

Cultural and Religious Authority in Public Health: The Role of Ulema and Traditional Leaders in Stunting Prevention in Kampar Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract

Stunting is a global health issue affecting approximately 22% of toddlers worldwide, with a prevalence rate of 21.6% in Indonesia (SSGI 2022), necessitating a multisectoral approach that includes the role of local actors. This study aims to explore the role of religious leaders (ulema) and traditional community leaders in stunting prevention efforts in Kampar Regency, an area facing challenges related to child malnutrition. Stunting, resulting from chronic malnutrition, not only hinders child growth but also diminishes long-term human resource quality. The study examines how these leaders, as social influencers, contribute through educational and advocacy activities. A qualitative method was chosen to gain an in depth understanding of their perspectives, experiences, and community participation dynamics, employing data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving Ulema, traditional leaders, health agency representatives, and local government officials. Data analysis reveals their key role in raising public awareness about balanced nutrition and proper parenting, primarily through religious sermons, Islamic study groups, and traditional rituals. Major challenges include insufficient program integration with the health system and the need for further training. These findings highlight the importance of structured collaboration among local leaders, the health sector, and the government to strengthen holistic stunting prevention efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

Stunting is defined as a condition of growth failure in children under five due to chronic malnutrition, resulting in a child's height being significantly below the standard for their age (Agustin & Rahmawati, 2021). This process begins during pregnancy and continues into early childhood, but its physical manifestations only become apparent after the child reaches two years of age (Afifa, 2019). The consequences extend beyond physical growth impairment, hindering cognitive development, increasing susceptibility to diseases, and ultimately diminishing long-term human resource (SDM) quality.

Globally, stunting affects 22% of children under five. In Indonesia, its prevalence reaches 21.6% (Kementerian Kesehatan RI, 2022), placing the country among 17 nations grappling with the double burden of malnutrition (Saputri & Tumangger, 2019). Beyond stunting, Indonesia faces additional challenges such as child wasting (acute undernutrition), anemia, and chronic energy deficiency (CED) among pregnant women (Ariani, 2020). These issues are exacerbated by high mortality rates: 35 per 1,000 live births for under-five mortality, 58 per 1,000 for infant mortality, and 307 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (Ariati, 2019).

Maternal malnutrition contributes to low birth weight (LBW) and elevates the risk of stunting in children (Ariani, 2020). The poor nutritional status of the population underscores the urgency to strengthen health systems and community-based interventions. However, current stunting prevention efforts remain fragmented and often exclude local actors such as religious or traditional

leaders—whose influence is critical for shifting community behaviors. This study aims to address this gap by exploring integrative strategies that leverage the authority of community leaders in sustainable nutrition programs.

More than half of the deaths of infants, toddlers and pregnant women are related to poor nutritional status (Prakoso, 2012). The results of the South East Asian Nutrition Survey (SEANUTS) in 2010-2011 put Indonesia as the country with the highest number of short babies, far above Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. In 2010, the standard height figure for children aged 5 years was 110 cm, but the average height for Indonesian children aged 5 years was less than 6.7 cm for boys and less than 7.3 cm for girls (Trihono et al., 2015). The World Health Organization (WHO) in World Health Assembly (WHA) Resolution number 55.25 of 2002 concerning Outline of Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding reported that 60 percent of infant deaths were directly or indirectly caused by vitamin deficiency and 2 or 3 of these deaths related to inappropriate feeding practices which cause many children to face developmental obstacles and suffer from malnutrition (World Health Assembly, 2002).

The stunting prevalence rate in Indonesia in 2022 will still be at 21.6%, although it is slightly lower than in 2021 which reached 24.4% (Siti Nadia Tarmiz, 2023). Meanwhile, according to data from the 2022 Indonesian Nutrition Status Survey (SSGI), the stunting rate in Riau Province decreased to 17.0% compared to 2021, namely 22.3% (Kusnadi 2023). In response to this, all parties must take part in preventing stunting, including religious and traditional leaders who have a strong influence in society.

