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Accelerating Institutional Strengthening at the District Level in a Fiscally Fragile Border Region: Evidence from Arso Kota District, Keerom Regency, Papua

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the acceleration of institutional strengthening at the district level in a fiscally fragile border region. The Arso Kota District, the administrative center of Keerom Regency in Indonesian Papua, is selected as the case study. The study poses three research questions. Firstly, it seeks to understand how structural determinants condition service capacity. Secondly, it explores how relations with customary authority shape spatial governance. Third, it investigates which reform sequence is proportional to these constraints. The study used a qualitative, embedded, single-case design within a constructivist paradigm. The data were collected through a combination of methods, including in-depth interviews with purposively and snowball-selected key informants, non-participant observations of the district office during field visits, and a documentary study of regulations, development plans, audited financial reports, and personnel records. The analysis followed a rigorous process of data reduction, thematic display, and verification through source and method triangulation, as well as member checking. The district exhibits a fictive presence syndrome: of the eighty-five personnel, approximately half reside in Jayapura City, meaning effective service relies on just three officers. Consequently, the absence of these three officers causes service to collapse. The region's fiscal autonomy ratio averages 2 percent of total revenue. In addition, of the district's annual budget of approximately five billion rupiah, only four hundred million remains for programs after deducting salaries and fixed costs. The district lacks operational vehicles and relies on manual processes, which are vulnerable to unstable connectivity. Its remaining functions are limited to issuing business licenses, domicile certificates, and inheritance transfers. The delegation of regent authority is ineffective because no budget, personnel, or equipment has been transferred. The institutional capacity assessment is approximately 2.5 out of 5. Digital services and infrastructure are the weakest area, while customary collaboration and dispute settlement are the strongest. The latter depends on the district head's personal relationship with customary authority, rather than institutionalized mechanisms. The study proposes a hybrid agile district model, operationalized as a four-phase roadmap that integrates capacity-building theory, dynamic governance, agile organization, and the district-building (DMMD) paradigm. The model prioritizes mobile and digital delivery over capital-intensive infrastructure, revitalizing the district's role in the village-fund accountability cycle and establishing a permanent forum for customary and government collaboration. The projected service improvements are qualitative and indicative only; a limited pilot is therefore warranted before full adoption in the Keerom long-term regional development plan for 2025–2045.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Sub-national governments are defined as the operational arm of the state (Setiawan et al., 2022). At this level, policy intentions translate into the concrete services citizens experience. However, in decentralized systems, inadequate local capacity repeatedly undermines the potential to enhance governmental

proximity to the populace. Consequently, formal decentralization does not inherently ensure reliable service delivery (Batley et al., 2012; Lewis, 2023). The gap between administrative form and service substance is particularly evident in fiscally fragile border regions. In this context, limited capacity for self-sustaining revenue sources restricts infrastructure development, which is essential for the effective functioning of a bureaucracy. This, in turn, creates an uneven distribution of state presence within a single national territory (Agneman et al., 2025; Deutschmann et al., 2023).

The Keerom Regency occupies a strategic position as a buffer zone between states and a Special Autonomy area in the Land of Papua. An evaluation of its financial performance from 2018 to 2022 shows an average fiscal autonomy ratio of about two per cent, which is categorized as very low. Consequently, the administration is heavily reliant on central and provincial transfers for its financial sustenance. This limited fiscal scope is directly linked to an inability to provide and maintain adequate bureaucratic infrastructure at district and village levels (Suryawati et al., 2026).

This fiscal profile presents a paradox that requires explicit attention: Keerom receives Special Autonomy transfers as stipulated in Law Number 21 of 2001, as amended by Law Number 2 of 2021. Nevertheless, the district's own-source revenue remains at approximately two per cent of total revenue, and its district apparatus is chronically underfunded. Three features of the allocation chain explain the rationale behind the substantial Otsus inflows, which leave district operations largely unsupported. First, Otsus funds are incorporated into the regency budget as earmarked transfers, intended to allocate funds to the mandated sectors of education, health, infrastructure, and the economic empowerment of indigenous Papuans. The execution of these measures is typically undertaken by sectoral technical agencies as opposed to territorial units. The district is not a sectoral spending unit; therefore, it is not entitled to any portion of the block grant. Second, the 2021 amendment converted most of the allocation into specific grants and performance-based funding, managed through sectoral work plans approved at both the provincial and national levels. This further centralizes decision-making power and lengthens the distance between the transfer and the point of service delivery. Thirdly, the funds allocated to the district are distributed through the routine apparatus component of the regency budget, which is predominantly comprised of salaries and fixed office expenses. The consequence is structural rather than incidental: a regency may appear comparatively well-resourced in aggregate, yet its territorial front line operates on a residual allocation. The subsequent analysis is informed by the distinction between aggregate fiscal inflow and the fiscal space that is actually available at the point of service delivery.

In this context, the Arso Kota District plays a pivotal role. The administrative unit is not merely a subordinate entity within the regent's purview; rather, it serves as a key showcase and gateway for governance in Keerom. The city is home to several significant public institutions, including the Regent's Office, the regional public hospital, and the regional legislature. Similarly, Arso Kota is distinguished by its high degree of demographic heterogeneity, a consequence of the national transmigration program. The program has created multiple social identities, superimposed on an indigenous Papuan customary landscape.

Governing customary land rights and contested land tenure is a complex issue with many facets. Government and spatial planning operations frequently directly oppose the territorial claims of the Arso Indigenous Law Community, which controls six primary villages. This study examines the consequences of an imbalanced relationship between positive state law and customary law, in the absence of robust collaborative mechanisms to manage it. The argument is that the absence of such management can engender socio-political instability. Recent scholarship corroborates the finding that, in Papua, the recognition of customary claims has been inadequate despite normative promises, precisely because local governments have prioritized other agendas and lacked supporting regulatory frameworks (Karso, 2025; Sopaheluwakan et al., 2023).

