



## Exploring the Lived Experiences and Sense-Making of Civil Servants in Indonesia's 3T Regions: A Phenomenological Study

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### ABSTRACT

Public administration research increasingly emphasizes the importance of understanding the human dimension of public service, particularly in challenging and marginalized settings. In Indonesia's 3T (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged) regions, civil servants encounter unique obstacles that shape both their professional responsibilities and personal experiences. While existing studies often address technical or policy challenges, little is known about the interpretation and lived realities of civil servants in these contexts. This study asks: How do civil servants in 3T regions make sense of the complexities of their service roles? Using a qualitative phenomenological methodology grounded in the philosophical principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research explores the essential meanings underlying their day-to-day experiences and their adaptive responses to adversity. Twelve civil servants with direct field experience in 3T regions participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using IPA, revealing core themes such as resource scarcity, emotional adaptation, the reconstruction of professional identity, and the importance of cultural engagement. The findings demonstrate that civil servants develop resilience, reshape their sense of purpose, and rely on community integration to navigate persistent challenges. These insights provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of public service in marginalized regions and highlight the necessity for policies and training programs that foster psychological resilience and cultural sensitivity among public officials. The results lay a foundation for future research on public service experiences in remote or disadvantaged settings.



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## INTRODUCTION

Public administration is pivotal in shaping the quality and equity of services delivered to diverse communities. In Indonesia, deploying civil servants to frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged (3T) regions represents a key strategy to promote inclusive governance and social justice. These regions face significant infrastructural deficits, limited access to essential services, and deep socio-economic disparities, making effective public service delivery both critical and challenging.

Civil servants in 3T regions function not only as administrators but also as agents of change who mediate between government policies and local realities. Their roles demand considerable adaptation and resilience due to complex social, cultural, and geographic factors. The experience of serving in these areas transcends administrative tasks to include emotional, psychological, and ethical dimensions closely linked to the local social context. Despite the recognized importance of public service in marginalized settings, the current understanding remains predominantly oriented toward policy outcomes and quantitative measures of service delivery. There is limited insight into the lived experiences of civil servants who are at the frontline of these challenges. Exploring these experiences is essential for capturing the nuanced meanings and personal significance attributed to public service in demanding contexts. A phenomenological approach offers the opportunity to uncover these layers of experience, providing a foundation for more humanistic, contextually sensitive, and effective public administration practices.

In recent years, research focusing on the lived experiences of individuals within specific social and organizational phenomena has gained increasing importance, particularly in the field of public administration. Understanding how civil servants interpret and ascribe meaning to their roles, especially in challenging environments such as 3T regions, provides essential insights that go beyond standard performance metrics or policy evaluations. This line of inquiry emphasizes the need to access the subjective realities and personal narratives that shape the day-to-day realities of public service.

However, methodological challenges persist in capturing these deep and nuanced meanings. Traditional quantitative approaches, while effective for measuring outcomes and identifying trends, often fall short in revealing the complexity and depth of individual experience. Data derived from surveys or structured instruments may fail to address the subtleties of emotion, adaptation, and personal transformation that are central to the phenomenon being studied. As a result, much of the existing research in this area tends to overlook the intangible and context-dependent aspects that can only be understood through direct engagement with participants' own stories and reflections.

This limitation underscores the need for research designs that prioritize the exploration of subjective experience and meaning-making processes. Phenomenological methods, with their explicit focus on lived experience, offer a powerful alternative for uncovering the essence of such complex social phenomena. Despite their potential, phenomenological studies in the context of civil service in remote or marginalized settings remain scarce, indicating a substantial gap in both understanding and practice.

Conventional solutions for addressing challenges in public service delivery—especially in remote and disadvantaged (3T) regions—have predominantly relied on established administrative practices and quantitative evaluations. While these approaches have contributed valuable insights into operational efficiency and policy implementation, they often lack the capacity to uncover the nuanced, subjective experiences of civil servants in the field. Practical measures, such as performance indicators or standardized surveys, may quantify outcomes but seldom capture the personal meanings, emotional responses, and transformative processes inherent to serving in complex social environments.

This limitation results in a less comprehensive understanding of the lived realities faced by civil servants, particularly regarding how they construct meaning, adapt to adversity, and negotiate their professional identities within challenging contexts. The richness of experience and the subtleties of personal and social adaptation are easily overlooked when research focuses solely on observable behaviors or measurable outputs.

