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Frontline Without Authority: Integrated Sub-District Services and Upstream Dependence in Rural Indonesia

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Abstract

This study assesses the quality of the Integrated Sub-District Administrative Service (PATEN) in a rural sub-district of West Java, Indonesia, and asks why some services fail to meet their published time standards while others succeed. Studies of PATEN usually treat service quality as the performance of the sub-district office alone. We conducted a qualitative descriptive case study, combining interviews with sub-district officials and a service user, observation at the service counter, and the office's published time standards for ten services. Data were analysed against the five SERVQUAL dimensions and then by the location of the resources and decisions that each service requires. Tangibles and empathy were rated well, while reliability and assurance were weak. Nine of ten services met their standards. The only failure was the electronic identity card, promised in three days but delivered in 7 to 30 days, and the only service whose blank cards and printing authority lay outside the sub-district. The office had met the three-day standard while it held printing authority, which was later withdrawn. The study shows that reliability failures can arise from a mismatch between promised standards and delegated authority, which turns the sub-district into the visible face of upstream delays.

Keywords: *Integrated Sub-District Services, Service Quality, Delegation Of Authority, One-Stop Shop, Electronic Identity Card*

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1. Introduction

The sub-district (kecamatan) is the point at which most rural Indonesians meet their district government. In mountainous and remote areas, where the district capital may be several hours away, the sub-district office is often the only place where residents can obtain identity documents, certificates, and letters needed for land transactions, schooling, or social assistance. Minister of Home Affairs Regulation No. 4 of 2010 on Guidelines for Integrated Sub-District Administrative Services (Pelayanan Administrasi Terpadu Kecamatan, PATEN) formalised this role. It positions the sub-district as a centre of public service and as a node for the district's integrated licensing agency, and it defines PATEN as the delivery of public services at the sub-district "from the application stage to the issuance of the document in one place". The scope covers licensing and non-licensing services. Its substantive condition is the delegation of part of the regent's or mayor's authority to the head of the sub-district (camat).

The idea follows the organisational form of the one-stop shop, which brings the access points of several agencies under one roof. International experience shows that this form can be adopted in very different variants, depending on how far the authority and resources of the parent agencies are actually transferred to the shared counter (Askim et al., 2011). Reform of employment and welfare administration in Norway, for example, showed that a single front office does not by itself resolve the coordination problems among the agencies behind it (Christensen et al., 2007). One counter at the front does not necessarily mean one decision-maker at the back.

The stakes are highest for identity documents. Sustainable Development Goal target 16.9 calls for legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030 (United Nations, 2015), and in Indonesia the electronic identity card is the gateway to almost every other public service, from social assistance and health insurance to banking and land transactions. A delay at the sub-district counter is therefore not only an inconvenience. For a rural resident who needs the card to enrol in a programme or complete a sale, a wait of several weeks can mean a lost benefit or a lost opportunity, and the additional trips to an office that may be far from home add their own costs.

In Indonesia, the quality of PATEN is usually assessed with the five SERVQUAL dimensions of Parasuraman et al. (1988): tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Studies in Karangpawitan Sub-District, Garut Regency (Ulumudin & Dwiandini, 2021), and Sawangan Sub-District, Depok City (Putra & Rahman, 2025), are typical. Their recurring finding is that staff attitudes are good, while the number of staff, facilities, and certainty of completion time remain inadequate. This approach treats service quality as an attribute of the sub-district office. It seldom asks whether the sub-district controls all the resources that determine the dimensions being rated, especially reliability.

The question matters for population administration services. Law No. 24 of 2013 provides that blank electronic identity cards (Kartu Tanda Penduduk elektronik, KTP-el)

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are printed by the central government with funding from the state budget, and regional governments may not print them themselves. When central budgets are tight, regions therefore have to wait for deliveries (Azhar, 2019). Shortages of blank cards have recurred as a national issue, to the point that the Director General of Population and Civil Registration had to assure the public that no citizen should go without an identity card "only because blank cards are not available" at the local office (Raharjo, 2022).

