

Exploring the Employee Perspective of Competency Development Practices in the Public Sector: A Case Study of the Indonesian Food and Drug Authority (BPOM)

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Abstract

Following the end of the New Order regime and reform initiatives promoted by the World Bank, the Indonesian government increasingly adopted New Public Management (NPM). With NPM, the skills and competencies of the State Civil Apparatus, as agents of bureaucratic reform, must be enhanced to meet organizational goals. However, these goals often conflict with employees' interests. Therefore, it is crucial to consider employees' perspectives when developing competencies. This research examines employees' views on competency development and the role of leaders. Using qualitative methods, 12 public sector employees were interviewed through an exploratory survey. The findings indicate that competency development is often linked to financial well-being, while other interpretations are overshadowed by different priorities. The practical implication is that the government should tailor its human resource policies and practices to achieve desired outcomes.

Keywords: *civil servant, employee perspective, competency development, public policy*

INTRODUCTION

The end of the New Order regime in the late 1990s marked the beginning of public sector reform in Indonesia. A significant bureaucratic transition occurred in 2003 following the World Bank's mandate, which set change targets (Turner et al., 2022). The government has worked to rebuild the nation's political (Keban, 2019), public service (Hutahaean & Pasaribu, 2022; Ibrahim, 2022), and economic (Siksiawati et al., 2020) sectors. During the reform era, Indonesia's public administration shifted from the old order to New Public Management (NPM) (Wijaya et al., 2023). The NPM paradigm was implemented to transform public administration, focusing on how public sector organizations and their employees should be designed, organized, and managed (Diefenbach, 2009).

As the public administration system evolves, policies and regulations are needed to help the government implement NPM. However, as a postcolonial country, Indonesia's public sector still struggles with governance issues and challenges. In Indonesia's current governance system, efficiency and effectiveness are prioritized to ensure that change is fully implemented beyond mere rhetoric. Enhancing public administration efficiency is crucial for Indonesia's long-term growth agenda. This effort is closely linked to human resources' role and capacity to accelerate bureaucratic reform (Malthis & Jackson, 2001). Competency development is crucial for developing human and organizational resources and maintaining a skilled and productive workforce (PIU, 2001; Harrison, 1997; ILO, 1999; ILO, 2000; McGoldrick et al., 2002; Torrington & Hall, 1998).

Human Resource (HR) competencies are essential for significantly enhancing performance in public sector organizations (Camilleri, 2021; Guzeller & Celiker, 2019). Another crucial aspect is assessing employee development needs to effectively manage competency development (Lussier & Hendon, 2021). This assessment identifies the development areas each employee should pursue to perform at their best. Employees should be encouraged to evaluate themselves accurately and choose the training areas they

want to pursue. HR managers should analyze employee and organizational demands and prepare a training plan that reflects these priorities (Arulsamy et al., 2023).

Regarding civil servant competencies, the government's commitment is evident in policies aimed at developing State Civil Apparatus competencies. This is reflected in directives from the president communicated through various speeches, slogans, programs, and governance regulations. The government formulates various regulations to achieve high-quality human resources and create a Smart ASN Towards World-Class Bureaucracy to lead the country in a better direction (REF). Current civil servants are responsible for this task, requiring them to navigate various turbulent changes with their competencies.

In its implementation, ASN development competencies are based on Law Number 5 of 2014 concerning the State Civil Apparatus, further regulated through the National Institute of Public Administration Indonesia (PerLAN) Number 10 of 2018 concerning the Development of State Civil Apparatus Competencies. This regulation states that State Civil Apparatus working in government agencies have a minimum right to 20 learning hours per year for competency development. It also emphasizes that competency development is part of fulfilling continuous learning, improving performance, preparing employees for advancement, and enriching employee experiences (PerLAN 10 of 2018). To achieve development goals, employees participate in every prepared competency development activity. However, some employees interpret fulfilling this right as an obligation. Employee competency development remains a key indicator in performance targets. Consequently, there is a paradigm shift, making competency development an obligation that must be fulfilled.

The government reinforced this shift with the issuance of Law Number 20 of 2023 concerning Civil Servants in October 2023, replacing Law Number 5 of 2014. In Law Number 20 of 2023, Paragraph 7 Article 489 states that every civil servant is required to undergo competency development through continuous learning to remain rele-

vant to organizational demands. This change resembles two sides of a coin, where rights and obligations have very different meanings. This difference will undoubtedly affect the system and the journey of competency development for civil servants in Indonesia in practice.