A comprehensive review of the extant literature reveals four salient themes that inform this study. First, capacity-building theory defines capacity as an accumulation of capabilities across three interacting levels: the individual, the organization, and the system. This suggests that deficiencies at the system level have the capacity to impede the accomplishments of individuals and organizations (Milèn, 2001). Institutional-capacity scholarship posits that capacity is a multidimensional and unevenly distributed property, rather than a single stock that can be increased through spending alone (Cornell et al., 2020; de la Riva Agüero, 2026; Persson et al., 2025; Salvador & Sancho, 2021). Secondly, from a dynamic governance perspective, public organizations must continuously anticipate, reconsider, and consider different perspectives in order to adapt to changing environments (Galdino de Magalhães Santos, 2024; R. C. Kurniawan et al., 2023; Neo & Chen, 2007).

Thirdly, the extant literature on agile and digital government examines how iterative, human-centric, cross-functional working methods and low-cost electronic and mobile channels may replace capital-intensive delivery. However, it is important to note the institutional challenges of agile adoption and the urban-rural inequalities of e-government in developing countries. In such contexts, the presence of limited infrastructure, suboptimal digital literacy rates, and unstable connectivity have been identified as factors that can impede the process of transformation (Astuti et al., 2026; Baxter et al., 2023; David et al., 2025; Desai & Manoharan, 2024; Fiestiandani et al., 2026; Latupeirissa et al., 2024; Marjerison & Gatto, 2024; Mergel et al., 2019; Neumann et al., 2024; Shabnam Sharmin & Rakibul Hasan Chowdhury, 2025; Shou et al., 2025). Fourthly, the district-building paradigm, known in Papuan policy discourse as 'Distrik Membangun, Membangun Distrik' (DMMD), repositions the district from a passive administrator to an orchestrator of a collaborative ecosystem (PATTIRO, 2021). Meanwhile, Grindle's account of implementation as an arena of politics and administration frames the negotiation of spatial policy with customary authority (Grindle, 1980).

Although these strands are usually mobilized separately, they address successive links in a single causal chain and can be viewed as a single framework when a district faces extreme fiscal constraints. Capacity-building theory provides a diagnostic framework that identifies the binding constraint at the system level, where the fiscal base determines the capacity that can be developed at organizational and individual levels. Dynamic governance explains how an organization recognizes a changed environment and rethinks inherited structures. In a district setting, this means acknowledging that a physically staffed office model is no longer financially viable. An agile organization provides the operational layer, specifying how a small, cross-functional team can deliver iteratively without waiting for structural reform (Tai & Awasthi, 2025). This approach is far more effective than a conventional restructuring program for a service core of three officers. Meanwhile, digital and mobile channels enable delivery at a low marginal cost. The DMMD paradigm provides the institutional framework that legitimizes these practices. Together, these factors propose a model for fiscally fragile border districts, termed 'hybrid-agile' in this study. Rather than sequencing capital investment, districts build adaptive capacity through agile working methods and low-bandwidth digital and mobile channels to substitute for the physical presence the budget cannot provide. Customary collaboration compensates for weak formal authority. The acceleration model developed in this article operationalizes this integration precisely.

A recurrent diagnosis across these strands is what this study terms 'fictive presence': the state is formally and administratively present, but the essence of its services remains dormant. As the preceding studies show, researchers have examined this pathology in a fragmented manner, with a paucity of interdisciplinary research. Several researchers have focused on fiscal capacity as a determinant of service performance. In contrast, other researchers have focused on customary recognition. Finally, a third group has focused on digital readiness in isolation. Few studies have combined fiscal fragility, demographic plurality, customary-law conflict, and bureaucratic modernization into a single district-based institutional-acceleration architecture. The implementation of agile and dynamic governance principles for a fiscally extreme border district in Papua is a subject that has been addressed by even fewer researchers. This research aims to design and validate a prototype to accelerate institutional strengthening at the district level.

The present study is guided by three research questions. Research Question 1: What is the impact of structural and spatial factors, including fiscal fragility, infrastructure deficits, personnel distribution, and the delegation of regent authority, on work culture, staff discipline, and the quality of public services in Arso Kota District? RQ2: How do power relations and negotiations with customary institutions influence district governance, particularly regarding spatial planning and land administration? RQ3: What form of proportional, thematic, bureaucratic reform can be implemented to accelerate development in a fiscally fragile border district, and how can this be incorporated into the Keerom long-term regional development plan for 2025–2045? The following sections of this presentation are organized around the following questions. The answers are synthesized at the end of the discussion.

■ METHOD

Informants and research subjects

Using a qualitative key informant design, the study drew on a small number of purposively selected key informants, chosen for their direct authority over, or first-hand knowledge of, district service delivery. The study then used snowball referral to reach additional relevant individuals. The study design focused on collecting data from informants who could speak authoritatively on the analytical themes, rather

than pursuing a large sample size. The accounts were then triangulated with direct observations of the district office and documentary evidence. The analysis is anchored by two in-depth interviews conducted on 10th July 2026: one with the Head of the Governance Division at the Keerom Regional Secretariat, who discusses the regency-wide design of district institutions; and one with service officers from the General and Public Service Affairs Section at the Arso Kota District Office, who discuss day-to-day service delivery. These were complemented by observations and discussions with district officials, as well as discussions at the regency Joint Secretariat on minimum service standards. The key informants whose testimony is drawn upon are set out by institutional role in Table 1. In the interest of safeguarding the privacy of the subjects concerned, it is imperative that individuals are identified by their role rather than by their name.

Table 1. Documented Key Informants and Basis in the Study

No.	Key informant (institutional role)	Institution	Basis in the study
1	Head of the Governance Division (Bagian Pemerintahan)	Regional Secretariat of Keerom Regency	In-depth interview, 10 July 2026
2	Service officers, General and Public-Service Affairs	Arso Kota District Office	In-depth interview, 10 July 2026
3	Apparatus of Arso Kota District	Arso Kota District Office	Field observation and discussion
4	Officials on minimum service standards	Keerom Regency Joint Secretariat	Observation and discussion

Source: Compiled by the authors, 2026

As shown in Table 1, the evidence comes from interviews at the two levels of the territorial hierarchy that most directly influence district performance: the regency secretariat and the district office itself. This is complemented by engagement with the district apparatus and discussion at the regency Joint Secretariat on minimum service standards. The two levels are deliberately paired: the regency secretariat account explains the structural and regulatory conditions within which the district operates, while the district office account documents how these conditions are experienced at the service counter. Juxtaposing the two accounts helps establish a correlation between organizational structure and practical activities at street level. The district apparatus accounts are recognized as the primary source of information on customary land and spatial matters. The apparatus reported that the district head and customary authority handled these matters directly. This reliance is made explicit to avoid exaggerating the evidentiary basis of these findings.