Although considerable research has assessed PATEN through SERVQUAL, less attention has been paid to how the distribution of authority between the sub-district and upstream agencies conditions the dimensions being measured. The article addresses two questions: (1) how is the quality of PATEN in the study sub-district assessed on the five SERVQUAL dimensions, and (2) why do some services fail to meet their time standards while others succeed? Its contribution is to show that reliability failures were concentrated in the service whose authority and materials lay upstream. The assessment of PATEN quality therefore needs to distinguish the performance of the sub-district from the performance of a service chain of which only the final link sits at the sub-district. The article first reviews the literature, then describes the method, reports the results, discusses them, and closes with conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 PATEN and the Delegation of Authority

Regulation No. 4 of 2010 sets two kinds of conditions for PATEN. The substantive condition is the delegation of part of the regent's or mayor's authority to the camat. The administrative and technical conditions are service standards, facilities, and implementing staff. Service standards are further governed by Law No. 25 of 2009 on Public Services and Minister of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform Regulation No. 15 of 2014 on Guidelines for Service Standards. Their components include requirements, procedures, time limits, fees, products, and complaint handling. A problem follows from this design. The time limit is a promise to citizens, but whether it can be kept depends on the authority that has actually been delegated.

This problem sits within the wider pattern of Indonesian decentralisation. Two decades after the 1999 reforms, authority and fiscal resources have moved substantially to districts and cities, but the distribution of tasks among tiers remains uneven and often unclear, and districts vary widely in their capacity to deliver (Talitha et al., 2020). Reform of Indonesia's large bureaucracy has also proceeded unevenly, with formal reorganisation frequently running ahead of changes in practice (Turner et al., 2022). Delegation to the sub-district is a further step in the same chain. It is easy to announce in a regent's regulation but harder to sustain when the materials, equipment, and staff needed to exercise the delegated authority remain with district or central agencies.

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2.2 One-Stop Shops and the Coordination Problem

Askim et al. (2011) compared one-stop shops for social welfare in three countries and found that the same organisational form could mean full integration in one place and little more than the collection of files in another. Christensen et al. (2007) showed that joining employment and welfare services at a single front desk did not remove the need to coordinate the separate organisations behind it, and in some respects made their differences more visible to clients. Peters (2018) argues more generally that coordination remains one of the most persistent problems of government because specialisation creates boundaries that integration at the front line cannot erase. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) had shown long before that the more decision points a programme must pass through, the smaller the chance that it will be implemented as planned. For PATEN, these studies together suggest that the quality of service at the sub-district counter is limited by decision points outside the sub-district.

2.3 SERVQUAL in Public Services

Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed SERVQUAL from the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions, resulting in five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The instrument has been widely adapted to public services, where it has proved useful for identifying gaps between what citizens expect and what agencies deliver (Brysland & Curry, 2001; Wisniewski, 2001). These adaptations also showed its limits. Public service users are not customers who can switch providers, and the quality they experience depends on rules and resources set elsewhere in government. In administrative services, reliability translates into keeping the promised time standard, and assurance includes the certainty that the promise will be kept. These two dimensions are the most exposed to inter-agency dependence. Osborne et al. (2013) make a related argument from public service theory: public services are produced through systems of organisations, and quality assessments that focus on a single provider risk attributing system failure to the most visible actor.

2.4 Frontline Staff

Counter staff at the sub-district are street-level bureaucrats in Lipsky's (2010) sense. They deal directly with citizens, work with limited resources, and often have to explain decisions they did not make. Under such conditions, frontline workers develop coping routines, which may include rationing information, routinising requests, or attributing delays to clients (Tummers et al., 2015). The administrative burden literature adds that citizens bear learning and compliance costs when requirements are unclear or have to be met through repeated visits (Moynihan et al., 2015). The position of the sub-district makes these dynamics particularly sharp. Counter staff are employees of the district government, but they are not the officials who decide on the supply of blank cards or the printing quota. When residents ask why a card has not arrived, staff can neither speed it

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up nor give a reliable date. Lipsky (2010) observed that frontline workers in such positions tend to manage demand rather than meet it, and that the routines they develop can harden into the organisation's de facto policy. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the way counter staff explain delays, and the information available to citizens before they arrive, shape how upstream dependence is experienced at the counter.

