

LOLEO AIRPORT REVIEW: CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE SHIFTING OF NORTH MALUKU'S CAPITAL TO SOFIFI

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ABSTRACT

Fifteen years after it attained the administrative status of North Maluku's capital, Sofifi continues to suffer from political strife, infrastructural deficits and uneven spatial development, but Ternate is poised in terms of economic and social dominance. Filling the essential knowledge gap on whether airport-led infrastructure—airborne connectivity through the new Loleo Airport—can ignite Sofifi to function as an effective provincial capital, we investigate through the qualitative-descriptive approach regional planning reports (RTRW, RPJPD, RZWP3K), research and policy publications, spatial databases (land cover change, NDBI analysis), and on-site site visit in Sofifi and Ternate. Our research demonstrates airport-led development in connectivity can redirect cityward development inlandward, stimulate diversified economic activities—agritourism and logistics especially—and link marginalized sub-districts into larger transport systems. Furthermore, through integrating local wisdom in airport precinct planning and aligning legislative improvements with development planning, Loleo Airport is perceived as an integrating node reducing elite conflictiveness, leveling out deficiencies in service provision, and integrating cultural heritage. These findings underscore the necessity of marrying planned infrastructure expenditure with inclusive governance and spatial planning to attain balanced development and legitimate Sofifi as North Maluku's economic and administration capital.

Keywords: Airport; Capital; Relocation; Sofifi; Ternate.

ABSTRAK

Lima belas tahun setelah memperoleh status administratif sebagai ibu kota Maluku Utara, Sofifi terus menderita akibat perselisihan politik, defisit infrastruktur, dan pembangunan spasial yang tidak merata, sementara Ternate siap untuk mendominasi secara ekonomi dan sosial. Untuk mengisi kesenjangan pengetahuan penting tentang apakah infrastruktur berbasis bandara—konektivitas udara melalui Bandara Loleo yang baru—dapat mendorong Sofifi untuk berfungsi sebagai ibu kota provinsi yang efektif, kami melakukan investigasi melalui pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif dengan menggunakan laporan perencanaan regional (RTRW, RPJPD, RZWP3K), publikasi penelitian dan kebijakan, basis data spasial (perubahan tutupan lahan, analisis NDBI), dan kunjungan lapangan di Sofifi dan Ternate. Penelitian kami menunjukkan bahwa pembangunan berbasis bandara dalam hal konektivitas dapat mengarahkan pembangunan kota ke pedalaman, merangsang kegiatan ekonomi yang beragam—terutama agrowisata dan logistik—dan menghubungkan kecamatan-kecamatan yang terpinggirkan ke dalam sistem transportasi yang lebih besar. Lebih lanjut, melalui pengintegrasian kearifan lokal dalam perencanaan kawasan bandara dan penyesuaian perbaikan legislatif dengan perencanaan pembangunan, Bandara Loleo dipandang sebagai pusat integrasi yang mengurangi konflik antar elit, meratakan kekurangan dalam penyediaan layanan, dan mengintegrasikan warisan budaya. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi perlunya menggabungkan pengeluaran infrastruktur yang direncanakan dengan tata kelola inklusif dan perencanaan spasial untuk mencapai pembangunan yang seimbang dan melegitimasi Sofifi sebagai ibu kota ekonomi dan administrasi Maluku Utara.

Kata kunci: Bandara; Ibukota; Relokasi; Sofifi; Ternate.

1. INTRODUCTION

Eastern Indonesia's North Maluku province lies approximately at 1.5710° N, 127.8088° E, includes several islands surrounded by the Sulawesi, Seram, Halmahera and Maluku Seas as shown in Figure 1. Thanks to its coastline, minerals and historic past, the region could have a strong base for sustainable tourism (Abubakar et al., 2024). In

2010, the provincial government moved the capital from Ternate to Sofifi, Halmahera Island, to help all regions grow equally, but some progress is still blocked by infrastructure and logistic issues (Aginda et al., 2025).

