traditional leaders.

The lack of women's involvement in programme planning and evaluation indicates that an empowerment approach has not yet been incorporated into policy design. This procedural involvement is insufficient to create structural change in power relations and gender role distribution. In fact, within the Lamaholot community in East Flores, women play a crucial role in local food knowledge, childcare practices, and family health, which, if maximized, can be a significant pillar in combating stunting.

Thus, the evaluation of Gerobak Cinta needs to be expanded from merely assessing technical effectiveness to considering the extent to which this policy is capable of fostering inclusive and gender-sensitive governance. Without a transformation in the empowerment of women as subjects of development, this programme risks losing its strategic potential in realising sustainable stunting prevention at the community level.

Taling as a Social Modality for Women in Community Food Distribution

In Lamaholot society, the word "*taling*" means "*to add*" or "*to contribute*." It is often paired with the word "*tulun*" (*to help*), forming the phrase "*tulun taling*," which reflects the spirit of cooperation and solidarity. Taling is practised in various social contexts, especially when families hold traditional ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, or celebrations. The community provides natural resources, garden produce, or livestock as a form of support voluntarily. However, taling is more than just an act of giving; it is an expression of collective values that bind the community through a sense of responsibility, respect for kinship relations, and spiritual involvement.

The values in taling do not stop at the material dimension. This tradition is an expression of inner presence, which is manifested in local symbols such as *hungen teti kotek* (carried on the head), *leba teti hanan* (carried on the shoulders), and *saga no'o tetek lali limak* (carried in the hands). This expression implies that giving is not just about goods, but a form of complete physical and spiritual involvement. The items brought can be rice, corn, coffee, sacrificial animals, traditional sarongs, and even palm wine—all measured not by economic value, but by sincerity.

Taling is carried out collectively. In every traditional ceremony, the sending family is led by the eldest woman, such as *ina bine* or *wae puken*. They walk at the front of the procession, carrying the gifts, followed by the mothers and girls, then the men, who carry palm wine or animals. Their arrival is greeted with a traditional ritual: *siri pinang* treats and

palm wine. The items brought are handed over to the party organisers and stored in a special room called *Rie Hikun Lima Wanan*, which is guarded by *bine* (sisters of the tribe) and managed by them. Throughout this process, women have complete control, both symbolically and practically, over the logistics and distribution of resources.

From a social capital perspective, the Taling system contains four important dimensions. First, relational capital strengthens networks between families and clans. Second, symbolic capital, in the form of respect for values, norms, and social hierarchy. Third, normative capital, because its implementation is based on customary obligations that have been passed down across generations. Fourth, distributional capital enables women to perform logistical functions based on collective ethics, rather than relying on administrative power. These four aspects make Taling a living, adaptive, and legitimate food distribution system in the eyes of the community.

In the context of nutritional vulnerability and high stunting rates in East Flores, systems such as Taling hold great potential as social infrastructure for community-based food redistribution. The state, through technocratic interventions such as food aid or nutrition education, often fails to reach the most vulnerable households, mainly because its approach is uniform and out of touch with the social context. In contrast, Taling works with a high sensitivity to local needs. Indigenous women do not need administrative data to know who needs help; they read social symptoms through collective relationships and experiences.

The role of women in *Taling* is not a cultural coincidence, but an established social structure. They are not merely traditional practitioners, but managers of the distribution system. With their position as value holders and technical actors, Lamaholot women are the main determinants of the sustainability of food solidarity. This structure empowers women to be decision-makers, protectors of norms, and guardians of social balance.

The superiority of *Taling* as a female social modality demonstrates that fair and sustainable food redistribution does not always require external design, but can emerge from within through proven local systems. Compared to bureaucratic approaches, Taling has the advantage of being run by actors trusted by the community and operating with cultural legitimacy. Therefore, recognition of such systems is not only important as a cultural heritage but also as a participatory, fair, and grassroots approach to nutrition policy design.

Analysis of Women's Empowerment in Taling Customs Based on the Longwe Framework

To systematically understand the empowerment of indigenous women in *Taling* practices, the Longwe framework is employed, which encompasses five dimensions: welfare, access, conscientization, *participation*, and *control*. These five aspects represent the hierarchy of women's empowerment, from the fulfilment of basic needs to control over collective resources. In the context of Lamaholot society, all these dimensions are firmly embedded in the practice of food redistribution through the Taling customary system.

The first dimension is *welfare*. This dimension describes the extent to which basic household needs, especially food and nutrition, are reasonably met. In Lamaholot, indigenous

women play a key role in recognising and responding to household food crises through sensitive social observation. They read signs such as changes in eating patterns or children dropping out of school. Through *Taling*, food distribution is carried out collectively without the label of "aid", avoiding stigma and maintaining the dignity of the recipients. This process places welfare as a social relationship, not a one-way gift. This approach reflects a more resilient and humane community-based safety net system, as described by the 2018 report.

