Decolonizing Bureaucracy in Papua: Indigenous Logics, Institutional Hybridity, and the Limits of Special Autonomy

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Abstract

Two decades after the implementation of Special Autonomy (Otsus), Papua remains one of Indonesia's most underdeveloped regions. Although the policy introduced fiscal decentralization and recognized indigenous rights, it has failed to reform bureaucratic structures in ways that reflect local socio-cultural realities. This study investigates the institutional disconnect between national administrative models and indigenous governance systems through a qualitative-descriptive analysis of secondary data, including national development indicators (BPS, 2001–2023), budget reports (Bappenas, World Bank, UNDP), legal documents (UU No. 21/2001 and its 2021 amendment), and scholarly sources on customary institutions and public administration. Through content analysis and comparative policy review, the findings show that the absence of structural integration, combined with the largely symbolic role of institutions like the *Majelis Rakyat Papua* (MRP), undermines both legitimacy and performance. Customary logics such as restorative justice, consensus-based leadership, and clan-based redistribution remain institutionally excluded despite continued relevance in everyday governance. Drawing from Melanesian political practices and local administrative evaluations, the study proposes a hybrid governance framework that enables partial integration of indigenous institutions into formal state structures, balancing administrative function with cultural legitimacy.

Keywords : *Autonomy*, *Bureaucracy*, *Customary Institutions*, *Governance Reform*, *Papua*

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1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, Papua has remained one of Indonesia's most paradoxical provinces, rich in natural resources and cultural heritage, yet persistently underdeveloped. Despite the enactment of Special Autonomy (Otsus) in 2001 and its 2021 revision, the region still grapples with poverty, weak infrastructure, and the marginalization of indigenous institutions (Manurung et al., 2021; Rumaseb, 2022). The central issue lies not merely in implementation gaps, but in a deeper institutional misalignment: national governance remains rooted in a centralized, Weberian bureaucratic model, whereas indigenous Papuan governance is based on customary authority, clan trust, and consensus (Pamungkas, 2021; Ungirwalu et al., 2025).

This epistemic disconnect has fostered alienation among indigenous communities, whose cultural legitimacy often surpasses the authority of state institutions. Development efforts frequently prioritize control over inclusion. While traditional leaders have played active roles in conflict mediation and resource management, their contributions remain informal and institutionally unrecognized (Sawir, 2025). The 2021 Otsus revision expanded fiscal provisions but fell short of integrating *adat*-based governance into formal systems. The *Majelis Rakyat Papua* (MRP), though symbolically important, holds limited policymaking power (Manurung et al., 2021).

Accordingly, this study situates Papua's development impasse within a broader failure of institutional imagination. Drawing from public administration, institutional reform, and decolonial theory, it explores the potential of hybrid governance, models that combine state proceduralism with indigenous legitimacy. Recognizing indigenous institutional logic is not only administratively feasible but ethically necessary for advancing inclusive autonomy and democratic pluralism in Papua.

In the vast, rugged landscapes of Papua, state-building has never been merely administrative, it is deeply entangled with identity, autonomy, and contested legitimacy. The Special Autonomy Law of 2001 (UU No. 21/2001) emerged as a political compromise, aiming to redress long-standing grievances of marginalization through devolved authority, affirmative action for indigenous Papuans, and a more equitable distribution of natural resource wealth. Under this framework, Papua was allocated 2% of the national General Allocation Fund (DAU) annually, with added discretion in managing special and block grants, resulting in over IDR 100 trillion in transfers between 2002 and 2020 (Manurung et al., 2021). Yet financial inflows alone failed to translate into stronger institutions or better governance outcomes (Bong et al., 2024).

One of the core institutional innovations, the *Majelis Rakyat Papua* (MRP), was created to embody cultural representation in policymaking. With members from religious, traditional, and women's groups, the MRP was envisioned as a moral safeguard, but has often been sidelined in actual decision-making processes (Ardy, 2021). The 2021 revision of the law increased Otsus funding to 2.25% of the DAU, but also re-centralized control over appointments and budgeting in Jakarta, raising concerns of recentralization and policy incoherence (Sopaheluwakan et al., 2023). While *adat* law and institutions were rhetorically acknowledged, no meaningful structural integration occurred, leaving customary actors such as *ondoafi* or clan councils excluded from formal governance structures. As a result, what emerges is a condition of "institutional dualism," where indigenous and state systems operate in parallel with minimal coordination, often undermining the intended outcomes of autonomy (Bong et al., 2024). This disconnect is further reflected in the region's stagnating development outcomes, as shown in Table 1, which compares the Human Development Index (HDI) of Papua against the national average from 2001 to 2023. Despite increased fiscal transfers and administrative reforms, the HDI gap remains wide and persistent, underscoring a structural failure to align governance design with local institutional realities.

