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Reforming Bureaucracy Through Ethics: Strengthening Institutions for Sustainable Development

Aan Warul Ulum
Public Administration Department, Universitas Yudharta Pasuruan, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author:
Aan Warul Ulum

Corresponding Author Email:
aan@yudharta.ac.id

ABSTRACT: This study explores the role of public ethics in supporting bureaucratic reform within the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency, Indonesia. Grounded in a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to uncover how ethical values are internalized and implemented within local governance structures. The findings reveal five critical themes: asymmetrical power dynamics, moral hazard in service delivery, adverse selection in program implementation, institutional governance gaps, and stakeholder exclusion. These issues highlight a disconnect between reform policies and daily bureaucratic practices. While ethical codes and reform strategies exist, their enforcement remains inconsistent, often limiting the transformative potential of bureaucratic reform. The study argues that embedding ethics into institutional culture is essential for achieving sustainable, transparent, and inclusive governance, as envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal 16. Recommendations emphasize the need for ethical leadership, participatory governance, and stronger accountability mechanisms. The study concludes that ethical reform is not merely a complementary component of bureaucratic change but a fundamental pillar for building trusted and sustainable public institutions.

Keywords: public ethics, bureaucratic reform, good governance, sustainable development goal 16, local government

INTRODUCTION

In the evolving discourse on public sector governance, the integration of public ethics into bureaucratic reform has emerged as a pivotal strategy to achieve institutional integrity, public trust, and sustainable development. Ethical principles such as integrity, transparency, accountability, and fairness are not merely abstract ideals (Mendy, 2023); they serve as practical frameworks that shape how government institutions interact with citizens and manage public resources. These values become especially critical in contexts where bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and service inequality persist, such as in many developing countries including Indonesia. Strengthening ethical governance is no longer optional, it is an essential component in realizing inclusive and equitable public administration.

Indonesia's bureaucratic reform agenda, launched through its Grand Design of Bureaucratic Reform 2010–2025, reflects an ambitious vision to build a professional, clean, accountable, and high-performing bureaucracy. This reform initiative aligns with global development frameworks, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) most notably SDG 16, which emphasizes the creation of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels (Pakkan et al., 2023). Bureaucratic reform in Indonesia, therefore, is not merely an administrative undertaking but a strategic pathway to institutionalizing good governance and achieving long-term national and global development targets.

At the core of this agenda lies the concept of public ethics, which can be defined as the moral compass guiding the behavior and decision-making of civil servants. As noted by Baskoro (2025) public ethics are instrumental in cultivating a culture of integrity and preventing malpractices such as corruption, collusion, and nepotism. Without a strong ethical foundation, even the most structurally sound reform initiatives risk failure. Thus, the synergy between public ethics and bureaucratic reform is essential for ensuring that governance transformation efforts are not only systemic but also value-driven.

Despite the normative emphasis on ethics in Indonesia's reform framework, practical implementation often faces significant challenges. These include resistance to change, entrenched organizational cultures, low ethical awareness, and inadequate accountability mechanisms (Poljašević et al., 2025). Local government institutions, such as the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency, are at the frontline of these reform efforts. They serve as both implementers and testing grounds for bureaucratic innovations and ethical governance models aimed at improving public service delivery especially for vulnerable populations.

This study aims to examine the role of public ethics in shaping the success of bureaucratic reform within the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency. Specifically, it investigates how ethical principles are internalized by civil servants, how they influence institutional performance, and what challenges persist in aligning practice with reform ideals. Through this inquiry, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how localized reform efforts can support broader national objectives and global commitments to sustainable development. It also provides empirical evidence to inform strategies for enhancing institutional resilience, service equity, and public trust in decentralized governance contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Public Ethics

The literature review on public ethics emphasizes that public ethics is a set of moral principles, values, and norms that govern the behavior and decision-making of officials and government apparatus in carrying out their service duties to the community. The main principles of public ethics include honesty, accountability, transparency, integrity, justice, professionalism, and a focus on the public interest. Public ethics serve as a guideline for state apparatus to act fairly, responsibly, and free from conflicts of interest, as well as a foundation for preventing corruption, collusion, and nepotism practices within the bureaucracy (Vebryna et al., 2023).