Several previous studies show the significance of organizational investment in employee competency development. Employee perceptions of such investment are associated with positive work efforts, behaviors, and attitudes within the organization, and a decrease in turnover intentions (Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010; Lee & Bruvold, 2003). Other studies indicate the importance of exploring employees' perceptions of supervisor support as organizational representatives regarding employee development, as they are tasked with communicating organizational values and goals (Noe & Ford, 1992; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Kuo et al., 2014). Kuvaas and Dysvik (2010) also revealed that line managers are crucial in implementing competency development practices, as this affects how the practices are perceived by employees, which, in turn, influences employee attitudes. Furthermore, scholars argue that employees differentiate between social support and organizational support in promoting employee development (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Isa et al., 2021). These findings highlight the importance of employee perceptions and perspectives.

Some argue that competency development is critical for achieving organizational performance (Otoo & Mishra, 2018; Potnuru & Sahoo, 2016). Velu and Manxhari (2017), for example, argue that there is a positive relationship between independent managerial competencies and business performance. However, others argue that there is no relationship between competency development and performance variables (Yazdanfar et al., 2014; Shet et al., 2019; Šparl et al., 2013), suggesting complex relationships between the two. It is important to note that the majority of existing research views competency development issues from a unitarist paradigm, where the organization and employees are seen to have the same primary interests and functions (Lapiņa et al., 2014). This unitarist perspective claims that there is only

one agreed conceptualization of organizational goals, often defined in terms of efficiency, profit, and growth for the organization's benefit. This perspective dismisses the idea that organizational goals and employee interests often differ (Hart, 1993; Dello Russo et al., 2024). Meanwhile, research shows that perceptions of competency development acceptance serve as a tool that facilitates employees' commitment to their work, stemming from their involvement in training programs (Madera et al., 2011).

Understanding these dynamics, a pluralist lens is beneficial in assisting the implementation of organizational policy. Pluralism holds out the possibility that employers and employees can engage in genuine partnerships based on partial congruence of interests, even as their interests also diverge in part (Van Buren, 2022). Therefore, the importance of such a partnership is realized when employers and employees negotiate goals that are genuinely shared rather than employees being coerced into adopting employer goals that may be inimical to employee interests (Van Buren, 2022).

Adopting a pluralist lens, this research explores how employees perceive competency development provided by organizations. A pluralist lens in HR research is essential to capture the complexity and multifaceted nature of human resource practices. It necessitates a focus on employee perceptions and is consistent with previous research, which argues that employee perceptions of organizational support for development, leader concern, and perceptions of the benefits of competency development significantly affect employee job-related attitudes (Alamri & Al-Duhaim, 2017; Yang et al., 2012; Santos & Stuart, 2003; Newman et al., 2011). Additionally, it underscores the importance of training and development for employees and the need for employers to provide more developmental opportunities (Edgar & Geare, 2005). This study also aims to extend previous research in the public sector (Mylona & Mihail, 2022), which focuses on policies regarding civil servant competency development, particularly in an under-studied setting such as Indonesia. Hence, our research question becomes:

how do civil servants understand or give meaning to competency development?

METHOD

Research Approach

This research adopts a qualitative method, focusing on meanings and processes that cannot be examined through quantity or numbers. It aims to provide a specific understanding of phenomena based on experiences with less generalization. Additionally, this qualitative research seeks to achieve an in-depth understanding of a particular case through deep exploratory studies, enabling the discovery of quality responses throughout the research (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Qualitative research is helpful for understanding complex and under-researched phenomena from insiders' perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This research also employs an interpretive approach, based on the understanding that various factors influence a person's perception of a phenomenon. These factors may relate to internal organizational politics, personal experiences, and organizational culture. In other words, the essence of the interpretive approach is exploring the different meanings used to understand how humans perceive life in a specific time and place (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Humans are considered different from physical phenomena, and it is assumed that humans cannot be explored in the same way as physical phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Giving meaning is a process of seeking to understand human views as agents, not as objects, constructing policies, societies, and cultures as a result of individual and collective sense-making (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

This research aims to raise contextualized views in the implementation of ASN competency development by situating our research in a specific setting: the Indonesian Food and Drug Authority (BPOM). BPOM was selected due to its relevance to the research objectives and its accessibility to the research team. Specifically, one of the authors is employed at this organization, which facilitated access to pertinent data and pro-

vided an in-depth understanding of the organizational context. Such selection aligns with established qualitative research practices, where the researcher's position can offer significant insights and facilitate deeper engagement with the study subject (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995).

