

## Institutional Constraints in Local Bureaucratic Reform: Evidence from Konawe Selatan Regency

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### ABSTRACT

Bureaucratic reform has become a central agenda in public administration, yet implementation outcomes remain uneven, especially in decentralized systems where local governments translate national reform mandates into practice. This article examines how institutional constraints shape bureaucratic reform implementation in Konawe Selatan Regency, Indonesia. Using a qualitative evaluative case study, the analysis draws on documentary evidence from the assessment of the 2015–2019 reform cycle and the formulation of the 2020–2024 bureaucratic reform roadmap, complemented by five semistructured interviews with anonymized key informants (I1–I5) involved in reform coordination, human resource management, performance monitoring, and policy advisory functions. Findings indicate that reform underperformance is driven less by the absence of policy than by interconnected institutional misalignment across four dimensions. Regulative constraints emerged through policy incoherence and limited operational guidance, producing interpretive variation and compliance-driven implementation. Structural constraints reflected fragmented reform machinery and discontinuous coordination, weakening sustainability across staffing changes. Capacity constraints involved limited competence in performance-based management and uneven technological readiness, contributing to the persistence of procedural routines. Political constraints were evident in weak reform ownership and limited leadership innovation, allowing reform to remain a routine administrative agenda rather than a strategic governance priority. The study contributes by reframing local bureaucratic reform failure as an institutional alignment problem rather than a managerial deficiency. Practically, it suggests that local governments should govern reform as a sequenced institutional alignment strategy—strengthening roadmap intelligibility, institutionalizing coordination, prioritizing capability-building, and sustaining political ownership to shift reform from symbolic compliance toward durable governance improvement.

### Keywords

*bureaucratic reform,  
institutional constraints,  
local governance,  
decentralization*

## Introduction

Bureaucratic reform has become a central pillar of contemporary public administration reforms worldwide, reflecting growing demands for effective governance, accountability, and high-quality public service delivery. Since the diffusion of reform paradigms such as New Public Management (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), governments have pursued administrative transformation aimed at improving efficiency, strengthening performance orientation, and enhancing citizen responsiveness. These reform efforts have typically emphasized managerial rationalization, organizational restructuring, and performance measurement as tools for improving administrative effectiveness.

More recently, however, reform agendas have expanded beyond managerial efficiency toward governance capacity, institutional resilience, and collaborative public value creation (Bryson et al., 2015; Osborne, 2018). Contemporary scholarship further highlights that reform success increasingly depends on adaptive governance capabilities and institutional learning processes rather than standardized managerial tools alone (Sørensen & Torfing, 2021; Torfing et al., 2021). This shift reflects a growing recognition that administrative performance is shaped not only by technical procedures and managerial instruments, but also by institutional conditions that determine how reforms are interpreted, implemented, and sustained over time (Ansell et al., 2024).

Despite these evolving approaches, the implementation of bureaucratic reform continues to produce uneven outcomes, particularly within decentralized governance systems where reform responsibilities are delegated to local governments. Scholars increasingly argue that bureaucratic reform should not be understood solely as a technical or managerial process but as an institutional transformation shaped by organizational structures, norms, and political environments (Peters, 2019; Scott, 2014). Institutional arrangements influence how administrative actors interpret policies, allocate resources, and respond to change initiatives. In practice, reform policies often enter organizational settings where existing routines, incentive structures, and administrative cultures have been shaped by long-standing governance patterns. Recent empirical studies confirm that reform adoption is frequently mediated by institutional compatibility and organizational sense-making processes, producing selective implementation outcomes across administrative contexts (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021).

