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Does Social Assistance Expenditure Reduce Poverty? Panel Evidence from Indonesian Provinces

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Abstract

This study investigates the determinants of poverty across Indonesian provinces with a particular focus on the role of social assistance expenditure. Using provincial panel data from 2015 to 2024, the analysis combines information on poverty headcount ratios with fiscal, economic, and political variables, namely social assistance per capita, gross regional domestic product (GRDP) per capita, unemployment rate, and election years. The study employs a fixed effects panel regression model, selected on the basis of specification tests, and incorporates one-year lagged values of social assistance and GRDP per capita to capture the delayed effects of fiscal and economic policies. The results reveal that social assistance has a negative but modest effect on poverty, indicating its limited yet relevant role in supporting vulnerable households. GRDP per capita emerges as the strongest determinant, confirming the importance of inclusive growth in driving poverty reduction, while unemployment significantly worsens poverty outcomes. In addition, poverty rates tend to fall in election years, reflecting the influence of political cycles on welfare spending. Overall, the findings underscore that poverty reduction in Indonesia requires multidimensional strategies that combine sustained economic growth, labor market improvements, and well-targeted social assistance, supported by institutional safeguards that ensure consistency beyond short-term political incentives.

Key words : Poverty, Social Assistance Expenditure, Growth, Unemployment

INTRODUCTION

Poverty remains a persistent challenge in Indonesia despite steady economic growth over the past two decades. According to the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2023), around 25.87 million people were still living below the poverty line in March 2023, representing 9.36 percent of the total population. Although this figure is lower than in previous decades, progress has slowed in recent years. The poverty rate declined steadily from 11.22 percent in 2015 to 9.41 percent in 2019, but the COVID-19 pandemic reversed this trend, pushing the rate up to 10.14 percent in 2021. Although it later fell back to 9.36 percent in 2023, the recovery has been gradual and uneven. Figure 1 illustrates this trajectory, which indicates that despite long-term progress, poverty in Indonesia remains highly sensitive to economic fluctuations and social disruptions.

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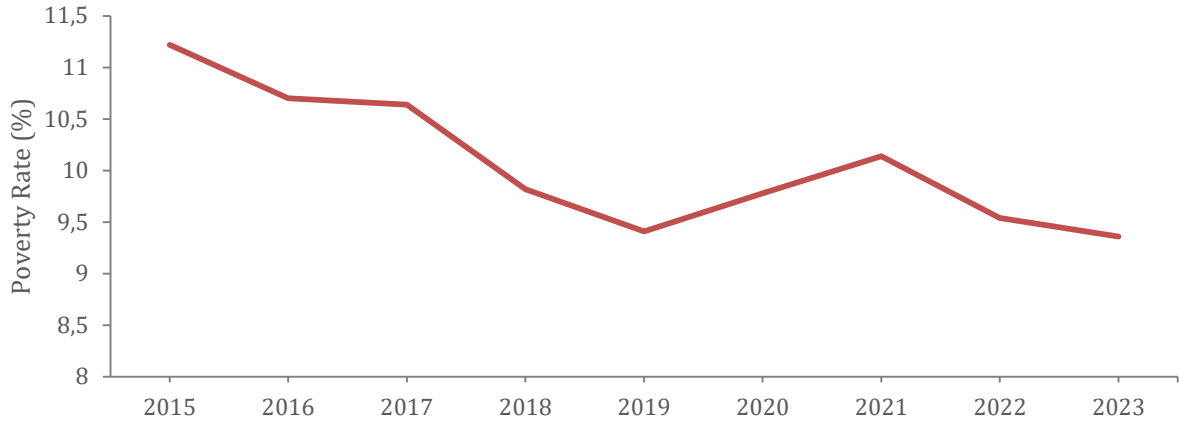


Figure 1. Poverty Rate in Indonesia during 2015-2023. Source: BPS (2025)