Moreover, competency development policies are universally regulated by the government through existing laws. The regulations applied are the same for all institutions, including BPOM. The uniformity of these regulations across institutions allows our case study to serve as a representative example of others. Competency development is also a topic frequently raised in many state events, emphasizing that ASN competency development is taken seriously by the government and organizations. Hence, our research question focuses on the personal experiences, perspectives, opinions, and realities experienced by the informants as ASNs in obtaining competency development.

In the interpretative approach, research contexts are often inseparable from the research findings. Understanding the data collected through the researcher's perspective and understanding is crucial. Data presentation is done by coding the data collection results and presenting them objectively and impartially. The findings and conclusions are developed based on the researcher's interpretive frameworks and sensibilities.

Case Setting: Indonesian Food and Drug Authority

The Indonesian Food and Drug Authority (BPOM) operates under Presidential Regulation Number 80 of 2017. BPOM is a Non-Ministerial Government Institution responsible for Drug and Food Control, reporting to the President through the health minister. BPOM's duties include administering government drug and food control according to the law. BPOM performs several functions to fulfill these duties, such as developing and implementing national policies, establishing norms, standards, and procedures, and controlling drugs and food before and during circulation. BPOM coordinates with central and regional government agencies, provides technical guidance and supervision,

enforces drug and food control legislation, and offers administrative support to all organizational elements within BPOM.

As an archipelagic country, Indonesia has numerous entry points for foreign pharmaceutical and food products, making the monitoring of drug and food circulation challenging. This geographical condition often results in ineffective supervision and control of food and drug distribution (Bappenas, 2022). To address this, BPOM has 113 representative offices and 5,398 employees across the country, ensuring comprehensive drug and food supervision from west to east Indonesia. As advancements in science, technology, and knowledge, particularly in pharmaceuticals and food, continue, it is crucial to ensure that personnel responsible for drug and food supervision are competent enough to effectively carry out their duties and protect the Indonesian population from harmful products.

Recognizing the importance of employee competency development, BPOM has established guidelines since 2012, starting with learning task guidelines. In 2018, the Chief of BPOM issued Kepka KP.07.01.1.82.04.18.2302 concerning Guidelines for Assigning Learning Tasks and Study Leaves for Civil Servants within BPOM, and KepKa HK.04.1.22.12.18.5812 concerning Guidelines for Competency Development for Civil Servants within BPOM. These guidelines were established in response to Law No. 5/2024 concerning Civil Servants (UU ASN) and Government Regulation No. 11/2017 (PP 11/2017). Updates were made in 2022 to the competency development and study leave guidelines through BPOM Chief Decrees No. 221 and 223. Additionally, BPOM Chief Decree No. 222 of 2022 was formulated regarding Policy Directions and Learning and Development Programs for Human Resources Supervising Drugs and Food in 2023. These policies reflect BPOM's commitment to enhancing the quality of human resources responsible for supervising drugs and food, ensuring they are capable of performing their duties effectively.

Reflexivity in Research

Reflexivity involves the analytical at-

ention given to the role of the researcher in qualitative research, both as a concept and a process (Dowling, 2006). It requires self-awareness (Lambert et al., 2010), meaning active engagement in the research process. Reflexivity is about recognizing that, as researchers, we are part of the social world we study (Ackerly & True, 2010). Researchers undertake a continuous process of reflection regarding their values (Lambert et al., 2010) and recognizing, examining, and understanding how their social background, location, and assumptions influence their research practices (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

The first author is a state civil apparatus currently working at the National Agency of Drug and Food Control, specifically in the PPSDM POM unit. She serves as a senior staffing analyst, focusing primarily on human resource development, including training, seminars, technical guidance, and more. Besides facilitating employee competency development, she is also involved in creating several competency development policies. In addition to being a manager of competency development, she is also a participant who needs to meet her own competency development needs. Therefore, she has experienced aspects that need improvement in competency development provision.