Sofifi is designed to support the province's management, finances and transportation sector. The country's geography promotes development, but progress is reduced by missing infrastructure and key economic centers. Sofifi's cultural traditions which grew through connections with Ternate and Tidore, remain significant for its identity and future (Samson & Hidayat, 2024). Sofifi might be the capital, but Ternate continues to control the economic scene because it has better infrastructure. Sofifi is held back by the absence of an airport, seaport and business district which makes the town peaceful and economically inactive (Dortje Leonora Yokbeth Lopulalan et al., 2024). The government decided to build a new airport to help Sofifi become a fully functional capital. In addition to better links, the airport is meant to lead to more investment, encourage commerce and improve Sofifi's role as a leading economic hub. Yet, it is not yet known how much this infrastructure has changed the city's layout and financial situation (Sihasale et al., 2023). This study looks at how improving the airport is supporting Sofifi's renewal effort.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Improving important sectors such as agriculture and tourism is Central Europe's focus for raising living standards. GRDP which stands for Regional Gross Domestic Product, is a major indicator, mainly when concerned with per capita figures which display how people's earnings are being shared. Yet, a continuing problem is if the gains from economic growth are shared equally among all people.

Thanks to economic growth, people and goods move more, so effective ways to travel and especially fly, are crucial. More people and more aircraft are flying in Indonesia, while airports are not being updated fast enough (Sudirman Hi Umar et al., 2023). People in Sofifi are not sure what to think about a new airport, but most still remain hopeful that it will lead to more business opportunities (Soselisa & Ellen, 2024). Success in providing community benefits for the airport relies on knowing local viewpoints. When airports are built with regional equity, they can spread opportunities and lessen the problem of too many resources being focused in only a few places (Singgalen, 2024). Using a spatial-economic approach explains the reason some areas such as Ternate, succeed as commercial centers, while other areas such as Sofifi, do not. Where real estate clumps is shaped in large part by transportation-related aspects, as shown by recent studies (Martiah et al., 2023). Seeing regions as self-contained segments of the economy enables public figures to recommend location-oriented strategies. Identifying Sofifi as apart from Ternate makes it clear where to create targeted airports to promote regional contact and independence among people there (Wicaksono, 2024). With a new airport in the region, Sofifi is expected to support more economic activity, better traffic and more foreign and local investments throughout North Maluku (Abdulah et al., 2024).

Comparing Sofifi with Ternate needs an analysis of goods and resources that pass between regions. Overlooking these aspects could weaken any economic efforts and researchers suggest that a spatial-economic perspective shows how airport development can awaken the North Maluku economy (Leosari et al., 2023).

When Sofifi becomes a functioning capital, key to guiding its development are transport and urban planning. Today's transport systems are transforming not only how we can move, but also city designs and the way cities function (Stewart, 2024). Creating an airport in Sofifi is meant to increase supports logistics as well as to help the city become more independent. This means cities should include all types of transport, linked roadways and regional public transit in their plans (Brown, 2022). Development in cities needs to respond to changes in land and population trends. Making transportation systems work well in every urban design model helps manage urban development. It is essential to link Sofifi to nearby regions by Bus Rapid Transit or rail so that the airport can have a big impact and support regional trade, particularly with Ternate (Graham, 2023).

Because of COVID-19, it is now apparent that being resilient and adaptable over the long term is necessary in urban planning. To be sustainable, development must join innovations with what people in the community need, including fair access to services, public recreation areas and low-cost housing (as discussed by (Abubakar et al., 2024) and (Leosari et al., 2023)). They are necessary for people to feel connected and for social improvements, mainly for people on the margins (Brown, 2022). For Sofifi to prosper, it is important that both spatial and structural planning consider its past, encourage development and satisfy the needs of its community (Dortje Leonora Yokbeth Lopulalan et al., 2024). Creating an airport in Sofifi is the first important step to turning the capital into a well-planned city better linked to both regional and global networks (Rudolph et al., 2024).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach combined with spatial comparison to analyze the role of airport development in positioning Sofifi as the administrative center of North Maluku. Data is drawn from strategic planning documents such as the RTRW, RPJPD, and RZWP3K, alongside research and official publications covering legal,

cultural, economic, and governance aspects. The analysis focuses on land use, accessibility to the new airport, and the influence of local communities and cultural practices on urban layout, while assessing GRDP, employment trends, and investment potential for equitable growth. Field observations complement the review by identifying informal economic activities, land ownership issues, and community dynamics, ensuring development strategies align with on-the-ground realities.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

