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Close to Citizens, Short of Authority: Public Service Quality in an Indonesian Village Office after the 2014 Village Law

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Abstract

Indonesia's 2014 Village Law gave villages new funds, salaried staff and planning powers, yet many services that citizens seek at village offices still depend on higher tiers of government. Domestic studies of village service quality usually apply SERVQUAL descriptively and seldom ask which of its dimensions a village can actually influence. This article examines how officials and residents assess service quality in a village office, how officials explain that quality, and which service limits lie within or beyond village authority. A qualitative single case study was conducted in a village office in West Bandung Regency, West Java, drawing on semi-structured interviews with three officials and several residents, non-participant observation and village documents. Data were coded against the five SERVQUAL dimensions and regrouped by locus of control. Relational quality was rated highly: staff were described as friendly and non-discriminatory, and no informal fees were reported. Officials attributed this to regular pay, selection-based recruitment and digital applications. Service limits lay mainly in documents requiring sub-district or civil registry action, in power cuts, and in competence concentrated among front-desk staff. The article proposes reading SERVQUAL dimensions in public settings according to the level of government that controls each.

Keywords: *Public Service Quality, SERVQUAL, Village Governance. Village Law, Frontline Service*

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1. Introduction

For most rural Indonesians, the village office is the first and most frequent point of contact with the state. Residents go there for cover letters needed for identity cards, family cards, birth certificates and good-conduct certificates, as well as for a range of local certificates. Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages (the Village Law) substantially changed the conditions under which these offices operate (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014). It channelled large annual transfers to villages, gave village governments authority to plan and budget their own priorities, and was followed by regulations placing village officials on regular salaries (Antlöv et al., 2016; Vel et al., 2017). Since 2019, the fixed income of village officials has been set at no less than the base salary of a junior civil servant and paid monthly, replacing arrangements under which officials were often paid irregularly (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019).

These reforms have been studied mainly in terms of village finance, participation and elite capture (Antlöv et al., 2016). Much less is known about what they mean for the everyday quality of administrative services at the village counter. Domestic research on village service quality is plentiful but largely descriptive. A typical study applies the five SERVQUAL dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988) to one village and concludes that service is "good but needs improvement". Such studies seldom ask which of these dimensions a village can actually influence. The question matters because many village services are only one step in a longer administrative chain. A good-conduct certificate needs a sub-district signature, and a population record can be corrected only by the district civil registry. A village may therefore deliver courteous and fee-free service and still be unable to promise when a document will be ready.

The public management literature offers two reasons to treat SERVQUAL results in public settings with care. First, citizens are not simply customers, and public services are shaped by legal mandates and by the involvement of several organisations (Brysland & Curry, 2001; Osborne et al., 2013). Second, citizen satisfaction depends on expectations as well as on performance, so favourable ratings may reflect low expectations or close social ties rather than high quality (James, 2009; Van Ryzin, 2004). Both points are especially relevant in small villages, where officials and residents know one another personally.

This article examines service quality in the Cipangeran village office, Saguling sub-district, West Bandung Regency, West Java. It addresses three research questions: (1) How do village officials and residents assess the quality of village administrative services across the five SERVQUAL dimensions? (2) Which conditions do officials invoke to explain service quality, and how do these relate to the post-2014 reforms? (3) Where do the limits of service quality lie, and which of them fall within the village's authority?

The article makes two contributions. Empirically, it documents service quality at the lowest tier of Indonesian government after the Village Law and its pay reforms took

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effect. Conceptually, it proposes that service quality dimensions in public settings be read according to the level of government that controls each of them. In the case examined, relational quality was largely within the village's control and was rated highly, while procedural reliability depended on higher tiers and remained the main source of delay.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Service quality in public settings

SERVQUAL conceptualises service quality along five dimensions: tangibles (physical facilities, equipment and staff appearance), reliability (performing the promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help and provide prompt service), assurance (knowledge, courtesy and the ability to inspire trust) and empathy (individualised attention) (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1990). The instrument was developed for commercial services, and its measurement assumptions have been debated (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). It has nonetheless been widely adapted to local government, where studies report that it helps managers identify gaps but must be adjusted to the statutory and multi-agency character of public services (Brysland & Curry, 2001; Wisniewski, 2001). In Indonesia, the five dimensions are commonly taught through Hardiyansyah (2011), and Law No. 25 of 2009 on Public Services sets service standards for all public providers, including time limits and fees (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 2009).

