

Implementation of Indonesia's Social Protection Programs in the Period 2015–2025

Darmin Tuwu^{1*}, Liwaul², Muhammad Obie³, Ratna Supiyah⁴, Sarpin⁵

¹Social Welfare Department, Halu Oleo University, Kendari

²Department of Administrative Science, Halu Oleo University, Kendari

^{3,4,5}Department of Sociology, Halu Oleo University, Kendari

Corresponding Author: Darmin Tuwu darmintuwu@uho.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Institutional capacity, Policy implementation; Social protection, Welfare systems

Received : 10 November

Revised : 15 December

Accepted: 30 January

©2026 Tuwu, Liwaul, Obie, Supiyah, Sarpin: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Atribusi 4.0 Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of Indonesia's social protection programs during the period 2015–2025, with the aim of advancing understanding of how implementation quality and system-level dynamics shape program effectiveness beyond formal policy design. Drawing on qualitative survey data and multiple case studies, the paper contributes to the social protection literature by adopting a systems-oriented and implementation-centered analytical framework. The study identifies persistent challenges related to targeting accuracy, uneven local administrative capacity, and fragmentation across programs, while also highlighting adaptive responses during crisis periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that implementation quality is a stronger determinant of outcomes than program design alone. These results imply that future social protection reforms should prioritize system coherence, data governance, and sub-national capacity building to enhance equity, resilience, and long-term impact

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade (2015–2025) Indonesia substantially expanded and diversified its social protection portfolio—including flagship schemes such as Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH), food assistance and non-cash benefits, pandemic emergency transfers (BST/Bantuan Sosial Tunai), and health cards (KIS)—producing complex outcomes across welfare, access, and inclusion. Despite large fiscal and delivery investments, evidence indicates persistent problems in coverage, targeting, and program integration, especially in remote and disadvantaged areas (OECD, 2019). These observable policy-practice discontinuities highlight a social fact: scale-up has not uniformly translated into equitable or sustained social protection outcomes nationwide (World Bank, 2024).

The theoretical literature on social protection has extended beyond simple cash-transfer effectiveness to emphasize systems thinking, institutional capacity, and governance as mediating variables of program impact (Smeru, 2019). Yet mainstream evaluation paradigms remain dominated by program-level impact metrics (income, schooling, health), often neglecting meso- and macro-level mechanisms such as registry quality, inter-ministerial coordination, and local administrative capacity that influence real-world implementation. This produces a theoretical gap: existing models insufficiently theorize how institutional and implementation bottlenecks interact with program design to shape medium-term program effectiveness (Capano, 2025).

Finally, recent shocks—notably the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) and subsequent economic volatility—exposed and compounded structural weaknesses in Indonesia’s delivery systems (temporary top-ups, emergency scaling, digital payment constraints), underscoring a second empirical gap: limited knowledge on whether emergency adaptations have improved or undermined routine program performance and whether innovations introduced during crises (e.g., digital registries, top-ups) have been institutionalized or remain ephemeral (Arslan et al., 2021). Together, these gaps justify a comprehensive, systems-oriented review of implementation across 2015–2025.

A growing body of rigorous evaluations has documented positive human-capital impacts of Indonesia’s long-running conditional cash transfer, PKH, on utilization of health and education services and some nutritional outcomes (Cahyadi et al., 2020; Lestari et al., 2024). Randomized and quasi-experimental studies provide robust evidence on beneficiary-level effects, and longer-term follow-ups point to sustained improvements in service use and some intermediate outcomes. These program-level results are indispensable, but they do not fully explain heterogeneous outcomes across geographic and administrative contexts.

This paper aims to critically review the implementation of Indonesia’s social protection programs between 2015 and 2025 by (a) synthesizing empirical evidence on program impacts and implementation failures, (b) mapping institutional and operational bottlenecks that explain heterogeneity in outcomes across contexts, and (c) proposing a future research agenda and policy recommendations that prioritize systems strengthening, targeting accuracy, and

the institutionalization of beneficial innovations introduced during crisis responses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Implementation studies of Indonesia's flagship social protection programs emphasize that operational mechanisms-targeting, payment modalities, and frontline administration-critically shape program outcomes. Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH), for example, produced important gains in health and schooling but its impacts were mediated by local rollout quality, outreach, and registry accuracy (Cahyadi et al., 2020). Empirical evaluations show that implementation frictions (late payments, conditionality enforcement inconsistencies, and limited case management at sub-district level) reduce the realized benefits for the poorest households and generate heterogeneity across districts.

