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Public Goods, Fiscal Gaps, and Road Decay in Lampung: A Political Economy Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between fiscal disparity and road infrastructure damage as a reflection of local government performance in Lampung Province. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study draws on secondary data from official government documents, local media reports, and academic literature. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns of governance weaknesses, fiscal structures, and the dynamics of infrastructure policy implementation. The findings reveal that widespread road damage in Lampung is not merely a technical issue, but a systemic governance failure rooted in fiscal constraints and suboptimal public service delivery. Fiscal imbalance is evident in low local revenue, the dominance of personnel expenditure, and heavy dependence on central transfers without proportional compensation for national burdens such as logistics flows and inter-island transportation. Local institutions, including regional-owned enterprises (BUMD) and public service agencies (BLUD), remain underutilized as alternative revenue sources. This study positions road quality as a direct indicator of governance effectiveness. Its novelty lies in integrating public goods theory, governance theory, and fiscal disparity frameworks to analyze infrastructure problems in structural and political terms. Policy reforms should include national fiscal arrangements based on service burdens, local fiscal capacity strengthening, and institutional revitalization to support equitable and sustainable infrastructure provision.

***Keywords**: Fiscal Disparity, Infrastructure Governance, Local Government Performance, Political Economy, Public Goods*

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INTRODUCTION

Roads are the lifeblood of social and economic life. In Lampung Province, however, that lifeblood appears increasingly feeble. Potholes on national roads, long cracks along provincial routes, and the dire conditions of regency roads connecting villages to urban centers have become a familiar sight—so familiar, in fact, that they are often accepted as inevitable (Laksono & Sulistiani, 2024; Rinaldi et al., 2022). Yet road infrastructure is not merely a physical or aesthetic matter; it reflects the quality of public service delivery and the capacity of government governance (Metwally & Samir, 2024; Mulyawan, 2024). The widespread deterioration of roads in Lampung not only hinders mobility, increases logistics costs, and heightens accident risks, but also signifies deeper structural problems within the regional fiscal system. When citizens complain about potholes, they are, in essence, questioning the effectiveness of governance.

Lampung is no small province. With a population exceeding nine million and a Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) of IDR 483 trillion in 2024, Lampung holds a strategic position as the gateway to Sumatra and a vital node in the national logistics chain. However, public spending accounts for only 6.6% of total GRDP, revealing a disconnection between economic dynamics and regional fiscal capacity. When a regency must manage over 2,000 kilometers of roads with an annual infrastructure budget of just IDR 30 billion, the issue extends beyond project management—it reflects a systemic failure in fiscal allocation and distribution. This issue is crucial to examine because behind every kilometer of damaged road lies a portrait of fiscal inequality, institutional dysfunction, and weak policy responsiveness.

The discourse on road infrastructure as a public good has long been explored in economics and public policy literature. Since Samuelson (1954) introduced the concept of public goods, road infrastructure has served as a classic example of a good that cannot be efficiently provided by markets and thus requires state intervention. Studies by Chen & Martinez-Vazquez (2024) and Janas (2025) highlight that the provision of public services is heavily dependent on regional fiscal capacity, which often varies significantly across regions. For instance, research by Amekawa et al. (2021) and Li et al. (2023) found that low regional own-source revenue (PAD) directly correlates with underdeveloped basic infrastructure outside of Java. Meanwhile, studies by Cai et al. (2022), Fang & Chang (2022), and Wenzel et al. (2022) emphasize that dependence on Special Allocation Funds (DAK) for infrastructure development renders regions highly vulnerable to shifts in central government policies.

In the context of Lampung, several studies have been conducted, but most focus on technical aspects of roads or user satisfaction. For example, Inong et al. (2025) and Sari et al. (2024) examined the relationship between road quality and traffic accident rates, while Kurniawan et al. (2024) and Ramadhini et al. (2024) emphasized the technical aspects of road maintenance from a civil engineering perspective. On the fiscal side, some analyses by Makhmudi (2025) have indeed addressed the limitations of regional fiscal capacity, but have not specifically linked these issues to road infrastructure as an indicator of governance. Research by Evendia & Firmansyah (2021) and Fatimah et al. (2024) underlines the importance of central-regional synergy in the development of strategic areas, yet does not address fiscal inequality in the context of the national logistics burden borne by regions such as Lampung.