Consequently, reform programs often encounter institutional inertia and organizational resistance that limit substantive transformation even when reform policies are formally adopted. Empirical studies across developing countries show that bureaucratic reform frequently results in symbolic compliance rather than structural change, as organizations adjust superficially to external reform pressures while maintaining established routines (Andrews, 2013b; Andrews et al., 2017; Pritchett et al., 2018). More recent comparative analyses similarly demonstrate that

administrative reforms often stabilize at procedural compliance when institutional incentives remain unchanged (M. S. de Vries & Nemec, 2025). This recurring pattern points to a critical analytical implication: the gap between reform ambitions and reform outcomes may be less about the absence of policy and more about the institutional conditions in which policy implementation takes place.

The challenges become more pronounced in decentralized administrative systems. Decentralization transfers authority and administrative responsibility to subnational governments, positioning local institutions as key actors in translating national reform agendas into operational practices (Faguet, 2014; Smoke, 2015). In principle, decentralization can enhance responsiveness by enabling local governments to tailor governance reforms to local needs and capacities. Yet decentralization also introduces variation in institutional readiness, resource availability, and coordination capacity, thereby increasing the likelihood of uneven reform progress across regions.

Recent decentralization research shows that governance outcomes increasingly depend on subnational institutional capacity and interorganizational coordination rather than formal authority transfer alone (Bolívar et al., 2022; Ladner et al., 2025). Local governments often operate under varying institutional capacities, political dynamics, and resource constraints, producing significant variation in reform performance. Research demonstrates that administrative capacity, leadership commitment, and institutional coordination strongly influence reform outcomes at the local level (Grindle, 2017; The World Bank, 2020). Where institutional capacity is limited, reform initiatives tend to emphasize procedural compliance rather than performance improvement, reinforcing uneven reform trajectories across regions (Gong & Janssen, 2023).

Indonesia provides an important empirical setting for examining these dynamics. Since the early 2010s, bureaucratic reform has been institutionalized as a national priority aimed at creating a clean, accountable, and capable bureaucracy capable of delivering high-quality public services. Reform policies require local governments to develop bureaucratic reform roadmaps integrating organizational restructuring, human resource management reform, performance accountability systems, and service innovation. These reforms reflect global governance trends emphasizing results-based management and performance-oriented administration (Kettl, 2015; Moynihan, 2008). The intent is clear: reform should shift public administration away from input- and procedure-oriented routines toward measurable outcomes and service quality improvements. Nevertheless, national evaluations and academic studies indicate persistent gaps between reform design and implementation outcomes, particularly at the subnational level (McLeod & Harun, 2014; Prasojo et al., 2019; Sutiyono et al., 2018).

Recent Indonesian governance studies further show that reform implementation varies significantly across regions due to institutional readiness and

leadership alignment rather than regulatory differences (Indra et al., 2024; Prihatin & Wicaksono, 2022). Recent empirical research highlights recurring institutional barriers affecting local bureaucratic reform in Indonesia and comparable governance contexts. Studies identify limitations in civil servant competencies, fragmented organizational arrangements, weak monitoring systems, and entrenched bureaucratic culture as key constraints to reform effectiveness (Kim, 2019; Turner et al., 2022). These constraints directly affect the operational capacity of reform programs: weak competence limits the adoption of performance-based management, fragmentation weakens coordination, and entrenched routines reduce organizational adaptability.

Comparative studies of administrative modernization similarly demonstrate that reform sustainability depends on organizational learning capacity and internal coordination mechanisms (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2021; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). Moreover, as reform increasingly incorporates digital governance elements, disparities in technological infrastructure and administrative readiness have become more visible across regions. Digital governance initiatives also reveal disparities in technological infrastructure and administrative readiness across regions (Cordella & Paletti, 2019; Mergel et al., 2019), while recent studies emphasize that digital transformation succeeds only when institutional capacity and governance arrangements coevolve (Criado & Gil-garcia, 2026; Meijer, 2024). These findings reinforce the argument that reform success depends not only on policy formulation but also on institutional readiness and adaptive capacity.