Table 1. Comparative Human Development Index (HDI): Papua vs. National Average, 2001–2023

Year	Papua HDI	Indonesia HDI	Gap (Indonesia - Papua)
2001	54.45	66.28	11.83
2005	56.15	68.50	12.35
2010	58.55	70.78	12.23
2015	60.36	70.18	9.82
2018	61.39	71.39	10.00
2020	60.44	71.94	11.50
2023	61.39	72.91	11.52

Source: Indonesia Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), 2001–2023

These tables reflect more than statistical disparity, they expose lived inequalities in health, education, and basic services, despite constitutional promises of justice. The persistent HDI gap, especially between urban centres like Jayapura and remote areas like Nduga, underscores a deeper

flaw in Special Autonomy: the belief that funding alone, without institutional adaptation, can address complex challenges. Papua's hierarchical, centralized bureaucracy often clashes with indigenous, kinship-based governance. In many regions, legitimacy flows from customary authority, not state mandates, creating friction and fragmentation. Though hybrid models offer promise, they remain rare. Meaningful reform requires epistemic humility and recognition of cultural plurality in governance design.

These institutional and developmental disparities form the basis for this study's core inquiry: how structural flaws in the implementation of Special Autonomy intersect with indigenous governance logics, and what this means for building more contextually grounded public administration in Papua.

What Accordingly, this study investigates the structural disparities evident in the implementation of Papua's Special Autonomy policy by analysing patterns in secondary development data. It also examines the relevance of indigenous governance logics, such as restorative justice, clan-based authority, and consensual decision-making, for contemporary public administration in Papua. Finally, the study considers how these indigenous logics might be meaningfully integrated into the formal bureaucracy and explores the broader institutional implications of such hybridity.

Ultimately, this paper advocates for a shift in how we conceptualize and operationalize bureaucratic reform in culturally distinct regions. Moving away from one-size-fits-all institutional models towards pluralistic, context-sensitive architecture is not only pragmatic but also morally necessary in advancing equitable and sustainable development in Papua.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study draws on a wide range of secondary data, categorized into legal-regulatory frameworks, statistical reports, and scholarly literature. It includes Law No. 21 of 2001 on Special Autonomy and its 2021 amendment, as well as localized special regional regulations (Peraturan Daerah Khusus); statistical data from Indonesia's Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) from 2001–2023 covering poverty, HDI, education, and infrastructure; and policy evaluations from Bappenas, the World Bank, and UNDP. It also integrates academic sources such as peer-reviewed articles (e.g. *Public Administration and Development*), policy briefs from civil society organizations (e.g. ELSAM, LP3ES), and local editorials from *Cenderawasih Pos* and *Tabloid Jubi*. Collectively, these sources offer a

triangulated view of how national policy instruments have engaged with, or overlooked, Papua's indigenous institutional landscape.

Two primary qualitative techniques were employed to generate the analysis. First, content analysis was used to extract key themes and institutional narratives from legal and policy documents, with particular attention to autonomy, customary authority, accountability, and bureaucratic design. Second, a comparative policy review was applied to examine discrepancies between formal administrative structures and indigenous governance systems, specifically how ondoafi leadership, marga-based redistribution, and consensus-based conflict resolution mechanisms align or conflict with state frameworks (Pamungkas, 2021; Ungirwalu et al., 2025). By integrating these methods, the analysis moves beyond normative critique and provides an empirically grounded assessment of the possibilities and limitations of hybrid institutional models in Papua.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

3.1.1 Development Disparities: HDI, Poverty, and Institutional Gaps

1. HDI and Poverty: Program Disconnection from Local Needs

Although the Special Autonomy (Otsus) policy aims to improve human development indicators (HDI), its implementation reveals significant spatial disparities between districts. Many customary regions remain stagnant due to a development approach that is centralistic and infrastructure-driven, failing to account for local social systems, particularly those related to clan-based land ownership (Sopaheluwakan et al., 2023).