One of the government's primary instruments to address poverty is social assistance expenditure. mplemented through various programs, including unconditional transfers, subsidies, and conditional schemes such as the *Program Keluarga Harapan* (PKH) and the *Bantuan Pangan Non-Tunai* (BPNT), these initiatives are designed to provide direct support to poor and vulnerable households while complementing growth-oriented development strategies. However, the effectiveness of social assistance expenditure as a fiscal instrument for poverty alleviation remains debated. In some regions, large budget allocations for social assistance appear to have reduced poverty, while in others, limited funding and problems of mistargeting have resulted in only marginal benefits. Previous studies similarly find that although transfers can improve welfare, their impact is often modest, constrained by adequacy and implementation challenges (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025a; Resina et al., 2023). International evidence over the last decade likewise suggests that social protection achieves stronger results when programs are adequately financed, well targeted, and consistently implemented (Beegle et al., 2018). These insights highlight the need to examine more systematically whether social assistance spending has been effective in reducing poverty across Indonesian provinces.

Alongside fiscal transfers, economic growth has consistently been viewed as a central driver of poverty reduction. Increases in Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) per capita are generally associated with higher incomes and improved living standards. Many studies confirm that growth has played a central role in reducing poverty in Indonesia, although its benefits are not always inclusive (Suparman, 2022; Suryahadi et al., 2012; Taruno, 2019). Regional disparities in growth outcomes also mean that some provinces experience greater reductions in poverty than others. Understanding the link between GRDP per capita and poverty at the provincial level is therefore essential for assessing whether growth remains the strongest driver of welfare improvements.

Labor market conditions, particularly unemployment, also play a crucial role in shaping poverty outcomes. When individuals are unable to find jobs, households lose income security and become more vulnerable to falling below the poverty line. Research shows that poverty reduction in Indonesia often slows during periods of weak job creation and rising unemployment (Alatas & Newhouse, 2010; Feriyanto et al., 2020). Moreover, the prevalence of informal employment means that even when growth occurs, many households remain trapped in vulnerable conditions. Examining the role of unemployment is therefore crucial for understanding how labor market outcomes interact with poverty.

Political factors also play a role in shaping poverty outcomes. Evidence from Indonesia shows that government spending, including social assistance, often increases during election years (Sjahrir et al., 2013; Wiguna & Khoirunurrofik, 2021). This pattern suggests that electoral incentives may drive temporary expansions in welfare programs, which can influence poverty levels in the short term. While such increases may reduce poverty in election years, they raise concerns about sustainability if driven mainly by political cycles rather than long-term development planning. Including election years as a factor in the analysis allows this study to capture the influence of political dynamics on poverty reduction.

Previous studies on poverty reduction in Indonesia have produced mixed results, particularly regarding the effectiveness of social assistance and the relative importance of economic, labor, and political factors. These inconsistencies suggest that the relationship between poverty and its potential

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determinants remains inconclusive. Motivated by these limitations, this study examines the determinants of poverty across Indonesian provinces with a particular focus on social assistance expenditure. Using panel data from 2015 to 2024, the analysis explores how social assistance, GRDP per capita, unemployment, and election years influence poverty outcomes, while explicitly considering potential lagged effects. The aim is to provide empirical evidence on whether social assistance complements growth and labor market dynamics, and to assess the extent to which political cycles shape welfare outcomes. In doing so, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of provincial poverty dynamics and supports Indonesia's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1 on ending poverty.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a quantitative research design using panel data regression to examine the determinants of poverty across Indonesian provinces. The analysis covers 34 provinces during the period 2015–2024, resulting in a balanced panel dataset that combines both cross-sectional and time-series dimensions. A panel data approach was selected because it allows the study to control for unobserved heterogeneity across provinces while capturing dynamic changes over time.

The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from official government and statistical sources. Poverty indicators, specifically the headcount ratio (P0), were collected from Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS). Social assistance expenditure was derived from the Ministry of Finance (Direktorat Jenderal Perimbangan Keuangan/DJPK) database on regional budgets (APBD). Macroeconomic indicators such as Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) at constant 2010 prices, GRDP per capita, and the unemployment rate were sourced from BPS publications. Additional information related to political cycles, specifically election years, was coded as a dummy variable based on the official schedule of national and regional elections. All monetary variables, including social assistance and GRDP, were converted into per capita values and expressed in natural logarithms to reduce skewness and improve interpretability.