Institutional theory offers a useful analytical framework for understanding these dynamics. Institutions shape organizational behavior through regulative rules, normative expectations, and cultural-cognitive beliefs that structure decision-making processes (Scott, 2014). Reform initiatives must therefore interact with pre-existing institutional logics embedded within bureaucratic systems. When reform objectives conflict with entrenched administrative norms or incentive structures, implementation tends to slow or become ceremonial, reflecting institutional pressures embedded within bureaucratic systems. Policy implementation scholarship similarly emphasizes that successful reform depends on alignment among policy goals, organizational capacity, and actor incentives (Hill & Hupe, 2021; Weible & Sabatier, 2018). Recent implementation research reinforces this perspective by showing that institutional alignment and collaborative governance arrangements significantly shape policy outcomes in complex administrative environments (Capano & Oliveira, 2025; Capano & Toth, 2023; Howlett & Mukherjee, 2018). Weak institutional alignment can therefore generate implementation gaps despite clear regulatory frameworks, particularly in decentralized governance contexts.

While existing studies provide valuable insights into bureaucratic reform, much of the literature concentrates on national policy design, leadership dynamics, or performance measurement systems, leaving limited attention to how institutional

constraints operate at the local government level as interconnected structural conditions shaping reform trajectories. Empirical research shows that reform initiatives often fall into a capability trap, where formal reforms are adopted without sufficient institutional capacity for implementation (Andrews, 2013a). In Indonesia, local governments frequently demonstrate procedural compliance with reform mandates while substantive organizational change remains constrained by institutional fragmentation and weak coordination (Rufini et al., 2025). Comparative subnational governance studies further reveal that variations in administrative capacity and institutional alignment significantly influence reform outcomes despite uniform regulatory frameworks (The World Bank, 2020). Consequently, empirical explanations remain limited regarding why reform initiatives stagnate even when formal roadmaps and regulatory mandates exist, making institutional constraints central to understanding persistent reform underperformance in decentralized governance contexts.

This article addresses this gap by examining institutional constraints affecting bureaucratic reform implementation in Konawe Selatan Regency, Indonesia. Drawing on qualitative evidence generated from the evaluation of bureaucratic reform implementation during the 2015–2019 period and the formulation of the 2020–2024 reform roadmap, the study identifies multiple institutional barriers, including weak policy coherence, dysfunctional reform mechanisms, limited administrative capacity, technological constraints, and insufficient political support. The evidence suggests that reform challenges are rooted less in policy absence than in institutional conditions that constrain organizational transformation.

The study seeks to answer the following research question: What institutional constraints hinder the effective implementation of bureaucratic reform at the local government level? By integrating institutional theory and policy implementation perspectives, this article conceptualizes bureaucratic reform challenges as multidimensional institutional constraints encompassing regulative, structural, capacity-related, and political dimensions. The study contributes to public administration scholarship in three ways. First, it advances theoretical understanding by reframing local bureaucratic reform underperformance as an institutional phenomenon rather than a purely managerial problem. Second, it provides empirical evidence from a subnational government context in a developing country, contributing to the limited comparative literature on local bureaucratic reform. Third, it offers practical insights into institutional conditions necessary for translating reform policies into sustainable governance outcomes.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative evaluative design to examine institutional constraints affecting bureaucratic reform implementation at the local government level. The analysis draws on empirical materials generated during the preparation

of the Bureaucratic Reform Roadmap of Konawe Selatan Regency (2020–2024), which included an evaluation of reform implementation during the 2015–2019 period. While the original study addressed broader reform planning objectives, this article analytically narrows the focus to institutional factors shaping reform outcomes.

Konawe Selatan Regency was selected as the case study because it actively implemented nationally mandated bureaucratic reform programs within Indonesia's decentralized governance system, providing an appropriate context for examining how local institutional conditions influence policy implementation. The analysis focuses on institutions directly involved in reform processes, including organizational management units within the regional secretariat, the inspectorate, the civil service and human resource development agency, and the integrated public service office.