The COVID-19 period (2020–2022) highlighted both strengths and weaknesses of Indonesia's delivery systems: emergency cash transfers (BST), village direct cash (BLT-DD), and food assistance were scaled rapidly, demonstrating agility; yet implementation analyses report substantial exclusion errors in remote areas, logistical bottlenecks in payment delivery, and challenges in integrating emergency registries with existing beneficiary databases (Mahendradhata, et al., 2021). Several mixed-methods assessments argue that the crisis induced valuable experimentation (e-G2P pilots, faster digital onboarding), but institutionalization of those innovations remains uneven, and persistent administrative capacity gaps limit sustainability (Alam et al., 2022).

At the systems level, reviews of Indonesia's social protection architecture point to fragmentation across programs and ministries, shortcomings in the national social registry (Data Terpadu Kesejahteraan Sosial-DTKS), and weak interoperability of information systems (Dharma, 2024). The OECD and World Bank system reviews document how multiple assistance streams (PKH, Program Sembako/BPNT, KIS, BLT variants) operate with overlapping eligibility rules and parallel delivery channels, creating both fiscal inefficiencies and administrative complexity that complicate accurate targeting and monitoring (Sutiyo, 2023).

Governance and institutional capacity are repeatedly identified as meso-level determinants of implementation quality. Comparative policy analyses suggest that improvements in registry management, data sharing agreements, and sub-national administrative training produce outsized gains in coverage and targeting efficiency relative to marginal changes in benefit size (Simcoe, et al., 2019). In other words, system coherence and governance arrangements (inter-agency coordination, data governance, and fiscal predictability) are as important as program design in determining whether social protection produces sustained welfare improvements.

Finally, aggregated analyses of the pandemic-era scaling suggest that social assistance dampened income shocks and reduced poverty incidence in 2020–2021, but distributional and geographic inequities persisted. Macro-micro syntheses find that emergency transfers contributed to poverty alleviation at national level but struggled to reach isolated communities and informal workers lacking formal identifiers, highlighting the continuing importance of registration

and outreach. Taken together, the literature supports a systems-oriented research agenda that prioritizes registry accuracy, payment reliability, and sub-national capacity as leverage points for improving the effectiveness and equity of Indonesia's social protection portfolio.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing a survey-based qualitative approach combined with multiple case studies to examine the implementation of Indonesia's social protection programs during the period 2015–2025. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study seeks to understand processes, institutional dynamics, and implementation mechanisms rather than to measure causal effects alone (Cresswell, 2013). Qualitative inquiry allows for an in-depth exploration of how social protection policies are translated into practice across different administrative and social contexts, capturing actors' perceptions, constraints, and adaptive strategies.

The first methodological component is a qualitative survey, designed to collect structured but open-ended responses from key stakeholders involved in social protection delivery. Unlike quantitative surveys, qualitative surveys emphasize depth, meaning, and explanation, enabling the researcher to identify patterns of experience and interpretation across a relatively broad sample (Ransome, 2017).

The qualitative survey targets three groups of respondents:

1. Policy and program administrators at national and provincial levels (e.g., officials involved in PKH, food assistance, and health insurance schemes);
2. Frontline implementers, including social workers, facilitators, and local government staff responsible for program delivery;
3. Beneficiaries and community representatives, particularly from poor and vulnerable households.

To complement the qualitative survey, the study employs a multiple case study approach. Case studies are well suited for examining complex policy phenomena embedded in real-life contexts, especially where boundaries between the phenomenon and context are blurred (Yin, 2014). In social protection research, case studies allow for the exploration of how national programs are implemented differently across regions with varying institutional capacity and socio-economic conditions.

Data collection is conducted in several stages. First, relevant policy documents, program guidelines, and evaluation reports from 2015–2025 are reviewed to construct an implementation timeline and identify key reform moments. Second, qualitative survey questionnaires are distributed to selected respondents, either through online platforms or facilitated sessions, depending on accessibility and digital literacy. Third, case study fieldwork is conducted through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Interview guides are designed to elicit detailed accounts of implementation experiences, coordination challenges, and adaptive practices, while allowing flexibility for respondents to raise unanticipated issues (Minichiello et al., 1996). All interviews are conducted with informed consent and audio-recorded when permitted.

