Jurnal Kebijakan Publik
Vol. 17, No. 2, June, 2026
Homepage: http://jkp.ejournal.unri.ac.id

The Mandalika Special Economic Zone Policy: An Evaluation of Implementation Content, Context, and Outcomes

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Received : April 14, 2026
Revised : May 12, 2026
Accepted : June 30, 2026

Keywords:
Mandalika SEZ, Policy Implementation, Policy Evaluation, Inclusive Development

ABSTRACT

While Special Economic Zone (SEZ) policies aim to foster economic equality through large-scale investments, their implementation often creates disparities between macroeconomic targets and local socio-economic realities. This study aims to evaluate the implementation of the Mandalika SEZ policy in Central Lombok Regency using the analytical framework of policy content, context, and outcomes. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, informants were selected through purposive sampling, involving key stakeholders such as bureaucrats, the management body (ITDC), and local communities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation study. The collected data were then analyzed using an interactive qualitative method consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the policy content is heavily biased toward macro-economic growth, lacking affirmative protection for local economic actors. Within the context dimension, implementation is hindered by centralized governance, pseudo-participation, and complex land acquisition disputes driven by international financing deadlines. Consequently, the policy outcomes demonstrate a duality: successful monumental infrastructure transformation, yet simultaneously producing a severe skill gap and risks of spatial segregation for the indigenous population. In conclusion, while the Mandalika SEZ succeeds in physical development, it falls short of socio-economic inclusivity. This study implies the urgent need for policy reorientation toward inclusive regional development by structurally strengthening local human resource capacity and ensuring proportional decentralization of authority.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive and equitable economic development is a primary pillar in the national strategic agenda to address disparities in welfare among regions. The Special Economic Zone (SEZ) policy is projected as a key instrument to accelerate investment growth, create employment opportunities, and promote economic equity by leveraging the geo-economic advantages of a region (Putranto et al., 2021; Rizalsan & Juwono, 2020). In its development, SEZs are not only intended as industrial centers but are also adapted to optimize the tourism sector, which has global competitiveness and is expected to provide added value to local communities (Buonocore et al., 2023; Fajarica et al., 2022). The implementation of this special zone concept requires a balance between providing incentive facilities for large-scale investors and protecting as well as empowering the local economy in surrounding buffer areas (Rizalsan & Juwono, 2020; Teangsompong & Sirisunhirun, 2018).

As a concrete manifestation of this strategy, the designation of the Mandalika SEZ in West Nusa Tenggara Province is focused on the tourism sector by adopting the concept of green ecotourism. This policy is designed to serve as a locomotive for regional development that integrates environmental sustainability with the promotion of local cultural wisdom in the international market (Azwar et al., 2023). At the macro level, the development of large-scale physical infrastructure such as the Mandalika International Circuit and improved transportation accessibility has shown positive impacts in the form of increased capital inflows and job creation (Buonocore et al., 2023; Susanti et al., 2026). Nevertheless, the implementation of this large-scale commercial tourism ecotourism concept often clashes with realities on the ground, which instead trigger risks of cultural commodification and threats to local ecological sustainability (Akbar, 2022; Azwar et al., 2023).

At the implementation level, the development of the Mandalika SEZ has generated various structural issues and highly complex social residues. Policy orientation that tends to be centralized (top-down) and more focused on hard infrastructure development often overlooks the fulfillment of local community rights, thereby triggering social exclusion (Pribudi & Sugiarto, 2023; Putro et al., 2021). The most crucial issue at the ground level is the prolonged land acquisition disputes, where the lack of transparency and disproportionate compensation have resulted in agrarian conflicts and the loss of traditional livelihoods (KPPII), 2023; Putro et al., 2021; Raziqin, 2024). In addition, the limited expertise of local human resources creates a sharp skill gap, marginalizing vulnerable groups—especially women and indigenous communities—from access to formal employment opportunities within the zone (Syafruddin et al., 2023; Teangsompong & Sirisunhirun, 2018).

