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Philosophical Approaches in Social Science and Public Administration: Ontological, Epistemological, and Axiological Perspectives and Their Relevance to Governance in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The success of governance is often judged by target achievement, budget absorption, and service speed, while citizens' experiences and unequal access receive far less attention. The problem is not only a lack of data, but also the assumptions made about society, the ways in which legitimate knowledge is established, and the values that underpin public decisions. This article analyses philosophical approaches in social science and public administration through ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives and examines their relevance to governance in Indonesia. It is a library-based study using critical conceptual analysis of positivist, interpretive, critical, postpositivist, and postmodernist approaches. The discussion connects the three philosophical perspectives with illustrative problems of poverty data, service digitalisation, and bureaucratic reform, without treating them as empirical tests. Ontologically, understanding the state merely as a set of formal institutions obscures power relations and the position of citizens as subjects of policy. Epistemologically, quantitative indicators are essential for accountability but insufficient to explain service experiences, and must be brought together with contextual knowledge and citizens' voices. Axiologically, efficiency is not an adequate measure of success when uniform procedures burden vulnerable groups or when digitalisation merely moves barriers from the service counter to the application. The article argues for reflective governance that combines rigorous data, openness to citizens' experiences, and a commitment to justice, so that administrative reform does not stop at technical change.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Public administration is often understood narrowly as government work: preparing budgets, issuing decrees, administering civil registration, or running development programmes. This view is not wrong, but it is too technical. Every government decision raises more fundamental questions: who counts as the public to be served, who has the right to shape policy, how the truth of a public problem is established, and which values define successful government. These questions cannot be answered by statistics or procedures alone. This is where philosophy matters. The philosophy of science examines the foundations of knowledge, the methods by which it is obtained, and the values attached to its use, and it helps to uncover the assumptions that shape both the theory and the practice of public administration (Ongaro, 2019; Wessels, 2021).

Public administration problems therefore cannot be reduced to procedure, organisational capacity, and target achievement. Ontology, epistemology, and axiology provide a basis for examining the nature of public administration, the development of its knowledge, and its purposes (Ongaro & Yang, 2025). Administrative practice rests on

assumptions about society, about how knowledge is obtained, and about the values that guide government action. Bringing Western and Eastern philosophical traditions together further enriches this understanding and cautions against treating any single model as universally valid (Ongaro & Ho, 2025). Building on this literature, this article does not simply describe different philosophical approaches; it examines how the position of citizens, the basis of knowledge, and the measures of service success are connected.

Philosophy allows public administration to examine not only the effectiveness of policy but also its fairness, legitimacy, and effects on citizens. Social science and public administration occupy a distinctive position because they study human beings and societies, which cannot be treated like natural objects. People have consciousness, interests, and cultures, and they can resist or reinterpret policy. A single approach is therefore often inadequate. A positivist approach can measure poverty rates or service satisfaction, but it struggles to explain why citizens distrust social assistance programmes or why officials interpret rules differently. Policy should be evidence-informed, combining scientific data with practical and local knowledge, rather than mechanically evidence-driven (Head, 2016).

The gap between the availability and the accessibility of services is evident in digitalisation. In August 2026, ANTARA reported a member of the Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia stating that limited internet access was hindering digital services in several regions, including civil registration, health, education, licensing, and village services (Victoria, 2026). A report published by the West Java Education Quality Assurance Centre noted the physical, geographical, and social barriers that vulnerable groups face, including inadequate facilities and complex procedures (Tim Media BBPMP Jawa Barat, 2025). Neither report describes conditions across Indonesia, but both show that access depends on citizens' ability to complete the service process, not merely on the existence of a system. Digital transformation reshapes the relationship between government and citizens (Mergel et al., 2019), yet digital encounters are not equally easy for all users (Lindgren et al., 2019), and gaps in digital skills determine who benefits (Scheerder et al., 2017).