Research design and approach

The present research adopts a qualitative approach, employing a descriptive, analytical, and exploratory design within a constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This theoretical framework posits that social reality is a constructed meaning formed through social interaction. The present study employs an embedded single-case design within the context of Arso Kota District (Yin, 2018). The district was selected because district institutions cannot be considered in isolation from the socio-political context of Keerom Regency. The design is considered appropriate in instances where the case is revelatory, and where the unit of analysis – the district institution – is situated within a broader regency system. The fieldwork was carried out in Arso Kota District and the capital of Keerom Regency in 2026.

Data collection

To ensure the triangulation below is based on genuinely different types of evidence rather than a single instrument, three complementary techniques were combined. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted using a guide organized around five analytical themes: personnel capacity, fiscal constraints, institutional infrastructure, government-customary relations, and the digital transformation of public services. To obtain the required data, interviews were conducted with several individuals, including the Head of the Governance Division of the Keerom Regional Secretariat and staff members from the General and Public-Service Affairs Division of the Arso Kota District Office. Thematic coding was then applied to the transcribed

interviews. Second, an observational study documented the physical conditions and daily operations of the Arso Kota District Office through site visits. The condition of the building and equipment, the availability of an operational vehicle, connectivity, and the pattern of officer attendance and citizen service were systematically documented. This observation is illustrated by the field documentation appended to the underlying research report. Third, a documentary study covered regional regulations, medium- and long-term regional development plans, audited regional financial reports for 2018 to 2022, the district personnel register, the district asset register, and Statistics Indonesia publications for the district.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Before each interview, the purpose of the study and the intended use of the data were explained to the informants, who then gave consent to participate and be recorded. In accordance with local protocol, customary leaders were approached through the Keerom Customary Council. To protect participants involved in the politically sensitive issue of customary land governance, informants are identified in this article by institutional role rather than name. However, two roles can be identified solely by position: The Head of the Governance Division at the regency secretariat and the service officers at the Arso Kota District Office. It is imperative to recognize that their accounts cannot be interpreted in isolation from the institutional vantage point from which they speak. Furthermore, their testimony concerns administrative arrangements rather than personal matters and is therefore attributed at the level of role. The remaining participants are reported in aggregated form. The research team is responsible for the secure storage of recordings and transcripts.

Data analysis and data validity

The analysis comprised iterative stages of data reduction and display in the form of descriptive-analytical narratives and thematic matrices, followed by conclusion drawing and verification. The coding process was initiated with open coding of the interview transcripts, observation records, and documentary records, and progressed towards the consolidation of the five analytical themes. The interrelationships among the aforementioned themes are illustrated in Figure 4 through the utilization of a thematic map.

The institutional capacity profile depicted in Figure 3 necessitates an explicit methodological justification, given the incompatibility between a numerical score and a constructivist design. The scores are structured analytic summaries of qualitative evidence produced by the research team, not measurements. The study adapted six dimensions from capacity-building theory and the institutional capacity framework for local government proposed by Salvador and Sancho (2021). This study focuses on six dimensions: governance and leadership; human resource capacity; physical infrastructure; digital services; customary collaboration; and budget and finance. The assessment of each dimension used a descriptive rubric with five levels. Level 1 denotes a condition that is absent or non-functional; level 2, a condition that is present only nominally; level 3, a condition that functions but depends on particular individuals; level 4, a condition that functions with established written procedures; and level 5, a condition that is institutionalized and routinely evaluated. The level of the rubric applied to each dimension, the resulting score, and the principal evidence on which the judgment is based are set out in Table 2. It is evident that these values are of the nature of ordinal analytical judgments about qualitative evidence. Therefore, they must be interpreted in terms of the profile's shape, rather than as a precise metric.

The credibility of the research was established through source triangulation across the three informant clusters, method triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, and member checking, whereby informants confirmed the summary of findings and the draft roadmap. The present study is confined to a single district, and its intended contribution is analytical rather than statistical generalization.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Structural determinants of district service capacity (RQ1)

A thorough examination of Keerom Regency's financial documentation supports the assertion that the region's fiscal autonomy ratio remained in the 'very low' category from 2018 to 2022. As shown in Figure 1, the year-on-year fluctuations in the ratio are evident.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the trajectory under consideration is essentially flat, with a two per cent range and no discernible upward slope. The lack of improvement over five years is significant, as it suggests a chronic structural reliance on external funding rather than a temporary or cyclical deficit. This stagnation is consistent with national evidence showing that local government capacity – of which fiscal capacity is one component – significantly affects service delivery under decentralization (Setiawan et al., 2022), as well as with a critical evaluation of the evolving Indonesian fiscal decentralization framework (Lewis, 2023).

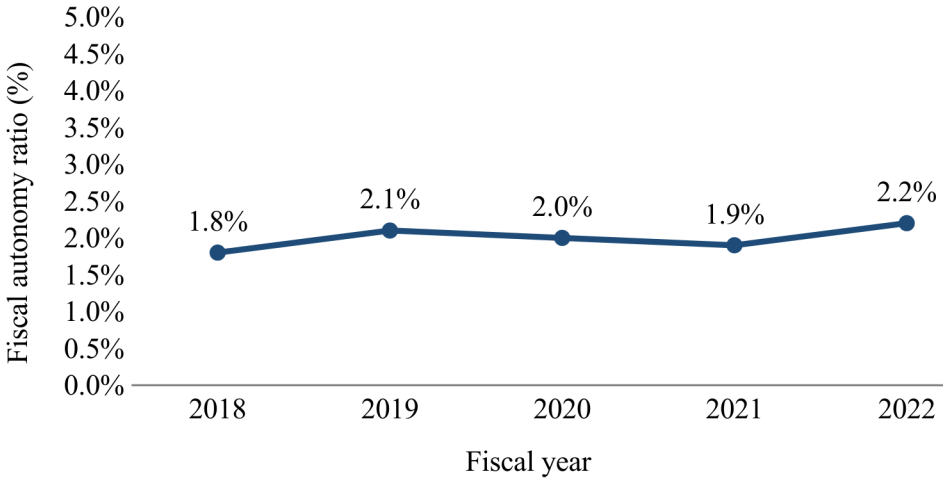


Figure 1. Trend of the Fiscal-Autonomy Ratio of Keerom Regency, 2018 to 2022

As demonstrated in Figure 2, the internal composition of this dependence is illustrated for the most recently audited year.