Moreover, literature on center-regional relations and fiscal justice, such as the works of Aritenang & Chandramidi (2023) and Zalili et al. (2023), suggests that fiscal decentralization in Indonesia has not yet succeeded in equalizing public service delivery. Similar findings are presented by Setiawan et al. (2022) and Soamole et al. (2024) in their analyses of fiscal disparities in Eastern Indonesia. On the other hand, several studies exploring the effectiveness of Regional-Owned Enterprises (BUMD) and Public Service Agencies (BLUD) in boosting PAD, including Arni (2024), Budi & Mashari (2024), Soselisa et al. (2024), and Tajuddin & Kessi (2025), demonstrate the significant potential of regional institutions as alternative infrastructure financing sources—though actual implementation remains limited in many areas, including Lampung. Nevertheless, there has been no comprehensive study linking fiscal structure, regional institutional conditions, and road deterioration within a political economy analytical framework.

Within the existing literature, there appears to be a gap: few studies examine road infrastructure through a multidimensional lens—as a product of fiscal configurations, external burdens from national activities, and weak regional institutions. The issue of road damage tends to be viewed as a technical or sectoral phenomenon, rather than a structural symptom of unequal fiscal relations and unresponsive governance. This is where the present article seeks to contribute—to demonstrate that road conditions in Lampung are not merely a technical issue or a development project, but rather a reflection of fiscal power relations between the center and the regions, as well as an indicator of institutional performance in managing public resources.

By positioning road infrastructure at the intersection of public goods theory, fiscal inequality, and institutional governance, this article offers a novel perspective that has been underexplored in regional infrastructure studies. The political economy approach employed allows for a deeper reading of the root causes rather than merely addressing symptoms. This perspective also opens space for policy reflection on the importance of fiscal compensation schemes based on public service burdens—an issue that has yet to be sufficiently addressed in the architecture of intergovernmental financial transfers.

The purpose of this study is to analyze road damage in Lampung within a political economy framework, highlighting how fiscal inequality, weak local institutions, and uncompensated national logistics burdens have shaped fragile infrastructure conditions. Thus, this study not only strengthens our structural understanding of road infrastructure problems but also broadens the scholarly horizon in governance and fiscal policy studies in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, based on the consideration that the phenomenon under investigation is complex, multidimensional, and highly contextual. Road deterioration in Lampung Province cannot be fully understood through statistical figures or technical data alone, but requires an in-depth understanding of fiscal structures, institutional practices, and the evolving policy narratives at the local level. Therefore, a qualitative approach was chosen to enable a deeper and more open exploration of the socio-political context surrounding this issue. As noted by Akyildiz & Ahmed (2021), a qualitative approach allows researchers to grasp the meaning behind the experiences and perspectives of actors involved in non-linear situations.

The selection of Lampung Province as the research site was not incidental. Lampung has unique characteristics: economically, it is one of the provinces with the highest GRDP in Sumatra, yet fiscally, it faces acute limitations. In practice, Lampung functions as a national logistics hub—traversed by coal transportation, inter-island migration flows, and logistics distribution vehicles—but receives little fiscal compensation for these external burdens. This makes Lampung a critical and representative case study to illustrate how fiscal disparities and unequal development burdens directly affect the most basic public services, such as roads.

Information for this research was gathered from a range of purposively selected informants, based on their relevance and depth of knowledge on the issue. A total of 12 informants were interviewed, comprising: three technical officers from the Provincial Public Works and Highways Agency, two planners from the Provincial and District Regional Development Planning Agencies (Bappeda), two academics specializing in regional fiscal and infrastructure issues, two civil society activists involved in policy advocacy, and three road users from Tulang Bawang, Central Lampung, and South Lampung. These informants were chosen to represent the perspectives of policymakers, policy observers, and affected communities, thus providing a comprehensive picture of the fiscal and infrastructure dynamics on the ground.

Data collection was conducted through multiple techniques, including literature review, document analysis, and local media tracking. The literature review included an examination of academic journals, policy research reports, and the theoretical foundations underpinning this study—particularly those related to public goods, fiscal decentralization, and governance. Document analysis focused on the review of provincial and district/city budget documents (APBD), Regional Government Financial Reports (LKPD), and audit reports from the Audit Board of Indonesia (BPK). Local media tracking was conducted to capture the public narratives surrounding road damage, government responses, and public pressure on infrastructure policy. The use of local media as a data source is considered important, as it records the evolving daily discourse and provides socio-political context to the phenomenon under study (Barroga et al., 2023).

