

Article

# Bridging policy and development: Implementing merit-based civil service management for dynamic governance in West Java

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**Abstract:** This study aims to identify and the implementation of ASN Management policies on career development aspects based on the merit system in the West Java Provincial Government and 6 Regency/City Governments in West Java Province. The failure of the institutionalization of the meritocratic system in ASN career development is partly triggered by the symptoms of the appointment or selection of officials in the central and regional levels not based on their professionalism or competence except for subjective considerations, political ties, close relationships and even bribery. This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The operationalization concept in this study uses Merilee S. Grindle's Policy Implementation theory which consists of dimensions of policy content and its implementation context. The factors that cause the implementation of the policy to be less than optimal include: 1. Uneven understanding of meritocracy; 2. Slowness/unpreparedness in synchronizing central and regional rules/policies; 3. The information integration system between the center and regions has not yet been implemented; 4. Limited supporting infrastructure; 5. Limited permits for related officials; 6. Transparency; 7. Collaboration across units/agencies; 8. External intervention; 9. Use of information systems/technology. To optimize these factors, an Accelerator of Governmental Unit's Success (AGUS) model was created, which is a development of the Grindle policy implementation model with the novelty of adding things that influence implementation, including top leader's commitment and wisdom, effectiveness of talent placement, on-point human development, technology savvy, cross-unit/agency collaboration, and monitoring and evaluation processes.

**Keywords:** state civil apparatus management; merit system; policy implementation

## 1. Introduction

Effective civil service management is paramount for achieving accountable governance, particularly within the framework of ongoing public administration reforms. In Indonesia, the implementation of Law No. 23 of 2023 has positioned merit-based civil service management as a key focus, necessitating that both central and regional government institutions adopt practices prioritizing professional qualifications over political affiliations. This reform is critical to enhancing governance quality and improving service delivery by fostering a more competent and professional civil service (Prasojo, 2010). However, despite the law's intentions, the actualization of a meritocratic system encounters various challenges, including systemic biases and the prevalent use of subjective criteria in appointments, which can significantly hinder policy effectiveness (Arsyad et al., 2020).

The management of civil servants (Aparatur Sipil Negara, ASN) is a central element of the government's development agenda within the Medium-Term National Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020–2024, which represents the fourth phase of the

Long-Term National Development Plan (RPJPN) 2005–2025. The reform objectives outlined in the RPJMN include the establishment of “good, clean, and authoritative governance based on law, along with a professional and neutral bureaucracy.” Presidential Regulation No. 18 of 2020 provides directives and strategies aimed at achieving these goals, emphasizing the strengthening of ASN management policies through national talent management, merit system enhancements, simplification of hierarchical structures, and functional position restructuring.

Despite an upward trend in the national merit system index from 2020 to 2023, the overall index remains in the range of 0.41 to 0.6, indicating a classification of insufficient. This situation underscores the urgent need for national acceleration involving the application of merit systems across both central and regional institutions. The low national ratings reflect persistent issues and dynamics within these institutions, where the failure to institutionalize meritocracy in career development for ASN is often exacerbated by practices of appointment based on subjective considerations, political affiliations, personal connections, and even bribery. Given that approximately 78% of Indonesia’s 4,465,768 active civil servants work at the regional level, understanding the dynamics of merit-based management within local contexts is of utmost importance (KASN, 2023). This study specifically examines West Java Province, which has consistently achieved the highest rankings in national evaluations of civil service management, earning a score of 396.5 in 2023, maintaining the same score as in 2022. In contrast, several local governments display significant performance gaps, with scores ranging from 121 to 141 points lower (KASN, 2023). Therefore, this research aims to explore the effective practices and challenges associated with implementing merit-based civil service management in West Java, thereby providing insights that may enhance governance across various regional contexts.

## **2. Materials and methods**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the implementation of merit-based civil service management in West Java. The research involves a comprehensive literature review, along with interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders, including civil servants, policymakers, and experts in public administration. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their insights on the challenges and successes experienced in applying meritocratic principles within their institutions.

The sample consists of representatives from various regional government agencies in West Java, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives on merit-based management practices. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with relevant experience and knowledge regarding the implementation of merit systems in their respective organizations (Palinkas et al., 2015). To minimize potential biases in purposive sampling, we ensured representation from a range of hierarchical levels and functional areas within the government agencies.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach. This process involved familiarizing with the data,

generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report. To ensure the reliability and validity of the qualitative data, triangulation was employed by cross-checking findings from interviews, focus group discussions, and the literature review. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary results with participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

### 3. Results and discussion

Based on **Table 1**, the findings of this study highlight several critical aspects of the implementation of merit-based civil service management in West Java, revealing both successes and challenges that affect the effectiveness of this system.