Figure 2. Composition of Keerom Regency Revenue Sources, Fiscal Year 2022

As shown in Figure 2, fiscal year 2022 exhibits a clear imbalance. Central transfers and special autonomy funds dominate the revenue structure, while revenue from own sources accounts for a relatively small share. When read alongside Figure 1, this composition clarifies why the ratio cannot increase. The revenue base lacks components amenable to local control and growth. Beyond the allocation chain outlined in the introduction, this structural dependence affects each capacity constraint examined in the following sections. This finding aligns with the observation that the behavior of budgets in Indonesian local governments is influenced to a significant extent by factors such as capacity and bargaining, in addition to formal allocation rules (Hummel & Kusumasari, 2026; Vidyattama et al., 2022).

The institutional capacity was subsequently mapped across the six dimensions delineated in the method. As shown in Table 2, the rubric level applied to each dimension is illustrated, along with the resulting score and the main evidence used to make the judgment. This process enables auditing the profile depicted in Figure 3 against its evidentiary basis, rather than accepting it uncritically.

Table 2. Assessment Rubric Level, Score and Evidentiary Anchor for the Six Institutional-Capacity Dimensions

Capacity dimension	Score (0-5)	Rubric level applied	Principal evidentiary anchor
Governance and leadership	3.0	Level 3: functions through individuals	District head active and recognized; coordination rests on personal standing; no written internal coordination procedure
Human-resource capacity	2.7	Level 2-3: nominal, partly individual-dependent	Eighty-five names on the register against three effective officers; attendance fuller only Monday to Thursday; limited technical and digital skills
Physical infrastructure	1.8	Level 2: nominally present	Office and equipment inadequate; no operational vehicle (the former dinas vehicle unaccounted for); observed during field visits

Capacity dimension	Score (0-5)	Rubric level applied	Principal evidentiary anchor
Digital service (SPBE, the electronic-based government system)	1.4	Level 1-2: absent to nominal	No service application in operation; services conducted manually; connectivity unstable
Customary collaboration	3.9	Level 3-4: individual-dependent, approaching procedural	Regular engagement with the Council and Keret and disputes settled, but no standing forum and no written protocol
Budget and finance	2.2	Level 2: nominally present	Ceiling of approximately IDR 5 billion, of which about IDR 400 million is programmable; no multi-year district planning document
Mean score	2.5		

Interpret the radar in Figure 3 by its shape rather than its average. The profile extends outward toward traditional collaboration, then collapses inward toward digital services and physical infrastructure. This asymmetry would otherwise be masked by the single mean of 2.5. This uneven pattern indicates that acceleration should be concentrated where the profile is thinnest, rather than being distributed evenly. This fundamental principle underlies the sequencing of the roadmap delineated below. As demonstrated in Table 3, these relative scores are underpinned by concrete operational magnitudes.

Figure 3. Institutional-Capacity Profile of Arso Kota District Across Six Dimensions, Scale 0 to 5

As illustrated in Table 3, the fictive-presence syndrome is demonstrated in absolute terms. The establishment comprises eighty-five personnel, including one district head and one contract cleaner. However, the effective service core comprises merely three officers. Staff members in the General and Public-Service Affairs Division have noted that the office receives a comparatively higher number of visitors from Monday to Thursday. In the absence of the three core officers, the counter service becomes effectively paralyzed (Cheema et al., 2026; Edri-Peer & Cohen, 2025). It is estimated that approximately 50% of the staff are residents of Jayapura City. After deducting salaries and fixed costs, approximately 400 million rupiah of the five billion rupiah budget will be available for program expenditure. The district is currently without operational vehicles; the dinas vehicle that was previously in existence is now missing; services are being conducted manually with unstable connectivity; and the surviving services have been restricted to business licensing, domicile certificates, and inheritance transfers, since civil registration services have been withdrawn entirely to the Population and Civil Registration Office. Consequently, the district's involvement in the villages has been reduced to biannual verification and monitoring of village funds, with no outreach services. These raw figures, rather than any rating, expose the discrepancy between the formal headcount and actual service capacity.

Table 3. Operational Indicators of Service Capacity in Arso Kota District and Their Verification Sources

No.	Indicator	Figure	Verification source
1	Nominal staff establishment	85 personnel (plus 1 district head and 1 contract cleaner)	District personnel register (Daftar Urut Kepangkatan), 2026
2	Officers sustaining daily service	3 officers	Interviews with district staff, corroborated by observation during field visits

No.	Indicator	Figure	Verification source
3	Staff residing in Jayapura City	Approximately 50%	Residential addresses in the personnel register; interviews with district staff
4	Attendance pattern	Fuller only Monday to Thursday	Interviews with the General and Public-Service Affairs Division; field observation
5	Annual budget ceiling	Approximately IDR 5 billion	District work plan and budget; audited regency financial report
6	Effective work-program allocation	Approximately IDR 400 million	District work plan and budget, non-salary and non-fixed-cost component
7	Operational vehicles available	None	District asset register (KIB B, the fixed-asset inventory card); observation during field visits
8	Surviving service types	Business licensing, domicile certificate, inheritance transfer	Interviews; civil-registration services withdrawn to the Population and Civil Registration Office
9	Village-fund verification frequency	Twice per year	District governance section records; interviews with village officials

Because these figures underpin much of the article's argument, the final column of Table 3 states their provenance rather than attributing them to a single source. The figure of 85 came from the district personnel register, maintained by the General and Public-Service Affairs Division, which also includes residential addresses. The proportion of these addresses in Jayapura City was then identified. The effective service core comprised three officers; the Monday–Thursday attendance pattern was observed; the absence of an operational vehicle was noted; and interviews with district staff and direct observation during field visits to the office reported manual service delivery. The budget figures come from three primary sources: the district work plan and budget document, the audited regency financial report, and informant testimony. The figures presented are based on informant testimony and therefore involve some approximation. This tendency aligns with the extant literature on street-level bureaucracy, which posits that discretion in contexts of resource scarcity determines which citizens are served and which are overlooked (Chang, 2022; Chang & Brewer, 2023; Eiró & Lotta, 2024; Eriksson & Andersson, 2024). This finding aligns with recent studies showing that the state's effective reach can vary significantly within a single jurisdiction. In border regions, this reach depends on the proximity to the capital and international boundaries (Agneman et al., 2025; Åsblad, 2026). In this context, the narrowing of surviving functions and the reduction of the district-village relationship to twice-yearly verification reflect functional hollowing. This is defined as an erosion of territorial authority, which provides the immediate backdrop to the authority relations examined subsequently.