Data were collected between November and December 2020 through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Documentary sources included policy regulations, internal administrative reports, reform evaluation documents, and performance accountability records, enabling longitudinal assessment of reform implementation. A total of five key informants were interviewed using purposive sampling based on their institutional roles and direct involvement in bureaucratic reform implementation. Informants consisted of senior local government officials responsible for organizational reform coordination, human resource management, policy advisory functions, and performance monitoring.

To ensure research ethics and protect participants from potential professional risks, all informants are anonymized in this article using coded identifiers (I1–I5). These informants represented: (I1) a senior regional secretariat official, (I2) a policy advisor to the regional head, (I3) a senior official in the civil service and human resource development agency, (I4) a head of organizational affairs, and (I5) a performance management officer. Interviews explored institutional challenges, coordination mechanisms, administrative capacity, and reform implementation experiences.

Interview data were documented using detailed field notes and interview summaries, focusing on convergent themes across informants rather than individual-level attribution. The interview guide was organized around four analytic domains—regulatory clarity, reform coordination structures, human and technological capacity, and political ownership—allowing systematic comparison across actors with different institutional responsibilities. To reduce interpretive bias, preliminary themes derived from interviews were cross-checked against documentary records (e.g., internal evaluation documents, reform activity reports, and accountability materials) to confirm whether perceived challenges were also reflected in formal administrative evidence.

Data analysis followed an iterative qualitative procedure combining domain and taxonomic analysis (Denzin et al., 2024). Empirical materials were coded to identify recurring themes, which were subsequently refined into categories of institutional constraints. Interpretation was guided by institutional theory and policy implementation perspectives, supported by contextual assessment using selected dimensions of PESTLE analysis (Belsare, 2024), particularly political, technological, and legal factors influencing reform capacity. Analytical credibility was strengthened through triangulation between documentary evidence and interview data, ensuring consistency and reliability in identifying institutional patterns affecting bureaucratic reform implementation.

## **Result and Discussion**

The findings indicate that bureaucratic reform implementation in Konawe Selatan Regency was constrained not primarily by policy absence but by interconnected institutional conditions shaping implementation practices. Analysis of documentary evidence and five semi-structured interviews reveals four interrelated categories of institutional constraints: regulative, structural, capacity, and political constraints. These findings directly respond to the research question concerning institutional factors hindering effective bureaucratic reform at the local government level and demonstrate how institutional misalignment limits reform effectiveness within decentralized governance systems. Rather than representing isolated administrative shortcomings, the constraints identified reflect deeper institutional dynamics influencing how reform policies are interpreted, coordinated, and operationalized. Consistent with institutional perspectives, reform outcomes are shaped by interactions among rules, organizational arrangements, actor capacities, and political incentives (Peters, 2019; Scott, 2014), and contemporary reform scholarship further emphasizes that institutional learning and adaptive governance capacity are decisive for sustaining reform beyond formal compliance (Ansell et al., 2024; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021; Torfing et al., 2021).

### **1. Regulative Constraints: Policy Incoherence and Reform Trajectory Ambiguity**

The first constraint relates to weaknesses in the regulative dimension of reform implementation. Documentary analysis shows that bureaucratic reform during the 2015–2019 period lacked a coherent roadmap capable of defining reform trajectories, operational priorities, and measurable outcomes. Reform initiatives were implemented through fragmented administrative activities rather than through an integrated institutional strategy guiding organizational transformation.

Interview evidence confirms this condition. One senior organizational official stated: “Reform activities were mostly carried out to meet reporting requirements, not because agencies clearly understood the direction of institutional change” (I4). Another informant emphasized interpretive inconsistency: “Each agency interpreted

reform differently because there was no clear operational guidance linking policy goals to daily administrative work” (I1).