The second author is a management/organizational studies scholar who has conducted research related to human resource development practices, particularly those that prioritize employee perspectives, highlighting the plural dimension of the contemporary workplace. While working on this research, we realize that our positions can influence the interpretive results of the findings. We do not claim that our interpretation is the only interpretation of the data, as a researcher's position shapes their worldview and thus may generate different interpretations (Corlett & Mavin, 2018).

Data Collection

The data collection method involved in-depth interviews to obtain explanations from informants regarding their attitudes, actions, beliefs, and perspectives (Yin, 2016). Before the interviews, the first author recruited informants using an exploratory survey to identify suitable participants. The

interviews were semi-structured, defined by Magaldi and Berler (2020) as exploratory interviews. The interviewer prepared an interview guide with grouped topics and informal questions asked differently to various participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Interviews

The exploratory questions aimed to understand each informant's perspective based on personal experience. The open-ended questions allowed informants to use their commonly employed terms (Yin, 2016). The study used purposive sampling, selecting samples based on specific considerations (Campbell et al., 2020). Sampling began with an exploratory survey to understand how various factors contribute to a phenomenon (Sue & Ritter, 2007). Researchers typically seek individuals knowledgeable about a particular topic or process (Sue & Ritter, 2007). To screen and recruit potential informants, we sent out an exploratory survey. Out of 136 responses obtained through social media, including Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp group communities, 71 respondents were willing to be interviewed. From these 71 respondents, potential informants were screened based on the following criteria: a) working at BPOM, either in central or regional offices; b) being an ASN who has worked for at least one year; and c) having participated in one or more competency development activities.

Additionally, researchers selected informants based on open-ended responses from the exploratory survey, considering various contextual variations to enrich the study's findings. The selection also aimed to address diversity. As a result, 12 informants were identified and became participants in this study. During the interviews, informants elaborated on their open-ended responses to the preliminary survey to delve deeper into the context being studied.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, we coded the verbatim transcripts and conducted several rounds of close reading. We also used Microsoft Excel to categorize observation notes and facilitate analysis. The collected data were reorganized into codes and categories. Data reduction simplifies notes through sum-

marizing, coding, and identifying themes, which helps draw conclusions. We repeatedly read the transcripts to understand them comprehensively, linking this process to the emphasized research topics during the interviews. Then, themes were determined.

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses can explore contexts flexibly and interpretively (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This method can be applied to various approaches, such as theoretical and epistemological (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis, consisting of six phases, is used by researchers to manage data obtained from interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process, also called coding, is based on the researcher's skills and interpretive abilities. The results of coding are then analyzed to generate three main themes: Competency Development: Right or Obligation? Leaders and Competency Development: The Good and the Bad, and Competency Development in the Era of Budget Austerity. We will explain these in detail below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Competency Development: Right or Obligation?

The first theme identified from the data relates to the history of competency development policy as established by the government in Law Number 5 of 2014 regarding Civil Servants (ASN), which seems to be implemented differently by BPOM (Indonesian Food and Drug Authority). According to this regulation, ASNs have the right to obtain competency development. However, in practice at BPOM, this right has been included as one of the performance indicators in the Employee Performance Targets (SKP) since 2020, making it appear to be an obligation that must be fulfilled.

“When I was still a civil service candidate (CPNS), there was already a target of 20 teaching hours in the SKP. It is still in place until now (2024). However, in 2023, that target was not included in the SKP because I was on study leave. But recently, even though I failed in 2023, my head of the administrative division said

that I still need to meet that target, even though it's not in the SKP". (Employee B, female, 5 years of work)

The policy to include this target as an obligation for employees has been implemented at BPOM since 2019. Another informant mentioned that routine tasks often take priority over competency development, making the right to development seem useless and causing employees to miss out on opportunities. However, since it has become a mandatory target, employees are required to comply, even if they do so reluctantly. The employee I said:

Actually, obtaining self-competency development is a right. It's our right to further develop ourselves to have more potential than before. But most employees perceive it as an obligation, because perhaps they already have routine work activities, so some perceive competency development as unnecessary for them. [...] So, some employees still see it as an obligation and don't demand it. If, for example, they forget and haven't reached 20 lesson hours, they're okay with it if not reminded (Employee I, female, 5 years of work)

This obligation is further emphasized when competency development is periodically monitored and evaluated for compliance by the HR managers in several work units. Informant B mentioned that employees in their unit will be required to continue participating in competency development.

