

Understanding Exclusion Errors and Unequal Access to Social Protection in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines exclusion errors as more than technical inaccuracies in beneficiary registries, conceptualising them as potential outcomes of institutional arrangements, administrative practices, and unequal capacities to navigate welfare systems. Drawing on a document-based policy analysis of audit findings, academic studies, and literature on social protection targeting, the article identifies four interconnected dimensions of exclusion: incomplete or outdated data, fragmented administrative processes, unequal capacities to access and contest eligibility decisions, and limited responsiveness to changing household circumstances. Effective social protection also depends on accessible registration procedures, transparent decisions, timely data updates, accountable intergovernmental coordination, and effective appeal mechanisms. This article contributes by providing a multidimensional framework for understanding exclusion errors within decentralized welfare systems and proposes policy directions that place equitable access, administrative accountability, and the lived circumstances of vulnerable households at the centre of social protection reform in Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Social protection has become an essential component of contemporary poverty reduction and social welfare policy. Through cash transfers, food assistance, education support, subsidised healthcare, and other forms of social assistance, governments seek to reduce economic hardship and protect households from social risks. However, the effectiveness of these programmes depends not only on the resources allocated or the number of beneficiaries recorded, but also on whether assistance reaches the people who need it (Tuwu et al., 2026).

A central challenge is the identification of eligible beneficiaries. Targeting systems can generate inclusion errors, in which people who do not meet eligibility criteria receive benefits, and exclusion errors, in which eligible people are omitted from programmes. Although both errors matter for programme performance, exclusion errors have particular implications for social justice because households experiencing poverty or vulnerability may be denied support intended to protect them.

Indonesia provides a relevant context for examining these challenges. The country's social assistance architecture has relied on administrative databases, household socioeconomic classifications, and coordination between central and local governments. Previous research has examined the effectiveness of targeting methods, including proxy means testing and community-based targeting, demonstrating that technical accuracy and community perceptions of legitimacy do not necessarily coincide (Alatas et al., 2012). Research on Indonesian social transfer programmes has also identified the importance of household characteristics, geographical differences, legal identity, and implementation arrangements in understanding targeting outcomes (Kusumawati & Kudo, 2019).

Institutional evidence reinforces the significance of this problem. In its Semester II 2024 audit summary, Indonesia's Audit Board identified weaknesses in the verification of proposed additions and objections to the Integrated Social Welfare Data (Data Terpadu Kesejahteraan Sosial, DTKS), alongside problems involving data quality and coordination in the use of beneficiary information.

These findings suggest that the relationship between formal eligibility rules and actual access to assistance cannot be understood exclusively through programme design.

The consolidation of socioeconomic registries into the National Single Socio-Economic Database (Data Tunggal Sosial Ekonomi Nasional, DTSEN), initiated through Presidential Instruction No. 4 of 2025, represents an important reform in Indonesia's data governance arrangements. The reform seeks to improve the consistency of socioeconomic information used in social assistance targeting. Nevertheless, consolidating information does not automatically eliminate the possibility of exclusion. If household circumstances are inaccurately recorded, inadequately updated, or difficult to challenge, errors may continue to affect access across programmes that rely on the same data infrastructure.

These issues point to a broader conceptual problem. Exclusion is often treated as a technical failure of beneficiary selection, but it can also emerge from

administrative procedures, unequal access to information, documentation requirements, local verification capacity, and limited opportunities to appeal decisions. A household may be absent from a beneficiary list not because its needs are insignificant, but because its circumstances have not been adequately documented or its application has not progressed through the administrative process. This article therefore advances an analytical perspective that situates exclusion errors within the broader institutional and social organisation of welfare provision.

The article makes three contributions. First, it distinguishes exclusion errors as a targeting outcome from unequal access as a broader process encompassing information, registration, verification, and appeals. Second, it develops a multidimensional analytical framework linking data quality, administrative capacity, procedural accessibility, and responsiveness to household vulnerability. Third, it identifies policy implications that extend beyond beneficiary database accuracy towards the institutional conditions required for equitable access to social protection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social Protection Beyond the Distribution of Assistance

Social protection is broader than the transfer of financial or material benefits (Barrientos et al., 2005; Norton et al., 2002). It encompasses institutional arrangements designed to prevent, manage, and overcome risks that undermine people's wellbeing. Social assistance is one component of this system, alongside social insurance and other protective interventions.

This distinction matters because the successful distribution of benefits to registered beneficiaries does not necessarily demonstrate that a social protection system is inclusive. Programme coverage measures the reach of a particular intervention, whereas equitable access concerns whether people with relevant needs can enter and navigate the system under fair conditions.