These findings indicate weak regulative alignment, where formal policies exist but fail to structure coordinated administrative action. Policy implementation literature explains that ambiguous policy frameworks reduce implementation consistency and weaken actor commitment (Hill & Hupe, 2021; Weible, 2018). In addition, recent implementation research highlights that institutional alignment and workable governance arrangements are often more consequential than the formal presence of policy instruments in producing consistent implementation behavior (Capano & Oliveira, 2025; Capano & Toth, 2023; Howlett & Mukherjee, 2018).

The situation reflects what Andrews (Andrews, 2013a) characterizes as a capability trap, in which reform adoption occurs formally without sufficient institutional clarity to support operational change, and it is consistent with more recent comparative evidence showing that administrative reforms often stabilize at procedural compliance when incentives and operational guidance remain weak (G. de Vries, 2020; M. de Vries & Nemec, 2013). From an institutional standpoint, the absence of coherent regulatory direction produced uncertainty regarding organizational expectations, encouraging agencies to prioritize procedural compliance over transformation.

This pattern is also consistent with recent findings that reform uptake is shaped by organizational sense-making and institutional compatibility, which can generate selective implementation even when reform goals are widely endorsed (Cepiku, 2015; Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021). As a result, reform became a reporting exercise rather than a governance restructuring process, reinforcing symbolic compliance patterns previously identified in developing governance contexts (Pritchett et al., 2018).

## **2. Structural Constraints: Dysfunctional Reform Machinery and Organizational Fragmentation**

A second constraint concerns organizational structures responsible for reform coordination. Evidence indicates that reform implementation relied on temporary or ad hoc institutional arrangements lacking authority, continuity, and cross-agency integration. Reform teams operated without stable institutional mandates, resulting in fragmented coordination and uneven program execution.

An informant responsible for performance monitoring explained: “Reform responsibilities were spread across many units, but coordination mechanisms were unclear, so programs often overlapped or stopped midway” (I5). Another official observed: “When personnel changed, reform activities often restarted from the beginning because there was no institutionalized system” (I3). These findings reveal structural fragmentation that undermined reform sustainability.

Institutional theory emphasizes that organizational change requires stable coordination mechanisms capable of integrating actors and resources (Peters, 2019;

Scott, 2014). Contemporary reform research similarly stresses that institutional learning and routinized coordination are required to maintain reform continuity across administrative cycles (Ansell et al., 2024; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021; Torfing et al., 2021). Without institutionalized structures, reform initiatives depend heavily on individual leadership rather than organizational systems.

This condition also resonates with the logic of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), whereby organizations adopt reform structures to maintain legitimacy while underlying coordination practices remain weak. Recent decentralization and local governance research reinforces that coordination capacity and inter-organizational integration at the subnational level are critical determinants of governance outcomes, often outweighing formal authority arrangements (Bolívar et al., 2022; Ladner et al., 2025). Similar patterns have been identified in decentralized governance environments where institutional fragmentation limits policy coherence despite standardized national reform frameworks (The World Bank, 2020), and where coordination deficits exacerbate uneven reform trajectories across local units (Gong & Janssen, 2023).

Structural instability also weakened organizational learning processes. Because reform mechanisms were not embedded within permanent institutional arrangements, knowledge transfer across reform cycles remained limited, preventing cumulative improvement in implementation practices. This aligns with evidence that reform sustainability depends on organizational learning capacity and internal coordination routines rather than one-off restructuring initiatives (Christensen & Lægveid, 2021; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020).

### **3. Capacity Constraints: Administrative Competence and Technological Readiness**

The third category of constraints concerns institutional capacity, particularly civil servant competence and technological readiness. Evidence shows that reform initiatives requiring performance-based management and digital administration encountered significant limitations due to uneven skills and infrastructure availability.

A senior human resource official explained: “Many staff still view reform as administrative paperwork because they do not fully understand performance-based management concepts” (I3). Another informant highlighted technological disparities: “Digital systems were introduced, but infrastructure and staff readiness were not equally prepared across agencies” (I2). These findings align with capacity-based explanations of reform performance emphasizing administrative capability as a prerequisite for institutional transformation (Grindle, 2017; Kim, 2019).

