Research Article

Accountability and Transparency in the Management of Special Autonomy Funds in Asmat Regency: Implications for Public Trust

Syamsul Agas

Public Administration, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

Abstract.
This study explores how accountability and transparency influence public trust in the management of special autonomy (Otsus) funds in Asmat Regency, South Papua Province, Indonesia. This was a qualitative study using in-depth interviews and field observations with 30 stakeholders, including government officials, community leaders, and citizens across five districts. Key findings reveal persistent gaps in financial accountability, limited transparency mechanisms, and a direct correlation between poor governance practices and declining public trust. The study underscores the need for institutional reforms to improve reporting systems, community access to information, and participatory monitoring. These improvements are essential to strengthen legitimacy, governance credibility, and social inclusion in Papua's development.

Keywords: accountability, transparency, public trust, special autonomy funds, governance, Papua, Asmat

Corresponding Author: Syamsul Agas; email: syamsulagas09@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The principle of good governance has become a global benchmark for effective and ethical public administration. Among its fundamental pillars, transparancy and accountability are considered essential for fostering public trust, particularly in regions where government legitimacy is under continuous scrutiny. In Indonesia, the special autonomy (Otonomi Khusus, or Otsus) policy for Papua was introduced to address historical injustice, marginalization, and developmental disparities affecting indigenous Papuans. Despite its noble intentions and substantial financial allocations, Otsus implementation has often been criticized for lacking transparent mechanisms and adequate accountability, leading to persistent public distrust.

Asmat Regency, located in the newly formed South Papua Province, represents a compelling case for examining the Otsus fund governance. Since becoming a regency in 2002, Asmat has recived Otsus funds aimed at improving education, healthcare,

infrastructure, and local economic development. However, reports from government audit agencies, civil society organizations, and academic studies have raised concerns abount fund mismanagemet, limited public participation, and weak institutional oversight.

In response to these concerns, this study investigates how accountability and transparency practices practices shape public trust in the governance of Otsus funds in Asmat. The research draws on primary data collected through interviews with 30 perticpants, including community members, government officials, and local leaders from five districts in Asmat. The anaysis is framed withing the theoretical framework of good governance [1]; [2] and the conceptual nexus between trust and institutional performance [3]; [4].

This research holds significance for several reasons. First, it offers empirical insight into the micro-level dynamics of public trust in remote, underrepresented regions of Indonesia. Second, it highlights how weaknesses in accountability and transparency mechanisms undermine the intended objectives of decentralization and autonomy. Third, the findings contribute to the broader discourse on governance reform, emphasizing the importance of localized institutional capacity and inclusive monitoring systems.

The study addresses the following key research questions :

1. How are accountability and transparency principles implemented in managing Otsus funds in Asmat Regency

2. What impact do these governance practices have on public trust in local government institutions?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to provide policy recommendations to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of special autonomy framework in Papua.

1.1. LiteratureReview

1.1.1. Accountability in Public Administration

Accountability refers to the obligation of public institutions and officials to answer for their decisions and actions to citizens and oversight bodies. Bovens [5] defines it as a relationship in which an actor is obliged to explain and justify conduct to a forum. In the context of decentralization and public fund management, accountability serves as a mechanism to ensure

that state resources are utilized effectively and ethically. According to Beetham [4], accountability enhances legitimacy when government actors provide clear justifications and are subject to sanctions if they deviate from their duties. The failure to establish robust accountability structures can erode public trust and foster perceptions of corruption and inefficiency.

1.1.2. Transparency and Access to Information

Transparency is a core component of democratic governance and refers to the availability and accessibility of information about government activities. Klitgaard [6] emphasizes that transparency reduces the opportunity for corruption by exposing decision-making processes and budget allocations to public scrutiny. Stiglitz [7] argues that access to information is a right that empowers citizens to participate meaningfully in governance. In regions where transparency is low, public confidence in institutions tends to diminish. Transparency International [8] also underlines that transparency is not only about data availability but also about presenting information in ways that are understandable and relevant to the local population.