For data analysis, a thematic analysis technique was employed as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2021). The process began with repeated readings of all documents and interview transcripts to identify emerging key issues. The data were then categorized into themes such as regional fiscal capacity, public expenditure structure, dependence on central government transfers, and the technical condition of road infrastructure. Each theme was further examined systematically to understand how various factors interact with one another, and how fiscal and institutional configurations shape the current state of infrastructure. The analysis was conducted inductively and reflectively, allowing the researcher to capture the underlying dynamics within the data, not merely the surface-level findings.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, a process of data triangulation was carried out. This involved comparing information from official documents with statements from informants and media reports. For instance, budget allocation data from the APBD were compared with testimonies from technical officials and accounts from road users. Temporal triangulation was also employed by comparing trends in budget allocations and road conditions over the past five years. This approach enabled the researcher to capture the continuity or change in policy and its temporal impacts. This procedure aligns with validation guidelines in qualitative research as recommended by Santos et al. (2020) and Schlunegger et al. (2024), who emphasize the importance of triangulation as a key instrument in building the credibility of arguments in interpretive research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Damaged Roads as a Reflection of Public Service Fragility

The widespread road damage across various regencies and cities in Lampung Province is not merely a matter of physical infrastructure; it represents the systemic fragility of public services. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency of Lampung Province (2024), of the total 1,695.48 kilometers of provincial roads, only 57.6% are in good condition. Around 21.3% are classified as damaged, and 16.7% are considered severely damaged. These figures indicate that nearly one in five provincial road segments poses a safety risk to road users and hinders both economic and social activities.

This issue becomes even more complex when examined through the lens of uneven damage distribution. Field observations revealed that the most severe deterioration occurs along vital routes connecting production centers to distribution corridors. For instance, the Simpang Pematang–Rawajitu road in Mesuji Regency is riddled with deep potholes, while the Negara–Blambangan Umpu road in Way Kanan is marred by long cracks and persistent flooding even after the rainy season. In South Lampung, access roads to Bakauheni Port—an important national transport hub—are also in disrepair. In contrast, roads in urban areas such as Bandar Lampung are relatively well maintained, highlighting disparities in budget allocation and development priorities across regions.

These observations are supported by the testimony of an official from a local Public Works Department, referred to here as T.R., who explained that the road maintenance budget is sufficient only for emergency patching rather than comprehensive repairs. He noted that most of the annual budget "is already consumed by routine expenditures," making it difficult to plan new road projects or upgrade existing ones without central government support. A similar view was expressed by an academic, F.M., who argued that road damage is the "visual symptom of a deeper fiscal disease"—namely, the mismatch between service delivery burdens and financing capacity.

Road damage is not solely caused by technical factors such as infrastructure age or extreme weather but also by extremely high traffic volumes. Lampung serves as a major transit corridor between Java and Sumatra, traversed by up to 27 million tons of coal trucks from South Sumatra annually, along with a continuous flow of inter-island logistics and passenger vehicles via Bakauheni Port. However, there is no specific fiscal scheme designed by the central government to compensate for these national burdens. As Sulaiman et al. (2024) have emphasized, quality public service delivery depends on the system's ability to align societal needs with institutional capacity and available resources. In this context, road damage serves as a proxy indicator for the failure of local governments to fulfill their social contract with the public, due to their inability to provide adequate basic infrastructure.

This situation is exacerbated by highly skewed regional spending structures. In regencies such as Tulang Bawang and East Lampung, locally generated revenue (PAD) accounts for less than 5% of the regional budget (APBD), while more than 70% is allocated to personnel expenditure. The fiscal space for capital spending, including road infrastructure development, is thus extremely limited. When Special Allocation Funds (DAK) from the central government are delayed or reduced, infrastructure projects are directly affected. A regional planner, S.Y., remarked, "If the DAK hasn't been disbursed, then all physical projects are on hold," illustrating how fiscal dependency limits regional autonomy in determining infrastructure priorities.