However, the role of ulema and traditional leaders in preventing stunting is still relatively minimal. In fact, ulema and traditional leaders have an important role as respected figures in society (J. S. Levin 1996, 850). Ulema and traditional leaders also have easier access to communicate with the wider community and can provide education about balanced nutrition and healthy eating patterns in accordance with religious teachings and applicable customary norms. This is reinforced by research conducted by Tri Hastuti et al which states that cultural and religious approaches are significant factors in encouraging changes in people's behavior regarding nutrition (R et al., 2020). Theoretically, cultural and religious approaches are grounded in the understanding that health behaviors are deeply embedded within social norms, values, and belief systems. Religious leaders often serve as trusted opinion leaders, shaping attitudes toward health interventions, disease prevention, and treatment adherence (Aldbyani 2025, 696). Their influence is particularly pronounced in societies where religious identity is central to daily life and decision-making (J. Levin, Chatters, dan Taylor 2011, 389).

The aim of this research is to formulate a strategy to increase and optimize the role of ulema and traditional leaders in preventing stunting in Kampar Regency. The urgency of this research is to empower the role of ulema and traditional leaders in preventing stunting so that they can accelerate the reduction in stunting rates in Indonesia, especially in Riau Province.

METHODS

This research was conducted in Kampar Regency with a descriptive qualitative approach. Primary data sources came from religious and traditional figures, namely MUI, ICMI, Islamic mass organization figures, Islamic religious instructors, Malay Customary Institutions, and community leaders (Lexy J. Moleong, 2012). Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from documentation, field observations, journals, theses, dissertations, and books relevant to stunting prevention. Data were collected through interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation (Sukardi, 2003). To maintain the validity of the data, triangulation and in-depth observation techniques were used (Sugiyono, 2011). Data analysis was carried out using the Miles and Huberman model which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The data collection process was assisted by a team of research assistants from students of the Riau Ministry of Health Polytechnic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Comprehensive Overview of the Stunting Phenomenon in Kampar, Riau, Indonesia

Stunting is a chronic nutritional problem that occurs in children throughout the world. Stunting is a condition where the length or height of a toddler does not match his age according to the standards set by WHO (Ratnawati & Rahfiludin, 2020). According to WHO data, around 149 million children in the world currently experience stunting. Stunting can occur when children do not get enough nutrition during their growth period, especially in the first 1,000 days of their lives. Nutritional status during the first thousand days of life (1000 HPK), namely 270 days during pregnancy and 730 days during the first period of a baby's life, is a critical period because the consequences are permanent and cannot be repaired (Hijrawati et al., 2021). The long-term impact of stunting can include reduced learning ability, work productivity and lower quality of life in later life.

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Based on the table 1 and figure 1, an overview of the condition of stunting in Kampar Regency during the last 3 (three) years 2019, 2020 and 2021 shows that there has been a decrease in the prevalence of stunting from 32.99% (in 2019), in 2020 the prevalence was 23.07%, and in In 2021, there will be an increase in prevalence, namely 25.7%. However, the increase in prevalence in 2021 after evaluating stunting cases decreased according to the number of children.

Tabel 1. Percentage of Stunting at Regency Level for 2019 -2021

Type	Total	Year	Percentage
Toddlers	5464	2019	32.99 %
	4059	2020	23.07%
	3873	2021	25.7 %

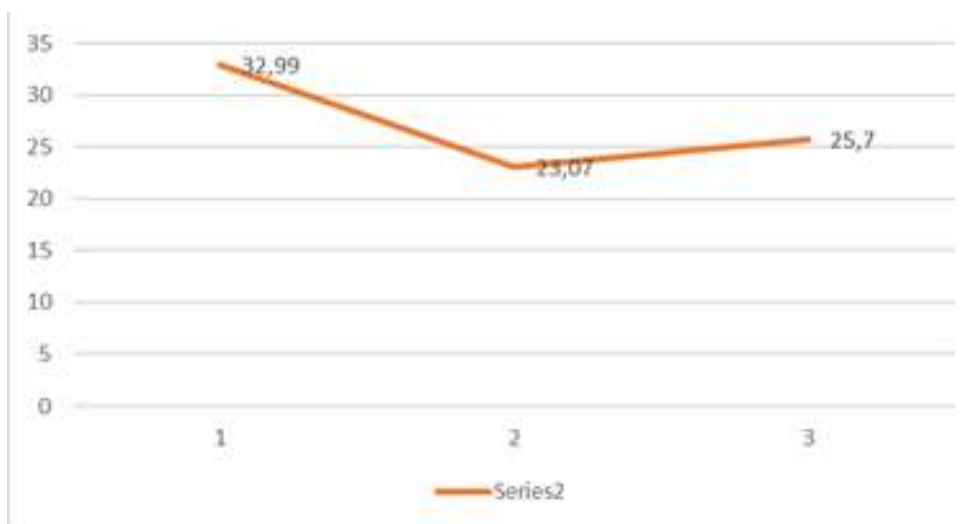


Figure 1. Graph of Percentage of Stunting at Regency Level for 2019 -2021

However, the role of religious scholars and traditional leaders in preventing stunting is still relatively minimal. In fact, religious scholars and traditional leaders have an important role as respected figures and have a strong influence in society. Islamic scholars and traditional leaders also have easier access to communicate with the wider community and can provide education on