2.5 Service Standards as Accountability Devices

Service standards serve two purposes at once. They are management tools that tell staff what to deliver and by when, and they are public promises against which citizens can hold an agency to account. Law No. 25 of 2009 requires service providers to publish their standards and to handle complaints when the standards are not met. The accountability function presupposes that the agency publishing the standard also controls its fulfilment. Where it does not, the published standard directs citizens' expectations, and their complaints, to the wrong address. This tension is rarely discussed in the PATEN literature, which tends to treat a missed standard as a performance failure of the office that published it.

2.6 Research Position

Existing PATEN studies describe service quality well but rarely trace it to the distribution of authority. Studies of one-stop shops and coordination explain why front-office integration may be thin, but they come mostly from high-income countries with stable funding. This study brings the two together. It uses SERVQUAL to describe quality and then asks, service by service, who controls the resources and decisions that determine whether the time standard is met.

3. Research Method

3.1 Approach and Site

This study used a qualitative descriptive case study approach. A single case was appropriate because the aim was to understand how service quality is shaped within a specific institutional setting rather than to measure it across sites. The case is the Pakenjeng Sub-District Office in Garut Regency, West Java, a rural sub-district in the southern, mountainous part of the regency. Its residents live in dispersed villages at a considerable distance from the regency capital, where the population agency is located, so that the sub-district office is the most accessible point of contact with the regency government. The case was chosen because it combines services that the sub-district completes by itself with services whose final step depends on other agencies, which makes it possible to compare the two groups within one office, under the same management and with the same staff. The office provides PATEN for licensing and non-

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licensing services, including the recording of KTP-el data, family cards, certificates, legalisation, change-of-residence letters, and land administration.

3.2 Types and Sources of Data

The study used primary and secondary data. Primary data came from interviews and observation. Secondary data came from the office's Profile and Typology document, which sets out the time standards for ten types of service, together with the relevant regulations and news reports on the supply of blank identity cards. The time standards in the profile were compared with the completion times observed during fieldwork (Table 1).

3.3 Informants and Instruments

Informants were selected purposively for their knowledge of service delivery. They were the head of the governance section (P1), the head of the general affairs and personnel subsection (P2), and one resident who had used the office's services (W1). Interview guides were developed from the five SERVQUAL dimensions, with separate versions for staff and for residents. The researcher acted as the main instrument, supported by the interview guides and an observation checklist covering facilities, information displays, and the handling of applicants at the counter.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation in the service area of the sub-district office, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and recorded in field notes, and the excerpts reported below were translated by the authors. Observation covered the condition of facilities, the availability of service information, and the time taken to complete applications. The research was conducted with the permission of the head of Pakenjeng Sub-District (letter No. 474/87-Kec/2021 of 13 October 2021), and informants are identified by codes.

3.5 Theoretical Framework and Analysis

The analysis proceeded in two steps. The first mapped interview and observation data onto the five SERVQUAL dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The second grouped the ten services in Table 1 by whether they met their time standards, and then examined who controls the resources and final decisions for each service, drawing on the literature on delegation and one-stop shops (Askim et al., 2011; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). The analytic steps followed data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). The final column of Table 1, which records who controls the materials and final decision, is the authors' analysis based on the division of authority in population administration rather than a field observation.

The second step relies on a within-case comparison. All ten services are delivered by the same office, under the same head, with the same counter staff, facilities, and opening

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hours. Differences in the attainment of time standards across services therefore cannot easily be explained by the qualities of the office as such, since these are held constant. What does vary across services is the location of the materials and the final decision. This logic does not establish causation in a statistical sense, but it allows the analysis to separate explanations rooted in the office from explanations rooted in the service chain, which a dimension-by-dimension SERVQUAL reading cannot do.

3.6 Credibility

Credibility was supported by triangulation across officials' statements, the resident's account, observation, and the documented time standards. Where accounts diverged, as they did on the causes of delay, both views are reported. The evidence base is small, particularly on the citizen side, so the residents' perspective in this study is illustrative rather than representative, and the analysis relies more heavily on the documented standards and on observation.

4. Results

4.1. Time Standards: Nine Met, One Failed

Table 1 compares the published time standard with the completion time observed for each of the ten services.