The second dimension is *access*. In Longwe's framework, this means the ability to obtain and manage resources. In Lamaholot, women's access to food is not determined by administrative means but rather based on social legitimacy and customary responsibilities. Women are fully trusted to manage food distribution and assess who is most in need. This process takes place without bureaucratic procedures. When a crisis arises, women leaders in *Taling* immediately coordinate assistance based on social knowledge and community empathy. Food is often distributed through indirect channels to preserve the dignity of the recipients. This model shows that indigenous women have absolute control over strategic food flows and are trusted to maintain household balance. These findings align with research that suggests local redistribution often provides greater opportunities for women to manage resources efficiently and effectively in their specific contexts.

The third dimension is *conscientisation*. This dimension pertains to women's awareness of their social position and the structural inequalities they face. In *Taling*, women's collective consciousness developed out of community experiences and values, rather than because of external intervention. They understood that the state's formal food distribution often ignored the social role of indigenous women. Instead of submitting to a formal system that marginalised them, indigenous women created alternative mechanisms based on local values. They take over the role of food distribution, determine the recipients, and develop a system that maintains dignity and social equality. This process demonstrates active and strategic critical awareness, as described by Cornwall, that women's awareness is not only to understand domination, but also to redefine the social system.

The fourth dimension is *participation*. Women's participation in *Taling* is not merely a symbolic presence, but substantive involvement in decision-making and the implementation of redistribution. Women lead the entire process: from determining the timing and form of distribution to deciding who is eligible to receive it. Informants mentioned that women are often the most knowledgeable about the conditions of the kitchen and the difficulties faced by each household. They act as facilitators and negotiators, even though they do not hold formal positions in the village government structure, such as Musrenbangdes. However, in the customary structure, their positions are recognised and respected. This participation does not require formal legality, as social legitimacy is the basis of their authority. This illustrates an authentic model of participation based on values and social relationships, which differs significantly from the state model, which is often based solely on administrative presence.

The fifth dimension is *control*. The highest dimension of empowerment is control, which is the ability to make strategic decisions for oneself and the community. Lamaholot

indigenous women are not only technical implementers, but also the final decision-makers in food distribution. They manage community storage spaces and decide when and how reserves are used. Their decisions are final and cannot be interfered with by village officials. This suggests that control originates from experience, ongoing roles, and collective trust, rather than formal positions. In *Taling*, women manage more than logistics. They maintain the rhythm of social solidarity, determine the ethics of giving, and ensure the continuity of relationships between households. This control is substantive because it has a direct impact on community balance and collective survival.

Through the Longwe empowerment framework, *Taling* practices can be interpreted as a process of empowerment that occurs in stages and systematically within the Lamaholot social structure. In terms of *welfare*, *Taling* ensures that families' food needs are met through a system of mutual giving based on the values of responsibility and social balance. In terms of access to resources, women have customary legitimacy to manage and distribute harvests and community resources, thereby strengthening their position as managers of the social economy. Participation is evident in women's active role in every deliberate process and customary decision-making related to logistics, rituals, and social relations between families. Meanwhile, the dimension of *conscientisation* (critical awareness) is manifested in the collective awareness that the role of women is not merely to complement ceremonies, but to maintain social balance and determine the sustainability of the customary system. Finally, in the dimension of control, Lamaholot women hold the highest authority in regulating social resources and ensuring that food circulation remains fair and based on collective ethics. Thus, women's empowerment in *Taling* is not the result of state intervention, but a form of social sovereignty that has grown from values, life experiences, and networks of solidarity that have long been rooted in the Lamaholot indigenous community.

Reconstruction of *Taling* Customary Law: A Cultural Strategy for Stunting Prevention

This study found that the *Taling* customary system, as practised in the Lamaholot community, has a social structure, ethical values, and distribution mechanisms that serve as social capital for women in maintaining community food security. However, this strength has not been recognised as a strategic resource in the formulation of nutrition policies and stunting prevention. These findings reveal a gap between the technocratic approach of the state and the local social system, which has proven to be adaptive and participatory in nature. In practice, *Taling* has the capacity to function as a food redistribution system run by women with customary authority, but it is not formally recognised in intervention designs. In fact, as described earlier through the framework of the ', this practice fulfils the entire spectrum of women's empowerment: from access, participation, critical awareness, to control over community resources.

Previous studies also reinforce these findings. The study by Velásquez et al. (2018) shows that community-based food distribution systems run by women have a direct effect on reducing nutritional vulnerability (Martinez et al., 2019). It adds that informal structures

run by local women are often faster and more targeted than formal mechanisms. Meanwhile, the study by Bhutta et al. (2020) emphasises that community-based interventions involving local social authorities produce more sustainable impacts in reducing stunting. In the context of Lamaholot, all these characteristics are reflected in the practice of *Taling*.

As also emphasised by (Amoah and Mensah 2023), interventions based on local women have proven to be more effective in addressing the needs of vulnerable households. However, in the Lamaholot context, the power of women is not formed through formal training or projects but is inherited and institutionalised within living customary structures. This forms the basis for developing a reconstruction strategy that is not top-down, but rather stems from existing values, practices, and legitimacy.

