

The Potential of International Cooperation of Pohuwato Regency, Gorontalo Province: A Qualitative Explanatory Study

Ayuni Nur Siami¹, Sitti Nurtina²

¹² Universitas Bina Mandiri, Gorontalo, Indonesia

* Correspondence e-mail; siamiayuninur@gmail.com

Article history

Submitted: 2026/02/01; Revised: 2026/03/11; Accepted: 2026/06/28

Abstract

Pohuwato Regency is located at the westernmost part of Gorontalo Province and possesses abundant natural resources, including metallic mineral mining, forestry, fisheries, agriculture, and biomass energy sectors. Amid fiscal constraints, international cooperation (paradiplomacy) has emerged as a strategic instrument to stimulate local economic growth. This study aims to analyze and explain the potential for international cooperation of Pohuwato Regency through a qualitative explanatory research method. Data were collected through document analysis, in-depth interviews with policymakers, and literature review from credible sources. The findings reveal that Pohuwato Regency has significant cooperation potential in four main areas: (1) biomass energy (wood pellet) exports to Japan and South Korea, already reaching USD 52 million annually, (2) gold and mineral mining cooperation with potential investor countries, (3) eco-tourism and marine tourism development, and (4) technical cooperation in agriculture and fisheries. The study concludes that strong institutional frameworks for international cooperation at the regency level are required, along with policy harmonization aligned with central government regulations (Permendagri No. 25/2020 and PP No. 28/2018), and a planned, sustainable regional economic diplomacy strategy

Keywords

Pohuwato Regency; International Cooperation; Paradiplomacy; Regional Potential; Gorontalo



© 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY SA) license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of globalization marked by increasingly permeable national borders, local governments worldwide are increasingly actively involved in international networks. This phenomenon is known as paradiplomacy, which refers to the involvement of subnational entities—including district and city governments—in international diplomacy and cooperation (Takdir Ali Mukti, 2013). In Indonesia, the authority of local governments to establish international cooperation has been legally legitimized through Law No. 32 of 2004 concerning Regional Government, which was later strengthened and updated through Government Regulation No. 28 of 2018

and Minister of Home Affairs Regulation No. 25 of 2020 concerning Procedures for Regional Cooperation with Regional Governments Abroad.

Pohuwato Regency, located at the western tip of Gorontalo Province, is one of the regions with the greatest natural resource potential in Sulawesi. This region boasts reserves of metallic minerals such as gold, silver, and copper; a production forest area covering hundreds of thousands of hectares; a coastline rich in marine resources; and proven biomass energy potential that has attracted investment worth over IDR 1.4 trillion from PT. Biomasa Jaya Abadi (BJA) since 2019 (Liputan6.com, 2024). Wood pellet exports from Pohuwato Regency to Japan and South Korea have even reached a value of USD 52 million per year, contributing approximately 51–52 percent of total national wood pellet exports (Gorontalo Provincial Government, 2025).

However, this significant potential has not been matched by strong and structured foreign cooperation institutions at the regency level. The Pohuwato Regency Regional Budget (APBD), recorded at IDR 971 billion in 2022, is deemed insufficient to drive optimal economic growth without the support of foreign investment and cooperation (Tilongkabila News, 2022). Therefore, the development of planned and strategic foreign cooperation is an urgent need for Pohuwato Regency. This research aims to address the literature gap on paradiplomacy at the regency level in eastern Indonesia, particularly Gorontalo. Previous studies have focused more on sister city cooperation in large cities such as Bandung, Surabaya, and Denpasar. In-depth studies on the potential and strategies for foreign cooperation in Sulawesi regencies are still very limited. Using a qualitative explanatory method, this study aims to: (1) identify leading sectors that have the potential to become the basis for foreign cooperation, (2) analyze the institutional and regulatory obstacles faced by Pohuwato Regency, and (3) formulate recommendations for applicable and sustainable foreign cooperation strategies.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an explanatory qualitative research method. The explanatory method was chosen because the research aims not only to describe the phenomenon but also to explain the causal relationship between factors influencing the potential and challenges of foreign cooperation in Pohuwato Regency. Creswell and Creswell (2017) explain that explanatory qualitative research seeks to uncover "why" and "how" a phenomenon occurs, not simply "what" occurs...