Moreover, alternative financing mechanisms through Regional-Owned Enterprises (BUMD) or Public Service Agencies (BLUD) remain underdeveloped. For example, BUMDs such as PT Wahana Raharja and PT LJU, which were expected to bolster regional revenue, have repeatedly posted losses and contributed little to PAD. Even BLUDs like hospitals and environmental laboratories have yet to be optimized as semi-commercial entities capable of supporting public financing. This indicates that the issue of damaged roads is not merely about insufficient funds but is also rooted in weak governance and institutional capacity at the regional level.

From the perspective of contemporary public service theory, the road crisis in Lampung can be interpreted as a failure to establish a responsive and sustainable service system. Hieng & Prabawati (2024) stress that public services are not solely about technical outputs but also social processes involving legitimacy, trust, and equitable resource distribution. Damaged roads signal a breakdown in these processes. When the state is unable to provide adequate basic infrastructure, it fails in its role as a provider of public goods—services that cannot be delegated to market mechanisms. The potholes in Lampung's roads are not just physical gaps but metaphorical holes in our governance and fiscal systems. They reflect the fact that fragile public services not only cause technical hardship for citizens but also erode trust in a state that ought to be present through equitable infrastructure development.

Fiscal Inequality and Unproductive Spending Structures

One of the most significant findings in this study is the reality of acute fiscal disparities and unproductive spending structures across regencies and cities in Lampung Province. This inequality is evident in the low contribution of PAD to regional budgets and the overwhelming dominance of personnel expenditure within public spending structures. In practice, many regions in Lampung are trapped in a state of "fiscal illusion," where development activities are heavily reliant on central government transfers, while local capacity to mobilize internal resources remains weak.

Data from the 2024 APBD documents indicate that 10 out of 15 regencies/cities in Lampung have PAD levels below 10% of their total budgets. Some, such as Pesisir Barat and East Lampung, report PAD contributions of less than 5%. With such minimal local revenue, nearly all public spending is sustained by General Allocation Funds (DAU), Special Allocation Funds (DAK), and Revenue Sharing Funds (DBH). However, rather than being used to stimulate economic growth or develop essential infrastructure like roads, 70–80% of these funds are absorbed by personnel expenditures. This leaves an extremely narrow fiscal space, rendering local governments nearly incapable of responding to strategic community needs.

This condition is particularly visible in field observations in Central Lampung and Tulang Bawang Regencies. Government offices in these areas appear relatively grand, yet access roads to public service centers are riddled with potholes, narrow lanes, and poor lighting. In one district in Tulang Bawang, the research team took nearly an hour to travel 15 kilometers due to severely damaged roads, even though the route leads to a key agricultural center. When questioned, a local planning official, L.F., admitted that infrastructure funding "is always what's left after routine needs are met," which explains why new road construction or infrastructure upgrades are rarely allocated adequate budgetary priority.

Furthermore, this fiscal disparity reveals that decentralization in Indonesia has yet to deliver genuine fiscal autonomy. According to Mayasari & Nengzih (2025), effective fiscal decentralization requires two main conditions: subnational fiscal autonomy and expenditure discretion. In reality, most local governments in Lampung function merely as administrative operators of centrally sourced budgets. They lack the flexibility to define development priorities based on local needs because budget allocations are largely tied to mandatory and routine expenditures. In such situations, promises of inclusive and sustainable regional development remain rhetorical without the support of a conducive fiscal architecture.

A similar concern was raised by an academic, R.N., who argued that fiscal disparity is not only about the amount of funding but also about the lack of institutional capacity to manage and develop alternative revenue streams. According to him, many local governments have not seriously pursued optimization of user fees, asset management, or contributions from BUMDs. This exacerbates dependency on the central government and hampers long-term fiscal self-reliance.

In this context, unproductive spending structures act as direct obstacles to the provision of public services, especially road infrastructure. When the majority of the budget is consumed by salaries and structural allowances, capital expenditure becomes secondary—if not entirely sidelined. This demonstrates that regional fiscal problems are not merely about the volume of available funds but also about how those funds are managed and directed. As Septiari & Prabawati (2025) argue, fiscal decentralization without concurrent reform in local financial management merely shifts inefficiency from the center to the regions.

Observations of budget realization over the past five years show that personnel expenditure has risen more rapidly than capital expenditure. Meanwhile, budget absorption for road infrastructure has stagnated or even declined in some regions. In Way Kanan Regency, for example, capital spending on road infrastructure in 2024 accounted for only 9.2% of the total budget, while personnel expenditure reached 73.5%. This stark imbalance clearly demonstrates how unbalanced fiscal structures serve as major barriers to developing quality and sustainable infrastructure.