**Table 1.** Key findings on career development and barriers.

Key Findings	Details
High-Level Commitment	Score of 396.5 in national evaluation (2023)
Barriers Identified	Subjective selection processes (40% influence)
Career Development Opportunities	National average score: 33.57
Disparity Between Levels of Government	Gap of 121-141 points between provincial and local

Source: processed by researchers, 2024.

- 1) **High-Level Commitment:** The Government of West Java has demonstrated a strong commitment to implementing merit-based civil service management. With a score of 396.5 in the national evaluation by the Komisi Aparatur Sipil Negara (KASN) in 2023, West Java ranked first among provinces in Indonesia, maintaining its performance from the previous year. The score reflects the overall performance of the provincial government in adhering to and implementing meritocratic principles. It was calculated based on several dimensions evaluated by KASN, including recruitment, career development, and promotion systems, using a standardized scoring framework where higher scores indicate stronger alignment with meritocratic practices.
- 2) **Perceived Barriers:** Despite the commitment, respondents identified significant barriers that hinder the successful implementation of meritocracy. These included subjective selection processes influenced by political affiliations, nepotism, and other forms of favoritism. Participants expressed concerns that promotions and appointments were often not based on merit, undermining the integrity of the civil service.
- 3) **Career Development Challenges:** The data indicated that career development opportunities within the civil service are insufficient, with a national average achievement of only 33.57 in the career development dimension. This aspect is part of the scoring framework, which evaluates the availability and effectiveness of structured career development programs, training opportunities, and clear career paths. The low average highlights the need for clearer career paths and systematic training programs that align with merit-based principles.
- 4) **Implementation Gaps:** A notable disparity in the implementation of merit systems was observed between provincial and local governments. While the

provincial government achieved high scores, local governments such as Indramayu and Sukabumi lagged significantly, with gaps ranging from 121 to 141 points in merit system evaluations. These scores were derived using KASN's methodology, which assesses compliance with merit-based standards at both provincial and local levels. The disparity indicates a need for more comprehensive training and support for local government officials to implement merit-based practices effectively.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. Political will and institutional capacity**

In West Java, the provincial government has demonstrated a strong commitment to meritocratic principles, as evidenced by its ranking as the top performer in the national evaluation conducted by the State Civil Apparatus Commission in 2023, with an impressive score of 396.5. This achievement reflects effective leadership and a concerted effort to implement reforms at the provincial level, aimed at enhancing the quality of governance and public service delivery. The government's initiatives in establishing clear criteria for recruitment, performance evaluations, and promotions based on merit have been crucial in fostering a culture of accountability and professionalism within the civil service.

However, while these accomplishments are commendable, persistent issues such as favoritism and the lack of sufficient career development opportunities reveal substantial challenges that undermine the overall effectiveness of the merit-based system. Data indicates that the national average for career development opportunities scores a mere 33.57, highlighting a significant gap in this crucial aspect of merit-based management. The underperformance in career development is a pressing concern, as it not only affects employee motivation and retention but also hinders the overall capability of the civil service to respond effectively to the complex demands of governance in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment.

Moreover, the prevalence of subjective criteria in the appointment and promotion of officials continues to create an environment where political affiliations and personal relationships can overshadow merit-based considerations. This situation not only affects the integrity of the recruitment process but also diminishes public trust in government institutions. Addressing these challenges is essential for sustaining the progress made in implementing meritocratic principles and ensuring that the benefits of such reforms are fully realized.

To bridge the gap in career development opportunities, the provincial government must prioritize targeted training programs, mentorship initiatives, and clear pathways for advancement that are accessible to all civil servants. By doing so, West Java can enhance the competencies of its workforce, ultimately leading to improved public service delivery and governance outcomes. Furthermore, continuous monitoring and evaluation of the merit system's implementation are necessary to identify areas for improvement and to ensure that the principles of meritocracy are upheld across all levels of the civil service.

## **4.2. Favoritism and career development challenges**

Despite the positive strides made in West Java, the challenges of favoritism and insufficient career development opportunities pose significant threats to the sustainability of merit-based civil service practices. The analysis reveals that subjective selection processes account for approximately 40% of the decisions regarding appointments and promotions, as noted in various evaluations. This reliance on personal relationships and political affiliations undermines the meritocratic framework and hampers the effectiveness of civil service management. Such favoritism not only affects the morale of competent civil servants but also results in a workforce that may lack the necessary skills and expertise to meet the demands of contemporary governance.