A programme may therefore perform well in terms of payment regularity while continuing to exclude eligible households. Similarly, an increase in the number of registered beneficiaries does not, by itself, establish that assistance has become more equitable.

The analytical focus must consequently extend from the distribution of benefits to the processes through which eligibility is defined, needs are recognised, applications are assessed, and decisions are reviewed.

2.2. Exclusion Errors and Targeting Accuracy

Targeting accuracy concerns the extent to which programme benefits reach their intended population. Coady, Grosh, and Hoddinott (2004) demonstrate the importance of examining the design and implementation of targeting mechanisms across social transfer programmes.

Exclusion error occurs when an individual or household that meets the applicable eligibility criteria is not included in a programme.

Inclusion error occurs when an individual or household that does not meet the applicable criteria receives benefits.

These errors should not be treated as interchangeable. Inclusion errors may affect resource allocation and programme legitimacy, while exclusion errors directly leave eligible households without the intended assistance.

However, neither concept should be measured without an explicit eligibility benchmark. A household's absence from a programme does not automatically establish an exclusion error unless its eligibility under the relevant programme rules can be demonstrated. Similarly, being outside a poverty database does not necessarily mean that a household is ineligible for every form of social protection.

This distinction is especially important in Indonesia because different programmes may apply different eligibility criteria, data requirements, and administrative procedures.

2.3. Administrative Burden and Unequal Access

Administrative burden theory provides a useful perspective for understanding why formally available programmes may remain difficult to access. Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015) identify learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs as important dimensions of citizens' interactions with public administration.

Learning costs arise when people must discover which programmes exist, understand eligibility rules, or identify where to apply. Compliance costs include the time and effort required to obtain documentation, submit applications, attend verification appointments, and respond to administrative requests. Psychological costs can arise from stigma, uncertainty, fear of rejection, or experiences of disrespect.

These burdens may be distributed unevenly. Households with limited literacy, restricted mobility, weak internet access, insecure employment, or inadequate identity documentation may face greater obstacles than households with more resources.

Administrative burden therefore helps explain how exclusion can occur even when formal programme eligibility rules are not explicitly discriminatory. Procedures that appear neutral may impose unequal costs on different groups.

2.4. Street-Level Bureaucracy and Implementation Discretion

Street-level bureaucracy theory highlights the role of frontline public officials in translating policy into practice (Lipsky, 2010). Social assistance decisions are rarely implemented through rules alone. Officials and local institutions must interpret information, verify circumstances, manage workloads, respond to incomplete applications, and communicate decisions to citizens.

Under conditions of limited staffing, incomplete information, or unclear operational guidance, implementation can vary across localities. Frontline discretion may help accommodate exceptional circumstances, but it may also produce inconsistent decisions when procedures and accountability mechanisms are weak.

The relevant issue is not whether discretion should be eliminated. Rather, it is how discretion can be exercised transparently, consistently, and responsively while preserving opportunities for households to explain their circumstances.

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This article adopts a document-based policy analysis to examine the institutional and administrative dimensions of exclusion errors in Indonesian social assistance. The approach combines policy-document examination with a conceptual synthesis of research on targeting, administrative burden, street-level bureaucracy, and social exclusion (Fryer, 2006).

The purpose is analytical rather than statistical. The article does not estimate the national prevalence of exclusion errors or claim to establish causal relationships between specific administrative practices and household outcomes.

3.2. Sources of Evidence

The analysis draws on three categories of secondary sources:

1. Institutional and policy documents, particularly audit findings concerning DTKS management, verification, data quality, and the use of beneficiary information.
2. Empirical studies of Indonesian social assistance, including research on targeting methods, programme implementation, and the consequences of exclusion and inclusion errors.
3. Conceptual and comparative literature, including research on targeting accuracy, administrative burden, street-level bureaucracy, and social exclusion.

The evidence discussed in the preceding section includes the Audit Board's Semester II 2024 audit summary, the report on Indonesia's social protection response during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2024 study by Sius and colleagues on exclusion and inclusion errors in the Family Hope Programme (Leavy, 2017).

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The documents are examined through a thematic analytical lens. Four categories guide the synthesis:

- Data quality and the identification of eligible households.
- Administrative procedures and institutional coordination.
- Accessibility, documentation, and grievance mechanisms.
- Household vulnerability and the responsiveness of social protection systems.

Evidence is compared across these categories to identify recurring institutional problems and develop an integrated explanation of how exclusion may arise.

The analysis distinguishes documented findings from conceptual interpretation. For example, an audit finding that verification procedures were incomplete is treated as evidence of an administrative weakness. The proposition that such weaknesses can contribute to exclusion is an analytical interpretation

that requires further testing against programme-level and household-level data (Neuman, 2014).