The application of public ethics is closely related to efforts to realize good governance, where transparency, participation, and accountability are the main pillars. Public ethics not only serve as a mechanism for behavioral oversight but also as the foundation of an organizational culture oriented towards quality public service and the enhancement of public trust in government institutions. Studies show that bureaucracies that uphold public ethics principles tend to have better performance, more responsive services, and higher levels of integrity and public trust (Susanti & J., 2024).

However, the implementation of public ethics still faces challenges such as the weak internalization of ethical values, an organizational culture that does not fully support ethical behavior, and an inadequate oversight system. Therefore, strengthening ethics education, continuous training, and the enforcement of codes of ethics and reward-punishment systems are important strategies to ensure that public ethics values are truly realized in public service practices (Adeoye, 2025). Thus, this literature review emphasizes that public ethics is a crucial foundation for the success of bureaucratic reform and the achievement of a clean, professional, and community-oriented government.

Bureaucratic Reform

The literature review on bureaucratic reform emphasizes that bureaucratic reform is a fundamental and structured change process within the governance system, aimed at creating a professional, clean, efficient, effective, and accountable bureaucracy (Yaqin et al., 2023). This reform emerged as a response to various classic bureaucratic problems in Indonesia, such as the prevalence of corruption, collusion, and nepotism, the low quality of public services, weak accountability, and the suboptimal efficiency and productivity of government apparatus. The main objective of bureaucratic reform is to build a bureaucracy that is adaptive, has integrity, high performance, neutral, prosperous, dedicated, and firmly upholds the basic values and code of ethics of state apparatus, so that it can provide excellent public services and meet the expectations of the community (Mendrofa et al., 2025).

The implementation of bureaucratic reform in Indonesia is based on a clear legal framework, such as the Grand Design of Bureaucratic Reform 2010-2025 and the Road Map of Bureaucratic Reform 2020-2024, which emphasize eight main areas of change: change management, policy deregulation, organizational restructuring, strengthening governance, strengthening human resource management of officials, strengthening accountability, strengthening the oversight system, and improving the quality of public services. The strategies for successful bureaucratic reform include enhancing institutional efficiency through restructuring, applying a merit system in the recruitment of officials, improving the legal system, enhancing the quality of public services, and strengthening accountability and oversight. However, in its implementation, bureaucratic reform faces various challenges, such as internal resistance, limited human resource capacity, budget constraints, weak supervision, and an organizational culture that has not fully supported the changes (Oniani et al., 2023).

Previous studies also highlight the importance of implementing good governance principles, such as transparency, accountability, public participation, innovation, and justice in bureaucratic reform to improve the quality of public services and foster public trust. Bureaucratic reform based on these principles has proven capable of increasing public satisfaction, reducing corruption, and optimizing the use of information technology in public services. Thus, this literature review emphasizes that bureaucratic reform is a key prerequisite for achieving good governance and high-quality public services in Indonesia.

Ethics and Reform in the Context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The synergy between public ethics and bureaucratic reform holds transformative potential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. This goal calls for inclusive institutions that are accountable, transparent, and participatory in decision-making. Ethical governance and reform practices directly support this vision by promoting a professional and principled public service, strengthening democratic accountability, and preventing corruption (Agu et al., 2024).

In local governance settings, such as regional social service offices, the adoption of ethical frameworks and reform principles helps ensure that services are equitably distributed, especially to vulnerable and marginalized groups. This not only enhances institutional credibility but also contributes to SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). As such, public ethics and bureaucratic reform are not just governance tools, they are foundational mechanisms for sustainable development.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to explore the role of public ethics in bureaucratic reform within the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency, Indonesia. The case study method, as advocated by Lim (2025), is particularly suitable for addressing "how" and "why" questions in real-world contexts where researchers have limited control over events. The aim was to gain a deep understanding of how ethical principles are internalized and operationalized in the bureaucratic reform process, especially in relation to sustainable governance and institution-building aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 16.