North Maluku Capital Shift from Ternate to Sofifi

Law No. 46 of 1999 required North Maluku's capital to be moved from Ternate to Sofifi within five years, but the task is not finished after twenty years due to poor administration and lacking infrastructure (Rustam et al., 2022). Because of conflicts between the elite, growth in development has stopped and there are unclear legal rules for Sofifi (Djen & Qodir, 2023) (Samson & Hidayat, 2024). As agriculture and services that made up almost half of the regional income in 2010 are valuable resources, they have become the cause of conflicts between Sofifi, Tidore Islands City and different ethnic groups and are a challenge for authorities. Attention to ethnic problems between Makian and Tidore elites is used by competing parties to enlarge differences and reduce unity. Because people face problems with who they are, who is in charge and what resources they have, they call for independence and improved public services. Poor handling of these problems could actually result in bigger problems. For Sofifi to develop successfully, its elites must reach agreements, resources are shared fairly and there is more understanding between its different cultures.

Conflict of Interest in Sofifi Expansion as Capital

After Law No. 46/1999 was enforced, the region consisted of Central Halmahera, the North Maluku regencies (now West Halmahera) and Ternate City. The shortlist for the capital included Goal, Sidangoli and Sofifi. The airport was built where Sofifi was, based on a study from the Bogor Agricultural Institute which found that agribusiness logistics could thrive there, even with bad infrastructure and Ternate was set up as a temporary capital. Rivalries among leaders meant that Ternate closed ranks with Sidangoli, Central Halmahera allied with Sofifi and initially, the Tidore Sultanate opposed Sofifi, but later allowed it to become Tidore City's capital if Soasio remained its center.

Ternate Sultanate officials were upset by Sidangoli's rejection in 1999 and the tension soon led to arguments over what to name the province, with "North Maluku Province" being chosen at the expense of community good. Lives became more difficult for people because of these rivalries and as a result, most locals (54%) demanded autonomy. On account of poor infrastructure in the city, few government officials wish to move there, keeping the capital separated administratively.

The government of Tidore City neglected its residents due to the rise in poverty in Sofifi, as it went from 5.95% in 2016 to 6.52% in 2018. In a 2010 royal decree, the Tidore Sultanate said that granting independence to Sofifi would weaken the system of royal rule and welcome involvement from other countries. The decree mentioned cultural changes, weaker bonds between the Sofifi and Tidore Islands and decreased Sultanate strength over the past three decades. It proposed relocating the provincial capital if it is eventually separated.

A nationwide pause on creating new autonomous territories, backed by one-quarter of democratic activists and ordered by President Joko Widodo, briefly halts Sofifi's progress on making new provinces, except in Papua. An issue continues in Tidore: the Sultanate wants to protect the region's culture, but the provincial government wants to focus on building new infrastructure. There is still debate amongst 16% of dissenters about power, who they are and Sofifi's role as the capital of North Maluku.

Spatial-Urban Expansion in Sofifi

The quick increase in Sofifi's urban area has resulted from progress in infrastructure and government reorganization. Land is now being changed for development inside the country, mainly along roads and set by administrative borders. Before, dipterocarp forests ruled in the Halmahera ecoregion, but the area also boasted mangroves at Locations Gosale and Guraping, plus tropical rainforests in Silo peaks.

After President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono moved the provincial capital from Ternate to Sofifi in 2010, the region's built-up area grew by an average of 19.09% per year from 2010 to 2015. Constructing offices for the government in the beginning led to new projects, including roads, new housing, busy markets and transport centers which helped Sofifi become a leading regional center.

As a result, there was increased need for accommodation, meals and entertainment which helped urbanization grow. Due to changes in the climate and people taking sand and gravel from the Oba River, its major changes have affected both sediment transport and the land's stability.

Most of the urban growth is found along the west coast, rather than the more difficult terrain in the east. According to the NDBI analysis, Sofifi's urban area grew from 0.00 to 216.62 ha by 2020, up by 8.15 times—with 28.61% annual growth—and most rapid growth happened in the lowland/coastal sub-districts (Aginda et al., 2025). There were the greatest numbers of developments in Sofifi Sub-district, which was the administrative center and Guraping, the region's main health and provincial town.