The failure to accommodate customary land rights (*hak ulayat*) in planning and land acquisition processes has triggered conflicts, delayed infrastructure development, and deepened structural poverty in indigenous territories (Manurung et al., 2021).

2. Institutions: Weak Cultural Integration and Institutional Capacity

The Papuan People's Assembly (MRP), which is constitutionally mandated to protect cultural rights and advocate for indigenous interests, faces serious constraints in institutional capacity and political influence (Pamungkas, 2021).

The absence of formal mechanisms to integrate customary institutions into district planning and budgeting processes has led many indigenous communities to feel substantially excluded. As a result, many see the state as an external entity rather than a development partner (Sawir, 2025).

3.1.2 The Actual Function of Customary Systems: Restorative, Collective, Redistributive

1. Restorative: Conflict Resolution through Healing

Unlike the state legal system, which emphasizes retributive justice, customary systems in Papua adopt a restorative approach, focused on social healing through mediation, ritual, and reconciliation (Syukur & Bagshaw, 2020). In areas with limited formal legal infrastructure, such practices have proven more effective in maintaining stability and preventing conflict escalation (Colman, 2018).

2. Collective: Consensus-Based Decision Making

Customary leadership functions through collective and deliberative mechanisms, where decisions are made via inclusive community discussions (*musyawarah*) and validated through ritual legitimacy (Munro, 2018). This model fosters strong social accountability, as decisions emerge from consensus rather than authoritative designation.

3. Redistributive: Resource Allocation Based on Clan Structures

Clan-based social systems determine resource distribution genealogically and functionally. When state interventions disregard this structure, the result is unequal distribution of development benefits and horizontal conflicts (Yunus & Ibrahim, n.d.). In practice, many Otsus programs have been exploited by local elites with bureaucratic access but without customary legitimacy, leading to unfair wealth accumulation and grassroots-level policy delegitimization (Manurung et al., 2021).

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 The Failure to Align Policy with Local Contexts

Despite the ambitious aims of Indonesia's Special Autonomy Law for Papua, a deep and persistent disjuncture remains between the formal administrative structures imposed by the state and the culturally embedded governance systems of indigenous Papuan communities. Over two decades since the enactment of Otsus in 2001, evidence indicates that the lack of structural integration between these two spheres of governance has undermined the policy's efficacy, eroded trust, and in some cases, exacerbated existing tensions.

One of the clearest manifestations of this misalignment is the absence of formal mechanisms to link customary governance (adat institutions) with the modern bureaucratic apparatus. District-level governments, established under Indonesia's national administrative law, operate on hierarchical lines with standardized responsibilities, budget structures, and reporting procedures. These systems presume a universal application across Indonesia's diverse provinces. However, in Papua, governance legitimacy is often earned not through legal authority, but through ancestral lineage, oral consensus, and cultural leadership (Antonio & Griffith-Charles, 2019).

This parallel existence of two governing logics, legal-rational and cultural-customary—creates friction in implementation. For example, government-appointed district heads may find their directives ignored or subtly resisted if they conflict with the will of local ondoafi (clan elders), whose decisions are rooted in generations of tradition and communal loyalty. In such cases, public policies, however well-intentioned, become symbolically disconnected from the very communities they are meant to serve (Ungirwalu et al., 2025).

The *Majelis Rakyat Papua (MRP),* created as a cornerstone of Otsus to represent the cultural aspirations of indigenous Papuans, has unfortunately failed to fulfill its transformative promise. While it is constitutionally empowered to oversee the protection of Papuan cultural rights, its institutional capacity, budgetary autonomy, and political leverage remain limited (Harvelian, 2018). Its advisory status prevents it from playing a substantive role in policymaking or resource allocation. As a result, the MRP has often been perceived more as a symbolic token of representation than a vehicle for indigenous empowerment.

Furthermore, in the absence of meaningful integration, development programs are often designed with a "Jakarta mindset," neglecting the sociopolitical realities of Papuan society. A case in

point is the imposition of infrastructure-driven development models in highland regions, where customary land tenure systems complicate land acquisition. In some districts, projects have stalled or triggered disputes because land allocation decisions failed to acknowledge marga-based (clan-based) land rights (Sonrexa et al., 2023). These outcomes are not merely bureaucratic failures; they are symptomatic of a deeper epistemological disconnect.