Data collection was conducted over a period of three months, from February to April 2024. A total of 20 participants were involved in this study, selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure rich, relevant, and diverse perspectives. The participants comprised ten officials from the Pasuruan Social Service Office, three members of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), three representatives from regional government agencies (*Organisasi Perangkat Daerah* - OPD), and four individuals from academia and civil society who are engaged with or observe the reform process.

To ensure the credibility and depth of the findings, multiple data collection techniques were used, including in-depth interviews, semi-structured participant observation, and document analysis. In addition, a focus group discussion (FGD) was held on March 10, 2024, involving stakeholders from the Social Service Office, NGOs, academia, and community representatives. The FGD aimed to capture collective insights and reflections on the implementation of ethical values in the bureaucratic reform process, particularly in the context of improving governance quality and public service delivery.

All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Atlas.ti software. The data were processed using the thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2023), which involved three key phases: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Emerging themes included asymmetrical governance, moral hazard, adverse selection, institutional gaps, and stakeholder exclusion factors that significantly influence the practical realization of ethical reform in the bureaucratic environment.

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the affiliated institution. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. This methodological framework ensured a rigorous, ethical, and context-sensitive exploration of the interplay between public ethics and bureaucratic reform in the pursuit of sustainable governance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study explored how public ethics are integrated into bureaucratic reform within the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency. Using thematic analysis guided by Braun & Clarke (2023), five major themes were identified through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. These themes reflect the practical realities, challenges, and complexities of ethical governance as experienced by civil servants, NGO actors, and community members. To capture the interrelation of ideas and their influence on institutional reform, a mind map was created to visualize the thematic structure derived from field data. This map illustrates how various issues ranging from governance imbalances to stakeholder exclusion intersect with the reform process and affect the realization of accountable, inclusive institutions, as envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal 16.

Figure 1. Mind Mapping for Thematic Result
Result: Atlas.ti

The first theme that emerged is the presence of asymmetrical power dynamics in public service delivery. Despite ongoing reform efforts, decision-making within the Social Service Office largely remains top-down, with minimal engagement of community voices, especially those from vulnerable groups. Bureaucrats continue to dominate program planning and implementation, which reflects a persistent imbalance in participatory governance. This pattern contradicts the goals of inclusive decision-making and local empowerment promoted under SDG 16.7, and highlights the need to decentralize authority in a more meaningful and democratic manner.

The second theme involves moral hazard in service delivery, where ethical codes are inconsistently enforced or even bypassed. The study found examples of selective treatment, preferential behavior, and lack of transparency in decision-making. These behaviors are facilitated by a weak internal monitoring system and the absence of clear sanctions. In this context, public ethics are often reduced to formality rather than being internalized as guiding principles of public service. Such conditions hinder the realization of reform goals that prioritize professionalism and integrity.

A third critical issue is adverse selection in program implementation, where beneficiaries are not always chosen based on objective assessments of need but rather through informal networks or personal affiliations. This practice undermines public trust and contributes to uneven distribution of resources, leading to further marginalization of the poor. The misalignment between policy intention and field implementation creates inefficiencies and contradicts the ethical obligation to serve equitably. These outcomes reflect missed opportunities to support SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) at the local level.

The fourth theme points to institutional governance gaps that limit the effectiveness of bureaucratic reform. Despite formal efforts to build a more accountable and responsive system, the study observed fragmented oversight, inconsistent policy application, and limited enforcement of internal ethical standards. These institutional shortcomings result in a lack of follow-through, where reforms exist only in regulatory form but fail in daily practice. Without strong internal governance, public ethics cannot flourish, and reform agendas risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

Lastly, the theme of stakeholder exclusion was evident in the limited roles played by NGOs, academic institutions, and civil society in the reform process. While their participation is often acknowledged in official documents, in practice it is marginal and often limited to consultation without real influence. This kind of symbolic engagement fails to harness the diverse expertise and community insights that could strengthen ethical decision-making and inclusive governance. It also runs counter to the principles of transparency and participation that underpin SDG 16.