Several transformations were applied to the dataset to ensure consistency. Social assistance expenditure and GRDP per capita were lagged by one year under the assumption that their effects on poverty are not immediate but materialize over time. The poverty measure P0 was selected as the dependent variable, while the independent variables consist of lagged social assistance expenditure per capita, lagged GRDP per capita, unemployment rate, and an election dummy variable.
The econometric specification of the model can be expressed as follows:

$$POV_{it} = \alpha_i + \delta_t + \beta_1 \ln(BANSOS_{i,t-1}) + \beta_2 \ln(GRDPpc_{i,t-1}) + \beta_3 UNEM_{it} + \beta_3 ELEC_t + u_{it} \qquad (1)$$

where POV_{it} is the poverty headcount ratio in province i at time t; α_i represents the unobserved province-specific effects; $\delta_t$denotes time-fixed effects; $\ln(BANSOS_{i,t-1})$ is the natural log of per capita social assistance expenditure lagged one year; $\ln(GRDPpc_{i,t-1})$ is the natural log of GRDP per capita lagged one year; $UNEM_{it}$ is the unemployment rate; $ELEC_t$ is a dummy variable equal to one in election years (2019 and 2024) and zero otherwise; and u_{it} is the error term.

The technique of data analysis involves panel data regression with fixed effects estimation. The choice of model was based on a series of specification tests, including the Breusch–Pagan Lagrange Multiplier test and the Hausman test, which indicated that the fixed effects model was the most appropriate specification for the dataset. Fixed effects estimation was chosen to account for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics of provinces that may influence poverty, such as geographic conditions or cultural differences. Standard errors were clustered at the provincial level to address potential heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation within provinces.

All statistical analyses were conducted using Stata software, version 17, which is widely used in empirical economic research for panel data estimation. The use of clustered standard errors, lagged variables, and fixed effects estimation provides robust and consistent results. The procedures and technical details described in this study allow replication by other researchers using similar datasets.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

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This section presents the empirical findings of the study and discusses their implications. The analysis begins with descriptive statistics to provide a general overview of the variables, followed by regression estimates that evaluate the impact of social assistance expenditure, economic growth, unemployment, and political cycles on poverty. The discussion integrates these results with existing literature to highlight both consistencies and divergences, while also drawing policy implications that are relevant to Indonesia's ongoing poverty alleviation agenda.

RESULTS

The results of the empirical analysis are presented in this section. The discussion begins with descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the main variables used in the study. This is followed by regression estimates that assess the impact of social assistance expenditure, economic growth, and unemployment on poverty

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of the variables employed in the analysis. The poverty rate has an average of 10.57 percent, but the disparity across provinces is striking. While some provinces record poverty rates as low as 3.42 percent, others reach nearly 30 percent, reflecting the persistence of deep inequality in welfare conditions across Indonesia.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Poverty Rate	340	10.57475	5.517166	3.42	28.4
Social Assistance Expenditure	340	6.704006	3.39203	0	13.3299
GDRP per capita	340	17.40109	.5481374	16.22136	19.12039
Unemployment Rate	340	5.110985	1.785008	1.4	10.95

Source: Author's Work (2025)

Social assistance expenditure, measured in logarithmic per capita terms, has a mean of 6.70 with substantial variation. In some provinces and years the value is recorded as zero, indicating the absence of realized spending, while in others it reaches a very high level. This disparity suggests that the distribution of social assistance across provinces is uneven, raising questions about the consistency and targeting of fiscal policy.

GRDP per capita, also expressed in logarithmic form, shows an average of 17.40 with a relatively small standard deviation. The narrower spread compared to poverty and social assistance reflects that economic development, while unequal, is more stable across provinces. Nevertheless, the difference between the richest and poorest provinces remains large enough to shape poverty outcomes in significant ways.

The unemployment rate averages 5.11 percent, but the range from 1.40 to nearly 11 percent points to major differences in provincial labor market conditions. Provinces with higher unemployment tend to face additional social and economic challenges, while those with lower unemployment may still struggle with poverty due to high levels of informal employment. This highlights that labor market indicators alone cannot fully capture poverty dynamics.

Overall, the descriptive statistics highlight heterogeneity across provinces, with poverty and social assistance expenditure showing the widest disparities. The fact that some provinces allocate no social assistance at all while others spend heavily provides an early indication that fiscal policy may not always be aligned with local poverty needs. These findings underscore the importance of examining not only economic performance but also the political and institutional context that shapes the allocation of social spending.