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Table 1. Published and observed completion times at the sub-district office

No	Service	Standard	Observed	Remarks	Controls materials or final decision
1	Electronic identity card (KTP-el)	3 days	7–30 days	Shortage of blank cards and operators	Population agency and central government (blank cards)
2	Family card	14 days	14 days	As estimated	Population agency
3	Company domicile certificate	3 days	3 days	As estimated	Sub-district
4	Statement of heirs	3 days	3 days	As estimated	Sub-district
5	General certificate	1 day	1 day	As estimated	Sub-district
6	Legalisation	1 day	1 day	As estimated	Sub-district
7	Certificate of low income	1 day	1 day	As estimated	Sub-district
8	Change-of-residence letter	1 day	1 day	As estimated	Sub-district
9	Covering letter for residence permit	1 day	1 day	As estimated	Sub-district
10	Land administration	1 day	1 day	As estimated	Sub-district

Source: Pakenjeng Sub-District Profile and Typology and field observation. The last column is the authors' analysis.

Nine of the ten services were completed exactly within their standards. The family card, also issued by the population agency, met its standard because the standard had been set long enough (14 days) to absorb the agency's processing time. The only failure was the KTP-el. Its standard was three days, but completion took 7 to 30 days, between 2.3 and 10 times the promised time. Beyond Table 1, officials and observation also indicated that building permit processing, which in principle should be completed in one day in one place, took more than a week in practice. Figure 1 contrasts the service chain of the services completed entirely by the sub-district with that of the KTP-el.

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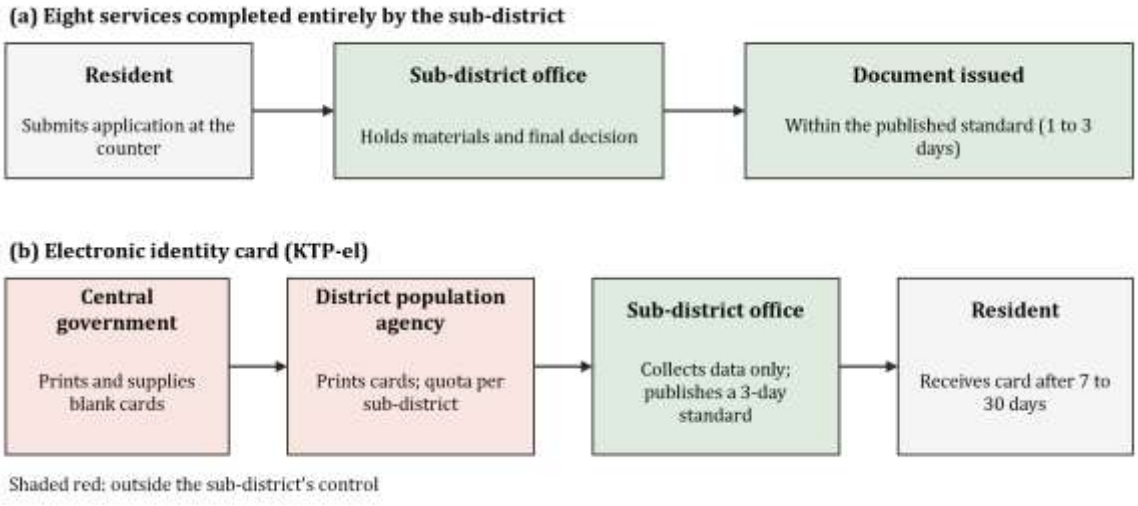


Figure 1. Service chains for services completed by the sub-district and for the electronic identity card (authors' elaboration from Table 1 and interviews)

4.2. The Five SERVQUAL Dimensions

Tangibles

Officials and the resident rated the facilities favourably. P1 described them as "already good, although there is still a lot of homework that has not been finished, and that is in progress". W1 compared them with other sub-districts: "compared with other sub-districts, Pakenjeng is better". Observation, however, recorded too few computers and no online information about services. Residents therefore had to come in person to learn the procedures and requirements.

Reliability

Reliability was the weakest dimension, and P1 explained its cause in detail:

> *"In terms of reliability, the sub-district itself used to provide the equipment to print e-KTP, so the identity card service could be finished in three days. But that only lasted a few months, and after that it was taken back by the population agency because the blank cards had run out. Until now e-KTP printing is limited to two batches per sub-district, so the sub-district cannot predict when it will be finished. [...] So under the 2020 regulation the sub-district is only a place to collect data from people who want to make or change their e-KTP, and the rest is printed by the population agency." (P1)*

The resident confirmed the consequence: "when I applied for a new e-KTP it did not match the estimate that was promised; it should have been finished in three days, but in reality it took longer than that" (W1).