The service officers interviewed on 10 July 2026 provided further insight into this syndrome. The district encompasses the villages of Arso Kota, Yuwangain, and Yuwakarsa (Swakarsa), extending to the most distant village of Sawapung (Sawanawa), which is accessible only on foot. Consequently, outreach work is physically demanding. The remaining services provided by the relevant authorities relate to business licensing, domicile letters, and inheritance transfers. Identity documents must be obtained at the regency level. The officers identified limited computer skills among staff as the main human resource constraint, which concentrates the workload on those who can operate the systems (Johansson, 2025). This is one factor contributing to the effective core being so small. A comparison was also drawn between Arso Kota and the more remote Waris District. It

was reported that, in the latter, officers serve in rotation, meaning that the counter is not always staffed. The district's own diagnosis is consistent with the analysis presented here. The district is currently functioning more as a verification body than as a manager of its territory. The district identifies strengthening staff capabilities and restoring genuine authority over village development as pivotal to its improvement.

A comparison in the opposite direction is equally instructive. The District of Muara Tami, located within the neighboring City of Jayapura, operates a unified service center within its district office. This comparison is offered as a reference point rather than evidence, since no data were collected in Muara Tami and the conditions sustaining the arrangement there were not examined. Notwithstanding, its analytical value is indisputable: it establishes that a functioning service node at district level is an available institutional form within the Land of Papua. Consequently, its absence in Arso Kota reflects decisions about allocation and delegation rather than a limit inherent in the district tier. In the context of the initial research question, this distinction matters, as it differentiates between the district's capabilities and its limitations.

Fictive presence and the pathology of authority delegation (RQ1)

The conditions delineated above were not reported as an autonomous catalog of deficits. Informants described them as connected, with structural constraints shaping the conditions under which institutional standing erodes. Figure 4 presents these relations as an interpretive map, thus enabling the position of each theme to be seen at a glance. The map delineates the structural conditions, institutional processes reported by informants, and the outcomes described by them. The arrows in the visual representation illustrate the relationships the research team inferred from multiple data sources, including coded interviews, the documentary record, and field observations. The directionality of the sequence is attributed to the consistent reporting by informants, who described the events in that particular order. This is not a result of the study measuring an effect. Given the absence of a counterfactual and quantitative test, the map should be regarded as an analytical reconstruction open to revision, rather than a verified causal model. Alternative orderings among the themes cannot be excluded.

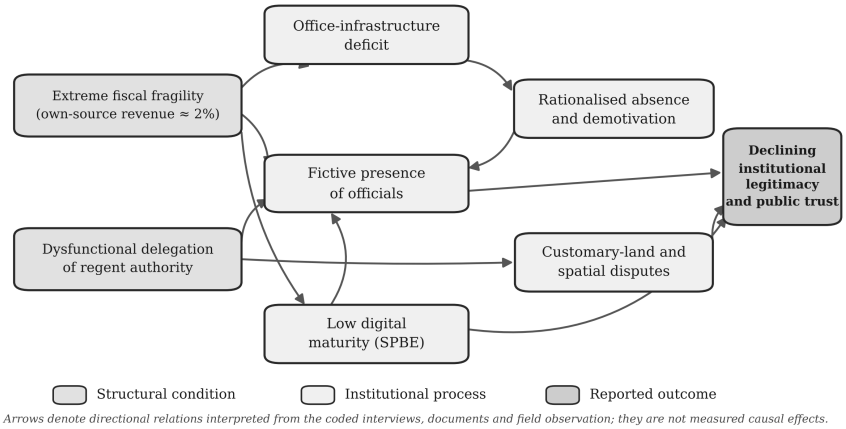


Figure 4. Interpretive Map of Relations Among the Dominant Themes

Two features of the map warrant particular attention. Firstly, the infrastructure deficit was reported not only as an inconvenience to personnel, but also as a justification for the normalization of absence. For this reason, it sits between fiscal fragility and fictive presence, rather than at the end of the sequence. Second, dysfunctional delegation manifests in the map independently of fiscal fragility. This finding suggests that an exclusively financial remedy would leave one of the two structural conditions unaddressed. The interpretive content of each theme, distinct from its position, is set out in Table 4.

Table 4. Thematic Matrix of Findings, Field Manifestations and Institutional Implications

No.	Finding theme	Field manifestation	Institutional implication
1	Fictive presence of officials	Approximately half the establishment is resident in	Declining legitimacy and public trust

No.	Finding theme	Field manifestation	Institutional implication
		Jayapura City; three officers sustain counter service.	
2	Infrastructure deficit	Office and equipment inadequate; no operational vehicle; unstable connectivity	Demotivation and rationalized absence
3	Fiscal fragility at two per cent autonomy	About IDR 400 million programmable from a ceiling of IDR 5 billion	Reliance upon non-physical and digital solutions
4	Customary-land disputes	Yowong and Swakarsa negotiations handled directly by the district head and Customary Council, outside regular procedure.	Need for an equal and legally binding collaborative mechanism.
5	Low digital maturity of service	No service application; services conducted manually; limited digital literacy	Opportunity for mobile-service leapfrogging
6	Dysfunctional authority delegation	Delegation unaccompanied by budget, personnel and equipment; echelon parity; villages defer to the DPMK, the Office for Community and Village Empowerment, over the district	District loses authority and legitimacy before the villages.

Figure 4 delineates the relationships between themes, while Table 4 documents each theme's manifestation in the field and its institutional implications. This approach offers a relational interpretation rather than a numerical one. These implications indicate the authority relations at the center of the ensuing examination, rather than pointing to a technical remedy.