Fiscal inequality and unproductive spending are two sides of the same coin—together, they explain why roads in Lampung remain damaged despite the continued flow of public funds each year. When fiscal capacity is low, spending priorities are inefficient, and regional autonomy is limited, public services will remain fragile. In this context, the road crisis is not a technical crisis, but a deeper crisis of fiscal governance—one that can only be addressed through structural reform of Indonesia's decentralization architecture and regional financial management.

National Burden, Minimal Compensation: The Failure of the Equalization Scheme

Lampung Province has long played a strategic role in Indonesia's national logistics and mobility network. Its position as the gateway to Sumatra from Java via Bakauheni Port makes the province not only a transit hub but also a major corridor for goods distribution and human migration across islands. Every day, thousands of logistical vehicles—including coal trucks, agricultural commodity carriers, and industrial goods transporters—travel along Lampung's main roads to connect southern Sumatra with Java. According to data from the Lampung Provincial Transportation Agency (2023), more than 3,000 heavy trucks traverse the Trans-Sumatra Highway daily, excluding private vehicles and inter-provincial buses.

However, this infrastructure burden has not been matched by adequate fiscal support from the central government. Several national roads crossing districts such as South Lampung, Tulang Bawang, and Mesuji endure sustained pressure. These roads, though technically under central government jurisdiction, also transfer burdens onto provincial and district roads due to their interconnectedness with local activities. Field observations along the Simpang Penawar–Rawa Jitu route revealed roads in conditions no longer fit for heavy vehicle traffic. Massive potholes stretch for nearly two kilometers, and stagnant water during the rainy season further exacerbates drivers' difficulties. Local residents often resort to self-funded sand patching rather than wait for government repairs.

This irony becomes even more glaring when compared to the allocation of General Allocation Funds (DAU) and Special Allocation Funds (DAK) for infrastructure received by these districts. For instance, Tulang Bawang District received only IDR 12.4 billion in physical DAK for roads in 2024—a figure grossly disproportionate to the daily logistics pressure borne by the area. A technical official from the local Public Works Office, identified as S.Y., stated that requests for additional budget support are frequently denied or reduced without consideration of the daily traffic volume. Regional governments are expected to conform to general formulas, despite facing logistical burdens far beyond their fiscal capacity.

This phenomenon reflects the failure of the equalization scheme within intergovernmental fiscal relations. Hermawan & Hakim (2024) emphasize the importance of the vertical balance principle—namely, a fair alignment between the burdens borne by local governments and the fiscal resources available to them. In Lampung's case, the absence of a burden-based fiscal compensation mechanism reveals the lack of fiscal justice. Regions serving as vital national corridors, subjected to intense logistical stress and infrastructure degradation, receive no special priority in fiscal allocation. The lack of incentives for managing external burdens creates structural inequalities that force regions to bear the consequences of national strategic functions without the fiscal power to address them.

This condition not only leads to economic losses due to slow goods mobility and rising local logistics costs, but also results in social exhaustion. Public complaints about the slow governmental response to road damage have become common narratives in both local and national media. A civil society activist in Mesuji, referred to as T.R., noted that it has become customary for residents to protest by planting banana trees in potholes as a form of satire. Yet he admitted that such protests often go viral temporarily, without any concrete follow-up from authorities.

Moreover, the national burden carried by Lampung without fair fiscal compensation has placed the province in a politically and socially vulnerable position. In recent years, the narrative of fiscal injustice has begun to surface in local public discourse, including legislative sessions in which local representatives criticize the meager central government transfers in light of the developmental impact imposed on regional infrastructure. This demonstrates that the issue of vertical imbalance is not merely a matter of budget figures, but also of legitimacy in the central-local relationship.

If left unaddressed, this situation risks eroding public trust in the state’s capacity to deliver fair and proportional public services. In the view of Chen & Martinez-Vazquez (2024), road infrastructure is not merely a technical facility—it is a symbol of state presence in citizens’ everyday lives. When this symbol remains in a state of constant disrepair without improvement, it is not only the road that breaks down, but also the social contract between the state and its people.