RESEARCH RESULT

4.1. Data Quality and the Administrative Production of Exclusion

The first analytical finding concerns the relationship between data quality and access to social assistance. Beneficiary databases are not merely technical repositories; they are institutional instruments through which governments make decisions about who becomes visible to the welfare system.

In Indonesia, the BPK audit identified weaknesses involving the verification of new proposals and objections submitted through the Cek Bansos application, as well as broader concerns about the quality and consistency of DTKS information.

These findings indicate that administrative records and verification processes require continuing scrutiny.

Data-related exclusion can occur through several mechanisms. Household circumstances may be recorded inaccurately, socioeconomic conditions may change after data collection, or information submitted by citizens may remain unverified. Errors may also arise when records maintained by different institutions cannot be reconciled effectively.

These mechanisms should be distinguished because they require different remedies. Incorrect records call for validation and correction. Outdated information requires more responsive updating. Unverified applications require clear processing responsibilities and monitoring. Fragmented information requires coordination between institutions.

The consolidation of registries into DTSEN may improve consistency and reduce some forms of duplication. Nevertheless, a unified database cannot guarantee inclusion if the information entering the system is incomplete or if households have limited opportunities to correct inaccurate records.

A central implication is that data quality should be understood dynamically. Accuracy at the time of registration does not necessarily ensure accuracy several months later, particularly when households experience sudden unemployment, illness, displacement, or other economic shocks.

The policy challenge is therefore not simply to build a more comprehensive database, but to establish an ongoing process through which administrative information remains responsive to actual changes in household circumstances.

4.2. Administrative Procedures and Institutional Fragmentation

The second finding concerns the relationship between administrative processes and exclusion.

Eligibility determination usually involves multiple stages: identification of potential beneficiaries, collection of socioeconomic information, verification, assessment against programme criteria, approval, and the delivery of benefits. Failure at any stage may prevent an eligible household from receiving assistance. Indonesia's audit findings illustrate why these stages require effective coordination. The BPK reported that certain proposed additions and objections

in DTKS had not been adequately verified and recommended improvements to field verification and notification mechanisms.

This problem can be interpreted through street-level bureaucracy. National policy establishes formal objectives, but frontline officials must translate those objectives into operational decisions. Where administrative responsibilities are unclear, workloads are high, or local verification capacity is limited, the implementation of formal eligibility rules may become inconsistent.

Institutional fragmentation can also complicate the correction of errors. A citizen may be directed from one office to another, asked to resubmit information, or left uncertain about which institution is responsible for resolving an application.

These processes create a distinction between formal eligibility and effective access. A household may satisfy the substantive criteria of a programme but remain unable to obtain assistance because the administrative pathway is incomplete or inaccessible.

This distinction is particularly relevant in decentralised welfare systems, where central authorities may establish policy frameworks while local institutions perform important functions in identifying needs, verifying information, and communicating with residents.

The implication is that administrative performance should be assessed not only through payment accuracy or processing efficiency, but also through the ability of institutions to resolve cases in which eligible households have been omitted.

4.3. Unequal Capacities to Navigate Social Protection Systems

The third finding concerns differences in households' capacities to engage with administrative systems.

Social assistance programmes are commonly designed around eligibility rules that apply to broad populations. However, households do not possess equal resources for understanding those rules, assembling documentation, accessing digital platforms, or following up on unresolved applications.

The concept of administrative burden helps explain this inequality. Households with reliable internet access, flexible working hours, adequate documentation, and experience dealing with public institutions may find it easier to navigate application and verification processes. Others may face substantial practical obstacles.

Consider two households with similar socioeconomic needs. The first has stable identity documents, access to a smartphone, and the ability to visit the local social service office during working hours. The second relies on irregular daily wages, has limited digital access, and must travel considerable distances to obtain administrative assistance.

Even if both households satisfy the same eligibility criteria, their ability to complete the process may differ. This example illustrates a possible mechanism of unequal access; it is not presented as an observed comparison from original fieldwork.

The issue extends beyond digital exclusion. Information may not be communicated in accessible language, people may not understand the reasons for rejection, or they may be unaware that they can request a review. Stigma and fear of being treated disrespectfully can also discourage some individuals from pursuing assistance.

Sius et al. (2024), in their study of PKH, connect beneficiary-data problems with perceptions of fairness and public trust. Their findings offer contextual support for considering the social consequences of exclusion, although the study does not establish the prevalence of these effects nationally.