These problems invite philosophical reflection. The three dimensions allow the discussion to move beyond how administrative work is done to whom it serves, how success is known, and for what purpose administrative action is taken. Digital self-service can shift administrative work onto citizens themselves (Madsen et al., 2022), and the learning, compliance, and psychological costs of dealing with the state fall unevenly across groups (Halling & Bækgaard, 2024). Evidence from Indonesia shows that new digital systems introduced without transition support can lower citizens' assessments of service procedures and processing time (Nabawi et al., 2026). Social equity in administration is also linked to public trust in government institutions (Lee, 2021).

Within a citizen-oriented framework, citizens are not merely parties who follow procedures, but rights-holders and participants in public life (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). The value of public services is co-created by providers and users (Osborne et al., 2016), and those who exercise public authority must answer to citizens for its use (Koliba, 2025).

This article asks how assumptions about the position of citizens, the basis of knowledge, and value orientation shape assessments of governance success. It argues that administrative success should be examined through the coherence of the three perspectives: recognising citizens' rights must be reflected in the evidence collected and in the values used to judge services. Its contribution lies in using the three dimensions together as an analytical framework rather than as separate concepts. In the authors' analysis, the main problem in Indonesian public administration is not simply a lack of data or technology, but weak philosophical reflection in decision-making, as policies are judged by documentation, targets, or budget absorption while citizens' experiences, unequal access, and power relations are overlooked.

METHOD

This article is a library-based study using critical conceptual analysis. A conceptual article must make explicit its choice of theories, the role of each concept, and the link between argument and conclusion (Jaakkola, 2020). The literature was therefore used not as a summary of opinions but to build an analytical framework connecting ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives, drawing on work that treats these dimensions as foundations of public administration knowledge (Ongaro & Yang, 2025). The review was conducted integratively so that philosophical and public administration literature could be synthesised into a coherent framework (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016); it did not follow a systematic review protocol and does not claim to cover all publications on the philosophy of public administration. Two documentary sources on access to public services, a news report on the Ombudsman's concerns about internet limitations (Victoria, 2026) and a report on barriers facing vulnerable groups (Tim Media BBPMP Jawa Barat, 2025), were read as texts that illustrate the framework's relevance (Morgan, 2022). Service digitalisation is treated as the main illustration rather than as an empirical case study of a single agency, and the documentary sources are not used to estimate the prevalence of problems or establish causal relationships.

The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, the basic questions in each philosophical dimension were identified: how the state, bureaucracy, society, and citizens are understood (ontology); what sources of knowledge, including quantitative data and citizens' experiences, are used to judge policy success (epistemology); and which values, especially the relationship between efficiency, justice, participation, and the protection of vulnerable groups, underpin administrative action (axiology). These dimensions served as lenses for reading rather than as scored or weighted variables. Second, these questions were brought together with the documentary evidence on service barriers, and the assumptions, contributions, and limitations of the positivist, interpretive, critical, postpositivist, and postmodernist approaches were compared without seeking to declare any single approach correct. Third, conceptual and policy implications were formulated, distinguishing between what the sources report, the authors' interpretation, and normative proposals. The strength of the study lies in the consistency of its reasoning and the links it draws between concepts and problems; its limitation is that it uses library materials without fieldwork, so its policy implications are conceptual and require empirical testing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Philosophy of Science and Its Three Dimensions

The philosophy of science examines the nature of science, the foundations of knowledge, scientific method, and the values attached to scientific activity. It asks not only whether a statement is true, but how its truth was established, who has the authority to establish it, and in whose interest the knowledge is used (Ongaro, 2019). Philosophical thinking is radical in the sense that it does not stop at visible facts but continues to question the assumptions behind them. When government declares a region poor, for example, the philosophical question does not end with the poverty figure: who set the poverty line, which data were used, and whether the figure truly reflects people's lived experience.

In the authors' analysis, the philosophy of science matters because science is never fully neutral. It emerges from particular social settings, interests, and ways of seeing the world. In public administration this is especially evident: poverty data, staff performance indicators, and satisfaction indices are never wholly objective, because producing them involves choices of categories, methods, and institutional interests. Knowledge in public administration is always situated in its context and shaped by the methodological choices of those who produce it (Wessels, 2021, 2023).