balanced nutrition and healthy eating patterns in accordance with religious teachings and applicable customary norms. This is reinforced by research conducted by Tri Hastuti et al. which states that cultural and religious approaches are significant factors in encouraging changes in community behavior related to nutrition (R et al., 2020). Therefore, research on the role of Islamic scholars and traditional leaders in preventing stunting is important to explore the potential of Islamic scholars in increasing public awareness of balanced nutrition and healthy eating patterns. The involvement of Islamic scholars and traditional leaders in efforts to prevent stunting is expected to increase the effectiveness of existing stunting prevention programs and accelerate the reduction in stunting rates in Indonesia, especially in Riau Province. Islamic scholars in Kampar Regency have a strategic role in supporting efforts to prevent stunting through various concrete actions based on religion and local culture. Given the high level of public trust in clerics, they are at the forefront of delivering health messages linked to Islamic values.

One form of specific action by ulema is through Friday sermons. In sermons, clerics insert material about the importance of maintaining the health of pregnant women, providing exclusive breastfeeding, and fulfilling children's nutrition as part of religious obligations in maintaining the mandate from Allah. This message is delivered in simple language and linked to the verses of the Qur'an and Hadith so that it is easier for the congregation to understand and accept. In addition, clerics are also active in community meetings such as religious studies, religious study groups, and other religious events. In these forums, they deliver material about the importance of sanitation, environmental cleanliness, and healthy parenting in order to prevent stunting. In many cases, clerics also facilitate dialogue between the community and health workers, so that the community can better understand government programs related to nutrition and maternal-child health. Ulemas also play a role in initiating social activities, such as fundraising or activities to share nutritious food for underprivileged families. They encourage the birth of collective awareness in society to jointly combat stunting, not only through education, but also through real action.

In the structure of Kampar Malay customs and culture, ulema often also function as traditional figures. With this position, they strengthen health messages through a local wisdom approach, for example by using Malay proverbs or folk tales that are full of values of maintaining life and health.

Ulema, Da'wah, and Socialization of Stunting Prevention in Kampar Regency, Riau

Ulema have wide access to the community through lectures, recitations and sermons. They can use this platform to raise awareness about the importance of good nutrition for pregnant women and children. In Islamic teachings, the health and welfare of the people is the responsibility of every individual. Ulema can emphasize that providing adequate and balanced nutrition to children is part of maintaining the trust of Allah, where children are a gift that must be looked after well (Marni and Ratnasari 2021).

Through da'wah, ulema can convey correct information about nutrition, recommend healthy eating patterns, and encourage mothers to access health services such as posyandu. In addition, pre-marital education provided by ulema can include material about the importance of family planning and fulfilling nutrition during pregnancy, which has a big impact on preventing stunting. Islam emphasizes the importance of maintaining health as a form of worship. Ulema can teach that ignoring children's health and allowing them to suffer from malnutrition is a form of negligence in fulfilling their responsibilities as parents. By reinforcing religious values about the importance of maintaining family health and welfare, ulema can encourage the behavioral changes needed to prevent stunting. Ulema can mobilize zakat funds for programs that support maternal and child health, including providing nutritious food for those in need (Suwarta et al. 2023).

The role of ulema in preventing stunting in Kampar Regency is an important reference in increasing the reduction in stunting rates. Not only ulema, several important elements such as community leaders, traditional leaders and several mass organization figures are also the precursors in the campaign to prevent stunting.

Until now, ulema, mass organization figures, including Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and traditional leaders have only provided support. This means that there have been no progressive steps in building synergy of efforts to prevent stunting. Therefore, researchers are called to conduct research to create breakthroughs or programs that can certainly maximize the prevention of stunting. The following are some of the efforts of ulema, traditional leaders, mass organizations and several institutional elements in building a stunting prevention program.

The Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) of Kampar Regency has a strategic role in preventing stunting among the Kampar Malay community. As an influential religious institution, the MUI can utilize its moral and spiritual authority to educate, advocate and mobilize the community in an effort to improve the health and welfare of children.