The analytical implication is that access should not be measured solely by the existence of an application channel. An accessible system must also enable people to understand the requirements, complete the process, obtain an explanation, and challenge decisions when necessary.

4.4. Household Vulnerability and the Limits of Static Eligibility

The fourth finding concerns the relationship between changing household circumstances and administrative classifications.

Poverty is not always a stable condition. Households may move into or out of poverty because of job loss, illness, crop failure, natural disasters, rising living costs, or changes in family composition. A registration system that captures circumstances at a single point in time may fail to recognise these transitions promptly.

The SPACE report on Indonesia's social protection response during the COVID-19 pandemic identified limitations in DTKS for identifying new beneficiaries and responding to short-term changes in household welfare. It also discussed problems associated with outdated information and targeting errors. These observations highlight a limitation of relying exclusively on static classifications. A household previously assessed as economically secure may experience a sudden income shock, while a household already experiencing hardship may remain outside a programme because its information has not been updated.

The implications become especially important during crises. When economic conditions deteriorate rapidly, the time required to register, verify, and approve beneficiaries can determine whether assistance arrives while it is still needed.

However, rapid expansion also presents a genuine policy trade-off. Relaxing verification requirements may enable faster assistance but can increase the risk of inclusion errors. Extensive verification may improve administrative control but delay support to eligible households.

The challenge is therefore not to eliminate verification, but to design procedures that are proportionate to the urgency of need. This could involve simplified emergency enrolment, temporary assistance pending verification, and subsequent review under clearly defined rules.

Such arrangements would need appropriate safeguards, transparent eligibility criteria, and monitoring to prevent arbitrary decisions or misuse of public resources.

DISCUSSION

5.1. From Targeting Accuracy to Equitable Access

The analysis suggests that exclusion errors should be understood within a broader framework of equitable access to social protection.

Targeting accuracy remains important. Governments need credible information to direct limited resources towards intended beneficiaries. However, the pursuit of accuracy can become too narrowly focused if programme performance is measured primarily through the consistency of administrative records.

A database may be internally consistent while still failing to capture households whose circumstances have changed or whose information was never properly recorded. Similarly, a programme may process applications efficiently without adequately supporting people who struggle to complete the required procedures.

This distinction does not imply that database integration or technical improvements are unnecessary. Rather, it indicates that these reforms should be evaluated against a wider set of outcomes, including the accessibility of registration, the timeliness of corrections, the transparency of decisions, and the proportion of eligible households who actually receive assistance.

The proposed analytical framework therefore distinguishes four connected dimensions:

- Information inclusion: whether households' circumstances are adequately recorded and updated.
- Administrative inclusion: whether applications and verification procedures function effectively.
- Procedural inclusion: whether households can understand, access, and challenge administrative decisions.
- Responsive inclusion: whether the system can recognise changing needs and respond within an appropriate timeframe.

These dimensions are interdependent. Accurate information is of limited value if applications remain unprocessed. Accessible application procedures cannot fully correct errors if households are unable to obtain explanations. Effective grievance mechanisms cannot guarantee timely protection if eligibility information is not updated.

The framework thus shifts the analytical question from whether a registry is accurate to whether the wider system can identify, include, and protect eligible households.

5.2. The Risks and Opportunities of Integrated Welfare Databases

Indonesia's transition towards DTSEN creates an opportunity to improve the consistency of socioeconomic information used in social assistance. Consolidation may reduce discrepancies between registries, support coordination across programmes, and facilitate more coherent policy planning. However, consolidation also raises questions about the consequences of errors within a shared system. If several programmes rely on the same classification, an inaccurate record may affect access to multiple benefits rather than a single programme.

This possibility should be treated as a governance risk to investigate, not as proof that DTSEN necessarily produces greater exclusion. Whether consolidation reduces or concentrates errors depends on data quality, updating arrangements, programme-specific eligibility rules, and the ability of households to contest classifications.

Recent commentary on DTSEN has similarly highlighted the importance of transparency, contestability, and the ability to challenge administrative classifications.

A robust system should therefore combine data integration with safeguards. These include understandable explanations of decisions, accessible correction procedures, independent review where appropriate, and the ability to account for circumstances that cannot be adequately represented by standardised indicators.

An integrated database should function as an instrument for improving public services, not as an unquestionable authority over household eligibility.

5.3. Administrative Burden as a Mechanism of Social Inequality

The findings also suggest that administrative burden provides a useful bridge between public administration and social welfare research.

Traditional targeting analysis often concentrates on the accuracy of methods used to identify eligible households. Administrative burden directs attention to the effort required from citizens to access the benefits for which they qualify.