The philosophy of science is usually divided into ontology, epistemology, and axiology, which together shape how a discipline views reality, obtains knowledge, and uses it (Ongaro & Yang, 2025). Ontology concerns the nature of reality. In public administration it asks what the state, bureaucracy, society, citizens, and public services are: whether the state is merely a set of formal institutions or also a set of power relations that shape everyday life. If the state is seen as a neutral institution, administrative problems tend to be treated as technical; if it is seen as an arena of interests, policy must be analysed in terms of power and distribution. Epistemology concerns the sources, methods, and validity of knowledge: how do we know that an empowerment programme has succeeded, and is the number of beneficiaries enough, or must we also understand beneficiaries' experiences? Positivist epistemology relies on measurement, whereas interpretive epistemology emphasises understanding meaning (Wessels, 2023). Axiology concerns the values and purposes of knowledge. Because government decisions always affect people's lives, the question is not only whether a programme is efficient, but whether it is fair, participatory, and protective of vulnerable groups. Public administration has an irreducibly moral dimension and cannot be separated from responsibility for the public interest (Frederickson, 1997). In the authors' analysis, these dimensions are often neglected in bureaucratic practice, which tends to stop at how many targets were met rather than asking for whom the targets were designed, how citizens experience them, and which values should take priority.

Philosophy, Social Science, and Public Administration

Social science studies human behaviour, interaction, institutions, and culture. Because its object is human beings, it faces challenges unlike those of the natural sciences: people do not behave in fixed ways, but change according to meaning, experience, interests, and context. Social science therefore needs more than one approach. Public administration is a social science focused on policy implementation, government management, and public service, and it has developed in close relationship with political science, management, law, sociology, and economics (LePere-Schloop & Nesbit, 2022; McDonald et al., 2022). This complexity shows that public administration cannot be reduced to organisational management.

The New Public Service holds that public service should be oriented to citizens rather than merely to efficiency or market interests (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). This view has strong philosophical roots, because it treats people as subjects rather than objects of administration; citizens are not only service recipients but participants in shaping policy, and the value of services is co-created with them (Osborne et al., 2016). The relationship between philosophy and public administration runs both ways: philosophy provides a framework for critiquing government practice, while administrative practice provides empirical material for testing philosophical ideas. Justice, for instance, is not merely an abstract notion but can be examined through equitable access to health care, education, and social assistance.

The ontological perspective examines how the state, bureaucracy, and citizens are positioned in administrative relationships. This article develops it through the distinction between citizens as system users and citizens as rights-holders. As users, people are judged by their ability to meet requirements and follow procedures. As rights-holders, their service needs must still be considered even if they lack the capabilities needed to use a particular channel. This distinction reflects the principle of serving citizens rather than managing customers (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). In digital services, the key question is therefore not only whether an application exists, but what kind of citizen its design assumes. If using a service requires adequate connectivity, limited internet access directly affects the reach of the service. The Ombudsman's statement reported by ANTARA indicates that this prerequisite is not yet met evenly across regions (Victoria, 2026). This does not mean that all digital services have failed; the more limited implication is that opening digital channels is not enough to conclude that access has widened for all groups. Service design must be assessed against

citizens' actual conditions, not against an imagined user.

The epistemological perspective examines the sources of knowledge and the grounds on which conclusions are justified. In public service, the key question is what evidence is used to declare success and which groups it covers. This article distinguishes knowledge about process performance from knowledge about service reach. The number of transactions indicates recorded activity, and processing time indicates the speed of the process, but neither explains the situation of citizens who never managed to submit an application. The reported internet limitations give reason to examine the stage before a transaction is recorded: whether citizens can obtain information, open the service, and begin an application (Victoria, 2026). If attention is directed only at applications already received, barriers at the earliest stage may fall outside the scope of assessment. The issue is therefore not a choice between numbers and experiences, but the combination of both (Head, 2016).