They also fit with the argument that reform performance depends on whether local governments possess the institutional capacity to translate national mandates into workable routines (The World Bank, 2023). More specifically, uneven technological readiness mirrors recent digital governance scholarship showing that

digital transformation succeeds only when institutional capacity and governance arrangements co-evolve—meaning technology adoption must be aligned with skills, routines, and coordination structures (Criado & Gil-garcia, 2026; Meijer, 2024). This is consistent with earlier findings that technology adoption without organizational readiness produces limited improvement (Cordella & Paletti, 2019; Mergel et al., 2019).

The persistence of procedural routines despite reform initiatives illustrates institutional path dependency (Pierson, 2004), where historical administrative practices shape organizational responses to reform pressures. In the Konawe Selatan case, existing bureaucratic habits continued to guide behavior, reducing adaptability to performance-oriented governance models promoted by reform policies. This is also consistent with organizational sense-making research suggesting that reform messages are often reinterpreted through existing administrative frames, reinforcing “paper compliance” rather than behavioral change (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021). Consequently, reform initiatives were absorbed into existing administrative routines rather than transforming them. This helps explain why performance indicators could improve formally while substantive administrative practices changed only marginally.

#### **4. Political Constraints: Limited Leadership Innovation and Reform Ownership**

The fourth constraint concerns political and leadership dynamics influencing reform implementation. Although bureaucratic reform received formal political endorsement, sustained leadership engagement and innovation remained limited. One senior official noted: “Reform was acknowledged as important, but it was rarely linked to broader political priorities or development strategies” (I1). Another informant stated: “Without continuous leadership attention, reform becomes a routine administrative agenda rather than an organizational transformation” (I2).

These findings demonstrate weak political ownership of reform processes. Governance scholarship highlights political commitment as a key enabling factor for institutional transformation (Bryson et al., 2015; Kettl, 2015). More recent reform debates likewise argue that the sustainability of reform depends on political sponsorship and the integration of reform goals into broader governance priorities, not merely on administrative compliance mechanisms (Ansell et al., 2017, 2022; Torfing et al., 2021).

This condition reflects organizational decoupling described by Meyer and Rowan (1977), where formal structures are adopted to maintain legitimacy while operational practices remain largely unchanged. Importantly, recent comparative evidence suggests that decoupling becomes more likely when institutional incentives and leadership attention do not support implementation learning and adaptation (M. S. de Vries & Nemec, 2025). Comparable findings in Indonesian governance research indicate that local reforms often stagnate when political incentives prioritize short-term outputs over long-term institutional development

(McLeod & Harun, 2014; Prasojo et al., 2019), and recent Indonesian studies further show that reform outcomes vary across regions largely due to leadership alignment and local institutional readiness rather than differences in formal regulatory frameworks (Indra et al., 2024; Prihatin & Wicaksono, 2022).

## **5. Institutional Misalignment and Reform Underperformance**

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that bureaucratic reform underperformance resulted from institutional misalignment across regulative, structural, capacity, and political dimensions. These constraints interacted cumulatively, producing an implementation environment characterized by compliance without transformation. Institutional change theory suggests that reforms evolve gradually when institutional elements adjust at different speeds (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). In Konawe Selatan, regulatory change advanced faster than organizational restructuring, capacity development, and political adaptation, creating imbalance among institutional pillars. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary reform scholarship emphasizing that sustained reform depends on synchronized development of governance capabilities, coordination routines, and institutional learning (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Torfing et al., 2021; Torfing & Sørensen, 2019).