The heterogeneity highlighted in the descriptive statistics demonstrates that poverty, social assistance, and economic performance vary substantially across provinces and over time. Some provinces consistently record high poverty rates despite relatively stable economic capacity, while others allocate little to no social assistance even though fiscal space may allow otherwise. These patterns confirm that the dynamics under study cannot be adequately captured by a simple cross-sectional or time-series approach. Instead, the panel structure of the dataset provides an opportunity to exploit both the variation

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across provinces and the changes within provinces over time, making it possible to obtain more accurate and meaningful estimates.

However, applying panel data methods requires choosing the appropriate model specification. Using the wrong specification may lead to biased or inefficient estimates, which in turn would weaken the validity of the findings. To address this, a series of model selection tests were conducted to determine whether the data should be estimated using a common effect model, a random effects model, or a fixed effects model. Table 2 summarizes the results of these tests.

Table 2. Tests of Panel Model Selection

Test	**Null Hypotesis**	**Statistic** (p-value)	**Decision**
Breusch–Pagan LM Test	Common Effect is appropriate	1337.51 (0.0000)	CE model in not appropriate
Hausman Test	Random Effects is consistent	17.30 (0.0006)	FE model is appropriate

Source: Author's Work (2025)

The Breusch–Pagan Lagrange Multiplier (LM) test was first performed to compare the common effect model with the random effects model. The null hypothesis states that the common effect model is appropriate, meaning that unobserved heterogeneity across provinces is not significant. The test produces a chi-square statistic of 1337.51 with a p-value of 0.0000, which strongly rejects the null hypothesis. This implies that the common effect model cannot account for the variation in the data and is therefore not suitable.

The Hausman test was then employed to decide between the random effects and fixed effects models. The null hypothesis assumes that the random effects estimator is consistent, whereas the alternative suggests that the fixed effects model is more reliable. The test yields a chi-square statistic of 17.30 with a p-value of 0.0006, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Based on this result, the fixed effects model is selected as the most appropriate specification, as it controls for unobserved, time-invariant heterogeneity across provinces.

Following the results of the panel model selection tests, the fixed effects (FE) model was chosen as the most appropriate specification. The use of the FE estimator ensures that time-invariant provincial characteristics, such as geographic location or cultural factors, are controlled for in the estimation. This allows the analysis to focus on the influence of variables that change over time, providing more reliable estimates of the determinants of poverty.

Table 3 reports the results of the FE regression with poverty rate (P0) as the dependent variable. The model incorporates lagged social assistance expenditure, lagged GRDP per capita, the unemployment rate, and an election dummy variable. The overall fit of the model is strong, with an F-statistic of 23.36 and a probability value of 0.0000, indicating that the explanatory variables jointly have a significant impact on poverty. The within R^2 of 0.358 suggests that approximately 36 percent of the variation in poverty within provinces over time is explained by the model, which is considered meaningful in socioeconomic research where outcomes are typically influenced by a wide range of unobserved factors.

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Table 3. Fixed Effects Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
Social Assistance Expenditure	-0.0370*	0.0187	-1.98	0.056
GDRP per capita	-2.2976**	0.8271	-2.78	0.009
Unemployment Rate	0.1282**	0.0610	2.10	0.033
Pemilu (Election dummy)	-0.6531***	0.0976	-6.70	0.000
Intercept	50.1266	14.3803	3.49	0.001
R^2 (within) = 0.358**;** F-statistic = 23.36**;** Prob > F = 0.0000				

Note:
***, ** and * indicate significant at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels, respectively.
Estimation method is Fixed Effects (FE) with province-clustered standard errors. Social Assistance Expenditure and GRDP per capita are lagged one period (t−1).

The coefficient for lagged social assistance expenditure is negative (–0.0370) and weakly significant at the 10 percent level. This result implies that higher per capita social assistance spending is associated with reductions in poverty in the following year, although the magnitude of the effect is relatively modest. Specifically, a 1 percent increase in social assistance expenditure per capita is estimated to reduce the poverty rate by about 0.037 percentage points. While small in scale, this effect nonetheless points to the importance of transfer programs in supporting vulnerable households. The limited statistical significance suggests, however, that the effectiveness of such programs may vary widely across provinces, depending on the adequacy of budget allocations, the accuracy of targeting, and the administrative capacity for delivery.