To address this gap, phenomenological methods provide a compelling alternative by allowing for in-depth exploration of the essence and meaning of experience. Such an approach is crucial for revealing the complex, context-dependent realities that shape public service in 3T regions—realities that remain largely inaccessible through traditional methods. Despite the recognized need, phenomenological studies within this domain are still rare, underscoring the importance and timeliness of the present research.

Previous research on public service in remote and disadvantaged regions has explored various aspects of policy implementation, administrative challenges, and the impact of infrastructure limitations on service delivery. Several studies have examined the experiences of frontline workers, yet most rely on quantitative data or surface-level descriptions, often missing the deeper meanings behind their actions and adaptations. Theoretical frameworks on lived experience and meaning-making, such as those by Smith and colleagues, have highlighted the importance of capturing subjective perspectives in complex social contexts. However, there remains a need to better understand how civil servants personally interpret and respond to the unique demands of working in 3T regions. This study is motivated by the gap in knowledge concerning the rich, subjective realities of public service in these challenging environments.

This research adopts a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of civil servants in 3T regions. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was chosen because it enables a detailed exploration of the ways individuals construct meaning in their professional lives. By focusing on direct narratives and personal reflections, this study addresses the limitations of previous

approaches that fail to capture the essence of subjective experience. The use of IPA is justified by its strength in revealing the underlying meanings and psychological adaptations that define the work of civil servants in demanding contexts. In doing so, the study provides a deeper and more holistic understanding of public service in frontier areas.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction that sets the context and outlines the research gap. It is followed by a description of the research setting and the rationale for the chosen methodological approach. Subsequent sections explain the data collection process and the analytic procedures used, such as thematic and interpretative analysis. The results section presents the core themes and essential meanings identified in the data, supported by direct participant quotations. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings and recommendations for future research and practice.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

A phenomenological research design was employed to explore the subjective experiences of civil servants (ASN) engaged in public service within 3T regions. The phenomenological approach was selected for its capacity to capture the lived meanings and in-depth perspectives of individuals directly experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), rooted in the philosophical traditions of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger's existential hermeneutics, was utilized. IPA focuses on understanding how participants make sense of their unique situations and the broader context shaping those experiences, emphasizing both descriptive and interpretive layers of meaning. This design enabled a comprehensive examination of personal perceptions, emotional responses, and the construction of meaning within the challenging context of public administration in remote areas.

### **Participants**

Participants comprised civil servants currently or previously assigned to various 3T regions in Indonesia. Selection was carried out using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct, relevant experience pertaining to the research phenomenon. Inclusion criteria encompassed civil servants who had served a minimum of six months in 3T regions, represented diverse administrative roles, and varied in gender, age, and educational backgrounds. Exclusion criteria involved individuals without direct field experience or with administrative postings limited to urban areas. The sample included twelve participants (7 male, 5 female), aged between 28 and 52 years, with an average tenure in 3T regions of 1.8 years.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit detailed narratives and personal reflections on professional experiences. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations chosen by participants to maximize privacy and comfort, including government offices, community centers, and, in some cases, participants' homes. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Anonymity was emphasized throughout the process, and care was taken to create a supportive environment conducive to open, honest communication. Standardized protocols for phenomenological interviews were referenced (Smith et al., 2009), with minor adaptations to accommodate local cultural norms and logistical constraints.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), following a systematic process of familiarization, coding, and theme development. Transcribed interviews were reviewed multiple times to ensure immersion in the data. Significant statements and meaning units were identified, then coded and grouped into emergent themes representing the essence of participants' lived experiences. Thematic development was carried out iteratively, allowing for refinement and validation

of categories. NVivo software played a supportive role in organizing, managing, and retrieving coded data, thereby facilitating the analytic process and ensuring rigor in theme development. Far from being a mere coding tool, NVivo complemented the interpretive work by enabling efficient data handling, allowing the researcher to focus more deeply on meaning-making and pattern recognition inherent in IPA. The analytic steps resulted in the identification of essential themes that encapsulated the core meanings of serving as a civil servant in the 3T context.

### Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. Written informed consent was provided by all participants prior to data collection, and participation was entirely voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained through de-identification of all interview data and secure storage of research materials. The research conformed to international and local ethical standards governing studies involving human participants.