This study uses the five dimensions as sensitising categories for organising interviews and observation, not as a measurement scale. It also adds one analytical question that SERVQUAL does not ask, namely which organisation controls each dimension. Public services are frequently produced by several organisations together, and the quality a citizen experiences at the counter reflects processes that frontline staff cannot see or change (Osborne et al., 2013). Distinguishing the dimensions that the front office controls from those it does not avoids blaming frontline staff for delays that originate elsewhere, and vice versa.

2.2 Village reform and the conditions of frontline work

The Village Law recognised villages as self-governing communities with their own authority and gave them a guaranteed share of national transfers (Antlöv et al., 2016). Vel et al. (2017) show that the law was designed deliberately as a strategy for changing village government, not merely as a funding instrument. Subsequent regulations required village officials to be appointed through selection procedures (Ministry of Home Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2017) and linked their fixed income to civil service pay (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). These changes bear directly on service quality. Research on Indonesian bureaucracy has long associated low and irregular pay and patronage-based appointment with weak discipline and performance (Blunt et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2022). If the reforms worked as intended, one would expect

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improvements in staff discipline and courtesy, which correspond to the assurance and empathy dimensions.

The reforms did not, however, change the division of authority over civil registration and certification. Villages issue cover letters, but identity documents are issued by district civil registries, and some certificates require sub-district endorsement. Lipsky (2010) observed that frontline workers operate under constraints they cannot remove and develop explanations and routines to manage them. The administrative burden literature adds that the costs of such multi-step processes often fall on citizens, who must learn procedures, gather documents and absorb delays (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015).

2.3 Expectations and proximity

Citizen satisfaction is shaped by expectations as well as by performance. When expectations are low, modest performance may be rated favourably (James, 2009; Van Ryzin, 2004). In small villages, a further factor is proximity. Officials and residents are often neighbours or relatives, so service encounters are embedded in ongoing social relations. Proximity may encourage courtesy and, at the same time, discourage open complaint. This study therefore treats very positive ratings as findings to be explained rather than as straightforward evidence of high quality.

3. Research Method

3.1 Design and setting

The study is a qualitative single case study (Yin, 2018). The case is the office of Cipangeran village, Saguling sub-district, West Bandung Regency, West Java. Cipangeran covers 545 hectares, of which 190 hectares are rice fields, and is bordered to the east and south by the Saguling reservoir. It had 3,535 residents in 6 community units (RW) and 23 neighbourhood units (RT) at the time of the study. The village government consists of a village head, a village secretary, six heads of affairs and sections, three hamlet heads and four support staff. Of the fifteen officials, five held a bachelor's degree, five had completed senior secondary school, three junior secondary school and two primary school. Cipangeran was previously classified as a lagging village and was reclassified as developing after the creation of Saguling sub-district. Officials described it as the least populous village in the sub-district.

The case was selected because it is a typical small rural village office operating under the post-2014 framework, and because it handles both services the village completes on its own and services that require sub-district or district action. This combination allows the study to compare service dimensions within and beyond village control.

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3.2 Data collection

Data were collected in 2022 from three sources. First, semi-structured interviews were held with three village officials, namely the village head (P1), the village secretary (P2) and the head of the service section (P3), and with several residents who were using village services at the time of fieldwork (coded R). Officials were selected purposively because they manage or deliver services; residents were approached at the office as service users. The interview guide covered staff competence and status, staffing relative to demand, responsiveness, courtesy, discipline, communication, ease of service, rewards, facilities, constraints and remedies (Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in Indonesian at the village office, and quotations were translated into English by the authors.

Second, the office building, waiting area, parking area and service counter were observed in a non-participant manner during several visits. Third, village documents were collected, including the inventory of office equipment, the list of village officials and their educational background, and the village profile.

3.3 Analysis

Analysis followed the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). Interview and observation data were first coded deductively against the five SERVQUAL dimensions and two further categories, constraints and remedies. The coded material was then arranged in a matrix that recorded, for each condition affecting service, whether it was within the village's control, partly within its control, or outside it. The third step compared officials' and residents' assessments and identified the explanations officials gave for service quality.