Lagged GRDP per capita demonstrates a strong and statistically significant negative effect on poverty, with a coefficient of –2.2976 at the 5 percent level. This indicates that increases in regional income per capita are closely linked to reductions in poverty. Interpreted substantively, a 1 percent increase in GRDP per capita is estimated to lower the poverty rate by about 2.30 percentage points. This is a considerable effect, underscoring the central role of economic growth in lifting households out of poverty. The result is consistent with development theory and empirical evidence from other countries, which stress that sustained growth expands job opportunities, raises wages, and broadens access to essential services, all of which contribute to long-term poverty reduction.

The unemployment rate is positively associated with poverty, with a coefficient of 0.1282 that is significant at the 5 percent level. This means that higher unemployment tends to increase the poverty rate across provinces. Substantively, a 1 percent increase in the unemployment rate is estimated to raise poverty by about 0.13 percentage points. This relationship highlights the vulnerability of households to labor market conditions, as the absence of stable employment directly reduces income and increases the likelihood of poverty. The result reinforces the view that economic growth alone is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by adequate job creation and improvements in the quality of employment opportunities.

The election dummy variable is strongly negative (–0.6531) and highly significant at the 1 percent level. This suggests that poverty rates tend to decline in election years, which can be interpreted as evidence of political cycles in fiscal policy. The magnitude of the coefficient indicates that poverty is about 0.65 percentage points lower in election years compared to non-election years, after controlling for other factors. This result implies that governments may expand social spending or accelerate the implementation of welfare programs in the lead-up to elections, producing a temporary reduction in poverty. While beneficial in the short term, such politically driven spending raises questions about sustainability and the long-term effectiveness of welfare programs when detached from structural policy reform.

Overall, the FE regression results confirm that poverty in Indonesia is shaped by a combination of economic, social, and political factors. Economic growth, measured by GRDP per capita, emerges as the most powerful determinant, capable of substantially reducing poverty with each incremental increase. Social assistance programs also contribute to poverty alleviation, although their limited significance suggests that improvements in targeting and program design are needed to maximize their impact. The

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unemployment rate demonstrates the importance of labor markets, showing that poverty reduction strategies must be complemented by job creation and workforce development. Finally, the significance of election years underscores the role of political and institutional factors in shaping welfare outcomes. Together, these findings emphasize that effective poverty reduction requires multidimensional strategies that combine growth-oriented policies with employment generation and well-targeted social assistance, supported by institutional mechanisms that ensure policy consistency beyond electoral cycles.

Discussion

The regression results demonstrate that poverty in Indonesia is shaped by multiple determinants, with economic growth emerging as the most powerful factor. The strong and significant negative effect of GRDP per capita on poverty confirms the well-established growth–poverty nexus. Sustained economic expansion has been shown to generate employment and improve welfare, although its benefits are not always evenly distributed across provinces (Aerni et al., 2021). In addition, debates on development in Indonesia highlight that the state plays a central role in shaping growth and welfare outcomes through its governance and fiscal policies (Airlangga, 2024). By reaffirming these relationships, the present study strengthens the argument that sustained and inclusive growth, supported by effective state intervention, is indispensable for long-term poverty alleviation.

The negative but relatively weak effect of social assistance expenditure indicates that transfer programs have the potential to reduce poverty, yet their effectiveness is limited by targeting and implementation challenges. Earlier research on Indonesia's social protection system in the past decade has raised similar concerns, pointing to leakage, mistargeting, and the limited size of benefits (Kidd & Athias, 2019). Evidence also shows that social assistance allocations often rise before elections but fail to significantly reduce poverty rates, suggesting that political considerations dominate their distribution (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025b). On the other hand, the growing trend of social assistance has not always translated into lower poverty, as some beneficiaries perceive transfers as mere "bonuses" and use them for non-essential consumption rather than basic needs (Haliim & Hakim, 2024). Similar inconsistencies are also observed internationally. For example, a study on Turkey finds that while social expenditure is negatively associated with poverty in the short run, the relationship turns positive in the long run, reflecting the complex dynamics of welfare spending and poverty outcomes (Celikay & Gumus, 2017). This reinforces the view that without reforms in targeting, adequacy, and delivery systems, social assistance remains vulnerable to inefficiency, politicization, and behavioral constraints that limit its effectiveness in reducing poverty.