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Potential for Cooperation in the Biomass Energy Sector

The biomass energy sector is the sector that most concretely demonstrates the potential for international cooperation in Pohuwato Regency. PT. Biomasa Jaya Abadi (BJA), the sole company exporting wood pellets from Pohuwato Regency, has established direct trade partnerships with buyers in Japan and South Korea. These two countries are the primary users of Indonesian wood pellets as a substitute fuel for coal in coal-fired power plants (PLTU) as part of their energy transition (FWI, 2024). Data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry's Legality and Sustainability Information System (SILK) shows that from October 2023 to February 2024 alone, Pohuwato exported a total of 21.07 million kg of wood pellets worth US\$2.83 million. Exports to Japan reached 10.56 million kg (worth US\$1.43 million) and to South Korea 13.12 million kg (worth US\$1.73 million) (FWI, 2024). Annually, the export value is projected to reach USD 52 million, equivalent to approximately IDR 780 billion—almost equivalent to the district's own regional budget.

From a foreign cooperation perspective, this fact opens up vast opportunities. The Pohuwato Regency Government can strengthen bilateral relations with local governments in Japan (particularly prefectures that are centers of the energy industry, such as Fukushima Prefecture, which is undergoing an energy transition following the 2011 disaster) and South Korea through a sister regency mechanism. Cooperation could encompass not only commodity trade but also the transfer of biomass processing technology, environmental standards (sustainability certification), and human resource training.

However, this study also identified a significant challenge in this sector, namely the findings of deforestation reported by Forest Watch Indonesia (2024) in the concession areas of partner companies. Deforestation of approximately 1,105 hectares within the PT. Banyan Tumbuh Lestari (BTL) concession during the 2021–2023 period has the potential to create obstacles to achieving sustainability certification, a mandatory requirement for the Japanese and South Korean markets. The Pohuwato Regency Government needs to ensure sustainable forestry practices as a prerequisite for long-term international cooperation.

Potential for Cooperation in the Mineral Mining Sector

Pohuwato Regency has significant reserves of metallic minerals, particularly gold at Mount Pani and Bulontio. This potential has placed Pohuwato on the radar of international mining investors from Australia, Canada, China, and South Korea, who are actively seeking mining concessions in North Sulawesi and Gorontalo. Gorontalo Province's mining resources—with metallic minerals including gold, silver, and

copper spread across Pohuwato, Bone Bolango, and North Gorontalo Regencies—are geologically part of the North Sulawesi volcanic arc, known for its rich mineral resources (SIIG Gorontalo, 2024).

International cooperation in the mining sector can be pursued through several channels: first, government-to-government (G2G) cooperation with countries with advanced mining technology capabilities (Australia, Canada) to encourage downstreaming and value-added mineral processing within the region. Second, through collaboration schemes with international development institutions such as GIZ (Germany) or JICA (Japan) to develop transparent and sustainable mining governance systems. Third, participation in international forums such as the ASEAN Mineral Cooperation Program and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Mining Task Force.

Challenges in mining sector cooperation primarily stem from regulatory aspects. Based on Government Regulation No. 28 of 2018 concerning Regional Cooperation, cooperation involving strategic natural resources requires intensive coordination with the Central Government through the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources and the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Pohuwato Regency Government's capacity in negotiating foreign investment in the mining sector needs to be strengthened, including through the formation of a competent negotiation team and an integrated licensing system.

Potential for Cooperation in the Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Sector

With a coastline stretching along Tomini Bay, Pohuwato Regency has enormous marine fisheries potential. According to data from the Pohuwato Regency Statistics Agency (BPS), the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sectors are the largest contributors to the regency's GRDP. Tomini Bay, Indonesia's largest bay (approximately 59,500 km²), boasts high marine biodiversity, including potential for shrimp, milkfish, and reef fish cultivation. International cooperation in this sector could be directed at several strategic programs: (1) cooperation with Norway, Iceland, or the Netherlands—countries with leading fisheries and aquaculture technology—to modernize marine cultivation and processing systems; (2) cooperation with Japan on marine conservation area management programs, considering the presence of the Tanjung Panjang Nature Reserve and the Nantu Forest Wildlife Sanctuary in the Pohuwato area; (3) access to bilateral and multilateral grant programs for the development of fishing port infrastructure and the cold chain for fishery products.

One important finding from this study is that approximately 62 percent of

shrimp and milkfish ponds in Pohuwato Regency are located within protected forest areas (FWI, 2024). This situation creates serious regulatory risks in the context of international cooperation, given that international environmental standards (such as the ASC—Aquaculture Stewardship Council) require clear land legality. The district government needs to finalize area boundaries and legalize ponds as prerequisites for sustainable international cooperation.

Potential for Cooperation in the Tourism Sector

Although not yet optimally developed, Pohuwato Regency's tourism sector holds promising potential. The Panua Nature Reserve, Tanjung Panjang Nature Reserve, and Bogani Nani Wartabone National Park, part of which falls within Pohuwato, are key assets for ecotourism development. These areas can be developed through collaborations with international conservation organizations such as WWF, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), or government partners such as USAID and KOICA, which have community-based ecotourism development programs.