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Responsiveness

Officials considered staff responsive and placed the source of delays with residents: "it comes back to the people, many of them do not bring the requirements that have to be prepared" (P1). The resident saw it from another side: "not all the sub-district staff understand the service products when they explain them, because many also forget" (W1). Observation recorded that many residents still did not know the procedures and requirements for the services they sought.

Assurance

Staff were described as polite, residents' data as secure, and services as free of charge (P1). What could not be assured was time. The resident asked that "staff must be clear when they promise the completion time" (W1).

Empathy

Officials and the resident both rated empathy well. P2 stated that staff "serve the public in a friendly way", and W1 judged that "the procedure is not complicated, and none of the services are charged".

4.3. Human Resources: The Technology Gap and Non-Civil-Servant Staff

The constraints identified by officials concerned mainly technological skills. P2 referred to "some staff who do not understand how to run IT". Officials described many civil servants as older and unfamiliar with technology, so that the sub-district "recruits many non-civil-servant staff to help keep services optimal". The measures mentioned were training for civil servants and the recruitment of non-civil-servant staff. Other constraints mentioned were the absence of updated technical guidelines for PATEN, limited public outreach about PATEN, and communication between staff and residents that was not yet optimal.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reliability Failure Originates Upstream

A conventional SERVQUAL assessment would conclude that this sub-district is "not reliable". Table 1 gives a sharper picture. The sub-district met the time standard for every service whose decisions and materials it controlled. It failed only on the service whose material, the blank card, is produced by the central government and printed by the district agency. The history recounted by P1 strengthens this reading. While the sub-district had printing equipment, the three-day standard was met. When printing authority was withdrawn because blank cards ran out, the same standard could no longer be met, yet it remained listed as the sub-district's service promise. This is the pattern that Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) described: each additional decision point, here the procurement of blank cards at the centre, their distribution to the district, and the printing quota per sub-district, reduces the certainty of the result at the end of the chain.

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The finding qualifies the way earlier PATEN studies have read reliability. Ulumudin and Dwiandini (2021) and Putra and Rahman (2025) both identified uncertain completion times as a weakness and attributed it, together with staffing and facilities, to the sub-district. The present case suggests that at least part of this uncertainty is structural. Where the sub-district holds the authority, its reliability is high; where it does not, its reliability depends on upstream supply that it cannot influence. SERVQUAL measures the gap between expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman et al., 1988), but it does not locate the source of the gap. Applied to a single office in a multi-agency chain, it can attribute to that office a failure that originates elsewhere, the risk that Osborne et al. (2013) identify for provider-centred quality assessments.

5.2. What the Family Card Shows

The family card offers an instructive contrast. Like the KTP-el, it is issued by the population agency, not by the sub-district, and the sub-district's role is to receive and forward the application. Yet it met its standard, because the standard had been set at 14 days, a period that took the agency's processing time into account. Dependence on an upstream agency therefore does not by itself produce a reliability failure. The failure arises when a standard written for a period of delegated authority remains in force after that authority, or the materials needed to exercise it, have been withdrawn. This distinction matters for policy. It means that the reliability gap can be narrowed at little cost by aligning published standards with actual arrangements, even before the more difficult problem of supplying blank cards is solved.

5.3. Standards, Accountability, and the Misdirected Complaint

The case also shows how the accountability function of service standards can misfire. The three-day standard for the KTP-el remained in the sub-district's published profile, so residents measured the sub-district against it and directed their complaints to its staff. The agencies that controlled the supply of blank cards and the printing quota were not visible to residents at all. In effect, the standard made the sub-district answerable for decisions taken by others, while the agencies responsible for those decisions faced no comparable public promise at the point of service. A standard that names its dependencies would not by itself shorten waiting times, but it would tell residents where delays originate and give the sub-district a basis for pressing upstream agencies for supplies.