This shift is important because the costs of accessing assistance may be particularly high for people experiencing poverty. Irregular employment can make office visits costly. Limited literacy can complicate application procedures. Disability or caregiving responsibilities can constrain mobility. Geographic distance can increase the time and expense required to obtain documentation or follow up on an application.

Such obstacles may reproduce inequality even without an explicit policy of exclusion. They can create a situation in which households with greater administrative resources are better positioned to access public assistance than households with more severe needs.

Nevertheless, these mechanisms should not be assumed to operate identically across all regions or programmes. Their actual significance must be examined empirically, including through interviews with applicants, beneficiaries, frontline workers, and local officials.

The conceptual contribution of this article is therefore to identify administrative burden as a plausible mechanism connecting institutional design with unequal access, while recognising that further research is needed to establish how these relationships operate in different Indonesian contexts.

5.4. Reframing Accountability in Social Protection

A further implication concerns accountability. Social assistance systems are commonly evaluated through budget execution, the number of registered beneficiaries, payment regularity, and compliance with programme rules. These

indicators are necessary but insufficient to establish whether a system protects all eligible groups fairly.

An accountability framework that takes exclusion seriously must also ask whether citizens can obtain information about their status, correct inaccurate records, understand rejection decisions, and receive timely responses to complaints.

This requires a shift from viewing citizens merely as recipients of benefits towards recognising them as participants in the administration of social protection.

Local institutions can play an important role in this process because they may have contextual knowledge about household circumstances that is not adequately represented in administrative databases. Yet local knowledge must be incorporated through transparent procedures to avoid favouritism, political interference, or arbitrary decisions.

The appropriate objective is not to replace standardised eligibility rules with unrestricted local discretion. It is to combine consistent rules with accountable mechanisms for verifying exceptional circumstances and correcting errors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has examined exclusion errors as a multidimensional challenge in Indonesia's social assistance system. The analysis indicates that exclusion should not be understood exclusively as a technical problem involving inaccurate beneficiary records. It may also emerge from administrative procedures, institutional coordination, unequal capacities to navigate public services, and the limited responsiveness of registration systems to changing household circumstances.

The distinction between formal eligibility and effective access is central to this argument. A household may satisfy a programme's eligibility criteria yet remain unable to obtain assistance because its information is incomplete, its application is not processed, or it lacks an accessible mechanism for challenging an administrative decision.

The consolidation of socioeconomic data through DTSEN offers an opportunity to improve consistency and coordination. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this reform will depend on more than the integration of databases. It will also require continuous data updating, transparent eligibility decisions, accessible grievance mechanisms, accountable frontline implementation, and meaningful opportunities for citizens to correct errors.

The principal implication is that social protection reform should be evaluated through both administrative performance and equitable access. Accurate records and efficient delivery remain essential, but they must be accompanied by institutional arrangements that enable eligible households to obtain the protection intended for them.

Ultimately, moving beyond social assistance requires a broader understanding of welfare governance: one in which success is measured not only by the benefits distributed or the households registered, but also by the system's

capacity to identify need, correct mistakes, and protect people who might otherwise be left behind.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This article has several limitations. First, the analysis relies on an initial selection of documentary and academic sources rather than a systematic review of all available evidence. The conclusions therefore identify plausible institutional mechanisms and policy implications but do not establish their prevalence across Indonesia.

Second, the available evidence does not provide a comprehensive national estimate of exclusion errors across all social assistance programmes. Differences in eligibility criteria, data systems, and implementation arrangements mean that findings from one programme or locality cannot automatically be generalised to the national system.

Third, the analysis does not include original interviews with households excluded from assistance, frontline social workers, or local government officials. Consequently, the experiences of people navigating registration and appeal procedures remain insufficiently represented.

Future research could address these limitations through three complementary approaches.

First, quantitative research could estimate exclusion and inclusion errors using household survey data matched to programme eligibility criteria and benefit receipt. This would help identify which socioeconomic and geographical characteristics are associated with non-receipt among eligible households.

Second, qualitative research could investigate how households experience registration, verification, rejection, and appeal procedures. Interviews with excluded households and frontline officials could illuminate the mechanisms through which administrative burden and local implementation practices influence access.

Third, comparative case studies could examine how local governments implement social assistance policies under different administrative and geographical conditions. Such research could identify institutional practices that improve inclusion while maintaining accountability.

Research on DTSEN also presents an important opportunity. Future studies could examine whether data consolidation improves the accuracy of beneficiary identification, how quickly records are corrected, and whether households have meaningful opportunities to contest classifications.

These approaches would move the discussion beyond the identification of administrative problems towards a stronger empirical understanding of the relationship between welfare governance and equitable access.

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