In principle, the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) supports the government's efforts to address the stunting problem in Kampar Regency, although it has not specifically directed its programs for this purpose. MUI's support is mostly realized through its role in providing an Islamic legal perspective on policies and steps taken by regional governments. One example is when the MUI was asked by the Kampar Regional Government to discuss the issue of using funds from the Badan Amil Zakat Nasional (BAZNAS) in handling and preventing stunting. In this case, the MUI provides a view based on Islamic law regarding the appropriateness of using zakat funds for health programs, including stunting prevention.

Although the MUI does not have a program that directly targets stunting, one program that has the potential to contribute to stunting prevention is the "Family Resilience Campaign" run by the MUI Women and Family Empowerment Commission (PPRK). This program focuses on strengthening family resilience through education and coaching. In the context of stunting prevention, Away for Family Resilience can be used to convey information about the importance of balanced nutrition, maternal and child health, and good parenting patterns. Thus, this program can be expanded and adapted to be more effective in supporting stunting prevention efforts in the community ([Samsuatir MUI Kampar, 2024](#)).

Ulema use sermons and lectures at mosques or religious events to convey the importance of balanced nutrition as part of the congregation's responsibility to maintain health ([Qoriati et al. 2024](#)). Traditional leaders can integrate these health messages into traditional ceremonies or local traditions, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the well-being of children as assets for the future. Apart from that, through recitation activities, mothers' recitation groups, or traditional meetings, ulema and traditional leaders can provide education about balanced nutrition, exclusive breastfeeding practices, and the importance of sanitation in preventing stunting. They can work together with health workers to provide information that is accurate and easy for the public to understand. On the other hand, Ulema and traditional leaders can also form community groups that focus on preventing stunting, such as farmer groups that are encouraged to grow nutritious food or mothers' groups that are taught how to cook healthy food using local ingredients. With this empowerment, communities can be more independent in meeting the nutritional needs of their families ([Fitriany 2023](#)).

Optimizing the role of the community in supporting families at risk of experiencing stunting. Ulema and traditional leaders can form or strengthen community networks that care about children's nutrition and health issues, such as dasawisma groups, social gatherings, or religious organizations. This network can be a place for sharing information, moral support, and collective action to help families in need. Not only that, holding training and workshops involving nutritionists, health workers and community members to provide practical knowledge about managing balanced nutrition. This training can include how to make healthy menus with local ingredients, agricultural techniques to increase nutritious food yields, as well as methods for preventing and handling stunting. In addition, by providing direction to the community to optimally utilize local natural resources to meet nutritional needs. Ulema and traditional leaders can work together with agricultural and environmental experts to develop programs that encourage the planting of highly nutritious crops, small livestock farming, or fisheries that can be carried out by

local communities. This not only increases access to nutritious food, but can also be a source of additional income.

Collaboration of the Muhammadiyah General Health Council with Health Institutions

Collaboration between the Muhammadiyah General Health Council and various health institutions is a key strategy in improving the quality of health services and the effectiveness of stunting prevention programs in Kampar Regency. The Muhammadiyah General Health Council acts as a liaison between Muhammadiyah and various health institutions, both government and private, to achieve common goals in improving public health.

Muhammadiyah has a General Health Council led by Dr. Wira Darma tries to collaborate with hospitals, community health centers and health clinics to provide quality health services for the community, especially in terms of stunting prevention. These health institutions are strategic partners in carrying out pregnancy check-up programs, nutritional consultations, as well as treatment and care for children experiencing malnutrition. Apart from that, this collaboration also involves referring patients from community health centers or clinics to Muhammadiyah hospitals if more intensive treatment is needed (DzilKhair, 2024).

The Strategic Role of Nahdlatul Ulama Social Institutions in Stunting Prevention

Stunting, or a condition where children experience stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition, is one of the main health challenges faced by Indonesian society, including in Kampar Regency. In efforts to overcome this problem, the role of social institutions, especially those affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), is very crucial. Nahdlatul Ulama, as the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, has various institutions spread throughout the country. This institution has great potential to support efforts to prevent stunting through various social, educational and advocacy activities. This article will discuss how NU as social institutions can be utilized in efforts to prevent stunting in Kampar Regency.