The government further reinforced this shifting paradigm with the issuance of the latest Civil Servants Law, Law Number 20 of 2023, which changed competency development from being an ASN's right to 'Every ASN employee must undergo competency development.' This change indicates that the implementation of competency development is interpreted differently from the applicable policy.

However, the change in nomenclature does not immediately change the method of providing competency development to employees. Informant F stated that one of the requirements for their position is to attend

archivist training provided by the supervising institution, the National Archives of Indonesia (ANRI), but it is usually facilitated by the organization. However, even after four years of working in that position, informant F has not received the mandatory competency development, showing concerns about stagnant career progression. BPOM has yet to find a solution to the informant's apprehensions as this research continues.

Similarly, there is no significant difference in the change of competency development into an obligation from the government's budget allocation perspective. No apparent budget standards are set to ensure the implementation of competency development in each government agency. In BPOM itself, informant A mentioned that the budget allocation for competency development is still very small compared to the entire budget per work unit.

When the indicators are achieved, the budget is reduced. Then what? This is an issue, it's not easy in my opinion. Not to mention if there are supervisors who have employees take competency tests, and they don't pass, why is that? They're good, you know, they're good every day (Employee A, male, 15 years of work)

Informants mentioned that if the budget for competency development decreases, it will also affect the quality of employees' competencies. Thus, during competency tests, more employees are likely to fail.

The motivation behind competency development is paramount, as employees may fail to benefit from such development due to low motivation despite their ability to grasp the training content (Colquitt et al., 2000). This motivation also determines how employees perceive competency development as an obligation or a right. Especially when competency development becomes a target in assessing employee performance. Locke (1968) mentions that regarding performance, employees see it as a target to be achieved, making them more focused and exerting greater effort (Goal-Setting Theory). However, as mentioned by informants in this study, employees are confused about implementing competency development pol-

icies. They find that competency development is seen as an obligation when it is stated as a right in written regulations. This bias leads to an implementation where competency development is only considered quantitatively, without considering its effectiveness. Meanwhile, in competency development, it is important to set specific goals for enhancing skills or knowledge (Locke & Latham, 2006).

Implementing competency development targets in the key performance indicator can be one organizational strategy to encourage more competent human resources, but attention needs to be paid to several aspects of its application. For example, the goals set should be challenging yet achievable to enhance employee productivity (Locke & Latham, 2013). Moreover, it is important to focus on the quality of competency development provided rather than solely setting quantitative targets. There is often a mismatch between the competencies provided and those desired or needed by employees (Dewey et al., 2008). This misalignment can also be observed based on employees' positions and work units. Our analysis suggests that informants in both HR management and technical units feel pressured to develop competencies merely to meet a target of 20 learning hours.

Leaders and Competency Development: The Good and the Bad

The role of leaders is crucial in developing employee competencies. Most participants in competency development follow the directives of unit leaders or at least have their permission if the development is conducted online. Some informants argue that unit leaders have been very supportive of employees participating in competency development activities. This support is demonstrated by the initiative of unit leaders to disseminate information about competency development activities that employees can attend.

I think it's very important because if the leaders are concerned about it, concerned about competency development, then automatically those below them will also be concerned. It means they wouldn't dare to object or anything if indeed the leaders prioritize

that (Employee FT, male, 5 years of work)

Competency development, especially activities conducted offline, usually includes allowances for meals, transportation, and daily expenses for participants. Therefore, it is not uncommon for leaders to use these allowances as a reward for specific individuals. Informants N and FT argue that providing "daily allowances" is inevitably a motive for some individuals to participate in competency development. According to SP, leaders who have the authority to assign specific tasks to certain individuals use this motive as a way to provide recognition.

There must be (a motive to earn extra money), but not sure if joking or not. Their thought is if they get this training, for example, even just for 2 days to Bandung, it's quite good, right? Can add (income) [...] (Employee SP, male, 5 years of work)

The provision of "pocket money" is closely linked to a leader's perception of an individual. For example, someone who is often relied upon, an employee with a certain social status, or how an employee seeks attention from their superior. Thus, earning income through competency development becomes one way for superiors to meet their employees' expectations or motivate them to perform their duties well. From the employees' perspective, they appreciate the directive to participate in competency development, especially when it is conducted offline.