Collectively, these themes provide a deeper understanding of how ethical principles are both promoted and challenged within local bureaucratic environments. They reveal the practical gaps between reform rhetoric and institutional behavior, and highlight the critical importance of embedding ethical values into the heart of governance transformation. These thematic findings not only enrich our understanding of bureaucratic reform in Pasuruan but also offer broader insights into the conditions necessary for sustainable, ethics-driven development.

Asymmetrical Power and Decision-Making in Public Service

A key finding of this study concerns the persistent asymmetry of power in the governance practices of the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency. Despite ongoing bureaucratic reform efforts aimed at fostering transparency, participation, and inclusivity, the reality on the ground reveals that decision-making authority remains concentrated in the hands of bureaucrats. Communities, particularly the most vulnerable segments, are often excluded from participating in decisions about services that directly affect their lives (Boenigk et al., 2021).

The analysis showed that public programs especially in the area of social assistance are designed and implemented through top-down mechanisms. Community consultations are either symbolic or entirely absent, and decision-making processes are rarely transparent or participatory. This dynamic reflects a continuation of hierarchical bureaucratic culture, where citizens are viewed more as passive recipients of aid rather than as active stakeholders in development.

One participant, a community member interviewed during the fieldwork, described this exclusion clearly:

"We are rarely involved in discussions about social aid. Usually, the list of recipients is just announced. If something is wrong, we don't even know who to report it to."

This statement reflects a recurring theme in the data: the lack of accessible and accountable channels for community input and complaint. Citizens have little opportunity to influence decisions or to voice concerns, even when services fail to meet their needs. Such exclusion erodes trust in public institutions and diminishes the perceived legitimacy of government interventions.

From the perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16.7, which emphasizes "responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels," this situation represents a critical gap. A bureaucracy that fails to incorporate citizen voices undermines the ethical foundations of governance and impedes sustainable development. Without a shift toward shared decision-making and downward accountability, bureaucratic reform remains incomplete.

Moreover, this exclusionary model limits innovation and responsiveness. When community insights are dismissed, bureaucratic institutions risk implementing programs that are misaligned with real needs. Reform becomes a checklist exercise, devoid of the moral substance required for meaningful transformation.

Therefore, addressing asymmetrical power dynamics is essential for embedding ethics within bureaucratic reform. This includes strengthening participatory frameworks, empowering local communities through open dialogues, and ensuring that citizens are recognized not merely as beneficiaries but as co-creators of governance. Only through this shift can institutions become more inclusive, equitable, and aligned with the aspirations of SDG 16.

Moral Hazard in Service Delivery

Another critical theme identified in this study is the issue of moral hazard in the delivery of public services. Although the bureaucratic reform agenda in Pasuruan Regency has formally emphasized accountability and professional conduct, the findings indicate that unethical behavior still occurs in day-to-day administrative practices. These behaviors include discretionary misuse, favoritism, and selective enforcement of rules, all of which reflect a gap between policy and ethical practice.

Several informants expressed concerns about how services are distributed and monitored. In particular, the discretionary power held by certain officials is often exercised without sufficient transparency or oversight. This creates opportunities for moral hazard, where decisions may be made based on personal preference, social connections, or political pressure rather than on objective criteria or public need.

One civil society representative interviewed during the study offered a candid perspective:

"There's a code of ethics, yes—but it's not always applied. Sometimes we see certain families getting more support repeatedly, while others who actually need it are left out. It feels like it depends on who you know."