3.4 Sample adequacy, reflexivity and trustworthiness

The number of informants is small. Under the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), sample adequacy depends on the narrowness of the study aim, the specificity of the informants and the quality of dialogue. The aim is confined to a single office, and the three officials are those responsible for its services. The limited number of residents is acknowledged as a limitation.

The second author, who conducted the fieldwork, is a resident of Cipangeran. Insider status eased access and helped the researcher interpret local references, but it may also have encouraged informants, particularly residents, to give favourable accounts to a neighbour (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The analysis addresses this risk by treating uniformly positive ratings as data to be explained (see the Discussion) and by giving weight to observation and documents where they diverge from interview accounts. The other authors, who are not connected to the village, reviewed coding and interpretation. Trustworthiness was supported by triangulation across sources and by cross-checking

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quotations against codes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reporting follows the COREQ checklist (Tong et al., 2007).

3.5 Ethics

The study was conducted with permission from the village government. Informants gave informed consent before the interviews, and names are not reported. Because the positions of the three officials are unique, they were informed that their positions could be identified and agreed to this.

4. Results

The results are organised by the degree of village control over each condition. Table 1 summarises them before they are described in detail.

Table 1. Service quality conditions by SERVQUAL dimension and locus of control

Dimension	Assessment by officials and residents	Main limiting condition	Locus of control
Tangibles	Staff appearance neat; equipment sufficient	Narrow waiting room, limited seating and parking, dark entrance	Village (through village planning and budget)
Reliability	Staff "capable", skilled with digital applications	Competence concentrated at the service desk; 5 of 15 officials with primary or lower-secondary education	Mainly village; recruitment rules set nationally
Responsiveness	Village-only letters completed within minutes to a day	Documents requiring sub-district signature; complaints "need a process"	Sub-district and district
Assurance	No fees charged; staff friendly and capable	Completion time cannot be guaranteed; power cuts	Partly village, partly external
Empathy	Staff friendly, non-discriminatory; no complaints received	No formal complaint channel reported	Village

4.1 Relational quality within village control

The dimensions most directly under village control were rated most positively. Residents described staff as neat in appearance and friendly. One resident reported never having been asked for an informal payment: "As far as I know, I have never come across any strange charges at this office in all my dealings with the service staff. Whenever I have had business here, they have served me without charging any fee. And they are already friendly and capable in serving" (R). Another resident stated that staff were never indifferent, always asked how they could help, and treated relatives and non-relatives alike.

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Officials gave consistent accounts. The village head stated that the office charged no fees and that staff would tell residents honestly whether any cost applied. On courtesy, the village head explained that impolite or indifferent behaviour would be a matter of the individual officer and would be reprimanded, and that no resident had reported such behaviour during the head's term of office. No formal complaint mechanism was mentioned by informants or recorded in village documents, so the absence of reports cannot be read as an absence of problems.

The physical setting was the one relational element rated less favourably. Observation recorded a small building, a narrow parking area and an entrance darkened by a metal roof. The village head acknowledged the problem: "It is just that sometimes some rooms may feel uncomfortable, such as the waiting room which is not spacious enough, so residents waiting for service are not comfortable there. We fully understand this. But we already have a programme to rebuild the village office so that it is comfortable and spacious" (P1). A resident likewise noted that waiting became uncomfortable when many people came at once because the waiting room was small and seating limited. The secretary explained that facilities were funded through the village budget and planned through the village medium-term development plan. Tangibles were therefore a constraint the village recognised and had the means to address.

4.2 The professionalisation account and its limits

Officials explained service quality largely through changes in the conditions of village work. The secretary linked discipline directly to pay. In the past, village officials had been paid only once every three months, which the secretary believed had weakened motivation. With pay now close to the regional minimum wage, officials were expected to keep office hours from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and to attend on holidays when required. The secretary also linked competence to recruitment and digital administration: "In terms of ability, the staff here are average, already capable, especially in technology. Nowadays everything is on the internet, and even in the village there are several applications [...]. So village officials now have to be technology-literate. And the staff's ability is average, because we village officials went through selection, were screened, not just anybody, with no favouring of people close to us or relatives, because our ability is certainly assessed" (P2).