Data analysis follows a thematic analysis strategy, combining deductive and inductive coding. An initial coding framework is developed based on the literature on social protection systems and policy implementation, including themes such as targeting, governance, coordination, and administrative capacity. Additional codes emerge inductively from the data.

Coding is conducted iteratively, with constant comparison across data sources and cases to identify convergent and divergent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Findings from the qualitative survey are used to map common implementation challenges, while case studies provide contextual explanations for these patterns.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Result

1. Persistent Challenges in Targeting and Beneficiary Identification

Across all cases, targeting accuracy emerged as the most frequently cited implementation challenge. Respondents at national, provincial, and local levels consistently identified inaccuracies in the social registry (DTKS) as a major source of exclusion and inclusion errors. Frontline implementers reported that beneficiary lists often lagged behind rapidly changing household conditions, particularly in areas with high levels of informal employment and seasonal migration.

Beneficiaries in several case-study locations reported instances where households experiencing acute vulnerability were not registered, while others who were no longer poor continued to receive benefits. Local officials attributed these discrepancies to infrequent data updates, limited verification capacity, and reliance on self-reported or community-nominated data. These findings suggest that targeting problems were not primarily the result of program design but of implementation constraints related to data governance and administrative capacity.

Notably, while digitalization of registries was widely perceived as a positive development, respondents emphasized that technology alone did not resolve underlying institutional issues. In remote areas, limited internet access and insufficient training constrained the effective use of digital systems, reinforcing geographic inequalities in targeting outcomes.

2. Uneven Administrative Capacity at the Local Level

A second dominant theme concerns variation in administrative capacity across sub-national contexts. Case studies revealed significant differences in program implementation quality between districts with well-resourced social offices and those with limited human and financial resources. In high-capacity districts, social workers and facilitators were able to conduct regular beneficiary monitoring, resolve payment issues, and coordinate effectively with local health and education providers.

In contrast, low-capacity districts faced chronic understaffing, high workloads, and limited opportunities for training. Frontline workers in these settings reported prioritizing administrative compliance over substantive engagement with beneficiaries, reducing the potential for case management and

individualized support. As a result, programs that were formally identical produced markedly different experiences and outcomes for beneficiaries.

These findings indicate that local administrative capacity acts as a mediating variable between national policy intentions and on-the-ground outcomes. Respondents emphasized that benefit adequacy and conditionality mattered less than the presence of capable personnel and supportive institutional environments.

3. Fragmentation and Coordination Gaps within the Social Protection System

The findings also highlight persistent fragmentation across social protection programs and institutions. Despite policy discourse emphasizing integration, respondents described parallel data systems, overlapping eligibility criteria, and limited interoperability between programs such as PKH, food assistance, health insurance, and emergency transfers.

Local administrators reported that coordination meetings often focused on reporting requirements rather than joint problem-solving, while information sharing between ministries and agencies remained constrained by bureaucratic boundaries. Beneficiaries frequently perceived programs as isolated initiatives rather than components of a coherent system, leading to confusion regarding eligibility, grievance mechanisms, and benefit continuity.

Case study evidence suggests that fragmentation increased administrative burden at the local level and reduced the efficiency of resource allocation. Several respondents noted that households receiving multiple forms of assistance were not necessarily the poorest, while other vulnerable groups—such as informal workers and migrants—fell through systemic gaps. These findings reinforce the importance of system-level integration rather than incremental program expansion.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that Indonesia's social protection programs during 2015–2025 delivered meaningful protective benefits but were constrained by persistent implementation challenges. Targeting inaccuracies, uneven administrative capacity, and system fragmentation limited the reach and equity of programs, while crisis responses revealed both adaptability and structural weaknesses. The results highlight the need to move beyond program-centric evaluations toward a systems-oriented understanding of social protection implementation, emphasizing governance, capacity building, and institutional learning.

These findings provide an empirical foundation for the discussion and policy implications that follow, particularly regarding strategies to strengthen implementation quality and system coherence in Indonesia's evolving social protection landscape.