Honestly, back when the team leader hadn't changed yet, I often did, Ma'am. I was always the one appointed. [...] yeah, like and dislike earlier [...] There were some, Ma'am, whose Learning Hours was quite prominent (in quantity) (Employee SP, male, 5 years of work)

These observations suggest that competency development is seen as a 'transactional tool' capable of persuading employees to contribute voluntarily to the organization. Moreover, the practice of using competency development as a reward in the form of additional income, regardless of whether it is liked by employees or not, indi-

icates the existence of social exchange relationships. These relationships are described as mutual resource exchanges (such as growth opportunities, care, money) between two parties, with exchanges that are interdependent and create future obligations (Blau, 2017; Foa & Foa, 1980).

These findings imply that the relationship between employees and human resource strategies is an integral part of effective competency development management. Employee performance responds to their beliefs about the treatment provided by their organization. Considering that the core aspects of social exchange theory lie in reciprocity rules and norms (Gouldner, 1960), the actor initiating the exchange and the target initially receiving the exchange can be any organizational entity such as employees, leaders, teams, and organizations.

In employee competency development, perceived benefits and advantages are based on how individuals respond to assistance from others. Social exchange can begin when organizations show concern or support for employees (Gould-Williams, 2007). The goal of competency development is to enhance job-related skills. If effective in knowledge transfer and workplace application, employees are likely to feel satisfied with their development and performance (Giangreco et al., 2009). This satisfaction can create a positive psychological contract between the organization and employees, based on shared expectations of a long-term relationship or social exchange (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006).

Competency development is used as a reward, including within duty learning. This reward is often based on the employee's tenure. The longer the tenure, the higher the priority for duty learning tasks. Informants shared experiences regarding study assignments, a form of competency development for civil servants through the Education track. This track is structured based on Law No. 5 of 2014 and Government Regulation No. 17 of 2020 concerning Civil Service Management, covering study assignment requirements, implementation, funding, duration, extensions, continuous assignments, and related provisions.

Employees applying for study assignments must meet certain requirements, including length of service (Tukan et al., 2023). However, some informants described the process as 'complicated' due to considerations of service length. Leaders seem to prioritize the length of service.

So, if we have limited ABK (study quota), we have to finish this one first, and then apply for this one. Sometimes we have to queue, even though sometimes to get permission for study assignments, the HR says that even the seniors haven't. [...] later, even the seniors haven't gone to college yet, like that. (Employee T, male, 5 years of work)

Phrases like 'like and dislike', 'recognition by superiors', 'given to the favorite person', and seniority-based decisions illustrate how superiors use their power to determine who receives 'pocket money' from competency development. This reward can be enjoyed through additional financial benefits.

However, continuously appointing the same person can burden employees, especially if the development does not align with their needs. Informant P, a competency assessor, often feels that the development does not match what is needed and does not directly support performance.

For example, as reported, there are already recommendations for training or something like that, it hasn't been fully followed. Like me, I'm an assessor, and then suddenly I'm asked to attend advanced service orientation. That's two strange things. [...] because one, I haven't attended basic training, and two, my gap is not in public service, like that. (Employee P, female, 5 years of work)

Personal preference-based appointments can lead to misaligned competency development. Competency development should primarily target filling competencies that drive performance. But what if the targeted competencies are not appropriate?

Informant S mentioned the need for Training Needs Analysis (TNA), which is

currently unavailable in BPOM. TNA can help provide more targeted competency development. Similarly, A argues that leaders lack conceptual foundations in organizing competency development. Leaders must have analytical skills to identify needed competencies. However, not all superiors possess in-depth analysis and frame analysis skills, making it challenging to bridge the gap between employee needs and provided development.

Because according to me, TNA is the root, right. I mean, like before we do competency development, we must have the data first. It's like taking a blood test, right, so if we've checked the blood and then we know we have high level of cholesterol. So, how do we fix it to make it normal? If we never do lab testing, we don't know what needs to be fixed. (Employee S, female, 6 years of work)

Informant S emphasizes the importance of accurate 'medicine' to address issues. Everything is based on data in the government sector, which is moving towards a merit system. However, BPOM does not yet have comprehensive TNA data.