This observation reflects the underlying problem: ethical standards may be documented and even promoted in official discourse, but without consistent implementation and enforcement, they become symbolic rather than transformative. When public officials are able to act without accountability, trust in the system deteriorates. Moreover, those who follow ethical principles often feel demotivated when they witness others violating the rules with impunity.

The implications of this are far-reaching. From a governance standpoint, moral hazard weakens the credibility of reform initiatives. From the perspective of Sustainable Development Goal 16, particularly targets 16.5 (substantially reduce corruption and bribery) and 16.6 (develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions), the presence of unchecked ethical violations in service delivery signals a need for deeper structural and cultural reform.

Furthermore, the lack of ethical consistency can lead to unequal access to public services, reinforcing patterns of social exclusion and inequality. When aid distribution or community programs are managed based on informal relationships rather than ethical criteria, the integrity of public service is compromised. This directly contradicts the aim of creating clean, fair, and professional institutions as envisioned in Indonesia's bureaucratic reform framework.

To address moral hazard effectively, it is essential not only to strengthen ethical codes and procedures but also to create a culture of ethics within institutions (Alam, 2022). This includes providing regular ethics training, building whistleblowing mechanisms, and enforcing a transparent system of rewards and sanctions (Stiglitz, 1983). Without such mechanisms, moral hazard will continue to undermine the goals of bureaucratic reform and weaken efforts to build sustainable, trusted public institutions.

Adverse Selection in Program Implementation

The third major theme that emerged from the field data is the issue of adverse selection in the implementation of social programs. While the official policy mandates that aid and social services be directed toward the most vulnerable groups, the reality on the ground reveals a pattern of beneficiary selection that is often misaligned with objective need. This misalignment stems from a lack of ethical oversight and a reliance on informal or subjective criteria in decision-making processes.

Participants across multiple stakeholder groups noted that program beneficiaries are frequently chosen based on personal connections, political affiliations, or administrative convenience rather than through transparent and equitable assessments. As a result, individuals who are genuinely in need of support may be overlooked, while others who may already be relatively secure, receive assistance multiple times. This phenomenon is symptomatic of weak internal checks and the absence of a robust ethical culture within the bureaucracy.

A frontline NGO worker provided a clear example of this pattern:

"We found cases where one household received three different types of aid packages in a single month, while their neighbor, who was actually in worse condition, got nothing. It's not always about need—it's about who is visible to the system."

This kind of practice not only undermines the fairness of public service delivery but also erodes the moral foundation of bureaucratic reform. When social protection programs fail to reach the intended groups, public trust diminishes, and communities may disengage from formal systems of governance. Over time, such exclusionary dynamics can reinforce cycles of poverty and marginalization, contrary to the broader social objectives of reform.

From a Sustainable Development Goals standpoint, adverse selection represents a direct threat to the achievement of SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality). If local governance systems are unable to ensure equitable access to resources, the transformative potential of government intervention is lost. Ethical reform, therefore, must address not only how decisions are made but also how beneficiaries are identified, evaluated, and prioritized.

Moreover, this theme highlights the limitations of structural reform when it is not accompanied by behavioral change. Formal rules may exist for how programs should be implemented, but without an ethical mindset guiding officials' daily practices, these rules remain open to manipulation. Reform that focuses only on institutional structure, without embedding ethical principles into the operational level, is unlikely to produce sustainable results.

To address adverse selection, it is crucial to institutionalize transparent beneficiary selection processes. This includes the use of clear eligibility criteria, independent verification mechanisms, public disclosure of recipient lists, and community-based monitoring systems. Integrating ethical reasoning into routine program implementation helps ensure that public services fulfill their intended function: to serve those who need them most.

Institutional Governance Gaps

The fourth theme identified in this study centers on institutional governance gaps structural and procedural weaknesses that undermine the integrity and effectiveness of bureaucratic reform. While the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency has taken steps to modernize administrative systems and adopt reform mandates, the findings indicate that the internal mechanisms for oversight, performance monitoring, and policy enforcement remain fragmented and inconsistently applied.