The case therefore illustrates that bureaucratic reform in decentralized governance contexts is fundamentally an institutional alignment problem rather than a managerial deficiency. Effective reform requires simultaneous development of regulatory clarity, organizational stability, administrative capacity, and political ownership. When these dimensions evolve unevenly, reform initiatives generate formal conformity while underlying governance practices remain resistant to change. This reinforces the broader argument that, under decentralization, governance outcomes depend heavily on local institutional capacity and coordination rather than on authority transfer alone (Bolívar et al., 2022; Gong & Janssen, 2023; Ladner et al., 2025). Understanding bureaucratic reform through institutional constraints thus shifts analytical attention from policy design toward institutional capacity and governance alignment as central determinants of reform success. Building on this diagnosis, the next section outlines governance implications for local reform actors to address these constraints as an integrated alignment challenge.

## **6. Implications for Local Reform Governance**

The four constraints identified in Konawe Selatan have direct implications for how local governments should govern bureaucratic reform under decentralized conditions. The findings suggest that local reform cannot be treated as a linear administrative program—implemented through reporting cycles and isolated activities—but must be governed as an institutional alignment process that links regulatory clarity, organizational coordination, capacity development, and political ownership. This implication is consistent with the view that reform outcomes

depend on how institutions shape implementation behavior and incentives, not only on the presence of formal reform mandates (Peters, 2019; Scott, 2014).

First, the regulative constraint implies that local governments need to strengthen the operational intelligibility of reform roadmaps. The Konawe Selatan case shows that when reform direction is unclear, agencies translate reform into routine compliance (“meet reporting requirements”) rather than substantive change (I4). Practically, reform roadmaps should be translated into a limited set of operational priorities with clear sequencing and measurable milestones, reducing interpretive variance across agencies. This does not require additional regulations but requires clearer internal governance instruments—such as implementation guidelines, role allocation matrices, and periodic cross-unit review mechanisms—so that agencies do not “interpret reform differently” in the absence of guidance (I1). In policy implementation terms, strengthening operational clarity improves consistency and supports commitment among implementers by reducing ambiguity in expected actions and outcomes (Hill & Hupe, 2021; Weible, 2018).

Second, the structural constraint implies that local reform governance requires an institutionalized coordination core rather than ad hoc coordination. The evidence indicates that reform responsibilities were dispersed (“spread across many units”) without strong integration, leading to overlap and discontinuity (I5), and that reform activities often restarted following personnel changes (I3). This pattern highlights the need to embed reform governance in permanent organizational arrangements with stable authority and routine coordination practices. For local governments, the implication is that reform should be anchored in a cross-agency mechanism that can coordinate program planning, monitoring, and learning across reform areas—ensuring continuity across political and personnel cycles. This is particularly important in decentralized governance settings where institutional variation is high and coordination deficits can magnify uneven implementation (The World Bank, 2023).

Third, capacity constraints imply that reform governance must treat capability-building as a core reform intervention, not a supportive add-on. The interviews show that staff often interpret reform as “administrative paperwork” due to weak understanding of performance-based management (I3), while digital initiatives face uneven readiness across agencies (I2). This indicates that reform governance should adopt a targeted capacity strategy: (a) systematic strengthening of performance management competencies in key units responsible for planning, evaluation, and accountability; and (b) prioritization of digital readiness where reform relies on information systems and standardized data practices. These steps align with the broader shift in bureaucratic reform toward results-based governance and performance orientation (Kettl, 2015; Moynihan, 2008), and with evidence that digital reform is limited when technological adoption outpaces organizational readiness (Cordella & Paletti, 2019; Mergel, 2015). In practical terms, capacity

interventions should be sequenced: strengthening core competencies and data practices first, then scaling digital tools, rather than adopting technology prematurely and reinforcing the perception that reform is merely compliance.

Fourth, the political constraint implies that local reform governance requires sustained political ownership and incentive alignment to avoid reform becoming routine administration rather than transformation. Informants emphasized that reform was rarely linked to broader development strategies (I1) and that weak leadership attention reduces reform to routine agendas (I2). The implication is that local leaders must embed reform objectives into political and administrative priorities, linking reform to visible service outcomes and accountability expectations. Without such linkage, reforms risk becoming ceremonial and legitimacy-driven rather than performance-driven, reinforcing decoupling between formal structures and operational practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This point is particularly relevant in local contexts where political incentives may prioritize short-term outputs over long-term institutional development (McLeod & Harun, 2014; Prasojo et al., 2019).