The axiological perspective examines the values and purposes for which knowledge is used. Responsiveness, participation, social justice, and citizens' choice are central to the axiology of public administration, and social equity in administrative processes is linked to public trust (Lee, 2021). Efficiency has its place, but this article proposes that its assessment should include the distribution of benefits and burdens: a reduction in work on the agency's side does not necessarily mean less difficulty on the citizen's side. The concept of administrative burden clarifies this by distinguishing learning, psychological, and compliance costs in citizen–state interactions (Moynihan et al., 2015). Later research shows that these costs fall unevenly across groups (Halling & Bækgaard, 2024) and that digital self-service can turn citizens into their own caseworkers (Madsen et al., 2022). Because these studies do not concern Indonesia, they are used here conceptually rather than as empirical evidence about Indonesian services. In the digitalisation illustration, the framework raises questions about who helps citizens understand procedures, how requirements are met, and whether alternatives exist when the main channel cannot be used. These questions are relevant to the reported complexity of procedures and barriers facing vulnerable groups (Tim Media BBPMP Jawa Barat, 2025). The normative implication is that uniform procedures must be tested against citizens' different conditions, and that uniformity of rules should not be equated with equality of opportunity.

Ontology, epistemology, and axiology do not operate separately. How government understands citizens shapes which information is considered important, and that information shapes judgements of success and decisions on improvement. Table 1 summarises the relationship proposed in this article.

Table 1. Philosophical perspectives and their consequences for service evaluation

Perspective	Analytical question	Consequence for evaluation
Ontological	What kind of citizen is assumed in the service design?	Examine whether requirements fit the diversity of citizens' capabilities
Epistemological	Who is and is not covered by the evidence of success?	Distinguish process performance from service reach
Axiological	Who gains the benefits and who bears the burdens?	Assess efficiency together with fairness of access

Source: Authors' analysis, 2026

The framework demands consistency. If citizens are declared rights-holders, assessment must attend to those not yet served. If justice is the goal, evaluation cannot stop at the success of users already in the system. The philosophical contribution is not to replace performance indicators but to examine their basis and limits, showing when an administrative assessment has answered a service problem and when questions remain.

Positivism

Positivism holds that legitimate knowledge must be obtained through empirical observation, measurement, and verification. Rooted in Auguste Comte's emphasis on observable facts, it values research that is objective, measurable, free of researcher bias, and generalisable. In social science and public administration, positivism appears in surveys, statistics, performance indicators, hypothesis testing, and quantitative evaluation. Governments use it to measure poverty, unemployment, satisfaction indices, and programme targets, and it underpins the idea of evidence-based policy (Head, 2016). Its strength lies in producing structured, comparable data: governments can compare poverty across districts or assess social assistance by the number of beneficiaries. Such data are essential for planning, oversight, and accountability; without them, policy easily falls prey to subjective claims or political interests.

In the authors' analysis, however, positivism becomes problematic when overused in the Indonesian context. Indonesian society is highly diverse in culture, religion, education, economic access, and experience of the state, so the same figure can mean different things in different places. A region may record low poverty, yet its residents may still struggle to reach health services because of distance, transport costs, or discrimination. A sharper critique is that, in a still paternalistic context, positivism can entrench the state's position as the party that knows best. Citizens become objects of data rather than subjects with a voice: government collects data about them, sets poverty categories, and decides who is eligible. The process appears objective, but it can conceal power relations. Who sets the criteria, and are communities involved in defining their own problems? Policy that claims to be data-driven can become unresponsive if the data exclude citizens' experiences. Positivism remains necessary, but it should not be the sole measure of administrative success.

Interpretive and Hermeneutic Approaches

The interpretive or hermeneutic approach holds that social reality cannot be understood through numbers alone, because it is constituted by meaning, language, culture, experience, and interaction. Researchers must understand how social actors interpret their own behaviour, not merely observe it from outside (Wessels, 2023). In public administration, this approach helps explain citizens' experiences of government services. Two recipients of the same social assistance may give it different meanings: one may feel helped, while another feels humiliated by a long and judgemental verification process. The amount of assistance cannot capture this difference.