Furthermore, institutional governance and the stakeholder collaboration model (penta-helix), which are ideally designed to create a resilient development ecosystem, have not operated

optimally. Coordination is often hindered by inter-agency fragmentation, centralized decision-making, and weak involvement of actors at the regional level (Muktiyanto et al., 2025; Susanti et al., 2026). This condition is exacerbated by the high dependence on foreign financing, which has the potential to burden the country's fiscal sustainability if the economic targets of the zone are not achieved (Apriliyani et al., 2026; (KPPII), 2023; Raziqin, 2024). The aggressive land expansion for tourism industry purposes also brings risks of environmental carrying capacity degradation if not balanced with strict spatial planning and risk-based mitigation (Akbar, 2022; Yang, 2023).

Based on the contemporary public policy evaluation framework, the effectiveness of a program is highly dependent on the alignment between the content of policy and the dynamics of the context of implementation in the field. While previous studies often frame SEZ shortcomings as ordinary implementation or administrative failures, the unique contribution of this study is to uncover the structural mechanisms that systematically produce social exclusion. Specifically, this study highlights how regulatory and fiscal biases that prioritize macro-economic growth, coupled with the rigid time constraints of international lending, inherently marginalize local communities. Therefore, to elevate the discourse from a mere program evaluation to a systemic policy critique, this study specifically aims to evaluate the implementation of the Mandalika Special Economic Zone policy through an analysis of policy content, context, and outcomes. This in-depth assessment is expected to provide an empirical foundation so that future SEZ governance can ensure equitable distribution of benefits, social inclusivity, and sustainable economic development for local communities.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The case study design was selected because it provides the necessary depth to investigate the dynamics of power relations and empirical realities within their natural, real-life context holistically (Yin, 2018). To ensure a structured evaluation and avoid analytical bias, this study focuses on three main dimensions based on Grindle's implementation theory (Grindle, 1980): 1) Policy Content, 2) Context of Implementation, and 3) Policy Outcomes.

Informants were determined using purposive sampling techniques (Patton, 2015). This method was chosen to ensure data collection from individuals possessing authority and direct experience regarding the Mandalika SEZ policy. The study involved a total of 14 informants categorized through the penta-helix collaboration approach (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012), consisting of:

1) Government Actors (5): Representatives from the Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda) of West Nusa Tenggara Province and Central Lombok Regency, the Central Lombok Regency Tourism Office, the Investment and One-Stop Integrated Service Office (DPMPTSP) of Central Lombok Regency, and the Mandalika SEZ Administrator.
2) Management Body (2): Management representatives from the Indonesia Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC).
3) Academics (2): Public policy experts focusing on regional development in West Nusa Tenggara.
4) Local Community (5): Including Sasak traditional leaders, MSME actors in buffer villages (Kuta and Sengkol), and representatives of affected women's groups.

Data collection applied the principle of triangulation of techniques (Carter et al., 2014) to ensure validity, consisting of in-depth interviews, non-participant observation for spatial verification, and documentation studies of project feasibility drafts, regional regulations (RTRW), and EIA/AMDAL documents. All collected data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative approach (Miles et al., 2014), which involves three cyclical flows: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. urthermore, a textual analysis was applied to the Regional Spatial Planning (RTRW) and EIA/AMDAL documents to examine how the formal policy language structurally frames land use and community rights. This method ensures the trustworthiness of the research conclusions by cross-confirming claims from government actors with the realities expressed by local communities and independent findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Policy Content: Macro Orientation, Incentive Design, and the Ecotourism Paradox

An analysis of the content of the Mandalika SEZ policy, which is juridically based on Government Regulation (PP) Number 52 of 2014 concerning the Mandalika Special Economic Zone, reveals a very strong orientation toward a macroeconomic growth paradigm (growth-led development). Textually, this policy is designed as a strategic instrument to attract global capital flows through the provision of comprehensive fiscal and non-fiscal incentives. Based on derivative regulations related to SEZs in Indonesia, the incentives offered include tax holidays (corporate income tax exemptions), tax allowances, Value Added Tax (VAT) exemptions, as well as simplified customs and immigration procedures. However, when critically examined, the structural requirements to access these incentives involve very high investment thresholds. This policy implicitly acts as a filter that excludes small-scale local economic actors. As a result, the primary target groups benefiting from this regulation are multinational corporations and large developer consortia, while local Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) do not receive proportionate affirmative schemes within the regulatory framework.