## RESULTS

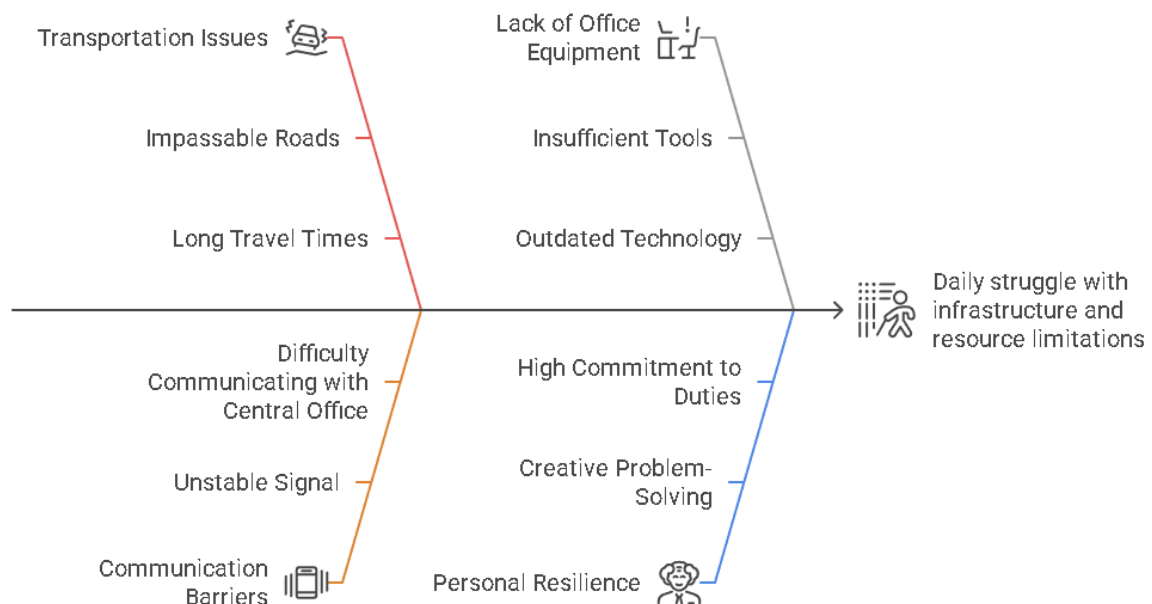
### Navigating Resource Scarcity and Infrastructural Challenges

Civil servants (ASN) in 3T regions described their daily service as a continuous struggle with the limitations of infrastructure and resources. The lack of basic facilities such as transportation, communication networks, and office equipment significantly shaped their working routines and personal resilience. One participant recounted:

“Every day, reaching the villages is already a challenge. There are times when the roads are impassable, and sometimes, we have to walk for hours just to deliver a single document. There is no stable signal here, so communication with the central office is almost impossible.” (Participant 2)

Despite these obstacles, the ASNs emphasized a strong sense of commitment to fulfilling their duties, often devising creative solutions to circumvent infrastructural constraints. This sense of perseverance, however, was often accompanied by feelings of frustration and fatigue.

#### Challenges Faced by Civil Servants in 3T Regions



### Emotional Struggles and Coping Mechanisms in Isolation

Many civil servants highlighted emotional and psychological strains resulting from professional isolation and prolonged separation from family. Feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and a lack of social support were recurrent in their narratives. One civil servant shared:

“Sometimes, I feel forgotten—not just by my colleagues in the city, but by my own family. The isolation here is not only physical, but also emotional.” (Participant 5)

To cope, participants reported building close-knit support networks with local community members and fellow ASNs stationed in the same area. These relationships became a crucial source of motivation and emotional resilience, enabling them to persist in their service roles.

### **Reconstructing Professional Identity and Meaning of Service**

ASN participants revealed that their experiences in 3T regions prompted a profound reevaluation of their professional identity and the meaning of public service. Rather than viewing their assignment as a burden, several described a deepened sense of vocation, pride, and personal growth. As expressed by one respondent:

“Initially, I saw this assignment as a punishment, but over time, I found purpose in serving people who truly need the government. It has changed the way I see my job and myself.” (Participant 8)

These experiences fostered a renewed understanding of public service as a mission oriented toward social equity and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

### **Community Engagement and Cultural Adaptation**

A recurrent theme was the need for cultural sensitivity and adaptation. Civil servants highlighted the importance of understanding local traditions, language, and norms to build trust and facilitate effective service delivery. One participant reflected:

“You cannot serve the people here if you don’t respect their customs. The community is welcoming when they feel we are part of them, not outsiders imposing rules.” (Participant 3)

Through active participation in local customs and collaboration with community leaders, ASNs often became agents of change and bridges between government and society.