Importantly, this lack of alignment has wider social consequences. Communities increasingly view the state as an external actor, an intruder rather than a partner. This perception erodes the state's legitimacy, fosters disillusionment, and leaves a vacuum often filled by informal customary authority. Moreover, it creates an administrative ambiguity: when conflict arises between state rules and customary practices, which system prevails? Without a framework to mediate such contradictions, confusion and contestation become the norm.

This governance disconnect is further complicated by the geographical and ethnic fragmentation of Papua. Unlike Java or Sumatra, where regional identities are more integrated into the state system, Papua is home to over 250 tribes, each with distinct languages, customs, and political systems. A one-size-fits-all administrative model thus fails to reflect the deep diversity of indigenous institutions across the island (Manurung et al., 2021).

Moreover, in several districts, customary leadership has demonstrated greater responsiveness to local needs than state-appointed officials. For instance, ondoafi-led assemblies have been able to resolve inter-clan disputes, redistribute land equitably, and respond rapidly to crises such as internal displacement or food shortages, roles that state institutions either neglected or addressed inefficiently (Bong et al., 2024). Yet, these actors remain excluded from official planning and budgeting processes.

The consequences of this exclusion are not limited to inefficiency. They also raise fundamental questions about democratic legitimacy and indigenous sovereignty. If state-led development fails to engage or even acknowledge the governing logic of indigenous institutions, it risks being perceived not as inclusion, but as imposition.

In summary, the failure to structurally integrate Papua's customary institutions into the Special Autonomy governance framework has weakened the very autonomy the policy was intended to enhance. The MRP's limitations, the neglect of ondoafi systems, and the cultural misalignment of

bureaucratic procedures all point to a governance model that is institutionally incoherent and politically unsustainable. A rethinking of this relationship is not merely a technical fixit, it is a precondition for restoring dignity, effectiveness, and local ownership in Papuan development.

3.2.2 The Function and Significance of Indigenous Governance Logics

While national policies in Papua often default to rigid, bureaucratic mechanisms of control, many indigenous communities continue to function through long-standing systems of governance that emphasize social cohesion, restorative justice, and collective responsibility. These indigenous logics, far from being archaic or obstructive, offer alternative governance models that may be better suited to local conditions, especially in areas where formal institutions are weak, distrusted, or absent.

1. Restorative versus Retributive Justice

A foundational difference lies in how conflict is resolved. The *state's legal system*, modeled on Western norms, emphasizes retributive justice: identifying violations, assigning blame, and imposing penalties. In contrast, *indigenous Papuan justice systems prioritize restoration and communal harmony*. Disputes, whether over land, marriage, or violence, are typically mediated through community dialogues, involving clan elders (ondoafi), religious figures, and extended kin networks.

This approach aims not merely to punish wrongdoers but to repair damaged relationships and restore social balance. As documented by Ungirwalu et al. (2025), customary mediations often include symbolic gestures such as animal sacrifices, public apologies, and redistribution of wealth as forms of reconciliation. These practices are deeply rooted in local cosmology and are recognized by community members as legitimate and binding.

Such mechanisms may seem informal to outsiders, but they often function with greater authority and efficacy than state courts, which are distant, expensive, and culturally alien. Moreover, they help prevent cycles of retaliation, which can escalate in the absence of culturally meaningful resolution. Ekawaty Ismail et al. (2023) found that in several remote districts, customary dispute resolution has been critical in maintaining peace in areas where police presence is minimal or distrusted.

2. Collective Leadership and Consensus

In contrast to hierarchical chains of command in formal government, leadership in Papuan societies is typically collective and deliberate. Decision-making is rarely centralized in one individual but spread across a network of elderly, kin leaders, and spiritual figures. The *ondoafi system* in the highlands and *korano nukhon* (clan houses) in coastal areas function as spaces of consensus-building, where decisions are made only after prolonged discussion and ritual affirmation (Chao, 2021).

This model of leadership is not merely symbolic. It shapes how communities allocate resources, resolve disputes, and respond to external threats, including state interventions. Bong et al. (2024) document how traditional leaders organized coordinated responses to forest encroachment and illegal mining, asserting control over communal land without needing state sanction.