The applications mentioned were the village financial system, the village information system and a community health post information system. A resident confirmed that service staff appeared skilled with technology (R).

The evidence also points to limits of this account. The head of the service section stated that not all staff could use the office equipment and that it was the service-desk staff who understood computers and other tools (P3). The educational profile of officials shows the same pattern: five of fifteen held a bachelor's degree, while five had completed only primary or junior secondary school. Competence was thus concentrated in the small group of staff who dealt directly with the public. This arrangement may work in a village

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that, according to the head of the service section, served at least seven residents a day, but it also makes service quality depend on a few individuals.

4.3 Procedural limits beyond village control

The main limits on service quality lay in procedures the village did not control. The head of the service section explained that letters issued by the village alone could be completed within a day or even within minutes, but documents requiring endorsement by the sub-district could not. A certificate of good conduct, for example, requires signatures from both the village and the sub-district and therefore takes longer. The same official acknowledged that complaints were always responded to but "need a process" for each applicant (P3).

The village head made a related point about assurance. The office could not guarantee completion times because work was disrupted by sudden power cuts and other events beyond its control, although urgent requests were given priority. When asked about obstacles, the village head first stated that there were generally none, then described a single case. A resident who had moved away without a transfer letter had been removed from the family record at the family's request. On returning, the resident had no identity data in the village and no population identity number on the family card. The village head explained that the village had no authority to check identity numbers and could only refer the case to the district civil registry, adding that the difficulty arose not because the village made things hard but because the resident had not brought complete data. The proposed remedy was to consult the civil registry and to keep village records more carefully in future.

5. Discussion

5.1 Relational quality improved, procedural reliability still dependent

The results suggest a division in service quality that a standard SERVQUAL summary would conceal. The dimensions that depend mainly on the conduct of village staff, namely courtesy, non-discrimination, the absence of informal fees and staff appearance, were rated highly by both officials and residents. The dimensions that depend on procedures, especially the time needed to complete documents, were limited by authority held at the sub-district and district levels and by infrastructure such as electricity supply. In the terms of Table 1, the village performed well where it had control and was constrained where it did not.

Officials' own explanations connect the first half of this pattern to the post-2014 reforms. Regular monthly pay close to the minimum wage, selection-based recruitment and village-level digital systems were presented as the reasons why discipline and competence had improved. These accounts are consistent with the intentions of the Village Law and its implementing regulations (Antlöv et al., 2016; Vel et al., 2017) and with the wider argument that irregular pay and patronage in appointments weaken

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Indonesian public administration (Blunt et al., 2012). The case cannot establish that the reforms caused the improvements, because no data from before the reforms are available. It does show that officials themselves understood service quality through the lens of these reforms.

The second half of the pattern is less amenable to village action. A good-conduct certificate that needs a sub-district signature, or an identity record that only the civil registry can restore, ties the village's reliability to other organisations. This illustrates the argument that public services are produced across organisational boundaries and that quality experienced at the counter reflects processes the front office cannot see or change (Osborne et al., 2013). It also helps explain why SERVQUAL applications in public settings need adjustment (Brysland & Curry, 2001; Wisniewski, 2001). A low reliability score for a village office may say more about the sub-district than about the village.

5.2 Why the ratings were so positive

Almost every assessment in the data was favourable. Three explanations deserve consideration. The first is that service was in fact good on the relational dimensions, which observation of staff conduct partly supports. The second concerns expectations. Residents of a village that was until recently classified as lagging, and whose officials were once paid quarterly, may judge current service against a low baseline (James, 2009; Van Ryzin, 2004). The third concerns proximity. In a village of about 3,500 people, residents and officials are neighbours, and one resident explicitly mentioned that staff did not distinguish between relatives and others. Proximity may encourage courteous treatment and also discourage open criticism, particularly when the researcher is also a resident (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The data do not allow these explanations to be separated, but they caution against reading positive ratings in small communities as straightforward evidence of high quality.