As roads are extended into new areas, cities enlarge and change the way the surrounding land is being used. Nevertheless, the area's boundary is limited by challenging elevations in the east. Development over the years has mostly happened at key transition areas, especially near "point B" where plains end and hills begin, making those edges important for shaping Sofifi's city boundaries.

Perspective From Regional Spatial Plan

The planned development of Loleo Airport in Oba Tengah, Tidore Islands City, emerges as a pivotal element in the spatial and economic transformation strategy of North Maluku, particularly within the framework of relocating the provincial capital to Sofifi. As outlined in the 2022–2042 RTRW and supported by the RPJPD, the airport is positioned as a strategic air transport node in the region's spatial hierarchy as shown in Figure 1. Its placement strengthens Sofifi's role as a new growth center, enhancing regional connectivity and supporting the decentralization agenda. Loleo's designation within the first medium-term priority phase (2023–2026) reflects its importance not only in infrastructure terms, but also as a symbol of shifting territorial legitimacy.

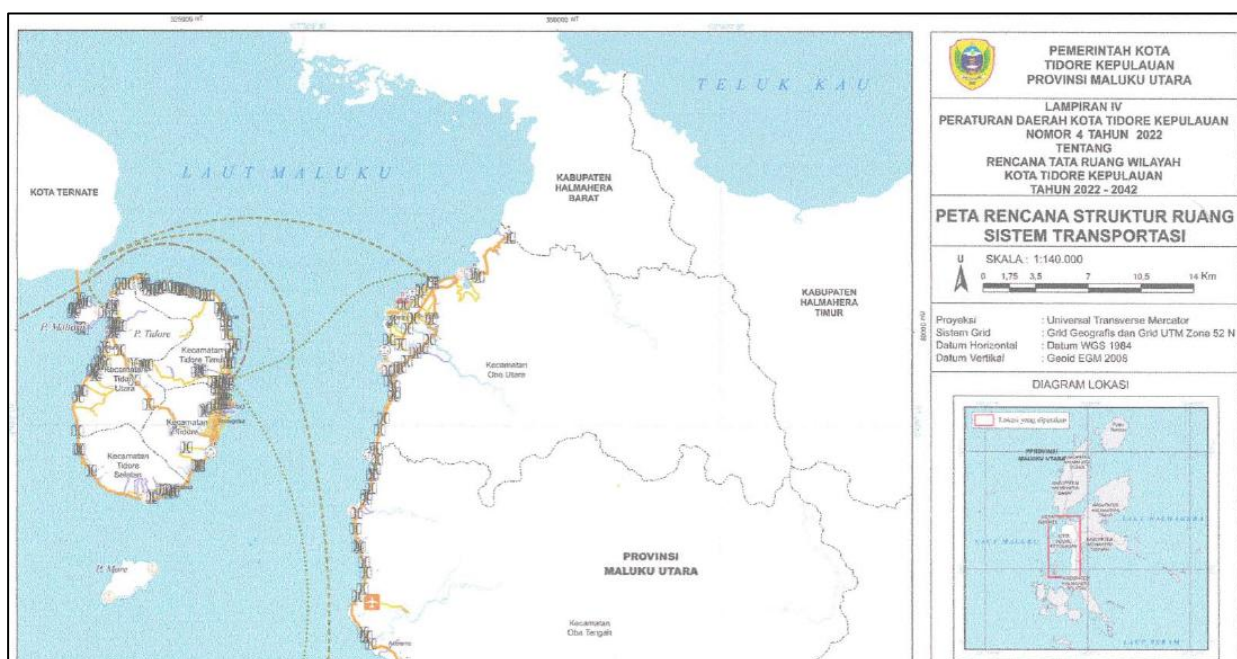


Figure 1. Location of Loleo Airport in Oba Tengah District based on the 2022-2042 North Maluku Province Spatial Plan

Spatially, the airport location is favorable: it sits between three critical urban centers—Sofifi, Ternate, and Tidore—offering central place advantages and broad reach. Its proximity to the Loleo seaport enhances the feasibility of multimodal transport integration, which is crucial for reducing Sofifi's dependency on Ternate and enabling logistical efficiency. While the physical terrain is mostly undeveloped, this provides both opportunity (in terms of land availability) and challenge (due to limited current infrastructure). The 40-minute land travel time from Sofifi, though moderate, signals the need for improved road access and intermodal synergy to optimize connectivity.