Discussion

This study set out to examine the implementation of Indonesia's social protection programs during the period 2015–2025 through a qualitative survey and multiple case study approach. The findings reveal that while social protection programs have delivered meaningful protective benefits, their effectiveness has been consistently constrained by implementation-related

challenges. This discussion interprets the findings in relation to existing theory and empirical literature, focusing on five interrelated dimensions: targeting and data governance, administrative capacity, system integration, crisis responsiveness, and the limits of social protection as a transformative instrument.

1. Implementation Quality as a Central Determinant of Program Effectiveness

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the empirical confirmation that implementation quality outweighs program design features in shaping social protection outcomes. Although Indonesia's major programs are well aligned with international best practices in terms of benefit structure and eligibility criteria, persistent weaknesses in targeting accuracy, payment reliability, and frontline capacity limit their realized impact. This finding is consistent with implementation theory, which emphasizes that policies are not simply executed but actively interpreted and negotiated by institutions and street-level actors (Gassner, et al., 2018).

The prominence of implementation constraints corroborates prior evidence that social protection outcomes cannot be inferred solely from program design or budgetary allocation. Instead, meso-level factors-such as registry management, administrative incentives, and local discretion-mediate the translation of policy into practice. This study extends existing literature by demonstrating how these dynamics persist over time, including during periods of crisis-induced expansion.

2. Targeting Errors and the Limits of Registry-Based Systems

The findings on persistent inclusion and exclusion errors align with earlier studies documenting weaknesses in Indonesia's social registry (DTKS), particularly in contexts characterized by high informality and mobility. While digitalization has improved efficiency and transparency, the results indicate that technological solutions alone are insufficient without parallel investments in verification capacity, institutional accountability, and community engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings challenge technocratic assumptions that improved data systems automatically yield better targeting. Instead, they support a socio-institutional view of targeting as a contested and dynamic process shaped by power relations, information asymmetries, and administrative constraints (Liu, et al., 2024). The persistence of targeting errors suggests that registry-based systems must be complemented by adaptive and participatory mechanisms to remain responsive to changing vulnerability profiles.

3. Local Administrative Capacity and Territorial Inequality

Variation in administrative capacity across districts emerged as a key explanatory factor for unequal program outcomes. This finding reinforces decentralization literature, which highlights how sub-national capacity differentials can generate territorial inequalities in service delivery (Rodrigues-Silveira, 2021). In high-capacity districts, programs functioned closer to their intended design, while in low-capacity areas, implementation was reduced to procedural compliance.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that capacity constraints affect not only efficiency but also the qualitative dimensions of social protection, such as beneficiary engagement, grievance redress, and case management. These insights resonate with research on “street-level bureaucracy,” which emphasizes how frontline workers’ discretion shapes policy outcomes under conditions of scarcity. Without sustained investments in human resources and institutional learning, program expansion risks amplifying rather than mitigating inequality.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By shifting analytical focus from individual program impacts to system-level and meso-level mechanisms, this study contributes to the broader literature on social protection and public policy implementation. It demonstrates that well-designed programs can produce uneven and fragile outcomes when institutional capacity, data governance, and coordination mechanisms are insufficient. Conversely, even modest benefits can yield meaningful welfare gains when supported by strong delivery systems and capable frontline institutions.

The study also underscores the importance of learning from crisis responses. While emergency adaptations during the pandemic revealed institutional flexibility and innovation, the limited institutionalization of these measures suggests missed opportunities for long-term system strengthening. Without deliberate efforts to consolidate lessons learned, social protection systems risk reverting to pre-crisis vulnerabilities.

Overall, the findings support a reconceptualization of social protection reform in Indonesia: from a program-centric approach focused on benefit expansion toward a systems-oriented and implementation-centered strategy that prioritizes governance, capacity building, and institutional learning. This conclusion has relevance not only for Indonesia but also for other middle-income countries seeking to strengthen social protection in the face of increasing social and economic uncertainty.