This imbalance in policy content is further evident in the absence of binding clauses related to vertical integration between large-scale investment ecosystems and local supply chains. In the area's Master Development Plan document, policies predominantly regulate physical spatial standards, zoning of commercial areas, and highly technocratic one-stop licensing procedures. Local communities are often positioned merely as passive recipients of impact or, at best, as providers of informal labor not protected by legal guarantees within the regulation. These findings confirm the argument that the misalignment between central macroeconomic targets and regional institutional capacity has structurally created social exclusion since the policy's formulation (Raziqin, 2024).

Furthermore, there is an interpretive bias in the articulation of the "Green Ecotourism" concept, which is claimed as the identity of the Mandalika SEZ. In policy drafts and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA/AMDAL) documents at the macro level, the term ecotourism is often reduced to merely fulfilling environmentally friendly physical infrastructure standards or providing green open spaces within the core zone (MotoGP Circuit and resort areas). In contrast, there are almost no policy provisions that explicitly guarantee the protection of community-managed spaces, the preservation of traditional

livelihoods of coastal communities, or efforts to prevent cultural commodification (Azwar et al., 2023). This interpretive bias is evident in the textual construction of the Regional Spatial Planning (RTRW) and EIA/AMDAL documents. A textual analysis of these documents reveals a heavy reliance on technocratic and spatial-economic terminology (such as pemanfaatan ruang / space utilization, or tapak proyek / project footprint). The formal discourse rarely accommodates the socio-cultural or customary narratives of the land. Instead, land is discursively framed merely as a measurable spatial asset to be acquired and "cleared" for investment utility, shifting the narrative from a living cultural space to a quantifiable economic commodity. Consequently, this approach ignores the profound historical and socio-cultural value of the land for the identity of the Sasak community in Central Lombok Regency.

Another substantial weakness lies in the variable of the expected extent of change versus resource allocation. The policy content demands a highly radical spatial transformation shifting an agrarian-coastal village landscape into a world-class super-priority tourism destination. However, this massive sociological and economic transformation is not accompanied by adequate resource allocation for human capacity development. Financing data, including those sourced from loans by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), indicate that more than 90% of the budget is focused on "hard" infrastructure (circuit roads, clean water provision, drainage, and landscape arrangement). There is no mandatory budget allocation percentage specifically designated for technology transfer programs or for improving the technical skills (skilling and up-skilling) of affected communities to meet the competency standards of the international hospitality and tourism industry. This structural gap within the regulatory content is the root cause of why the Mandalika SEZ, in theory, promises prosperity, but in practice produces significant inequality on the ground.

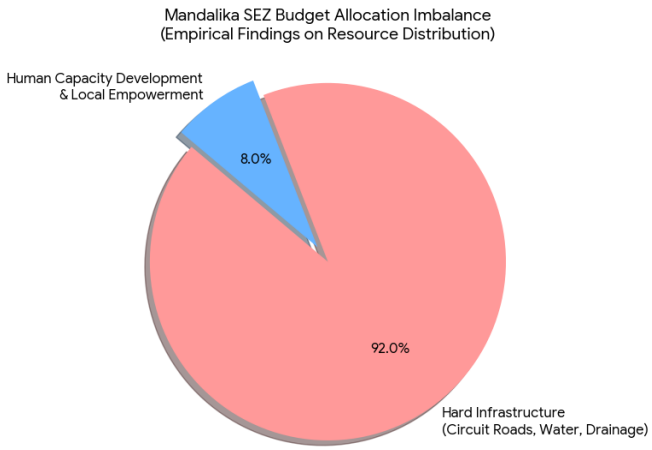

Figure 1. Empirical Findings on the Mandalika SEZ Budget Allocation Imbalance

To further visualize the resource allocation gap, Figure 1 illustrates the stark contrast in development financing. With over 90% of funds (including those from the AIIB) directed toward hard infrastructure such as circuit roads and drainage, the absence of an equivalent budgetary commitment for local human capacity building becomes visually evident. This structural funding gap practically guarantees a skill mismatch, leaving the local population unprepared for the international hospitality industry standards.