1.1.3. Public Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Public trust is the belief that institutions act in the public interest and fulfill their responsibilities fairly and competently. Bouckaert and Van de Walle [3]explain that trust in government is shaped by citizens' perceptions of institutional performance, fairness, and integrity. Trust increases when institutions demonstrate openness, responsiveness, and ethical behavior. According to Camões and Mendes [5], trust is essential for sustaining democratic legitimacy, especially in post-conflict or marginalized regions. Without trust, even well- designed policies may fail due to public skepticism and non-compliance.

1.1.4. Good Governance as a Framework

The concept of good governance encompasses principles such as accountability, transparency, responsiveness, participation, and rule of law [8]; [2]. It has become a guiding paradigm in public sector reforms across the developing world. Gisselquist and Grindle [6]argue that good governance enhances service delivery, reduces inequality, and promotes sustainable development. In the context of Papua, good governance is not

only a technical requirement but also a political and moral imperative to correct historical exclusion and restore trust among indigenous communities.

1.1.5. Previous Studies on Otsus in Papua

Several studies have examined the implementation of Special Autonomy in Papua. LIPI criticized the limited oversight and weak community involvement in fund allocation. Sulistyo [8] and Mardiasmo [1] noted that low levels of transparency and accountability have contributed to declining public trust in the policy. These findings underscore the relevance of this study, which focuses on the local dynamics of governance in Asmat as a microcosm of the broader challenges facing Papua's autonomy.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the relationship between accountability, transparency, and public trust in the management of Special Autonomy (Otsus) funds in Asmat Regency. The qualitative design allows for an in-depth understanding of stakeholders' perceptions, governance practices and contextual challenges, making it well-suited for capturing the experiences within the Otsus framework.

The research was conducted in Asmat Regency, South Papua Province, Indonesia. This region was selected due to its long-standing receipt of Otsus funds and its socio-political significance within the Papua autonomy framework. Five districts within Asmat were purposively selected to represent geographic diversity, including coastal and inland communities.

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants with direct knowledge or experience regarding the implementation of Otsus funds. A total of 30 informants participated in the study, comprising:

- Local government officials (district and regency level)
- Traditional and2 religious leaders
- Community-based organization (CBO) representatives
- Ordinary citizens (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries)

This diversity of respondents enabled a comprehensive perspective on how accountability and transparency practices influence public trust.

Data were collected using the following techniques:

-In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather narratives on perceptions of fund management, public access to information, and experiences with government accountability.

-Field observation: The researcher observed public service facilities and community meetings to assess the practical implementation of governance principles.

-Document analysis: Relevant government reports, audit summaries, and public communications on Otsus fund usage were reviewed.

Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and, where necessary, translated into English for analysis.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts from interviews and field notes were coded and grouped into theme categories reflecting the two main governance principles (accountability and transparency) and their perceived impact on public trust. NVivo software was used to support the organisation of data and the identification of patterns.

This research adhered to ethical guidelines, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary participation of respondents. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to fieldwork.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Accountability in the Management of Otsus Funds

Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of accountability from local government institutions. Although formal procedures such as budget reports and procurement documentation exist, community members reported limited access to these reports and a lack of clarity in how Otsus funds were utilised.

"We only hear that money comes from Jakarta, but we never see what it is used for. The roads are still damaged, and clinics have no medicine,"

(Community leader, District Jetsy)

This reflects Bovens' [5]accountability framework, where the public (as the forum) lacks both access to information and institutional channels to demand justification from government actors. Furthermore, some local officials admitted that there is no systematic feedback mechanism to respond to community concerns or complaints.

The absence of performance-based evaluation or public audits reduces government credibility. Beetham [4]suggests that the legitimacy of power is eroded when accountability mechanisms are inaccessible or symbolic rather than functional.

3.2. Transparency and Information Access

Transparency was also found to be severely limited. Most respondents claimed they were not informed about the amount or purpose of Otsus fund allocations. Public meetings (musrenbang) were conducted irregularly, and information boards or websites were either outdated or unavailable.

"We don't know how much money the district receives. Even village heads are sometimes not informed,"

(Religious leader, District Suator)

This aligns with Klitgaard's [6] notion that lack of transparency breeds suspicion and opportunities for corruption. Several informants mentioned that while there were official announcements, they were not followed up with actual implementation, creating a perception of mismanagement or deceit.