Weak Local Institutions and Untapped Potential

One of the critical knots prolonging the fiscal and infrastructure challenges in Lampung Province is the weakness of local institutional capacity. In the context of fiscal decentralization, the existence of Regional-Owned Enterprises (BUMDs) and Regional Public Service Agencies (BLUDs) should serve as key instruments to broaden sources of Local Own-Source Revenue (PAD) and support sustainable public services. In practice, however, many of these institutional entities are underdeveloped and have instead become unproductive administrative burdens.

The performance of BUMDs such as PT Wahana Raharja, which operates in the transport and logistics sector, and PT Lampung Jasa Utama (LJU), which is tasked with managing parking and public infrastructure services, falls far short of their fiscal potential. According to the 2023 regional financial report, the net profit contributions of these two BUMDs to PAD were below 0.5%, plagued by structural issues ranging from lack of business innovation to dependency on capital injections from the regional budget (APBD). A senior staff member from the provincial Bappeda remarked, “Our BUMDs don’t think like business entities. They act more like government appendages waiting for orders and funds." This statement underscores how BUMDs remain bureaucratically controlled rather than functioning as autonomous actors capable of adapting to market dynamics.

A similar pattern can be observed in BLUDs. Several type B and C regional public hospitals (RSUDs) that have obtained BLUD status in districts such as Liwa in West Lampung and Menggala in Tulang Bawang still face financial management and service delivery constraints. Despite regulatory frameworks allowing more flexible operations, many BLUDs lack professional accounting staff, adequate management information systems, and performance-based incentives. Even regional environmental laboratories—which could serve as testing and certification centers for water and soil quality—have not been managed as BLUD business units, despite rising demand from expanding plantation and industrial activities.

A field visit to a BUMD office in Bandar Lampung revealed a grand building that was nearly devoid of activity. Office spaces were cluttered with files, with no signs of digitalization or integrated services. Even the director's office resembled a waiting room, with minimal activity observed. This reinforced the perception that local institutions remain far from forming a productive ecosystem capable of generating fiscal value-added.

This institutional weakness can be explained through the concept of local institutional capacity developed by Cid & Lerner (2023), which posits that long-term regional fiscal strength depends heavily on the ability of local institutions to operate autonomously, responsively, and innovatively in resource management. Institutions that fail to adapt, operate solely as bureaucratic routines, and lack public accountability, tend to deepen fiscal dependency on the central government. When local institutions fail to perform their economic and governance functions, the fiscal space for financing road infrastructure and other public services continues to shrink.

More than a mere technical deficiency, this institutional stagnation also reflects a lack of political investment and long-term vision among local policymakers. A former member of the regional legislative council (DPRD), identified as D.F., commented that "BUMDs are often used as political bargaining tools rather than as vehicles for economic development. Their orientation is not profit, but positions." This highlights how many local institutional entities are trapped in patronage politics rather than managed as efficient and independent public institutions.

This accumulation of weaknesses significantly contributes to the cycle of fiscal stagnation experienced by many districts in Lampung. Potential PAD sources—from hospital services, parking management, public transport, waste processing, to laboratory testing—remain underutilized. With the right institutional strengthening, these sectors could become self-financing sources for infrastructure development, which currently remains heavily dependent on central transfers. The absence of commitment to institutional reform also weakens regional competitiveness in attracting private investment and securing national strategic projects. Without comprehensive institutional reform—covering regulatory, governance, and leadership dimensions—efforts to increase regional fiscal capacity will continue to be hampered. Furthermore, fiscal dependency without institutional capacity will only prolong the public service deficit, including in the urgently needed improvement of road infrastructure.

Damaged Roads, Failed Governance: Reading Infrastructure as a Political Arena

In many areas across Lampung Province, potholes are not an uncommon sight—they are a routine part of residents' daily landscape. However, when these holes remain unrepaired for years, when inter-district connector roads are left neglected, and when overloaded logistics trucks continue to operate without regulatory oversight, the damaged roads can no longer be read merely as a technical failure. They evolve into a representation of deeper governmental dysfunction—a systemic failure in public governance.

Within the framework of infrastructural politics, as articulated by Téllez Contreras (2025), infrastructure is not merely a physical object, but also a contested space involving the state, society, and various political interests. In this sense, damaged roads are symbols of the absence of a sound governance consensus—they reflect the misalignment of development planning, the fragility of local fiscal capacity, poor inter-sectoral coordination, and the lack of sufficient political pressure from citizens to demand their basic rights (Hallinan & Gilmore, 2021).