The approach is equally relevant to officials. A sub-district officer may formally follow procedure, yet interpret rules differently depending on social relationships, pressure from superiors, or a personal sense of fairness. Judged only by standard operating procedures, such behaviour looks uniform; interviews and observation reveal that bureaucracy is not a neutral machine but a social space full of meaning. The strength of the interpretive approach lies in capturing the complexity of human experience and giving voice to groups often absent from statistics, such as people with disabilities, female heads of household, indigenous communities, and the urban poor. Its weaknesses are limited generalisability and the influence of the researcher's assumptions; in Indonesian bureaucracy, power relations may also make interviewees reluctant to speak frankly, as citizens may fear criticising officials and officials may answer according to superiors' expectations. In the authors' analysis, the interpretive approach is nonetheless essential for service reform: satisfaction cannot be measured only through short forms at the counter, but must be understood through citizens' whole experience, from information, cost, distance, and language to the sense of being respected.

The Critical Approach

The critical approach, rooted in the Frankfurt School of Max Horkheimer, Theodor

Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas, seeks not only to understand society but to expose the structures of inequality, domination, and hidden interest behind the social order; knowledge should serve emancipation rather than explanation alone. In public administration, it asks who benefits and who loses from policy, and how power operates through rules, classifications, budgets, and procedures. Policies that appear neutral may be biased: complex administrative requirements for social assistance formally apply to everyone, but in practice burden the poor, the elderly, and people with disabilities most. Public administrators thus bear a moral responsibility to advance the public interest rather than merely execute political instructions or protect organisational efficiency (Frederickson, 1997).

In the authors' analysis, the critical approach is highly relevant to Indonesia because inequality concerns not only income but also access to the state. Not all citizens can equally obtain information, understand procedures, or engage officials. Middle-class urban residents may easily use online services, while residents of remote areas still face weak networks, travel costs, and limited digital literacy (Scheerder et al., 2017). The critical approach's main strength is its political awareness, which prevents public administration from hiding power behind technical language. Its risk is making accusations without adequate empirical evidence; critique without contextual understanding can become dangerous generalisation. It should therefore be combined with data and field experience.

Postpositivism and Postmodernism

Postpositivism developed as a critique of the positivist belief that science can discover absolute, objective truth. It does not reject science, but rejects the claim that scientific knowledge is free of assumptions, interests, and limitations; knowledge is always tentative and revisable (Wessels, 2023). Postmodernism goes further, questioning the existence of a single grand narrative. In public administration, it rejects the idea of one best model of governance for all societies. New Public Management, for instance, was often promoted as a universal solution for government efficiency (Hood, 1991), yet its application in countries with different social and political characteristics produced different results. States may also adopt the form of apparently successful institutions without building the capabilities that make them function (Pritchett et al., 2013).

In Indonesia, postmodernism helps explain why service standards are often copied from other countries without considering local context. Digitalisation is frequently promoted as a symbol of modernisation, yet for citizens without smartphones, without the skills to use applications, or living in areas with weak networks, it can become a new form of exclusion (Lindgren et al., 2019). In the authors' analysis, postmodernism's strength lies in recognising the diversity of voices and experiences and refusing to treat society as homogeneous; policies claimed to serve everyone are often designed from the perspective of dominant groups. Its weakness is that, if all truths are relative, critiques of injustice become hard to sustain. Public administration still needs minimum standards such as the right to services, accountability, and non-discrimination, without which relativism can justify uncertainty or evasion of responsibility (Koliba, 2025).

Poverty Data and Public Policy

Poverty reduction policy in Indonesia illustrates the contest between philosophical approaches. Government generally uses a positivist approach through poverty data, beneficiary lists, and welfare indicators, which are necessary to prevent budget allocation from depending on intuition or political interest. Yet poverty data are never fully neutral. Poverty criteria may overlook non-economic vulnerabilities such as sudden job loss, chronic illness, or care responsibilities. Evidence from Indonesia shows that the design of targeting matters: requiring applicants to take active steps can improve targeting (Alatas et al., 2016), and giving households tangible information about their entitlements strengthens their ability to claim benefits from local officials (Banerjee et al., 2018). The interpretive approach

highlights citizens' experiences in accessing assistance, while the critical approach questions the power relations between verification officers and beneficiaries. In the authors' analysis, data-based policy will be fairer if quantitative data are combined with participatory mechanisms, so that citizens are not merely objects of data collection but can correct data and voice their experiences.