In conclusion, Indonesia’s experience during 2015–2025 illustrates both the promise and the limitations of social protection expansion in a complex and decentralized governance context. The key lesson from this study is clear: social protection outcomes depend not only on what programs exist, but on how they are implemented, coordinated, and sustained over time. Strengthening implementation capacity and system coherence is therefore essential for ensuring that social protection fulfils its role as a cornerstone of inclusive and resilient social development.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

While this study provides rich qualitative insights, it is subject to limitations inherent in qualitative research, including limited generalizability and reliance on self-reported data. Future research could combine qualitative system analysis with longitudinal quantitative data to test the causal pathways identified here. Comparative studies across countries would also enhance understanding of how different institutional configurations shape implementation outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The writing team would like to thank all parties who did not have time to mention their names one by one here. We would like to thank you for the support, both morally-academically, and financially. We also thank the Institute for Research and Community Service of Halu Oleo Kendari University for its support from the beginning to the completion of this article.

REFERENCES

- Alam, M. M., Fawzi, A. M., Islam, M. M., & Said, J. (2022). Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on national security issues: Indonesia as a case study. *Security Journal*, 35(4), 1067-1086.
- Arslan, A., Golgeci, I., Khan, Z., Al-Tabbaa, O., & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, P. (2021). Adaptive learning in cross-sector collaboration during global emergency: conceptual insights in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. *Multinational Business Review*, 29(1), 21-42.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 00(00), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Cahyadi, N., Hanna, R., Olken, B. A., Prima, R. A., Satriawan, E., & Syamsulhakim, E. (2020). Cumulative Impacts of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs: Experimental Evidence from Indonesia. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 12(4), 88-110. <https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20190245>
- Capano, G. (2025). Policy implementation and policy instruments: The underdeveloped dimensions of the four “political” American policy process theories. A Western European perspective. *European Policy Analysis*, 11(2), 230-253.
- Cresswell, J. W. (2013). *Research Design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed approaches. Third Edition.* Student Library. <http://www.lontar.ui.ac.id/detail?id=20418213>
- Dharma, B. (2024). Architecture of the Indonesia Welfare State: The reflection of 20 years of Indonesia Reformation Era. *Jurnal Kesejahteraan dan Pelayanan Sosial*, 5(1), 68-82.
- Gassner, D., & Gofen, A. (2018). Street-level management: A clientele-agent perspective on implementation. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 28(4), 551-568.

- Lestari, R. N., Achdiani, Y., & Nastia, G. indah P. (2024). Peran Pekerja Sosial dalam pengelolaan dana PKH dan dampaknya terhadap keberlanjutan ekonomi keluarga. *Jurnal Kesejahteraan Dan Pelayanan Sosial*, 5(2), 127–148. <https://doi.org/10.52423/jkps.v5i2.36>
- Liu, L., Xin, G., & Yi, H. (2024). Information asymmetry and vertical collective action dilemma: The case of targeted poverty alleviation in China. *Review of Policy Research*, 41(5), 790-814.
- Mahendradhata, Y., Andayani, N. L. P. E., Hasri, E. T., Arifi, M. D., Siahaan, R. G. M., Solikha, D. A., & Ali, P. B. (2021). The capacity of the Indonesian healthcare system to respond to COVID-19. *Frontiers in public health*, 9, 649819.
- Minichiello, V., Aroni, R., Timewell, E., & Alexander, L. (1996). *In-Depth Interviewing, Second Edition*. Addison Wesley Longman Australia Pty Ltd.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2019). Social Protection System Review of Indonesia. OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org>
- Ransome, P. (2017). Sociological Theory. In *Social theory for beginners*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t892z5.19>
- Rodrigues-Silveira, R. (2021). Public policy provision from a subnational perspective: context, institutions and spatial inequality. In *Negotiating Universalism in India and Latin America* (pp. 156-175). Routledge.
- Simcoe, T., Catillon, M., & Gertler, P. (2019). Who benefits most in disease management programs: Improving target efficiency. *Health economics*, 28(2), 189-203.
- Smeru Research Institute. (2019). Strengthening economic opportunities for Program Keluarga Harapan families: Evidence and recommendations (Policy brief). Smeru. <https://smeru.or.id>
- Sutiyo, S. (2023). A neo-institutional analysis of social protection: Insights from Indonesia. *Global Social Policy*, 23(2), 268-285.
- World Bank. (2024). Indonesia: Social protection system review and recent developments 2015–2024 (World Bank Report No. P160665). World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc. Kindle ed.