An in-depth analysis of the Mandalika SEZ policy content (based on Government Regulation No. 52 of 2014 and the Master Development Plan) reveals a structural misalignment between macroeconomic growth targets and local empowerment. To avoid a purely conceptual description, the clean data extraction regarding the policy content is presented in Table 1, highlighting the gap between regulatory design and its empirical implications.

Table 1. Clean Data Analysis of the Mandalika SEZ Policy Content

Evaluation Indicator	Formal Policy Target	Empirical Finding (Clean Data)	Socio-Economic Implication
Incentive Design	Attract global capital via comprehensive fiscal incentives.	Extremely high investment thresholds with no affirmative schemes.	Structurally excludes local MSMEs; benefits only multinational corporations.
Supply Chain Integration	Regulate spatial standards and licensing procedures.	No binding clauses for vertical integration with local businesses.	Local communities are marginalized as unprotected, informal laborers.
Ecotourism Concept	Establish "Green Ecotourism" as the core identity.	Reduced to physical green spaces; lacks cultural preservation clauses.	Treats land purely as an asset, risking Sasak traditional livelihoods.
Resource Allocation	Radical spatial transformation into a super-priority destination.	>90% of financing is allocated solely to "hard" infrastructure.	Lack of up-skilling budget creates a severe skill gap and deepens inequality.

Based on the data presented in Table 1, it is evident that the policy acts fundamentally as a growth-led instrument rather than an inclusive development tool. The misalignment between central macroeconomic targets and regional institutional capacity has structurally created social exclusion since the policy's formulation phase (Raziqin, 2024). Furthermore, without a mandatory budget allocation specifically designated for technology transfer or technical skill improvement, the radical spatial transformation promised by the policy practically guarantees a skill gap, leaving the local population unprepared for the international hospitality industry standards.

Analysis of Research Topic Mapping (Keyword Co-occurrence)

The implementation of the Mandalika Special Economic Zone (SEZ) policy operates within a highly dynamic socio-political ecosystem. An analysis of the context of implementation shows that the main challenges in the field do not lie in the intent of development itself, but rather in the complexity of synchronizing national targets with institutional capacity and socio-cultural readiness at the regional level. Based on field observations and direct interactions with various stakeholders, the dynamics of policy implementation can be mapped into three main aspects:

Dynamics of Institutional Coordination and Governance Centralization

Findings in the field indicate structural challenges in cross-sectoral coordination between central and local governments. Institutionally, the management of the Mandalika SEZ is delegated to a state-owned enterprise entity (Indonesia Tou-

rism Development Corporation/ITDC), which carries a mandate to accelerate national-scale development. Through in-depth interviews with bureaucratic officials within the Central Lombok Regency Government, the researcher identified administrative bottlenecks. On one hand, the local government is responsible for maintaining social stability in its region; on the other hand, strategic authority related to spatial planning and project timelines is largely determined at the central level. This creates a dual burden for the local bureaucracy, as they are required to manage the social impacts of development without always having sufficient space to participate in the early stages of planning. This situation highlights the need for a more proportional decentralization of authority so that local governments can respond more precisely to community dynamics.