NU social institutions, such as the Lembaga Kesehatan Nahdlatul Ulama (LKNU), the Lembaga Amil Zakat, Infaq, dan Shadaqah Nahdlatul Ulama (LAZISNU), as well as other institutions, have a strategic role in supporting stunting prevention programs. LKNU, for example, has a main focus on community health services which include nutritional education, maternal and child health services, as well as community-based health programs. By collaborating with local health offices and community health centers, LKNU can hold specific health programs to prevent stunting, such as counseling about the importance of balanced nutrition and monitoring children's growth and development in various villages in Kampar (Sudarmadji, 2024).

Meanwhile, LAZISNU can play an important role in raising funds from *zakāt*, *infāq* and alms to support nutrition programs for poor families who are at risk of stunting. With this funding, LAZISNU can distribute nutritious food, supplements and free health services to pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and children under five in Kampar Regency. Apart from that, the funds collected can also be used to support family economic empowerment programs, which aim to increase families' financial capacity to provide adequate nutritional needs for their children.

Apart from social institutions, Nahdlatul Ulama has a number of institutions which have strong networks in society, such as Muslimat NU, Fatayat NU, and IPNU-IPPNU. These institutions can act as agents of change in efforts to prevent stunting in Kampar. Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU, for example, have a member base consisting of mothers and young women who are active in social and religious activities. They can be involved in nutrition education, health campaigns, and assisting families in need (Sudarmadji, 2024).

Fatayat NU, as a young women's organization, can utilize social media and digital platforms to widely disseminate information about stunting prevention. The digital campaign carried out by Fatayat NU can reach the younger generation and young mothers who are more familiar with technology. Apart from that, Fatayat NU can also be involved in training health cadres at the village

level, so that they can become local assistants who help monitor the health of mothers and children directly.

Utilizing the social institutions Nahdlatul Ulama in efforts to prevent stunting in Kampar Regency is a strategic step currently being taken at PCNU Kampar Regency. This can also have a long-term positive impact on public health. With a wide network and strong influence in society. In the future, the institution can be a driving force in education, counseling and assistance for families at risk of experiencing stunting. Close collaboration between NU social institutions, the government and health institutions will ensure that stunting prevention programs can be implemented effectively and sustainably, so that future generations can grow healthily and develop optimally.

The Role of Kampar Traditional Institutions and Efforts to Prevent Stunting

A traditional institution is an institution formed based on the traditions and culture of a society to regulate, preserve and maintain traditional values and norms passed down from generation to generation. This institution has an important role in regulating social life, culture, and even legal and traditional aspects in traditional communities. Traditional institutions are also often led by traditional figures or elders who are considered to have in-depth knowledge and experience regarding local customs. The main duties and functions of Traditional Institutions include resolving traditional disputes, holding traditional ceremonies, preserving culture, and maintaining harmony and balance in society. In a broader context, Traditional Institutions can also play a role in preserving the environment, supporting sustainable development, and overcoming social issues such as poverty, health and education, in accordance with their local wisdom (Kamaruddin 2013).

Traditional institutions have moral authority that is recognized by members of their community, so that decisions or advice produced by these institutions are usually respected and obeyed by the local community. In many cases, Traditional Institutions function as guardians of cultural identity and traditions, ensuring that traditional values remain alive and relevant amidst changing times.

Apart from that, Traditional Institutions also function as a forum for maintaining and strengthening social solidarity among community members. Through various traditional activities, such as mutual cooperation, religious ceremonies, and community meetings, Traditional Institutions help strengthen social relations and build a sense of togetherness among their members. In many regions in Indonesia, Traditional Institutions also play a role in managing natural resources and customary lands, which are important assets for indigenous communities. This institution also functions to ensure that the use of natural resources is carried out in a sustainable manner and in accordance with applicable customary laws, so that it can provide long-term benefits for the community (Ramli, Putri, and Fatonah 2017).

In the modern context, Traditional Institutions are also starting to adapt to social and economic changes, including collaborating with the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other parties to support development programs that are in line with the interests of indigenous communities. For example, in health issues such as stunting prevention, Traditional Institutions can play an active role in educating the community and become partners in implementing community-based health programs. Overall, Traditional Institutions are an important pillar in the social and cultural structure of indigenous communities, playing a multifunctional role covering legal, social, cultural and environmental aspects, as well as being a bridge between tradition and modern developments.