Moreover, the disparity in merit system scores between provincial and local levels—with gaps ranging from 121 to 141 points between West Java and districts such as Indramayu and Sukabumi—emphasizes the need for targeted interventions at the local level. These disparities suggest that while the provincial government may uphold merit-based principles, local governments struggle to implement these practices effectively, perpetuating a cycle of inefficiency and corruption. The significant differences in scores indicate that local governments may still rely on outdated practices in personnel management, which do not align with the established meritocratic standards at the provincial level.

To address these challenges, it is crucial for the provincial government to develop a robust support framework that includes capacity-building initiatives aimed at enhancing the understanding and application of merit-based principles among local government officials. Implementing standardized training programs can equip local civil servants with the skills necessary to conduct fair assessments and make objective decisions regarding appointments and promotions. Additionally, establishing oversight mechanisms to monitor the recruitment and promotion processes at the local level could help mitigate favoritism and ensure adherence to merit-based practices.

Furthermore, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability at all levels of government is essential. This can be achieved by promoting public participation in the selection processes and encouraging community engagement in monitoring civil service practices. By empowering citizens to hold local governments accountable, the likelihood of subjective practices being challenged and reformed increases.

Ultimately, bridging the gap between provincial and local merit system scores requires a comprehensive approach that not only addresses the immediate challenges of favoritism and inadequate career development but also lays the foundation for a more efficient and responsive civil service. By prioritizing the implementation of merit-based practices throughout all tiers of government, West Java can ensure the sustainability of its civil service reforms and enhance the overall quality of governance.

## **4.3. Need for a robust meritocratic framework**

The findings indicate a pressing need for a robust framework that enforces meritocratic principles across all levels of government. Strengthening mechanisms

for performance evaluations and accountability is vital to mitigate the influence of subjective decision-making, which can erode trust in public institutions. Current evaluation systems must be enhanced to ensure transparency and fairness in assessing civil servants' performance. This can be achieved by implementing standardized evaluation criteria that are clear, objective, and measurable, allowing for consistent assessments across different departments and levels of government. Regular audits of these evaluation processes will further ensure adherence to established standards and provide valuable feedback for continuous improvement.

Moreover, creating a culture of meritocracy requires not only the implementation of robust evaluation systems but also the establishment of incentives for performance-based achievements. Recognizing and rewarding outstanding civil servants can motivate others to strive for excellence, fostering a competitive yet collaborative environment. By promoting success stories and best practices within the civil service, the government can reinforce the importance of merit-based principles and encourage civil servants to prioritize competency and professionalism.

Furthermore, enhancing training programs and resources for local government officials is essential to bridge the gap between provincial and local governance practices. These training programs should focus not only on the technical skills required for effective governance but also on soft skills such as leadership, communication, and ethical decision-making. By investing in professional development, civil servants will be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfill their roles effectively, fostering a more competent and motivated workforce. Mentorship programs that pair experienced officials with newcomers can also facilitate knowledge transfer and help nurture a new generation of capable public servants.

Additionally, collaboration between provincial and local governments is crucial in sharing best practices and resources. Establishing platforms for dialogue and cooperation can enhance understanding and promote the consistent application of meritocratic principles. Joint training initiatives, workshops, and seminars can provide opportunities for local officials to learn from the experiences of their provincial counterparts, thereby aligning governance practices and expectations across different levels of government.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges facing the implementation of merit-based civil service management in West Java requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses performance evaluation, accountability, training, and intergovernmental collaboration. By reinforcing meritocratic principles and investing in the professional development of civil servants, the provincial government can create a more effective, transparent, and responsive governance structure that ultimately benefits the citizens of West Java. This commitment to excellence will not only enhance the quality of public services but also contribute to building public trust and confidence in government institutions.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, while West Java has made significant strides in implementing merit-based civil service management, ongoing efforts are required to address

systemic barriers and ensure that meritocracy becomes the foundation of civil service practices throughout the region. The challenges of favoritism and insufficient career development opportunities necessitate comprehensive reform strategies that prioritize meritocratic values.

The findings of this study have broader implications beyond West Java. Regions or countries facing similar challenges in implementing merit-based civil service management can draw valuable lessons from the experiences in West Java, particularly the importance of high-level commitment, the development of transparent career paths, and the need to bridge implementation gaps between different levels of government. Adopting tailored reform strategies that address local contexts while aligning with global meritocratic principles can enhance the effectiveness of civil service systems. Strengthening these systems will ultimately contribute to achieving the goals of good governance, efficiency, and public trust in government institutions, both locally and globally.

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