Overall, these implications suggest that improving local reform outcomes requires a governance strategy oriented toward institutional alignment—ensuring that rules, coordination structures, capacities, and incentives evolve in a mutually reinforcing way. When any one element advances while others lag, reform tends to stabilize at the level of compliance rather than transformation, consistent with gradual and uneven reform trajectories (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). For local governments, the practical takeaway is that reform roadmaps should function not only as planning documents but also as institutional governance instruments that coordinate actors, build capabilities, and sustain political commitment across reform cycles. (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

## Conclusion

This article set out to explain what institutional constraints hinder the effective implementation of bureaucratic reform at the local government level, using Konawe Selatan Regency as an empirical case. Drawing on documentary evidence and five interviews with key local actors (I1–I5), the study shows that reform underperformance cannot be attributed simply to the absence of reform policy. Instead, it is best understood as the consequence of institutional misalignment across four interrelated dimensions: regulative, structural, capacity, and political constraints. These constraints interacted cumulatively and produced an implementation environment in which reform initiatives were often carried out as formal compliance exercises rather than sustained organizational transformation.

First, regulative constraints were evident in weak coherence of reform direction and the absence of a clear operational trajectory during the 2015–2019 cycle. Ambiguity in translating policy goals into daily administrative practices reduced consistency among agencies and encouraged uneven interpretation of reform

priorities, reinforcing a capability trap in which formal compliance substitutes for functional change.

Second, structural constraints appeared in the limited effectiveness of reform machinery and fragmented responsibilities across organizational units. Temporary coordination arrangements weakened institutional continuity, making reform progress dependent on individual initiative rather than organizational systems. Without institutionalized structures and cross-unit integration, reform efforts proved difficult to sustain across leadership or staffing changes.

Third, capacity constraints—particularly civil servant competence and technological readiness—limited the internalization of performance-oriented and digital governance reforms. Human resource limitations constrained adoption of results-based management, while uneven digital readiness reduced the effectiveness of administrative digitalization initiatives. These conditions illustrate how reform programs may be absorbed into established bureaucratic routines, reflecting institutional path dependency.

Fourth, political constraints were evident in limited leadership innovation and weak reform ownership. Although reform was formally endorsed, it was not consistently reinforced as a political priority linked to broader development agendas, allowing reform to remain a routine administrative project rather than institutional transformation. This dynamic reflects how reform may become ceremonial when sustained political incentives are weak.

The study contributes to public administration scholarship by reframing local bureaucratic reform underperformance as a problem of institutional alignment rather than primarily a technical or managerial issue. The findings support institutional perspectives that reform is a multidimensional process shaped by organizational rules, structures, and incentives, and that reforms evolve unevenly when institutional elements develop at different speeds.

For local policymakers, bureaucratic reform should be governed as a sequenced institutional alignment strategy rather than a stand-alone administrative program. Reform roadmaps need to be translated into actionable governance instruments that reduce implementation ambiguity, institutionalize coordination, prioritize capability-building, and sustain political ownership linked to service outcomes. Treating roadmap cycles as governance cycles—rather than reporting exercises—can reduce compliance-driven implementation and support durable governance improvement.

This study is limited to a single local government case and qualitative evidence generated during roadmap formulation. Future research could strengthen generalizability through comparative studies across local governments and integration of longitudinal performance indicators or service-user perspectives.

In conclusion, bureaucratic reform in Konawe Selatan illustrates that local reform outcomes depend less on formal policy adoption than on institutional

conditions enabling implementation. Strengthening reform therefore requires not only better policy design but also institutional alignment capable of translating reform mandates into sustained governance improvement.

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