Challenges in Optimizing the Penta-Helix Collaboration Model

The government has designed the governance of this area by prioritizing a penta-helix collaboration model to create an inclusive development ecosystem. However, empirical data in the field indicate that the implementation of this model still requires further maturation. From the researcher's interactions with Sasak traditional leaders, environmental community groups, and local business actors, it was found that the existing space for dialogue remains largely in the "program socialization" phase rather than the deliberative phase of policy formulation. The involvement of local communities, including women's groups, has not fully entered the decision-making domain, particularly regarding the zoning of their livelihood spaces. This is not necessarily a form of intentional neglect, but is often driven by tight project deadlines (the need for infrastructure acceleration), which ultimately limit the opportunity for implementers to conduct longer and more comprehensive cultural approaches.

Complexity of Land Acquisition and the Need for Strengthened Social Mitigation

The most crucial issue testing the effectiveness of the implementation context in the Mandalika SEZ is land rights resolution. Direct observations in several buffer villages and interviews with affected residents reveal that the land acquisition process for circuit infrastructure and its supporting facilities is highly complex and requires careful handling. On one hand, project implementers are required to meet strict physical completion targets, some of which are tied to funding commitments from international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). On the other hand, for local communities, land is not merely an economic asset but also holds historical and cultural significance.

The researcher found that delays in the land mediation process often occur due to the limited capacity of field-level officials in bridging differences between formal legal mechanisms and customary law or traditional land tenure evidence held by local residents. The demand for project acceleration frequently clashes with the natural rhythm of conflict resolution, which inherently requires extended periods of dialogue. This indicates that area administrators need to strengthen social mitigation schemes and provide more transparent and independent dispute resolution mechanisms, in order to maintain a conducive investment climate while ensuring the fair protection of local communities' economic rights.

The implementation of the Mandalika SEZ operates within a highly dynamic socio-political ecosystem. Field observations reveal that the main challenges lie in the structural difficulty of synchronizing national targets with regional socio-cultural readiness. The condensed empirical findings regarding this context are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Implementation Context Findings

Implementation Aspect	Empirical Finding (Clean Data)	Field Consequence
Institutional Coordination	Highly centralized management under ITDC limits local government authority.	Local bureaucracy faces a "dual burden": managing social impacts without strategic planning control.
Penta-Helix Collaboration	Tight infrastructure deadlines reduce dialogue to mere "program socialization."	*Pseudo-participation*; marginalized groups (traditional leaders, women) are excluded from decision-making.
Land Acquisition	Fast-paced physical targets (driven by AIIB funding) clash with customary dispute resolution.	Prolonged agrarian conflicts and a critical need for independent social mitigation mechanisms.

Based on Table 2, the "acceleration" mandate dictated by the central government structurally overrides local socio-cultural rhythms. The highly centralized governance model leaves the local bureaucracy merely managing the resulting social residues. Furthermore, driven by strict physical completion deadlines, the envisioned penta-helix collaboration becomes a form of pseudo-participation. This structural bottleneck peaks during land acquisition; because land holds historical value for the Sasak community, the lack of transparent dispute resolution mechanisms frequently triggers prolonged agrarian conflicts, severely testing the social legitimacy of the SEZ.

To further elucidate the dynamics of these implementation challenges, Figure 2 visualizes the critical chains of cause and effect identified in the field. This flowchart illustrates how the 'acceleration' mandate dictates a linear path where central government priorities structurally override local socio-cultural rhythms. The highly centralized governance model leaves the local bureaucracy merely to manage the resulting social residues. Driven by strict physical completion deadlines, the envisioned penta-helix collaboration becomes a form of pseudo-participation. This structural bottleneck reaches its peak in the complexity of land acquisition, frequently triggering prolonged agrarian conflicts and severely testing the social legitimacy of the SEZ implementation.