The Kampar Traditional Institution has an important role in preventing stunting in the Kampar community through several strategic and culture-based way. One of them is through health values and applicable customary norms, such as including health values, including the importance of balanced nutrition, in customary norms and rules that apply in society. Thus, maintaining health and preventing stunting can become part of traditional obligations that are respected and carried out by all members of society. On the other hand, traditional institutions can also be involved in the process of making local policies related to community health and nutrition. With social capital and

strong solidarity in society to encourage joint efforts in preventing stunting. They can initiate aid or mutual cooperation programs that focus on providing nutritious food or improving sanitation in neighborhoods that need it most (Mawardi, 2024).

The Urgency of the *Bepalin Tigo Rope* (Government, Customs, and Enforcement)

Tigo Bepalin Rope is a traditional concept in Kampar society which describes the close and harmonious relationship between the three main pillars of community life, namely government, customs and law enforcement. This concept reflects the importance of cooperation and synergy between these three elements to create order, justice and prosperity in society (Mawardi, 2024).

The *Tali Bepalin Tigo* concept emphasizes the importance of balance between these three elements, where each party must support and work with each other together to create a harmonious, just and prosperous society. In practice, when these three pillars are in synergy, the decisions taken will be more holistic, include the interests of the wider community, and are in line with local values. For example, in resolving disputes or conflicts in the community, the Kampar Traditional Institution will work with the government and law enforcement to find solutions that are fair and acceptable to all parties, while still considering aspects of customary law and state law. This approach not only maintains peace and order, but also strengthens public trust in these three institutions.

In the context of development and community development, *Tali Bepalin Tigo* also plays a very important role. The government can rely on Traditional Institutions as partners in implementing development programs that respect local traditions, while law enforcement ensures that the implementation of these programs runs in accordance with applicable laws and without any violations of the rights of indigenous peoples (Husaini, 2024).

Synergy of the Bepalin Tigo Rope in Stunting Prevention

The government, traditional institutions and law enforcement must coordinate in designing and implementing stunting prevention programs. For example, the government can develop programs with the support of Traditional Institutions to ensure that they comply with local customs and culture, while law enforcement ensures compliance with policies. Collaboration between these three pillars can produce more effective education programs, combining health education from the government, custom-based training from Traditional Institutions, and monitoring from law enforcement to ensure that the information provided is received and implemented correctly. In the context of stunting prevention in Kampar, implementation *Tigo Bepalin Rope* namely, synergy between government, traditional institutions and law enforcement can play a very important role. The following is how these three pillars can collaborate in efforts to prevent stunting:

First, the government can develop and implement health and nutrition programs specifically designed to prevent stunting. This program can include counseling about healthy eating patterns, distribution of nutritious food, and health services for mothers and children. Apart from that, establish policies and regulations that support stunting prevention, such as exclusive breastfeeding policies, vaccinations and routine health checks for children.

Second, Traditional institutions can use traditional ceremonies, community meetings and local traditions to disseminate information about the importance of balanced nutrition and preventing stunting. They can integrate health messages into customary norms and cultural practices. Traditional institutions can provide assistance to families, especially mothers and expectant mothers, in terms of meeting children's nutritional and health care needs. This step includes education about a nutritious diet and proper health care. Apart from that, using local wisdom to overcome nutritional problems. For example, encouraging the use of local food ingredients that are rich in nutrients in the daily diet.

Third, Law enforcement plays a role in ensuring that policies and regulations related to health and stunting prevention are implemented properly. This includes ensuring that government programs run according to plan and that all parties comply with existing regulations. Next, carry out monitoring and supervision to ensure that there is no misuse or abuse in the stunting prevention

program. They can also assist in reporting and handling cases involving violations of children's health-related rights.

By effectively involving all elements in the *Bepalin Tigo Rope*, stunting prevention in Kampar can be carried out in a more holistic and integrated manner. Collaboration between the government, traditional institutions and law enforcement can create an approach that is sustainable and appropriate to community needs, and ensures that stunting prevention efforts are not only effective but also reflect local wisdom and social justice.

CONCLUSION

Ulema and traditional leaders in Kampar Regency have a very important role in preventing stunting, although this role can still be improved. They are not only supporters of government programs, but also have the potential to be the main movers in public outreach and education regarding the importance of balanced nutrition and good parenting patterns for children. With their large influence in society, ulema and traditional leaders can help strengthen health messages, encourage healthier behavior changes, and facilitate community access to needed health services. It is hoped that closer collaboration between ulema, traditional leaders, government and health institutions can increase the effectiveness of stunting prevention efforts in Kampar Regency, so that it can give birth to a healthier and more competitive generation in the future.

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