The findings reveal that civil servants serving in 3T regions experience a dynamic process of adaptation marked by persistent logistical and emotional challenges, but also by personal transformation and the development of new, context-sensitive approaches to public service. Their narratives underscore the vital role of resilience, community engagement, and cultural understanding in navigating the complexities of administrative work in frontier settings.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study reveals that civil servants in 3T regions undergo a profound process of adaptation, marked by persistent logistical challenges, emotional isolation, and significant personal transformation. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research uncovers the essential meanings embedded in their daily work—highlighting resilience, a reconstructed sense of professional identity, and the critical importance of community engagement and cultural adaptation. These conclusions directly address the central research question concerning how civil servants perceive, experience, and derive meaning from their service in challenging and marginalized contexts.

The findings contribute unique answers to the primary research question by providing a nuanced account of the lived realities of public service in 3T regions. Rather than focusing solely on administrative or technical barriers, the study illuminates the personal and collective processes by which civil servants build resilience, cope with professional isolation, and reframe their roles as both state agents and community members. This research moves beyond previous works by centering on the subjective narratives and meaning-making processes of civil servants, thereby enriching the understanding of public administration as a lived, context-dependent experience.

When viewed in relation to existing literature, these findings both reinforce and extend prior theoretical and empirical work. Earlier studies, such as Smith (2022) and Rahmawati (2021), have identified the significance of individual adaptation and the interplay between policy and local realities in public service settings<sup>12</sup>. The present research supports these perspectives, particularly regarding the value of community engagement and the challenges of infrastructural scarcity. However, it adds depth

by revealing how civil servants internally negotiate feelings of isolation, reframe hardship as meaningful service, and develop coping mechanisms grounded in cultural adaptation—a dimension less explored in prior studies. This work complements and extends the body of phenomenological research on public service by offering a detailed, first-hand account of the psychological and social processes shaping the professional lives of civil servants in marginalized regions.

These findings offer significant implications both academically and practically. From a scholarly perspective, the study enriches phenomenological understanding of public service by illuminating the complex interplay between individual adaptation, community engagement, and the social fabric of marginalized regions. Practically, these insights can inform policies and training programs that better prepare civil servants for deployment in challenging settings by emphasizing not only technical skills but also cultural sensitivity, psychological resilience, and community collaboration. Moreover, the ability of civil servants to reconstruct professional identity and meaning under adversity has potential relevance for other professions working in remote or resource-limited contexts, suggesting broader applicability of the study's conclusions beyond the 3T regions.

However, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The use of purposive sampling and a relatively small number of participants may restrict the generalizability of findings to the wider population of civil servants. The research is also context-bound, as it focuses exclusively on experiences within Indonesia's 3T regions, where social, cultural, and administrative structures may differ from those in other countries or regions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives may introduce subjective bias, although the phenomenological approach values these subjective accounts as valid representations of lived experience.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring longitudinal changes in civil servants' experiences over extended periods of service, or by comparing subjective experiences across different types of public service assignments and cultural settings. Investigations might also focus on the role of institutional support, policy innovation, or the impact of digital transformation on public service in marginalized regions. Such studies would further deepen understanding of how meaning and adaptation are constructed in diverse public administration environments and contribute valuable insights to the field of phenomenological research.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the subjective experiences of civil servants serving in Indonesia's 3T (frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged) regions, addressing the complex realities behind public service delivery in marginalized contexts. The research identified key themes such as resource scarcity, emotional adaptation, reconstruction of professional identity, and the critical role of community engagement. These findings provide new insights into how civil servants navigate challenges and find meaning in their work, offering a richer understanding than what previous quantitative approaches have revealed. By adopting a phenomenological method, the study addresses existing gaps and highlights the importance of considering individual narratives in public administration research. The results suggest that policy and training initiatives should emphasize psychological resilience and cultural adaptation for those assigned to remote areas. Future studies could expand on these results by conducting comparative analyses across different 3T regions, investigating the longitudinal effects of service in marginalized areas on career trajectories and well-being, and examining the applicability of these findings in diverse cultural and national contexts. Overall, the insights gained hold broader relevance for public administration practitioners and researchers worldwide, particularly in nations facing similar challenges of governance and service delivery in remote or disadvantaged settings.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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