Competency Development in the Era of Budget Austerity

Our third and final theme relates to the issue of budgeting in competency development, which can be challenging to measure. The success or failure of an organization's competency development cannot be predicted because there are no established standards. Most public sectors, including BPOM, are affected by government 'cost-cutting' actions. Consequently, various planned funding aspects are forced to be reduced and re-allocated to other needs, such as during the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia, when the central government decided to redirect all other funding to address COVID-19.

These budget cuts certainly affect competency development, which lacks standards for measuring its achievement. The decision to cut the budget lies with the leaders in each work unit who have the authority to oversee the use of the unit's budget. As stated by informant FT:

In other units of BPOM, if it can be said, competency development is not something that is prioritized very much. Maybe if there are other technical activities to be carried out. For example, let's say activities A B C, those A B C activities have been arranged, those A B C activities are technical, and then D E are competency development activities. Well, it turns out there will be an addition of technical activities, approximately which one will be removed from the budget, usually not from the technical activities. But from the competency development activities. (Employee FT, male, 5 years of work)

Employee DK mentioned that cost-saving through cutting the competency development budget was done because it was considered the easiest, as planned offline implementations could be transformed into online ones.

Because maybe we think we also have activity targets, right, Miss? So we prioritize achieving our activity targets first. Competency development, well, as long as there's an online option, we'll do it online, right? It can also be done online. (Employee DK, female, 5 years of work)

However, this change then raised doubts about the effectiveness of the activities. The responsibility to fulfill competency development of at least 20 learning hours imposed by BPOM makes employees choose their competency development almost randomly. Competency development does not align with what employees need but largely depends on the available themes of competency development, especially on online platforms. Employees seem to lose the essence of competency development, as stated by informant I:

For example, when they attend online training, it might be just a formality. During the online training, they might be doing other tasks at the same time. The main thing is just to meet the required 20 credit hours, and to add more. So, not all knowledge is absorbed by them. Therefore, the quality

is lacking. Because it's just for formality, not for self-improvement. It's one of the signs of lack of self-awareness. (Employee I, female, 5 years of work)

Informant S mentioned that participating in competency development no longer aims to improve performance but rather to meet the required numbers stated in the SKP documents. This gives the impression that fulfilling competency development no longer prioritizes quality but rather focuses on quantity.

So, they attend training, not because they need it, but because they want to meet the required credit hours. Because there's a paradigm that we have to fulfill a minimum of 20 credit hours per year. So, no matter what training it is, it's all the same to them, "As long as I can get the credit hours. (Employee S, female, 6 years of work)

We found that the quality of competency development has not yet become a priority target within the organization. The budget cuts for competency development in every cost-saving initiative indicate that competency development targets are merely numbers without considering the effectiveness of the activities. Thus, competency development remains a target that can be negotiated in terms of both quality and effectiveness.

Further findings provide insight that competency development is closely tied to leadership policies. Our findings suggest that leaders have the authority to conceptualize competency development implementation; thus, they should be able to analyze the competency development needed by their employees, whether for employee succession goals (Mehreen & Ali, 2022) or the achievement of organizational goals in general (Otoo & Mishra, 2018; Potnuru & Sahoo, 2016).

These research findings provide new insights for organizations regarding the role of leaders (unit leaders, direct superiors, team leaders) as organizational representatives to prioritize competency development in policy-making. In line with previous research, we conceptualize the role and support of leaders as a source of work and influence employees' perception of social support towards the development opportunities they perceive

(Mylona & Mihail, 2022). Thus, it can be said that employees perceive their superiors as working on behalf of the organization and acting in accordance with organizational directives. Therefore, the priorities and policies taken towards competency development become one of the determinants of employee perception.

The practical implications provided to HR managers and competency development managers are important to improve the quality of competency development so that it does not become a 'haphazard' project, but its impact can benefit both employees and organizations. Management needs to reorganize the implementation system, so that important terms are achieved, misalignment, budget cuts, imbalances, and additional allowances are no longer associated with competency development activities. Additionally, the availability of appropriate competency development still remains a task for management (Dagnew Gebrehiwot & Elantheraiyan, 2023). This research reveals alternative perspectives on competency development in the public sector. So far, employees perceive competency development, which is laden with added value and positivity, differently in different contexts. This research shows that employees are not yet 'free' to access competency development, both in terms of learning opportunities, availability of competency development, and leadership policies.