One of the recurring concerns raised by both government officials and civil society actors is the gap between formal policy and actual implementation. Policies related to ethical conduct, service standards, and public accountability often exist on paper, but their practical execution is constrained by limited institutional capacity, unclear responsibilities, and a culture that resists scrutiny. In particular, oversight systems lack the authority or resources to enforce compliance effectively, allowing deviations from ethical procedures to go unchecked.

A civil servant working within the department shared the following reflection:

"There are guidelines, SOPs, and accountability reports, yes. But the follow-up is weak. Sometimes issues are flagged, but there's no consequence, so people don't take them seriously."

This insight illustrates a broader problem: the absence of a feedback loop between monitoring results and corrective action. Without mechanisms to ensure that violations are addressed and that good performance is rewarded, reform policies fail to generate meaningful behavioral change. The result is a bureaucracy that appears to meet reform requirements on the surface but lacks ethical resilience at its core.

These institutional deficiencies not only hamper the goals of bureaucratic reform but also compromise the pursuit of SDG 16, especially targets 16.6 and 16.5, which emphasize the need for effective, accountable, and transparent institutions and the reduction of corruption. Governance systems that cannot monitor their own operations, enforce ethical behavior, or evaluate performance with integrity cannot be considered sustainable or trustworthy in the long term.

Furthermore, weak governance capacity affects not only internal operations but also external accountability to the public. For example, while citizen satisfaction surveys and service feedback forms are formally conducted, they are often treated as administrative formalities rather than tools for improving service quality. In many cases, the results are not used to adjust programming or retrain personnel, which signals a missed opportunity to engage citizens in the reform process.

Addressing institutional governance gaps requires a twofold strategy: first, strengthening the internal architecture of supervision, evaluation, and ethics enforcement; and second, cultivating an organizational culture that values reflection, learning, and continuous improvement. This may involve professional development, reform leadership at the mid-management level, and active collaboration with independent monitoring bodies or civil society watchdogs.

Without addressing these gaps, bureaucratic reform risks becoming a superficial exercise, unable to withstand challenges or deliver on its promises. Institutional transformation must go beyond administrative restructuring, it must embed ethics into the system's functioning and ensure that accountability is not just aspirational but actionable.

Stakeholder Exclusion in Reform Processes

The final theme that emerged from the data concerns the exclusion of stakeholders from meaningful participation in bureaucratic reform. Despite official narratives that emphasize multi-stakeholder involvement, the findings reveal that the engagement of civil society, NGOs, academia, and even community representatives remains largely symbolic within the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency. This exclusion undermines both the ethical aspirations of reform and the democratic values embedded in sustainable governance frameworks.

While public meetings, surveys, and consultation events are occasionally organized, they tend to function as procedural requirements rather than platforms for genuine dialogue or co-creation. Stakeholders reported being invited to attend forums but rarely having their inputs reflected in actual policies or program adjustments. As a result, a culture of performative participation has developed, one that acknowledges the importance of stakeholder involvement rhetorically, but fails to deliver on it substantively.

One academic informant described the situation as follows:

"We're invited to discussions, but most of the time the decisions have already been made. It's more about ticking boxes than really listening to what we say."

This quote reflects a broader problem of tokenism, where stakeholder inclusion exists only at the surface level. True participatory reform demands more than presence, it requires influence. When civil society actors and local communities are treated as passive observers rather than active contributors, reform initiatives lose valuable insights, weaken legitimacy, and fail to foster public ownership.

This dynamic is particularly problematic when viewed through the lens of Sustainable Development Goal 16, which promotes responsive, inclusive, and participatory governance. Specifically, target 16.7 emphasizes the need for representative decision-making at all levels. Excluding stakeholders from meaningful engagement contradicts this target and impedes the creation of institutions that are grounded in ethical accountability and public trust.