A relevant tourism collaboration model for Pohuwato Regency is a sister regency with a district or regency of the same level in countries with strong ecotourism traditions, such as Malaysia (Sabah), the Philippines (Palawan), or Costa Rica. This collaboration could include the exchange of tourism managers, the adoption of international ecotourism standards (GSTC—Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria), and joint promotion in the international tourist market. Given that Statistics Indonesia (BPS) data (2024) shows that international tourist visits to Indonesia increased by 24.85 percent in the first quarter of 2024, this is an opportune moment to begin developing alternative tourist destinations beyond Bali and Labuan Bajo.

Based on field data analysis and documentation, this study identified five major challenges that need to be addressed by Pohuwato Regency in developing international cooperation. First, institutional capacity remains limited because Pohuwato Regency does not yet have a dedicated unit responsible for managing foreign cooperation. Unlike larger cities that possess specialized international cooperation offices staffed with trained personnel, cooperation affairs in Pohuwato are still handled on an ad hoc basis by the Regional Secretariat's Cooperation Division, which simultaneously manages domestic interregional partnerships. Second, fiscal limitations pose a significant constraint. With a regional budget (APBD) of IDR 971 billion in 2022, which declined compared to the pre-pandemic period, the regency has limited financial capacity to support international promotion activities, diplomatic visits, and human resource development for foreign cooperation. Third, regulatory complexity creates additional obstacles, as

international cooperation procedures require coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and other relevant technical agencies, often resulting in lengthy administrative processes that exceed the current bureaucratic capacity at the regency level. Fourth, environmental and sustainability issues represent a potential barrier, particularly due to findings of deforestation and aquaculture activities within protected forest areas, which may hinder cooperation with countries that enforce strict environmental standards, especially in European and Japanese markets. Finally, the limited availability of civil servants with proficiency in English and other foreign languages constitutes a technical challenge in managing and maintaining international partnerships effectively.

To address these challenges, this study proposes several strategic recommendations. From an institutional perspective, a dedicated international cooperation unit should be established under the Regional Secretariat or Regional Development Planning Agency (Bappeda), staffed with trained personnel and supported by mandatory English-language competency requirements. In terms of regulatory improvement, the local government should formulate regional regulations and executive guidelines on international cooperation aligned with Minister of Home Affairs Regulation No. 25 of 2020 and Government Regulation No. 28 of 2018. Regarding sectoral priorities, Pohuwato Regency should focus its international cooperation efforts on three key sectors: biomass energy with partners from Japan and South Korea, mining development with Australia and Canada, and ecotourism collaboration within ASEAN countries. To strengthen environmental credibility, the government should accelerate the legalization of aquaculture areas and pursue sustainability certifications for export-oriented products, including PEFC/FSC certification for wood pellets and ASC certification for aquaculture products. Human resource capacity should be enhanced through scholarship programs and international negotiation training for civil servants, supported by LPDP, Bappenas, and partnerships with higher education institutions. Furthermore, it is recommended that at least 0.5% of the regional expenditure budget be allocated to investment promotion and international cooperation activities to ensure sustainable implementation of these initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Pohuwato Regency has significant and diverse potential for foreign cooperation, supported by its abundant natural resources in four key sectors: biomass energy, mineral mining, fisheries and marine affairs, and ecotourism. The fact that Pohuwato contributes 51–52 percent of total national wood

pellet exports, valued at USD 52 million per year, demonstrates that the region already has a significant international footprint, despite not yet being managed through formal and structured government cooperation mechanisms.

Explanatory, this study demonstrates that Pohuwato Regency's suboptimal foreign cooperation is caused by a complex interaction between three factors: (1) limited institutional and human resource capacity, (2) the complexity of foreign cooperation regulatory procedures in Indonesia, and (3) environmental compliance challenges that are prerequisites for international markets. These three factors reinforce each other, creating structural barriers that need to be addressed simultaneously. The findings of this study have important policy implications: first, the Pohuwato Regency Government needs to immediately establish a dedicated institutional unit to manage foreign cooperation; second, the determination of priority sectors for cooperation needs to be based on measurable comparative advantages, not merely aspirations; Third, environmental and sustainability issues must be addressed simultaneously as they are an absolute requirement for cooperation with developed countries; Fourth, the Gorontalo Provincial Government and the Central Government need to provide greater technical and financial support to Pohuwato as the district with the greatest export potential in Gorontalo.