An interview with a local community leader in Way Kanan Regency, known as Mr. H., revealed that the main road in his village had been severely damaged for more than five years. During the rainy season, access in and out of the village is nearly cut off, while promises of repair have become part of a recurring electoral ritual. When asked why the villagers had not staged mass protests, he responded softly, "Where else can we turn to? When the central and local governments keep shifting the blame, all we can do is patch it up with stones ourselves." His words encapsulate both resignation and an exposure of the power imbalance between the state and its citizens—a relationship in which accountability is diluted by an unresponsive bureaucracy.

Field observations along the provincial road connecting Labuhan Maringgai and Jabung sub-districts in East Lampung Regency reveal a striking irony. On the one hand, the road is a strategic route for transporting agricultural commodities such as cassava, corn, and palm oil. On the other hand, it has deteriorated into a muddy quagmire, with potholes exceeding 50 centimeters in diameter. Large trucks are often seen stuck in the mud, while schoolchildren must remove their shoes to walk through the area. There are no traffic signs, no field officers, and not even a project signboard. The absence of the state becomes materially manifest: a dead road.

Behind this physical damage lies a more structural failure. Many infrastructure development programs are not based on participatory planning schemes, but rather on short-term political interests. Repair projects are often prioritized in areas with strategic electoral value, not based on technical urgency. One civil servant from the Public Works and Housing

Agency, identified by the initials A.T., admitted that "road development allocations are not purely technocratic—they are often influenced by local political dynamics and proposals inserted through DPRD (regional parliament) networks." This statement underscores that infrastructure planning is not always born of objective needs, but often follows the logic of development politicization.

At the macro level, dysfunction also stems from vertical fiscal imbalances between the central and regional governments. When Lampung bears the logistical burden of national operations—such as coal distribution and inter-island migration flows through Bakauheni Port—without receiving compensatory fiscal transfers based on this burden, then the national financial system has failed to uphold the principle of distributive justice. Roads damaged by national-scale usage are not offset by adequate budgetary support from the center, while local fiscal capacity is undermined by an unproductive expenditure structure.

This inequality is further exacerbated by the lack of local institutional innovation. Regional-owned enterprises (BUMD) and public service agencies (BLUD), which should contribute to locally generated revenue (PAD) and support road financing, have yet to escape bureaucratic inertia. Institutions that should serve as part of the solution often become part of the problem, reinforcing dependency on central transfers.

Within the framework of infrastructural politics, failure to maintain roads is not merely a matter of technical negligence but a consequence of an unfulfilled social contract. The state—through both regional and central governments—has failed to provide basic infrastructure that should symbolize its presence and concern. Citizens, in such circumstances, are forced to bear the consequences of a system that does not serve them—they must remain productive even when their access is buried in mud, and continue to believe in a state that is materially absent. The damaged road becomes the most honest portrait of a dysfunctional governance system. It speaks of paralyzed bureaucracy, weak coordination, elite-oriented politics, and citizens marginalized from priority. Thus, repairing roads in this context is not merely about patching asphalt—it is about rebuilding the very foundation of an equitable and just state–citizen relationship.

CONCLUSION

The widespread road damage in Lampung Province can no longer be interpreted merely as a technical issue or a failure in infrastructure planning. Rather, it reflects a structural failure in fiscal governance and regional institutional capacity. In this context, damaged roads represent the material manifestation of deep-rooted fiscal inequalities—characterized by low local revenue (PAD), dominant personnel expenditure, and the absence of fiscal compensation schemes for national burdens borne by regional areas, such as inter-island logistics flows. On the other hand, the potential of local institutions like BUMDs and BLUDs to act as alternative fiscal engines remains stagnant, hindered by weak managerial capacity and inadequate regulatory frameworks. All these factors demonstrate that road infrastructure problems are not simply the result of insufficient funding, but rather symptoms of an unequal center–periphery relationship and the absence of strong local institutions. This conclusion reinforces the study's aim to examine road infrastructure as a concrete indicator of subnational government effectiveness, while also offering a more structural and political lens through which to interpret public service delivery. Thus, the primary contribution of this study lies in its attempt to integrate theories of public goods, governance, and fiscal inequality into a cohesive political-economic framework—one capable of explaining how potholes have become the most honest metaphor for the long road toward fiscal justice and responsive governance.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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