Moreover, the marginalization of external stakeholders limits the system's ability to adapt. In complex social contexts like Pasuruan, community actors often possess critical contextual knowledge about vulnerable populations, service delivery challenges, and informal governance dynamics. Ignoring these voices narrows the reform agenda and reinforces a top-down administrative model that is neither agile nor equitable.

To reverse stakeholder exclusion, reform strategies must intentionally design inclusive mechanisms not just invitations. This involves providing feedback loops where public input results in visible policy changes, establishing joint planning committees with civil society, and facilitating community-led monitoring of program outcomes. Equally important is the recognition of stakeholders not merely as watchdogs or advisors but as partners in governance.

In essence, stakeholder exclusion is not just a technical flaw, it is an ethical failure. Bureaucratic reform cannot succeed in isolation from the society it intends to serve. Real progress requires a shift from superficial consultation toward deep, sustained, and equitable participation. Only then can reform efforts align with the broader goals of ethical governance and sustainable development.

Integrating Ethics with Reform – Toward Sustainable Institutional Development

The findings of this study reveal a powerful insight: bureaucratic reform cannot achieve its intended outcomes without the deep integration of ethical values into the everyday practices of governance. Across the five themes ranging from asymmetrical power dynamics to stakeholder exclusion, it becomes evident that structural adjustments alone are insufficient. Without a shared commitment to ethical conduct, even well-designed reforms risk becoming superficial exercises, disconnected from the lived realities of those they aim to serve.

In the context of the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency, ethical standards are often present in official documents and reform strategies. However, their application remains inconsistent. This inconsistency signals a broader gap between institutional vision and on-the-ground behavior. Bureaucratic reform, when divorced from ethical reflection, struggles to generate trust, transparency, or fairness. It may improve efficiency in certain cases but will lack the legitimacy and moral authority necessary for sustainable impact.

This challenge is not unique to Pasuruan. It reflects a tension at the heart of many governance systems where technical reform is prioritized over cultural transformation. Yet, public ethics must not be viewed as an optional layer; they are the foundation on which all other reform initiatives rest. An ethical bureaucracy is not only more just and accountable, it is also more responsive, innovative, and resilient to political and administrative pressures.

From a global perspective, this insight directly aligns with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peachey & Shin, 2022), which calls for building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. Ethical behavior within institutions is essential for achieving these goals, as it fosters trust between government and citizens, reduces corruption, and ensures equitable access to services. Moreover, ethics-oriented governance is key to advancing broader SDG targets such as reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion, and strengthening the rule of law.

The case of Pasuruan also illustrates that reform cannot be sustained by formal policies alone. It must be supported by a culture that values ethical decision-making, encourages public engagement, and prioritizes long-term social benefit over short-term administrative compliance. This includes promoting ethical leadership that leads by example, cultivating environments where civil servants are empowered to speak up against misconduct, and creating systems where public input shapes not only what governments do but how they do it.

Institutionalizing ethics means weaving them into recruitment practices, performance evaluations, service standards, and community engagement models. It requires consistency, transparency, and a willingness to reflect on both failures and successes. In doing so, ethical reform becomes more than a bureaucratic project, it becomes a transformational force capable of reshaping public institutions from within.

In conclusion, the integration of ethics and reform is not merely a technical necessity; it is a moral imperative. Without it, governance remains fragile, uneven, and disconnected from the aspirations of the communities it serves. With it, reform becomes a pathway toward a stronger, more inclusive, and sustainable public administration. The experience of Pasuruan's Social Service Office provides valuable lessons for local governments across Indonesia and beyond: that ethical foundations are not peripheral to reform, but central to its success.

Implications

Building on the findings of this study, it is clear that any meaningful bureaucratic reform must prioritize the internalization and application of public ethics. This goes beyond policy declarations and structural reorganizations, it requires deliberate, consistent action to transform both the behavior of civil servants and the institutional culture in which they operate.