The emphasis on consensus and inclusion also produces a *stronger sense of accountability*, as decisions are made in the presence of, and with the endorsement of, the community. Leaders who fail to act in accordance with the collective will often face social sanctions, including exclusion from rituals and community ostracism.

3. Redistribution Based on Marga (Clan) Structures

Perhaps the most underappreciated aspect of Papuan indigenous governance is its redistributive logic, which ensures that resources are shared based on genealogical rights, social needs, and ancestral obligations. Most Papuan communities are organized into marga-based structures, where land, water, and forest access are communally held and inherited.

When the state introduces development projects, such as roads, housing, or agricultural programs, without understanding these systems, it often allocates benefits in ways that disrupt local balance and provoke inter-clan conflict. Projects labeled as “community development” sometimes empower only one marga while sidelining others, leading to grievances and, at times, violent backlash (Sokoy, 2022).

In the context of Otsus, funds are often distributed through district governments without regard for clan-based claims or community input. As a result, resources captured by local elites, often those who are bureaucratically literate but not socially legitimate, become common. This mismatch

not only breeds corruption but also delegitimizes the entire notion of autonomy among grassroots populations (Manurung et al., 2021).

4. Reframing Indigenous Logic as Governance Capacity

Far from being remnants of a pre-modern past, these indigenous governance logics represent a parallel and functional political order. They demonstrate real capacity: to manage resources, resolve disputes, enforce norms, and preserve social harmony. What they lack is not relevance, but institutional recognition.

Yet, despite their potential, these systems are rarely engaged in the official governance process. There is *no formal role for ondoafi in district councils*, no legal framework for integrating clan-based redistribution into budgeting decisions, and no official channels through which customary decisions can influence planning processes.

This exclusion becomes even more apparent when comparing the two systems side by side. While the formal bureaucratic system operates according to legal-rational principles standardized across Indonesia, customary institutions in Papua are grounded in cultural legitimacy, ancestral wisdom, and community accountability. The two systems do not simply differ in structure; they are fundamentally shaped by distinct logics of governance, which, if properly recognized, could be complementary rather than conflicting.

The following table outlines the core distinctions between these two governance frameworks:

Table 2. Comparative Features: Formal Bureaucratic System vs. Customary Governance in Papua

Dimension	Formal Bureaucratic System	Customary Governance System (Adat)
Authority Source	Legal-rational; appointed by state	Ancestral lineage; community recognition
Leadership Structure	Hierarchical; vertical command chain	Decentralized; collective leadership via ondoafi and clan elders
Decision Process	Centralized; rule- and procedure-based	Consensus-driven; dialogic and culturally ritualized

Conflict Resolution	Court-based; retributive justice	Mediation and reconciliation; restorative justice
Territorial Logic	Administrative districts and provinces	Clan (marga) territories; ancestral lands
Legitimacy Source	Legal authority, formal appointment	Social trust, cultural continuity, ritual participation
Accountability	Reporting to central/state apparatus	Moral and communal accountability; ritual sanctions
Primary Function	Budgeting, service delivery, planning	Cultural integrity, land rights, social cohesion
Inclusion in Policy	Legally mandated, culturally external	Informally engaged, structurally excluded
Adaptability	Rigid, standardized procedures	Flexible, context-sensitive

Source: Synthesized from Pamungkas (2021), Sopaheluwakan et al. (2023), and Ungirwalu et al. (2025)

Recognizing these differences is not about romanticizing the traditional or demonizing the modern. Rather, it is a call to institutional pluralism, where legitimacy is derived not from legal mandates alone, but from cultural resonance and functional credibility. As this table illustrates, a *hybrid institutional architecture*, drawing upon the strengths of both systems, may offer the most viable path toward governance that is both effective and legitimate in the Papuan context.

This disconnect is a loss not only for indigenous Papuans, but for the state itself. In a region marked by distrust, conflict, and logistical challenges, leveraging culturally legitimate institutions could enhance the delivery of services, reduce conflict, and build trust. Instead, the state often treats these institutions with suspicion, framing them as obstacles rather than opportunities.