The reconstruction in question is not a substantive renewal of customs, but rather a reinterpretation of their social function within the framework of public policy. This means that the state and the community need to find common ground where community distribution systems, such as *Taling*, can be recognised, supported, and integrated without eliminating local authority. In this context, indigenous women are not merely cultural actors, but strategic actors in the community's food security and nutrition system.

This study then compiled five adaptive strategies as a synthesis of field data and reflective analysis of social practices in the community, with detailed explanations as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Taling Indigenous Adaptive Strategies in Addressing Stunting

NO	STRATEGY	BRIEF DESCRIPTION
1	Formal legitimisation of the Taling custom within the village Policy structure.	Promoting recognition of Taling as a local value-based food redistribution system integrated into village planning documents such as the RPJMDes and RKPDes.
2	Institutionalising the role of women in village decision-making-making forums.	Requiring the involvement of indigenous women, such as <i>ina puken</i> and <i>wae puken</i> in village deliberations and policy forums, not merely as symbolic participants.
3	Strengthening the capacity of nutrition cadres based on the local context.	Providing training to posyandu cadres and nutrition educators to understand traditional values and norms related to food, so that interventions are more participatory and contextual.
4	Integrating Traditional Food Bams as a Village Nutrition Reserves.	Formalising existing traditional food storage systems based on cooperation to support households at risk of stunting.
5	Establishing a Collaborative Forum between Customary Communities, the State, and Health Workers.	Creating a space for communication between actors to develop joint strategies, harmonise technical approaches and local values, and build cross-sector trust.

Source: Researcher Processing (2025)

These five strategies do not stand alone but are interconnected as systematic steps towards the recognition and integration of local values in public health policy. By making

Taling part of the stunting prevention strategy, the state not only respects cultural heritage but also builds a participatory, rooted, and sustainable intervention model.

Integration of Taling Traditional Values in Stunting Prevention Policies in East Flores

The integration of Taling values into stunting prevention policies in East Flores marks an important shift in public administration practices from a bureaucratic-centralised approach to collaborative community-based governance (Ansell and Gash 2007; Ahmad and Esposito 2025). In this case, Taling is a bottom-up community-based social governance innovation in which indigenous women act as managers, distributors, and decision-makers regarding community food resources.

The values embodied in Taling—such as solidarity, distributive justice, and women's participation—are tangible forms of *public value* that have grown in the local context but are often overlooked by uniform and technocratic national policy design (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014). The Lamaholot experience shows that indigenous-based food redistribution models are more effective in reaching vulnerable groups than top-down state interventions.

Therefore, integrating Taling into the policy system requires a *co-production* mechanism between the government, communities, and indigenous actors. In this context, indigenous women are not only implementers but also co-designers and co-producers of food distribution and stunting prevention policies (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). Formal recognition of Taling in the RPJMDes and RKPDes documents is a crucial step in institutionalizing local values into an inclusive and participatory public administration system (Telleria, 2021).

Furthermore, the practice of Taling demonstrates the principle of *adaptive governance*, namely, the community's ability to develop innovations based on local knowledge and respond flexibly to change (Chaffin et al. 2024). The state needs to adopt social learning from communities, rather than simply distributing programmes from above.

This integration not only strengthens the effectiveness of stunting interventions but also emphasises the importance of women's participation, transparency, and accountability in the delivery of public services. Empowering indigenous women as food distribution managers and local decision-makers fosters public service innovations that are grounded in community values and oriented towards social justice.

Thus, the integration of Taling values becomes a model of inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable stunting prevention governance—a public policy alternative capable of addressing the complexity of stunting holistically and in a contextually relevant manner.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the Taling customary practice in Lamaholot society is not merely a cultural tradition, but an active social system run by women as a solidarity-based food distribution mechanism. In the context of food security and stunting prevention, Taling serves as a responsive, fair, and participatory redistribution structure, particularly for

vulnerable households. Indigenous women play a central role as managers, regulators, and guardians of values in this system, although these roles are not yet recognised in formal policies.

Using the Longwe empowerment framework, this study demonstrates that Lamaholot women have achieved a comprehensive spectrum of empowerment, encompassing access and welfare, as well as participation and control over community resources. The reconstruction of the Taling custom does not aim to change its substance, but rather to reinterpret and integrate it as a cultural strategy in the design of more contextual and sustainable nutrition policies. Social practices such as this prove that solutions to stunting do not always come from external interventions but can grow from within the community itself.

The five adaptive strategies that have been developed—ranging from the formal legitimisation of Taling to the establishment of a collaborative forum between the state and indigenous communities—offer a participatory policy direction based on local values. This study recommends that future stunting prevention policies should not only focus on medical approaches but also recognise and support social systems that have proven effective at the community level. In this way, food distribution justice and women's empowerment can go hand in hand as the foundation for sustainable social transformation.

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