In-depth interviews with the Head of the Governance Division of the Keerom Regional Secretariat revealed that the district's decline is primarily attributable to inadequate regulatory frameworks. Under Law Number 23 of 2014, the district functions as a regional entity equivalent in status to a technical agency. It also serves as a territorial leader. However, it lacks the territorial authority it held under the 1974 regime. Although the regent may delegate part of his authority to the district head, this does not occur in Keerom because delegation requires transferring budget, personnel, and equipment that the region cannot provide, and because technical agencies tend to retain authority at the regency level. The arrangement is further complicated by a vertical regulatory clash, since Government Regulation 106 of 2021 (PP 106/2021) on the implementation of Papuan Special Autonomy opens the possibility of a type-A district becoming a level-two apparatus, whereas Law Number 23 of 2014 and the government regulation concerning sub-districts limit districts to level three. Consequently, implementing this possibility in the regencies of Papua is unfeasible. The inconsistency concerns the legal hierarchy rather than the drafting process.

Within the Indonesian legal order, a government regulation is subordinate to a statute, meaning that the Otsus provision cannot expand an echelon structure established by Law Number 23 of 2014. Consequently, the Otsus provision remains inoperative until the aforementioned law is amended. A revision of twelve articles of Law Number 23 of 2014 is currently in progress, which reopens the question and provides a definitive interpretation from the Ministry of Home Affairs, the decisive variable for any restructuring of the district tier in the Land of Papua. The initial research question yields two consequences. The echelon parity described below is not a local administrative preference, but a position the regency must hold; consequently, the delegation pathology traced here cannot be resolved by regency-level action alone. The district's inability is partly due to the statutory design, not solely to local financial constraints. This is why the roadmap

presented later treats echelon restructuring as a long-term condition rather than a first-phase intervention. The consequences of this imbalance are evident: echelon parity undermines the Governance Division's supervisory capacity over districts, to the extent that the Division head is not even authorized to endorse a district head's performance targets. Meanwhile, villages show higher compliance with technical agencies, particularly the village-fund channeling agency, than with the district, disrupting territorial coordination. Comparative evidence that the design of the primary administrative division itself conditions the state's implementing capacity lends weight to the hypothesis that this is a design problem rather than an administrative lapse (He, 2022).

The interview with the Head of the Governance Division on 10 July 2026 corroborates this supervisory picture in detail. It was established that personnel management was to be placed entirely within the district head's purview, thereby negating the Governance Division's formal standing to intervene. Furthermore, he confirmed that he can no longer endorse district staff performance targets, as his division is now regarded as equal in standing to the district head. Consequently, the reference must now be elevated to the Assistant or the Regional Secretary. Furthermore, he framed absence as a rational phenomenon; officers have attested to salaries being disbursed on a deferred, credited basis and to irregular supplementary income allowances, compounded by the absence of clearly defined tasks, reducing office attendance to mere presence without tangible work. Unsurprisingly, many individuals opt to reside in Jayapura City. The interview also highlighted a symbolic dimension of the coordination breakdown: the state emblem is now held at every tier, down to district and village heads. This dynamic gives village heads a sense of entitlement to engage directly with higher levels, thereby circumventing the established district structure. This phenomenon further erodes the Division's coordinating position. Many districts cannot provide sufficient data on their villages. This is primarily because villages do not report the required information, nor are they asked to.

These authority pathologies show that institutional strengthening is not purely technical, but an economy of authority in which resources follow function. The dynamic-governance perspective is particularly pertinent here, as adaptive institutions must re-evaluate inherited structures and transcend departmental boundaries to improve coordination (Galdino de Magalhães Santos, 2024; R. W. Kurniawan et al., 2025; Neo & Chen, 2007). The Head of the Governance Division highlighted a historical precedent that closely aligns with the acceleration model proposed in this study. Under the earlier BK3 (Bantuan Keuangan Kampung, or village financial assistance) scheme, which preceded the current village-fund arrangement, the disbursement of the subsequent tranche to a village depended on the district head verifying accountability for the previous tranche in accordance with the DPMK technical guidelines. This mechanism positions the district as a control node in the accountability cycle. It is therefore possible to revitalize this mechanism within the current village-fund governance framework, without large-scale regulatory change. It was also confirmed that the primary impediment to institutional reconstruction is not solely regulation, but the regional leader's political determination, given its implications for financial control.

This issue is further compounded by the appointment of district leaders based on factors other than merit and pamong-praja competence. The need to revive pamong-praja education, formerly administered by the Ministry of Home Affairs, was emphasized to cultivate district leaders who can concurrently fulfill the roles of territorial leader and head of a regional apparatus. The reintroduction of district verification within the village-fund cycle indicates a well-documented weakness in that cycle. The accountability and developmental impact of village funds in Indonesia depend on local institutional capacity, supervision, and trust, rather than on the transfer itself (Adam et al., 2024; Permatasari et al., 2024; Rammohan & Tohari, 2023; Sofyani et al., 2022).

Customary authority and the politics of spatial governance (RQ2)

Implementing spatial policy in Arso Kota clearly encompasses both political and administrative aspects (Grindle, 1980). Agrarian negotiations, particularly in the Yowong and Swakarsa areas, clearly establish customary leaders and clan heads as decisive figures. The service officers interviewed on 10 July 2026 made it clear that staff do not handle matters relating to customary land; the district head deals with them directly and communicates with the customary authority. The most recent such incident recalled was a customary land issue connected to a major public event, such as the Papua Street Carnival or Guest Trek. This incident gained considerable attention on social media and reached Jayapura City. Resolving agrarian disputes depends on the personal relationship between the district head and the customary authority, rather than on any established mechanism. Consequently, routine

interaction with customary institutions at the level of everyday service is minimal. This underscores the necessity for a permanent collaborative forum to ensure that land governance is not contingent on individual figures (Beckers et al., 2026; Bucaite-Vilke et al., 2026).