The positive association between unemployment and poverty highlights the critical role of labor market conditions in shaping welfare outcomes. This result is consistent with evidence that unemployment remains one of the most persistent obstacles to poverty reduction in Indonesia. Studies show that provinces with higher unemployment rates tend to experience slower declines in poverty, and that the prevalence of informal employment further constrains households' ability to escape poverty (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025c). The persistence of informality and limited job opportunities thus prevents many households from benefiting from economic growth. The present study therefore reinforces earlier conclusions that reducing unemployment through active labor market policies, including skills development and improved job quality, is not only essential for supporting growth but, more importantly, for achieving sustained poverty reduction.

The strong and negative effect of election years on poverty introduces a political economy dimension. Evidence from Indonesia consistently points to the presence of political budget cycles, where governments expand fiscal transfers and social spending during electoral periods (Sjahrir et al., 2013; Wiguna & Khoirunurrofik, 2021). More recent analyses also reveal that social assistance allocations often rise before elections but fail to significantly reduce poverty rates, suggesting that political considerations dominate their distribution (Haliim & Muhammad, 2025). While such expansions may generate short-term welfare gains, they tend to be unsustainable if driven primarily by electoral incentives rather than long-term poverty alleviation objectives. These findings imply that poverty reduction strategies should not be overly dependent on temporary political cycles but instead embedded in institutional frameworks that ensure consistency, accountability, and continuity.

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Taken together, these findings carry important policy implications for Indonesia. First, the strong role of GRDP per capita highlights the need for sustained and inclusive economic growth, which must be designed to ensure that its benefits reach the poor. Second, the significant effect of unemployment points to the importance of job creation and labor market reforms that can reduce informality and improve wages. Third, the modest but negative effect of social assistance calls for reforms to strengthen targeting, increase adequacy, and improve delivery systems. Fourth, the influence of election cycles highlights the need for institutional safeguards that prevent welfare programs from being shaped primarily by political incentives.

These implications also resonate with the global development agenda, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 1 of the SDGs explicitly calls for ending poverty in all its forms everywhere. The findings of this study suggest that Indonesia's progress toward this goal depends on integrating economic growth with labor market improvements and effective social protection. By aligning national poverty reduction strategies with SDG 1, Indonesia can ensure that poverty reduction is inclusive, sustainable, and resilient to short-term political cycles.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that poverty reduction in Indonesia requires multidimensional policy strategies. Economic growth is essential but must be inclusive, employment opportunities must be expanded and improved, and social protection programs must be strengthened to support vulnerable groups. At the same time, institutional safeguards are needed to protect welfare policies from short-term political pressures. These integrated efforts will not only contribute to national poverty reduction but also accelerate Indonesia's achievement of SDG 1 by 2030.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the relationship between social assistance expenditure and poverty across Indonesian provinces from 2015 to 2024 using a fixed effects model. The results demonstrate that social assistance exerts a negative but relatively modest effect on poverty, indicating that while it can support welfare improvements, its impact is still limited by issues of targeting and implementation. These findings highlight the need to strengthen the design and delivery of social assistance to ensure that it provides consistent benefits for the poor.

The analysis also underscores the role of broader economic and institutional factors. Economic growth remains a major driver of poverty reduction, but its impact often requires time to materialize, similar to the lagged effect of social assistance. Unemployment continues to exacerbate poverty, and the significance of election years suggests that welfare programs remain vulnerable to political cycles, raising concerns about their sustainability.

From a policy standpoint, the results emphasize that poverty reduction requires more than short-term interventions. Strengthening and institutionalizing social assistance is essential to ensure durability, while inclusive growth and improved labor markets must complement these efforts. Taken together, these findings align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1 on ending poverty, by stressing the importance of integrated, long-term, and well-targeted strategies to achieve sustained poverty alleviation.

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