Despite being spatially strategic and well-aligned with zoning regulations, the operational realization of Loleo Airport faces notable constraints—including unresolved land acquisition issues, bureaucratic delays, and underdeveloped supporting infrastructure. Yet, if met with serious policy and investment commitment, the airport could serve not merely as a transportation hub, but as a catalyst for balanced regional development. It holds the potential to trigger new economic clusters, support inter-island logistics, and anchor the transition of provincial functions to Sofifi, making it a transformative asset in North Maluku's long-term territorial reconfiguration.

Loleo Airport as “Strategy” to Effective North Maluku Capital Shifting

Many arguments for Sofifi being recognized as a full capital city center on Loleo Airport. Many supporters argue that better air links for Sofifi will ease its isolation, draw civil servants, investors and tourists and help create secondary infrastructure, including hotels, malls and logistics centers which might address the problem that drives 54% of local autonomy requests in the region. When the airport connects to Makassar and Ambon, it is anticipated that growth on the east coast will rise and coastal cities in that area will be less crowded. By its very function, the airport competes with Ternate’s former authority and shows that Sofifi is now the leading administrative region (Samson & Hidayat, 2024).

Still, opponents state that an airport can’t tackle major challenges in politics, culture and how the country is governed. The government’s decision to suspend the creation of new autonomous regions and the expense of capital projects have led to worries about the country’s fiscal situation and let essential services slide (Soselisa & Ellen, 2024). If Sofifi’s municipal status is unclear, the airport could become an unprofitable asset. Traditional leaders in Tidore worry that quick modernization might upset their culture and social life.

Having an airport on Halmahera mainland, Loleo helps to distribute growth from Ternate and support better development across the area along important travel corridors. It helps transform the areas around Sofifi, forms new outlying cities and elevates the logistics of fisheries, spices and agroforestry products for the region. Because of community input, the airport will showcase local design and cultural elements that celebrate the past of the Tidore Sultanate.

Because Sultan Baabulah Airport is strapped for space and capacity, the airport in Loleo, Ternate, replaced it and now supports bigger airplanes and stronger links to the Oba plain. This action frees Ternate from ageing problems and marks Sofifi as the key area in the region. If supported by investment in community skills, local markets and eco-cultural tourism, modernization will not ignore the important knowledge of the community.

Loleo Airport has played a key role in handling Sofifi’s long-lasting spatial, economic and government problems. It increases chances for people to move around, promotes investment and integrates village communities with the main transport systems. As rapid urban growth reaches 28.6% in some areas, Sofifi Airport is likely to lure people from Ternate and Tidore which will help Sofifi become more influential administratively. Therefore, Loleo does more than provide transport; it facilitates fair development, maintains spatial harmony and shows political authority for Sofifi as the provincial capital.

5. CONCLUSION

With the purposeful design of Loleo Airport at Sofifi, development is meant to drive inward, enhance the local community and reflect the traditions of the region. Being on the mainland of Halmahera instead of Ternate Island, the airport helps grow cities in new areas and toward uninhabited eastern areas, encouraging factories and suburbs that ease the crowding in Ternate. By making it easier to sell fisheries, spices and agroforestry, business activity in North Maluku has increased, allowing them to be included in wider industry networks. Leading the approach, the airport and its surroundings were designed with community consultation, using classic buildings, reserving places for community activities and setting up agroforestry measures to retain heritage from the Tidore Sultanate. It is the combination of these approaches, centered around Loleo Airport, that is helping transform Sofifi into a real provincial capital. Political rivals, funding deficits and marginalization can be addressed when infrastructure is put in place that alters city habits, broadens the economy and values local expertise. Built on Halmahera, the new main airport can support more investments and growth in the interior as Ternate’s airport is closed. With open rules and transparency, community-led land use planning and culturally minded design alongside Loleo Airport, Sofifi can become an inclusive, lively and culturally grounded capital city. At its core, the project’s success is judged by better social unity, a stronger local economy and a clearer identity for North Maluku.

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