The division of customary authority must be specified precisely, because a collaborative forum can bind the parties only if it is constructed on the actual structure of customary decision-making rather than an undifferentiated notion of adat. Within Arso's administrative structure, two distinct tiers operate, each characterized by a unique and non-transferable set of competencies. The authority to dispose of specific parcels of land lies primarily with the head of the patrilineal clan, known as the Kepala Keret (Hidayat et al., 2026). This individual has the exclusive authority to delineate boundaries, identify the members of the rights-holding group, and grant consent for the release or utilization of a designated plot. Conversely, the Keerom Customary Council has no entitlement to dispose of any parcel of land; its authority is procedural and representative. The Keret's function is to verify which Keret is the legitimate claimant when claims overlap, to convene and witness negotiations, to arbitrate between clans, and to speak for the customary community collectively in dealings with the regency. Disputes in Yowong and Swakarsa escalated precisely where this division was blurred, either because the Council was treated as able to consent on behalf of a Keret, or because an individual clan figure was treated as speaking for the customary community as a whole. Evidence of this pattern of contested authority and unclear boundaries is also apparent in comparable customary-land conflicts elsewhere in eastern Indonesia (Siki et al., 2024).

To establish a legally binding agreement between the parties, three instruments are required, each operating at a distinct level. Recognizing the Arso customary law community and its territory depends on implementing a regency regulation. This is due to the fact that, as stated in Article 18B(2) of the 1945 Constitution and the implementing agrarian regulations, such recognition is deemed to be a prerequisite for the assertion of customary rights against third parties. Subsequently, a regent regulation is required to establish the forum itself, defining its membership, its quorum, the matters on which its opinion is mandatory before a spatial permit may be issued, and the time limits within which it must act. The outcome of each negotiation must be meticulously documented in a written agreement. The agreement must be signed by the Keret concerned, accompanied by a witness and verification from the Council. The agreement must also be countersigned by the Regency. The agreement must also be registered with the land office to ensure its enforceability as a civil instrument and its resilience to a change of district head. Without the third element, the forum would reveal the dependence on personal relationships evident in the present arrangement.

This layered design aligns with collaborative governance theory, which holds that principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity for action are key to establishing sustainable cross-boundary regimes (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Evidence suggests that multi-stakeholder platforms ensure accountability for indigenous parties only when their procedural role is clearly defined, rather than when they are merely representative (Larson et al., 2022). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that local collaborative governance can enhance service delivery by developing institutional capacity, and that cross-sector arrangements are most effective when accompanied by clearly defined governance roles (Bauer et al., 2023; Zia ud din et al., 2023). Moreover, research specific to Papua has shown that customary recognition becomes static without institutional design conducive to such recognition and integrated, coherent governance arrangements (Dhiaulhaq et al., 2026; Karso, 2025; Sopaheluwakan et al., 2023).

The interview with the Head of the Governance Division proposes a structural addition to the forum. The argument was made that district formation in Keerom might, where feasible, follow customary or ethnic-territorial lines. The example cited was Manem District, which coincides with the Manem people. The hypothesis was that this would make socio-customary coherence an asset in resolving land and land-release questions. The argument was further developed by analogy with arrangements being pioneered elsewhere in Papua, such as the formal recognition of customary villages and customary enforcement. It was also observed that customary control is placed within the village deliberative body under the clan head, while the district level remains the administrative executive. It was observed that Arso Kota, being demographically plural, cannot replicate a single-ethnicity model. However, it was asserted that the underlying principle of tying district institutions to the socio-cultural identity of their territory remains applicable in proportion to local conditions. This proposal should be treated as a long-term design option, not a short-term solution. Nevertheless, the article's primary assertion is evident: in this context, administrative authority is only effective when it is accompanied by customary legitimacy.

A four-phase roadmap for accelerating district institutional strengthening (RQ3)

The study's primary contribution is a four-phase thematic roadmap for bureaucratic reform that integrates capacity-building theory, dynamic governance and agile organization, and the district-building (DMMD) paradigm. Rather than prioritizing capital-intensive infrastructure, the sequence begins with diagnostics and initiatives that deliver rapid results. Thereafter, the focus shifts to mobile and digital services, which are used to address the lack of physical infrastructure. The model is then implemented to foster collaborative initiatives and build staff capacity. Ultimately, the model is integrated into long-term strategic planning. As shown in Table 5, each phase includes specific output indicators and proposed service-outcome targets. Administrative outputs alone are insufficient to demonstrate improvement.

Table 5. Roadmap Phases, Output Indicators and Proposed Service-Outcome Targets of the Acceleration Model

Phase	Intervention focus	Output indicator	Proposed service-outcome target
1	Institutional diagnostics and quick wins	Capacity mapping completed; standard operating procedures issued for four basic services	Processing time for a domicile certificate reduced from three days to one working day; counter open for the full statutory working day on at least 90% of days
2	Digitalization and mobile service delivery	Outreach schedule active across the six villages; basic digital channel for registration and status tracking in operation	Processing time for a micro and small business license recommendation reduced by at least 50%; at least 60% of applications from the four most distant villages submitted without travel to the district office
3	Customary collaboration and staff capacity building	Customary-government forum established by regent regulation; training delivered to all frontline officers	Blockades (pemalangan) of government office land reduced to zero across twelve consecutive months; at least 80% of spatial permits issued with a registered written customary agreement
4	Integration into the regional long-term plan	Formal adoption by the regional planning agency; dedicated district service-delivery budget line created; annual user survey established	Once the survey is in place, service-adequacy index rising by at least 15 points against its first-year baseline; effective program allocation rising above 20% of the district ceiling

Table 5 pairs each phase with a measurable administrative output and at least one target that service users can perceive, facilitating monitoring of progress on both dimensions. The numerical thresholds under discussion are targets proposed by the research team for a pilot, not projections derived from measurement. They state what the model would have to achieve to count as working, and the limited pilot recommended below is intended to test them. As shown in Figure 5, implementing this sequence is expected to significantly affect citizen-facing services.

Figure 5. Existing Versus Projected Service-Adequacy Index by Service Type Under the Acceleration Model

Figure 5 compares the current situation with the projected outcome for each service

type. The consistent upward shift, in conjunction with the widening at mobile service delivery, a channel absent from the current baseline, conveys the anticipated gains in terms of both direction and concentration, and indicates that the model adds the greatest value precisely where citizens currently receive nothing. Mechanically, the model inverts the conventional logic of service delivery. Instead of requiring citizens to travel to an office that is often unoccupied, officers proactively engage with citizens on a predetermined schedule. This approach is complemented by a fundamental digital channel for processing licensing and certification procedures. Together, these measures address the three interwoven constraints of absent infrastructure, fiscal scarcity, and fictive presence, avoiding the need for costly physical buildings. In accordance with the iterative and human-centric principles of agile delivery, this leapfrogging approach offers a pragmatic pathway for a district with limited resources, provided that the well-documented institutional challenges of agile adoption in the public sector are anticipated (Baxter et al., 2023; Mergel et al., 2019; Neumann et al., 2024).