Additionally, language barriers and low literacy levels among indigenous populations created further inequities in access to public information, reinforcing social exclusion. These findings support Sen's [7]argument, which emphasizes that transparency requires more than disclosure. It must be accompanied by intelligibility and accessibility to empower citizens.

3.3. Accountability and Transparency as Drivers of Public Trust

The interplay between accountability and transparency emerged as a significant factor shaping public trust. In districts where local leaders practised regular reporting and community engagement (though rare), citizens demonstrated higher levels of trust and support for government programs.

"At least here, our head always comes to report and shows us what the money is used for. That's why people still respect him,"

(Women's group member, District Jetsy)

Conversely, in areas where the flow of information and official explanations were absent, public cynicism was widespread. Respondents doubted whether the government genuinely intended to improve their welfare, and some described Otsus as "money for officials, not for the people."

These findings support Bouckaert and Van de Walle's [3] framework that institutional performance must be both visible and justifiable to nurture public trust. In the absence of accountability and transparency, trust deteriorates, leading to passive resistance and community disengagement from development efforts.

3.4. Policy and Governance Implications

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of Otsus in Asmat Regency is not merely a financial issue, but one rooted in institutional integrity and communication. Strengthening accountability and transparency could:

● Enhance public monitoring of development projects

● Improve service delivery through feedback loops

● Rebuild government legitimacy, especially among marginalized indigenous communities

This aligns with the good governance model, which emphasizes the interdependence of governance dimensions and their collective impact on public trust [1]; [7].

4. Conclusion

This study examined the critical role of accountability and transparency in shaping public trust in the governance of Special Autonomy (Otsus) funds in Asmat Regency, South Papua. Through qualitative analysis of 30 stakeholders across five districts, the findings reveal systemic weaknesses in both accountability mechanisms and transparency practices.

Accountability remains largely procedural and detached from community oversight. Reports and audits are not effectively communicated to the public, and mechanisms for public feedback or redress are underdeveloped. Transparency is similarly constrained by limited access to information, poor communication infrastructure, and the absence of

user-friendly platforms for public engagement. These deficiencies significantly undermine public trust, as citizens perceive government actors as unresponsive and opaque in managing public resources.

However, isolated examples of good practices—such as district leaders who engage directly with communities and explain budget use—demonstrate the potential for trust to be rebuilt where openness and responsibility are practiced. Ultimately, the study affirms that accountability and transparency are not only technical governance features but also foundational for legitimacy, inclusion, and social cohesion.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutionalise Community Reporting

Develop structured community-based reporting systems, such as regular public forums or bulletin boards in local languages, to inform citizens about Otsus fund allocations and expenditures.

2. Strengthen Local Audit Mechanisms

Involve independent civil society organizations and religious/traditional leaders in local audit committees to enhance the credibility of financial oversight.

3. Enhance Capacity for Transparent Communication

Train local officials in participatory communication strategies and promote the use of local media (e.g., radio, village assemblies) to share financial information.

4. Integrate Public Feedback into Budgeting Cycles

Establish feedback channels—both digital and face-to-face—that allow citizens to voice concerns or suggestions, especially during the Musrenbang (development planning forums).

5. Promote Governance Education at the Community Level

Introduce awareness programs about good governance and civic rights to empower communities to demand accountability and transparency from local authorities.

These recommendations align with international standards for good governance and can serve as entry points for improving public trust and development outcomes under the Special Autonomy framework in Papua.

References

[1] UNDP. Governance for Sustainable Human Development: A UNDP Policy Document. 1997.

[2] World Bank. Governance and Development. Washington (D.C.); 1992.

[3] Bouckaert G, Van de Walle S. Comparing Measures of Citizen Trust and User Satisfaction as Indicators of 'Good Governance': Difficulties in Linking Trust and Satisfaction Indicators. Int Rev Adm Sci. 2003;69(3):329–43.

[4] Beetham D. The Legitimation of Power. Palgrave Macmillan; 1991. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21599-7.

[5] Bovens M. Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework. Eur Law J. 2007;13(4):447–68.

[6] Klitgaard R. Controlling Corruption. University of California Press; 1988.

[7] Stiglitz JE. On Liberty, the Right to Know, and Public Discourse: The Role of Transparency in Public Life. Oxford Amnesty Lecture; 1999.

[8] Transparency International. Global Corruption Report. 2013.