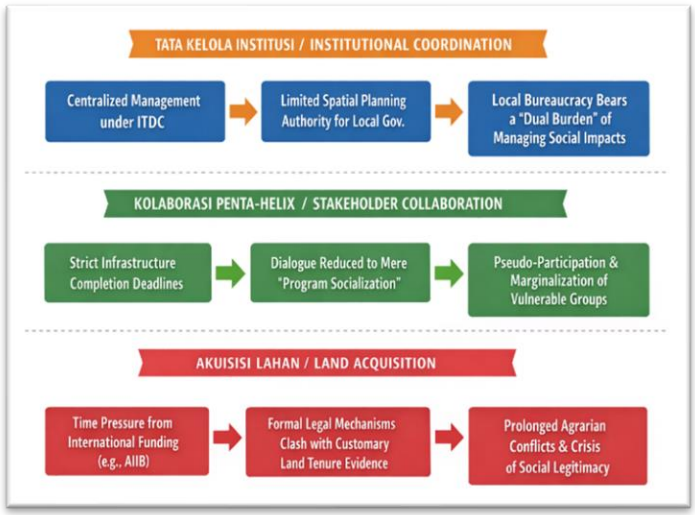

Figure 2. Causal Chain of Cause and Effect within the Mandalika SEZ Implementation Context.

Analysis of Policy Outcomes: Dual Impacts, Capacity Gaps, and Challenges of Inclusivity

The evaluation at the stage of policy outcomes shifts the analytical focus from merely achieving physical outputs (such

as the construction of circuits and resort facilities) toward examining the extent to which such development brings real improvements in the quality of life for target groups. Based on direct observation and empirical measurement in the field, the outcomes of the Mandalika SEZ implementation reveal a duality of impacts, showing a stark contrast between macro-level growth achievements and micro-level welfare realities. This analysis can be elaborated through three main dimensions:

Infrastructure Transformation and Short-Term Economic Stimulus

Objectively, it cannot be denied that the establishment of the Mandalika SEZ has served as a catalyst for transforming infrastructure in the southern part of Lombok Island. Field observations in the core zone indicate a significant improvement in public facilities, road access, and the establishment of an international-standard circuit, which has elevated the region's geopolitical status. The hosting of global sporting events (such as MotoGP) has proven to provide economic stimulus through increased capital circulation, hotel occupancy rates, and seasonal employment absorption. This policy has successfully fulfilled its initial function as a pull factor for foreign investment, representing a significant leap in macro-level development for West Nusa Tenggara Province.

Skill Gaps and Challenges in Formal Employment Absorption

Despite the creation of new job opportunities, field findings indicate structural constraints regarding local communities' accessibility to these opportunities. Through in-depth interviews with officials from buffer villages and local youth representatives, the researcher identified a significant skill gap. The high competency standards and qualifications required by the international tourism industry within the zone (such as foreign language proficiency and hospitality certification) are not aligned with the capacity of the available local human resources.

As a result, local communities, including women who face higher vulnerability, often struggle to enter formal and managerial employment sectors. Empirical evidence shows that local labor is predominantly absorbed into informal sectors, blue-collar jobs, or daily wage labor. This condition confirms the hypothesis that without massive and structured capacity-building (up-skilling) programs, the economic benefits of large-scale investments are more likely to flow outward (benefiting incoming skilled workers) rather than reducing unemployment at the local level.

Unequal Distribution of Benefits and Risks of Spatial Segregation

The most crucial outcome to evaluate concerns the equitable distribution of welfare. Comparative observations between the ITDC-managed core zone and surrounding buffer villages reveal the potential for spatial segregation. On one hand, the core zone is developing into an exclusive tourism enclave with premium facilities; on the other hand, several surrounding villages continue to face challenges in accessing basic infrastructure and sanitation.

Furthermore, interactions with local Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) indicate that they are not yet fully integrated into the tourism industry's supply chain within the SEZ. The theoretically expected trickle-down effect faces practical barriers such as standardization requirements and limited access to capital (KPPII, 2023). Based on Merilee S. Grindle's evaluation framework, these outcomes are a logical consequence of the lack of synchronization between macro-economically biased policy design (content) and a less participatory implementation context.