CONCLUSION

This study adopts a plural lens to human resources in the public sector and explores the perspectives and perceptions of civil servants (ASN) regarding the policy and practices of competence development within the organization. The study presents several findings based on in-depth interviews conducted with informants. Although existing research (Camilleri, 2021; Guzeller & Celiker, 2019; Aguinis, 2013; Potnuru & Sahoo, 2016) has shown that competence development can contribute to employee performance and innovation enhancement in the public sector (Bos-Nehles & Veenendaal, 2019; Jehanzeb, 2022), it includes both technical and behavioral aspects (Rothwell,

2010). Furthermore, this study demonstrates the value of studying the implementation of competence development, so that organizations can gain better insights to achieve their goals through improved employee performance.

The first finding highlights the entanglement between competence development and the fulfillment of financial well-being. A transactional relationship still motivates employees to participate in competence development activities. Competence development is seen as a pathway to securing additional income amidst the low salary in the public sector (REF), aside from obtaining new knowledge or skills. Motivation for competence development is crucial because even though employees can learn the training content, they may fail to benefit from it due to low motivation (Colquitt et al., 2000). This motivation also determines how employees perceive competence development as an obligation or a right.

The second finding suggests that the quality of competency development has not yet become a priority within the organization. The budget cuts for competency development in every cost-saving initiative indicate that competency development targets are merely numbers without considering the effectiveness of the activities. Thus, competency development remains a target that can be negotiated in terms of both quality and effectiveness.

The third finding provides further insight that competence development is closely tied to leadership policies. Leaders have the authority to conceptualize competence development implementation. They should be able to analyze the competence development needed by their employees, whether for employee succession goals (Mehreen & Ali, 2022) or the achievement of organizational goals in general (Otoo & Mishra, 2018; Potnuru & Sahoo, 2016). These research findings provide new insights for organizations regarding the role of leaders (unit leaders, direct superiors, team leaders) as organizational representatives to prioritize competence development in policy-making.

Based on interviews with informants, leaders in competence development become key social actors, particularly in implementing competence development within organi-

zations. Leaders have the authority granted by the organization to manage the implementation of competence development within their units. Therefore, we view the role and support of leaders as influencing employees' perceptions of social support and the development opportunities they experience, which is in line with the research conducted by Mylona & Mihail (2022). Thus, it can be said that employees perceive their superiors as working on behalf of the organization and acting in accordance with organizational directives. Leadership is crucial in ensuring the strategy of improving organizational performance (Sunahwati et al., 2019). Therefore, the priorities and policies taken towards competence development become one of the determinants of employee perception.

The practical recommendations for HR managers and competence development managers are crucial for enhancing the quality of competence development initiatives. This ensures that such initiatives are not handled in a disorganized manner but rather deliver meaningful benefits to both employees and the organization. Management must restructure the implementation system to ensure key objectives are met and to prevent issues such as misalignment, budget cuts, imbalances, and additional allowances from affecting competence development activities. Public organizations should implement training and development in accordance with the needs of the organization, and recognize the pivotal role that leadership plays in the strategic management of the organization in empowering and directing organizational resources towards achieving organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner (Sunahwati et al., 2019).

This research reveals alternative perspectives on competence development in the public sector. Despite the dominant understanding that competence development is laden with added value and positivity, employees perceive it differently in different contexts. This research shows that employees are not yet 'free' to access competence development, both in terms of learning opportunities, availability of competence development, and leadership policies.

This research offers several contributions. First, it speaks to studies on competen-

cy development from a pluralist lens. Second, it highlights the interconnectedness between competency development and new public management principles in the public sector, particularly managerial values such as efficiency (Head & Alford, 2013; Jackson & Lapsley, 2003; Osborne et al., 2013). Third, this research expands the study of social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017) and shows how it operates in the context of employee development (Jun & Eckardt, 2023). Our research shows that social exchange occurs between employees and the organization. Finally, this research provides methodological implications regarding competency development, which was previously carried out using a quantitative approach (Mylona & Mihail, 2022). This research expands the methodological toolbox through the use of qualitative methods to examine employee perspectives regarding competency development.

Further research is also necessary to include the perspective of policymakers and organizational elites. Based on the findings of this research, we encourage future research to explore more comprehensively the effectiveness, efficiency, and implications of the government budget on competency development, especially against the backdrop of budget austerity in the Indonesian public sector.

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