In conclusion, the indigenous logics of governance in Papua offer not only viable alternatives, but potentially superior models for governance in fragile contexts. They are locally grounded, socially legitimate, and operationally effective. Recognizing and integrating them is not about romanticizing tradition but about acknowledging what already works, and why it matters.

3.2.2 The Promise of Hybrid Governance: Partial Institutional Integration

In light of the persistent disconnect between formal governance and indigenous institutions in Papua, the concept of *hybrid governance* offers a compelling path forward. Hybrid models aim not to replace existing systems but to *blend the strengths of both formal bureaucratic institutions and customary governance mechanisms*, recognizing their distinct logics while creating synergies in function and authority.

1. Potential Design: Parallel Authority with Functional Division

A feasible starting point for institutional hybridity in Papua is the coexistence of administrative and cultural authority at the district level. This proposed division of functions illustrates the core logic of a *hybrid institutional model*, where the bureaucratic and customary domains do not compete for authority but instead collaborate within clearly defined functional boundaries. Such models offer a pragmatic and culturally sensitive pathway to reform that acknowledges both the legal structure of the state and the sociopolitical legitimacy of indigenous systems.

To visualize this structure, the diagram below presents a schematic representation of the hybrid governance model proposed for Papua. It shows the respective domains of formal institutions and customary governance alongside a shared coordination layer, emphasizing the potential for cross-system collaboration.

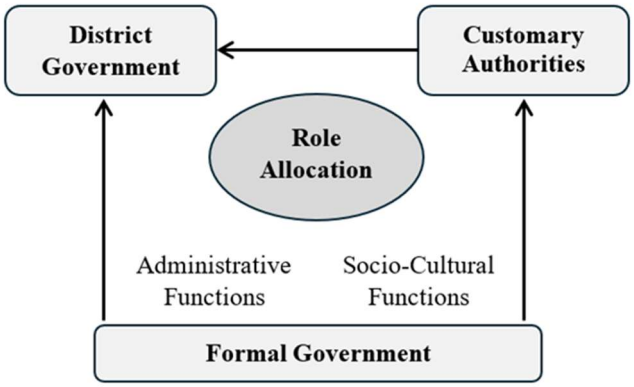

Figure 1. Hybrid Institutional Model for Local Governance in Papua

Source: Author's illustration based on Bong et al. (2024), Sopaheluwakan et al. (2023), and Pamungkas (2021)

This visual framework helps translate theoretical recommendations into practical governance mechanisms. It defines three key layers:

- *Formal Authority* (e.g., district heads, public service agencies).
- *Customary Leadership* (e.g., ondoafi, marga-based councils).
- *Joint Coordination Layer*, where decisions involving overlapping interests, such as land use, cultural policy, and conflict resolution, are co-managed through consultation.

This model does not aim to create legal parity between the two systems, but to institutionalize mutual recognition and negotiated coexistence. It assumes that legitimacy can emerge from dialogue, not dominance, from shared responsibility, not institutional silos.

By embedding this model in local governance, Papua's institutional architecture could shift from fragmentation and exclusion toward integration and pluralism, aligning administrative capacity with cultural legitimacy, an outcome essential for long-term development, trust, and peace in the region.

Such an approach would require a formal mechanism to recognize indigenous authority, for example by establishing a "Customary Council Desk" within district planning offices, or by granting ondoafi non-voting advisory roles in local parliament (DPRD) sessions, particularly on land and community matters. Sopaheluwakan et al. (2023) note that in several regencies in West Papua, informal collaboration of this kind already exists, albeit inconsistently and without legal protection.

Hybrid models also demand procedural reforms, such as joint consultations, participatory budgeting involving adat representatives, and parallel registers of land and clan structures maintained alongside cadastral maps. In these ways, state and society could negotiate policy design rather than collide in conflict or bypass each other entirely (Bong et al., 2024).

2. International Analogies: Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu

Indonesia need not invent this hybrid framework from scratch. *Comparative lessons from Melanesian neighbors*, such as *Papua New Guinea (PNG)* and *Vanuatu*, provide valuable examples. In PNG, customary land ownership is constitutionally recognized, covering over 97% of land area, and local-level governments work closely with traditional leaders in conflict resolution and land management (Moss et al., 2021). Similarly, *Vanuatu's National Council of Chiefs* holds consultative

authority over legislation affecting land and culture, serving as a moral compass in national development debates (McDonnell & Regenvanu, 2022).