The evaluation of policy outcomes shifts the focus from physical outputs to the actual quality of life improvements for target groups. Based on direct observations and empirical measurements, the outcomes of the Mandalika SEZ implementation reveal a duality of impacts—a stark contrast between macro-level growth and micro-level welfare. The condensed clean data regarding these outcomes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Clean Data Analysis on Policy Outcomes

Outcome Dimension	Empirical Findings (Clean Data)	Socio-Economic Consequence
Infrastructure & Economy	Successful construction of an international circuit and public facilities; increased capital circulation from global events (MotoGP).	Macro-Level Success: Fulfills its function as a powerful magnet for foreign investment and short-term economic stimulus.
Employment Absorption	Severe skill gap; local human resources do not meet the high competency standards (language, certification) of the international hospitality industry.	Exclusion & Informality: Local labor (especially vulnerable women) is marginalized into informal, daily-wage sectors.
Spatial & Welfare Distribution	The core zone develops into a premium enclave, while surrounding buffer villages lack basic sanitation. Local MSMEs face standardization and capital barriers.	Spatial Segregation: Failure of the trickle-down effect, resulting in unequal distribution of benefits.

Based on Grindle's framework, the outcomes detailed in Table 3 are the logical consequences of the lack of synchronization between a macro-economically biased policy content and a non-participatory implementation context. Objectively, the policy is a catalyst for monumental physical transformation. However, without massive and structured up-skilling programs, the economic benefits flow outward to incoming skilled workers rather than alleviating local unemployment.

To visually capture this stark contrast, **Figure 3** illustrates the duality of impacts produced by the SEZ. While macro-indicators such as infrastructure and investment pull score exceptionally high, the micro-level indicators representing local inclusivity lag significantly behind. Ultimately, the implementation of the Mandalika SEZ presents a monumental achievement in physical development but leaves critical "homework" in terms of social engineering. To achieve the true objectives of the SEZ policy, authorities must reorient their paradigm from mere *"development in the region"* to genuine *"regional development,"* positioning the welfare and capacity of local communities as the primary metrics of investment success.

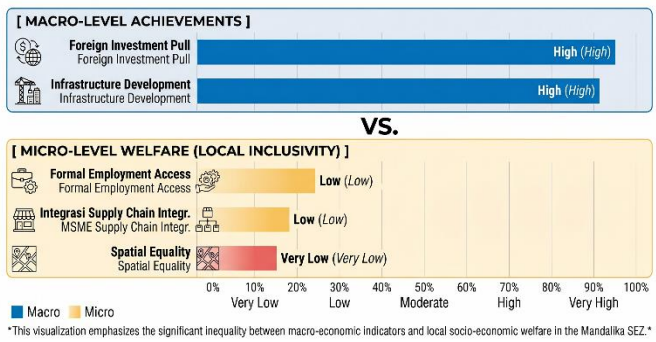

Figure 3. Comparative Visualization of Macro-Level Growth vs. Micro-Level Welfare.

Overall, the implementation of the Mandalika SEZ presents a monumental achievement in physical development, yet still leaves significant "homework" in terms of social engineering. To achieve the ultimate goals of the special economic zone policy, the government and managing authorities need to reorient their strategy from "development in the region" toward "regional development," placing the welfare and capacity of local communities as the primary indicators of investment success.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the Mandalika SEZ reveals a structural dichotomy between macro-level infrastructure achievements and micro-level socio-economic inclusivity. While the policy effectively catalyzes foreign investment and spatial transformation, its growth-led regulatory content lacks adequate affirmative protections for local economies. Compounded by highly centralized governance, pseudo-participatory planning, and tight international financing deadlines, the implementation process inadvertently marginalizes the indigenous population. This ultimately results in a duality of outcomes: a world-class tourism epicenter shadowed by prolonged agrarian conflicts, severe skill mismatches, and spatial segregation.

To overcome these disparities, future SEZ governance requires a fundamental paradigm shift toward inclusive regional development. Policymakers must formulate binding legal frameworks that guarantee vertical supply chain integration for local MSMEs and establish independent, culturally sensitive dispute resolution mechanisms for land acquisition. Furthermore, sustainable success necessitates mandating proportionate budget allocations for human capacity building (up-skilling) to ensure local communities are integrated as primary beneficiaries rather than informal spectators of the international tourism industry.

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