It is imperative to state explicitly that the values in Figure 5 are not satisfaction scores. The data are qualitative and indicative, rather than satisfaction measurements, and the axis is accordingly designated a service-adequacy index. The existing values summarise the current adequacy of each service as characterized in the coded interviews and the documentary record, and the projected values were obtained through member checking, in which informants confirmed the prototype model and the direction of change it would be expected to produce. These values have not been derived from a full-scale trial or a user survey. Consequently, the figure provides directional information and relative magnitude. Achieving these gains depends on sustained implementation, consistent attendance discipline, and reliable digital channel performance. The study thus recommends a limited pilot phase before the full roll-out, enabling empirical testing and refinement of the model's assumptions. As indicated in Phase 4 of Table 5, an annual user survey is a key indicator.

Synthesis and limitations

Taken together, the evidence responds to the three questions posed in the introduction. It supports the study's central proposition that a district facing extreme fiscal fragility and dense cultural plurality requires an institutional model that is both hybrid and agile. The model is hybrid, integrating the administrative authority of the state with the legitimacy derived from customary authority. This integration occurs within a unified governance framework. Additionally, it is agile, in the sense that it prioritizes adaptive, low-cost service processes over the addition of structures and physical assets. In response to RQ1, the structural determinants illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, in conjunction with the documented authority pathology, collectively influence the low service capacity documented in Table 3 and Figure 3. The prevailing work culture and staff discipline are less influenced by individual characteristics and more by a lack of infrastructure that justifies absenteeism and by a delegation arrangement that divests the district of accountability. In response to RQ2, power relations with the Arso customary community are a pivotal variable in implementing spatial policy. This community's current reliance on the personal relationship between the district head and customary authority can become an institutional asset, but only through the layered legal design set out above. In response to RQ3, the hybrid-agile model in Table 5 and Figure 5 offers a comprehensive solution to the three interlocking determinants. First, it provides mobile and digital delivery to address fiscal fragility. Second, it introduces a revitalized BK3-style control node to address weakened authority. Third, it proposes establishing a permanent customary forum to address the complexity of adat relations. This forum would be integrated within a four-phase roadmap proportional to the district's fiscal space.

The following discussion will outline the constraints that frame this interpretation. The study is confined to a single district; therefore, its transferability to other Papuan districts should be analyzed rather than assumed. Key informant accounts are susceptible to recall bias and social desirability bias. These issues can be mitigated through processes such as triangulating sources and methods and member checking. However, these measures do not guarantee the complete elimination of bias. The study did not include a structured citizen survey or focus group discussions, and future research should consider incorporating both. The fiscal figures are derived from regional financial reports for 2018 to 2022, and they may not reflect the most recent budget cycles. The capacity scores are analytic judgments rather than measurements, and the projected values in Figure 5 are member-checked estimates rather than post-implementation observations. These interpretations are constrained by the limitations inherent in the single-case evidence available.

■ CONCLUSION

The issue of institutional weakness in Arso Kota District cannot be attributed solely to individual discipline. The underlying causes are

numerous and complex, including extreme fiscal fragility, an infrastructure deficit, dysfunctional delegation of authority, and unmediated relations between the state and customary institutions. Together, these factors have created a situation in which a substantial formal presence coexists with minimal real service capacity. This study contributes by integrating these typically distinct variables into a single district-based hybrid-agile model. The model is translated into a four-phase thematic reform roadmap. This roadmap integrates capacity-building and dynamic governance methodologies with agile, mobile-first services, a revitalized district control node in the village-fund accountability cycle, and institutionalized customary collaboration.

The following three operational implications are pertinent to the Keerom district administration. First, new capital expenditure is not a prerequisite; instead, the focus should be on allocating protected and identified funds. The local government must establish a dedicated service center for the district, allocating at least 20% of the district's budget to this purpose. It is recommended that the second phase of the mobile and digital components should be funded by the Otsus budget, specifically for public service infrastructure, rather than for personnel costs. This finding aligns with the allocation chain outlined in the introduction: while the regency receives Otsus transfers, sectoral technical agencies administer them. Consequently, no district currently receives an Otsus allocation of its own. It is proposed that an operational transfer, covering expenses such as rent, vehicle fuel, and connectivity, would suffice to initiate Phase 2 in the plan's first year. Second, the regent's delegation of authority should be published as a regulation that includes the competencies being delegated, along with the relevant financial and supporting resources. This will prevent the recurrence of delegation without transfer, which occurs when responsibility and authority are not transferred. A delegation regulation of this kind operates within the statutory limits set out in the aforementioned discussion of the regulatory clash. Therefore, its scope should be confined to what the regent can in fact transfer under current law. Moreover, a separate Perbup, or regent regulation, is required that makes the forum for local governance a mandatory prerequisite for issuing the spatial planning permit. Third, the planning sequence should proceed as follows. It is recommended that Bappeda, the regional development planning agency, adopt the four-phase roadmap as a thematic program within the 2025–2045 RPJPD, the regional long-term development plan, with quantifiable indicators in the annual regional work plan (RKPD) and reporting through the SAKIP performance-accountability system. Two additional factors require full consideration. First, the allocation of funds through the district must be acknowledged as a means of empowering the district to influence village development. Secondly, the establishment of a unified service center within the district office must be recognized as a means of implementing the capacity-building strategies outlined in the analysis above.

■ SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The interview guide, the five-level capacity rubric in expanded form, the thematic coding matrix and the field documentation of office conditions are provided as supplementary materials accompanying this article.

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■ DISCLOSURE OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

During the composition of the present manuscript, the author(s) employed the DeepL Write platform (deepl.com) and Claude AI to assist with language refinement and proofreading. The author(s) have conducted a thorough review and editing process on the content generated by the tool, thereby assuming full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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