These models show that integrating customary systems does not weaken the state, it can strengthen legitimacy and compliance. They also suggest that flexibility is key: hybrid governance does not mean full legal parity, but rather strategic pluralism, where different types of authority operate within agreed domains, backed by mutual recognition.

For Papua, adopting a similar structure could reduce resistance to state policies, unlock community cooperation, and restore cultural dignity long marginalized by uniform national standards.

3. Risks and Limitations

However promising, hybrid governance is not without risks. One major challenge is the potential for jurisdictional conflict. Without clear delineation of roles, overlaps between customary and formal institutions can generate disputes, particularly in high-stakes sectors like land acquisition, mining, or public contracting. The integration process must therefore be carefully legislated, with mediation protocols in place to resolve overlaps in authority (Manurung et al., 2021).

Another limitation is the varying capacity of traditional leaders. While some ondoafi command deep respect and institutional memory, others may lack the administrative skills or neutrality required for public governance. There is also the risk of elite capture, where integration is used to entrench local dynasties or manipulate customary authority for personal gain, especially if formal oversight is weak (Pamungkas, 2021).

Resistance may also come from bureaucratic elites, who may perceive hybrid governance as diluting their authority or introducing uncertainty into established chains of command. In such contexts, capacity-building becomes crucial, not only for traditional leaders but also for civil servants, who must learn to engage with indigenous norms and values without condescension or bureaucratic arrogance.

Finally, the success of hybrid governance depends on its *acceptance by local communities themselves.* Any reform must be *locally negotiated, not imposed from above*, and must reflect the diverse cultural ecologies of Papua, from highland to coastal, from matrilineal to patrilineal, from

centralized to acephalous societies. There is no single indigenous system in Papua; there are hundreds. Any integration effort must recognize this diversity.

4. A New Institutional Imagination

Despite these risks, the promise of hybrid governance lies in its ability to transform conflict into cooperation, exclusion into participation, and institutional weakness into cultural resilience. As Bong et al. (2024) argue, hybrid models "offer grounded solutions in places where state legitimacy is thin but cultural legitimacy is rich."

In Papua, where decades of top-down intervention have yielded mixed and often disappointing results, a shift toward hybrid governance may not only be effective, but it may also be essential. Rather than asking communities to conform to a bureaucratic model they neither trust nor understand, the state could meet them halfway, respecting their traditions while inviting their participation in the shared project of development.

The road toward such integration will be complex, slow, and sometimes contentious. But it represents a *more honest, more just, and ultimately more sustainable approach* to governance in one of Indonesia's most misunderstood regions.

4. CONCLUSION

After more than two decades, Papua's Special Autonomy (Otsus) has demonstrated limited success in reshaping governance structures to fit indigenous realities. Although it introduced significant funding and legal recognition, it largely failed to integrate local socio-political institutions into the formal system. Rather than reform, Otsus extended a uniform bureaucratic model ill-suited for Papua's diverse customary contexts, contributing to persistent policy disconnects, weak implementation, and rising social frustration.

The marginalization of customary leaders, *ondoafi*, clan elders, and local assemblies, remains central to this problem. These actors continue to resolve conflicts, manage land, and uphold social norms, often more effectively than state actors. Yet, they are excluded from formal processes such as planning and budgeting. This institutional blindness undermines both the effectiveness and perceived legitimacy of the state.

Policy recommendations emerging from this study are threefold:

1. *Formally recognize and integrate customary institutions* into local governance through codified roles and participatory mechanisms, such as involving traditional leaders in village planning, land negotiations, and social programs, especially in remote regions.
2. *Redesign district-level bureaucracies* to reflect clan-based governance and local leadership structures. Training for civil servants should include intercultural dialogue and local political knowledge.
3. *Establish a coordination framework* to delineate roles between district governments and customary authorities. Clear division of responsibilities in land rights, public service delivery, and cultural preservation will reduce conflict and foster cooperation.

Beyond practical insights, this study challenges the dominance of Western governance templates in Global South contexts. It advocates for culturally grounded institutional models as legitimate and necessary in plural societies. In Papua, sustainable autonomy depends not on top-down reform, but on mutual recognition—where the state engages seriously with indigenous knowledge, authority, and voice. Only then can autonomy become a lived relationship, not just a legal provision.

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