The village head's account of the identity-number case adds a further layer. The difficulty was attributed to the resident's failure to bring complete data, not to any shortcoming of the village. This is understandable, since the village lacked the authority to resolve the case. It also shows how the costs of multi-level procedures can come to rest on citizens, who must deal with several offices to correct a record they may not know is wrong (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Moynihan et al., 2015). Lipsky (2010) observed that frontline workers facing constraints they cannot remove often develop conceptions of clients that place responsibility for difficulties on the clients themselves. The village head's explanation fits this pattern.

5.3 Concentrated competence

The professionalisation account also has internal limits. Competence with digital tools was concentrated among front-desk staff, and a third of village officials had primary or junior secondary education only. In a small village with modest demand, this arrangement can sustain good service, but it is fragile. Absence, transfer or replacement

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of a few skilled individuals would directly affect reliability, and selection procedures introduced after 2014 may have had little effect on officials appointed earlier. The secretary's statement that staff ability is "average" and "already capable" is therefore best read as a description of the service desk rather than of the village apparatus as a whole.

5.4 Practical implications

Three implications follow. First, village governments can make their service standards more informative by distinguishing documents the village completes alone from those requiring sub-district or district action, and by publishing the expected time and the absence of fees for each. Law No. 25 of 2009 already requires providers to publish service standards (Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 2009), and differentiating them by locus of control would set realistic expectations. Second, training can target officials outside the service desk to reduce dependence on a few individuals. Third, a simple and visible complaint channel would allow problems to surface in a setting where face-to-face criticism is socially costly.

5.5 Limitations and future research

The study has four limitations. First, it covers one small village with few informants, and the number of residents interviewed was limited. Second, the second author's residence in the village may have encouraged favourable accounts, although it also facilitated access. Third, no pre-reform data were available, so the role of the Village Law in improving service is inferred from officials' accounts rather than demonstrated. Fourth, the study did not collect service-time records, which would allow reliability to be assessed directly. Future research could compare villages of different sizes and remoteness, combine interviews with service logs, and trace documents across village, sub-district and district offices to locate delays more precisely.

6. Conclusion

This study examined service quality in a small Indonesian village office several years after the 2014 Village Law. Officials and residents rated the relational dimensions of service highly, and officials attributed this to regular pay, selection-based recruitment and digital administration. The main limits on quality lay in procedures that required sub-district or district action, in unreliable electricity, and in competence concentrated among a few front-desk staff.

The article contributes a simple analytical step to the study of public service quality, namely asking which level of government controls each dimension. Applied to this case, it shows that village reform appears to have strengthened what the village controls, the conduct of its own staff, while procedural reliability remains tied to authority held above the village. For researchers, this suggests that favourable SERVQUAL results at the lowest tier of government should be read alongside the administrative chain in which that tier

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operates. For practitioners, it points to service standards that tell citizens honestly which documents the village can complete itself and which it cannot.

7. Appendix A. Interview guide

The core questions were: (1) How capable are staff in handling residents' needs for identity card, birth certificate and family card cover letters? (2) What is the employment status of staff? (3) How many staff work at the service desk, and is this sufficient for the number of residents served? (4) How many residents are served each day? (5) Do staff respond quickly when residents need service? (6) Is service friendly, and how is staff discipline? (7) How do staff communicate with residents, and is the service easy or difficult to obtain? (8) Are staff who perform well or improve rewarded? (9) Are the village's facilities sufficient for providing service? (10) Can village officials operate equipment such as computers? (11) Do all village officials understand their duties and functions in providing service? (12) What factors hinder service, and what is done to overcome them?

Declarations

Author contributions. Iin Endah Setyawati: conceptualisation, supervision, formal analysis, writing – review and editing. Dessy Fitriany: investigation, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft. Susila: methodology, validation, writing – review and editing. Jamaliah Said: public sector governance and accountability perspective, writing – review and editing.

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Conflict of interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest. The second author is a resident of the village studied, as discussed in the Research Method section.

Ethical considerations. The study was conducted with permission from the village government. Informants gave informed consent before the interviews, and names are not reported. The three officials were informed that their unique positions could be identified and agreed to this.

Data availability. Interview transcripts and observation notes are not publicly available to protect informant confidentiality. Data and the village documents used in the study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Use of generative AI. AI-assisted tools were used for language editing of the manuscript. The authors reviewed all output and take full responsibility for the content.

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