One key recommendation is the need to embed ethics education and awareness into the professional development of civil servants. Training should not merely focus on technical competencies but also on moral reasoning, integrity in decision-making, and the ethical responsibilities of public service. These trainings must be ongoing, context-sensitive, and tied to real-world challenges, ensuring that ethical reflection becomes part of everyday administrative practice.

In addition, the enforcement of existing ethical codes must be taken seriously. It is not enough to have guidelines and standard operating procedures if violations are overlooked or inconsistently addressed. Institutional mechanisms such as independent internal audits, performance evaluations that include ethical criteria, and transparent disciplinary processes should be strengthened. Such systems must function fairly and independently to deter misconduct and foster accountability at all levels of the bureaucracy.

Citizen participation also needs to be reimagined as a meaningful and sustained engagement rather than a ceremonial exercise. This means creating opportunities for communities, NGOs, and academic institutions to contribute not only during program planning but throughout the implementation and evaluation phases. Platforms for public feedback must be accessible and their outcomes visible, so that people feel their voices are genuinely heard and acted upon.

Moreover, the development of ethical governance must be accompanied by transparent information systems. The public should have access to service performance data, budget allocations, and beneficiary lists. Making this information openly available helps deter favoritism and adverse selection, while simultaneously promoting a culture of openness and responsibility.

Finally, reform leaders within institutions should act as role models in promoting ethics-based leadership. Ethical values must be demonstrated from the top down, so that integrity and professionalism are seen not as abstract ideals but as lived commitments. A strong, ethical leadership culture can gradually shift organizational norms and inspire civil servants to uphold public interest above personal or political gain.

By addressing these areas, bureaucratic reform in Pasuruan and more broadly across Indonesia can evolve into a process that not only enhances administrative performance but also strengthens democracy, public trust, and institutional sustainability. Ethical reform is not a quick fix, but with consistent effort and the involvement of all stakeholders, it can serve as a cornerstone of long-term development aligned with the principles of SDG 16.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the integration of public ethics within the framework of bureaucratic reform at the Social Service Office of Pasuruan Regency. Through qualitative inquiry and thematic analysis, it has demonstrated that the presence or absence of ethical values significantly shapes how reform is experienced at the local level. While reform initiatives are in place and supported by formal policies and strategic visions, the actual implementation continues to be challenged by structural gaps, behavioral inconsistencies, and limited stakeholder participation.

The five key themes identified namely asymmetrical power dynamics, moral hazard in service delivery, adverse selection in program implementation, institutional governance gaps, and stakeholder exclusion reflect systemic issues that cannot be addressed through structural reform alone. They demand a deeper transformation rooted in public ethics. The findings reaffirm that bureaucratic reform will fall short of its goals unless it is accompanied by a parallel effort to foster ethical awareness, strengthen accountability, and cultivate a participatory governance culture. When ethics and reform work in tandem, they create the foundation for institutions that are not only more efficient but also more just, inclusive, and aligned with the vision of Sustainable Development Goal 16.

Despite these insights, this study is not without limitations. It is based on a single case study within one regional institution, and while the depth of qualitative data provides rich understanding, the findings cannot be generalized across all public agencies in Indonesia. Additionally, the study relies heavily on perceptions gathered through interviews and focus group discussions, which may reflect subjective biases or context-specific experiences. These limitations open avenues for future research.

Future studies may benefit from a comparative approach, examining multiple institutions across different regions to explore how variations in leadership, community dynamics, and administrative culture influence the integration of ethics into reform. Longitudinal research could also help assess how ethical reform practices evolve over time and whether current efforts result in lasting institutional change. Finally, future inquiry could explore the role of digital governance and technology in supporting ethical transparency, public engagement, and reform monitoring at both local and national levels.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing discourse on ethics-driven reform by offering empirical evidence from a local governance context. It calls for a shift in how reform is understood—not just as administrative efficiency but as a moral endeavor grounded in values of fairness, transparency, and public trust. The path toward sustainable bureaucratic transformation lies not only in policy documents but in the ethical conduct of those who implement them.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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