REFERENCES

- Adji, B. E. P., Saleh, S. E., Payu, B. R., & Mulyati, Y. (2025). Identifikasi Komoditas Unggulan Pertanian di Kabupaten Pohuwato. *Jurnal Studi Ekonomi dan Pembangunan*, 3.
- Berita Gorontalo. (2025). Gubernur Gorontalo Nilai Pohuwato Daerah Strategis Investasi. Diakses dari <https://berita.gorontaloprov.go.id/2025/05/13/gubernur-gorontalo-nilai-pohuwato-daerah-strategis-investasi/>
- BPS Kabupaten Pohuwato. (2024). Kabupaten Pohuwato Dalam Angka 2024. Gorontalo: Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Pohuwato. ISSN/ISBN: 2088-3692.
- BPS Kabupaten Pohuwato. (2024). Regional Statistics of Pohuwato Regency 2024. Gorontalo: Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Pohuwato. Nomor Publikasi: 75030.24028.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Duchacek, I. (1984). The International Dimension of Subnational Self-Government. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 14(4), 5–31.
- Dwiastuti, I., Endey, I., & Sugiyah. (2023). Pemetaan Potensi Ekonomi Daerah Berbasis Sektoral. *Jurnal Ekonomi Regional*, 12(2), 45–63.

- Eraku, S. S., Baruadi, M. K., & Permana, A. P. (2023). Analisis Potensi Ekonomi Kabupaten Pohuwato. *Gorontalo Development Review*, 6(1), 45–60.
- Forest Watch Indonesia (FWI). (2024). Energy Transition Business: Alert!!! New Deforestation Drivers in Gorontalo. Jakarta: Forest Watch Indonesia. Diakses dari <https://fwi.or.id/en/energy-transition-business-alert-new-deforestation-drivers-in-gorontalo/>
- Intentilia, A. A. M., & Surya Putra, A. A. B. N. A. (2021). From Local to Global: Examining Sister City Cooperation as Paradiplomacy Practice in Denpasar City, Bali, Indonesia. *Jurnal Bina Praja*, 13(2), 357–367. <https://doi.org/10.21787/jbp.13.2021.357-367>
- Kementerian Dalam Negeri RI. (2020). Peraturan Menteri Dalam Negeri Nomor 25 Tahun 2020 tentang Tata Cara Kerja Sama Daerah dengan Pemerintah Daerah di Luar Negeri dan Kerja Sama Daerah dengan Lembaga di Luar Negeri. Jakarta: Kemendagri.
- Kementerian Dalam Negeri RI. (2007). Peraturan Menteri Dalam Negeri Nomor 3 Tahun 2008 tentang Pedoman Pelaksanaan Kerjasama Pemerintah Daerah dengan Pihak Luar Negeri. Jakarta: Kemendagri.
- Liputan6.com. (2024, Oktober 4). Kaya Sumber Daya Alam, Gorontalo Siap Gelar Karpet Merah Demi Tarik Investasi. Diakses dari <https://www.liputan6.com/bisnis/read/5729540/>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Novriyal, F., Botutihe, N. M. U., Bentearu, F., Dunggio, I., Lihawa, F., & Hamidun, M. S. (2024). The Impact of Mining Activities on Ecology Condition and in the Marisa Watershed Pohuwato Regency, Gorontalo Province. *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences (IJHESS)*, 6, 538–549.
- Oktadiani, S., Olilingo, F. Z., Mopangga, H., & Saleh, S. E. (2024). Analysis of Regional Inequality in Gorontalo Province 2015-2022. *Gorontalo Development Review*, 7(1), 25–44.
- Pemerintah Kabupaten Pohuwato. (2022). Sambutan Wakil Gubernur Gorontalo pada Rapat Paripurna DPRD Pohuwato HUT ke-19 Kabupaten Pohuwato. Gorontalo: Setda Kabupaten Pohuwato.
- Pemerintah Republik Indonesia. (2018). Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 28 Tahun 2018 tentang Kerjasama Daerah. Lembaran Negara RI Tahun 2018.
- Pemerintah Republik Indonesia. (2004). Undang-Undang Nomor 32 Tahun 2004 tentang Pemerintahan Daerah. Lembaran Negara RI Tahun 2004 Nomor 125.

- SIIG Gorontalo. (2024). Potensi Investasi Provinsi Gorontalo. Diakses dari <https://siigng.gorontaloprov.go.id/potential>
- Takdir Ali Mukti. (2013). Paradiplomacy: Kerjasama Luar Negeri oleh Pemda di Indonesia. Yogyakarta: The Phinisi Press.
- Tilongkabila News. (2022, Februari 26). Ditunjang Potensi Alam Melimpah, Pohuwato akan Semakin Maju dan Sejahtera. Diakses dari <https://tilongkabilanews.id/daerah/ditunjang-potensi-alam-melimpah-pohuwato-akan-semakin-maju-dan-sejahtera/>