5.4. PATEN as a Shrinking One-Stop Shop

Regulation No. 4 of 2010 envisages service "from the application stage to the issuance of the document in one place". For the KTP-el, this sub-district moved in the opposite direction, from a place where the document was issued to "only a place to collect data". The finding of Askim et al. (2011) is relevant here: the organisational form of a shared counter can persist while its content shrinks to receiving files. The experience of

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Christensen et al. (2007) also applies. The front office remained, but the coordination problems among the organisations behind it were passed on to residents in the form of uncertain waiting times. The withdrawal of printing authority is understandable from the standpoint of the security and quality standards of population documents (Azhar, 2019), and from the recurring shortages of blank cards at national level (Raharjo, 2022). It was not, however, followed by an adjustment of the time standard announced to residents.

5.5. Who Gets Blamed

Because the sub-district remains the face of the service, complaints about upstream delays are directed at it. Counter staff, for their part, explained delays by referring to incomplete documents brought by residents. This pattern is consistent with the ways in which street-level bureaucrats manage demands they cannot meet (Lipsky, 2010) and with the coping strategy of moving away from clients by shifting attention to their compliance (Tummers et al., 2015). At the same time, the resident's remark that not all staff understood the service products points to a real information problem on the sub-district's side, aggravated by the absence of online information on requirements. The two explanations do not exclude each other. Together they suggest that uncertain waiting times would be easier for residents to bear if requirements and dependencies were clearly announced. In administrative burden terms, unclear requirements add learning costs, and repeated visits to complete documents add compliance costs (Moynihan et al., 2015), both of which fall on residents who may live far from the office.

5.6. Technology Capacity and Non-Civil-Servant Staff

The sub-district closed the gap in its civil servants' technological skills by recruiting non-civil-servant staff. This strategy kept services running, but it placed key skills in the hands of staff with the least secure employment status. The vulnerability deserves attention as national policy on non-civil-servant personnel is reorganised, because the loss of these staff would weaken the very capacity on which the counter's digital tasks depend. It also reflects the uneven progress of bureaucratic reform noted by Turner et al. (2022), in which formal structures change faster than the skills of the workforce that operates them.

5.7. Novelty and Implications

The contribution of this study lies in moving the analysis of PATEN quality from the office to the service chain. By pairing each service's time standard with the location of its materials and final decision, the study shows that the reliability gap was not spread evenly across services but concentrated where authority had not been delegated or had been taken back. This approach can be applied to other sub-districts and to other one-stop service arrangements in Indonesia, such as public service malls, where front-office integration may likewise conceal back-office dependence.

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Three policy implications follow. First, time standards for services that depend on other agencies, such as the KTP-el and building permits, should be set jointly with those agencies and announced together with their dependencies, for example "three days after blank cards are available", instead of a fixed promise that the sub-district cannot control. Second, delegation of authority under PATEN should be accompanied by guaranteed materials and equipment; delegation that is withdrawn midway lowers residents' trust more than no delegation at all. Third, the requirements and procedures for each service should be published online and at the counter, to reduce repeated visits and disputes over incomplete documents

6. Conclusion

The quality of PATEN in the study sub-district was good on tangibles and empathy but weak on reliability and assurance of completion time. This weakness was not evenly distributed. Nine of ten services met their standards, and the only failure was the KTP-el, whose materials and printing authority lay outside the sub-district. The office had met the three-day standard when it held printing authority; when that authority was withdrawn, the standard remained but could no longer be met. Answering the second research question, services failed where the sub-district depended on upstream agencies for materials and decisions, and succeeded where it controlled them.

The impact of these findings extends beyond the single office studied. For residents of rural sub-districts, the identity card is the document on which access to most other services depends, so a reliability failure in this one service has consequences well beyond the counter. For district governments, the findings indicate that the published standards of their sub-districts may contain promises that no sub-district can keep, and that reviewing these standards against current arrangements for delegation is a simple first step. For researchers, they suggest that SERVQUAL ratings of local offices should be read alongside an account of who controls each service.

These findings indicate that assessments of sub-district service quality should distinguish the performance of the office from the performance of the service chain behind it, and that service promises should match the authority actually delegated. The study has clear limitations. The interview evidence is thin, consisting of two officials and one resident, and the authority column in Table 1 is the authors' analysis rather than field data. Further research should interview the population agency, KTP-el operators, and a larger number of residents, and should collect completion times for individual applications so that the range of 7 to 30 days can be mapped systematically across sub-districts.

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