Service Digitalisation and Access

Digitalisation is often regarded as administrative progress. Online civil registration, business licensing, and social assistance applications can speed up processes and reduce face-to-face contact prone to illegal levies. From a positivist perspective, success is measured by service time, transaction numbers, and fewer complaints. The interpretive approach reveals another side: not all citizens have the same digital skills, and the elderly, the poor, people with disabilities, and residents of remote areas may struggle with online services. The critical approach asks whether digitalisation actually reduces inequality or merely moves barriers from the counter to the application. Research on digital identification shows that complex registration processes can exclude the very groups they are meant to include (Martin & Taylor, 2021), and Indonesian evidence shows that new systems without user support can raise administrative burden (Nabawi et al., 2026).

The relevance of philosophy to public administration is visible in the access problems raised by the Ombudsman. According to ANTARA's report of 7 August 2026, Ombudsman member Partono stated that limited internet access in several regions affected citizens' right to digital public services in civil registration, health, education, licensing, and village services. In a meeting with the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs, the Ombudsman also discussed internet equity in frontier, outermost, and disadvantaged regions, data interoperability, and stronger complaint channels (Victoria, 2026). Separately, the Head of the Ombudsman's West Java Representative Office, Dan Satriana, stated at a public consultation forum on 27 November 2025 that vulnerable groups still face physical, geographical, and social barriers, including inadequate supporting facilities, complex procedures, and officers' limited understanding of inclusive service (Tim Media BBPMP Jawa Barat, 2025). The two reports are not the same case or a study measuring all Indonesian services, but together they illustrate the distance between the availability of services and citizens' ability to access them.

Ontologically, the difference between citizens as system users and as rights-holders changes the administrative question. Instead of only asking why citizens have not adapted to technology, government must also ask whether service design has taken citizens' conditions into account. Barriers do not always lie with individuals; they can arise from a mismatch between service requirements and citizens' capabilities. Assisted service, face-to-face channels, or mobile services should therefore be considered part of service design, adapted to local needs rather than determined only by the goal of expanding application use.

Epistemologically, there is a difference between saying that "the system processes applications quickly" and that "citizens can obtain services easily". The first concerns the process after an application is received; the second requires broader information about citizens' ability to reach the service. The two are not contradictory, but they are not identical. Good performance in one domain should not be extended into conclusions about the whole service ecosystem, nor should evidence of access barriers automatically negate institutional achievements. Responsible analysis must state clearly what is measured, who is covered, and what conclusions can be drawn. In practice, this means bringing performance data together with complaints, studies of citizens' experiences, and information on groups not yet served, not to replace numbers with stories, but to ensure that assessment does not ignore experiences outside transaction records (Lindgren et al., 2019).

Axiologically, the question is not only whether digitalisation speeds up work, but whether it widens citizens' opportunities to obtain services. Identical procedures do not necessarily produce equal opportunities: citizens with connectivity, devices, and support

from others are in a different position from those without. Justice therefore means attending to citizens' real capability to meet requirements, not merely applying identical rules. Efficiency assessments must also consider the distribution of burdens. As a possibility requiring further research, citizens may have to seek help, travel to find a network, or repeat procedures they do not understand; these are evaluative questions arising from the reported access problems rather than field findings (Halling & Bækgaard, 2024). Alternative channels and assistance are not a rejection of digitalisation, but instruments to ensure that technological change does not reduce particular groups' access. The authors therefore argue that digitalisation should not entirely replace face-to-face service, and that the state must maintain alternative channels for those not yet able to use technology.

The critical approach deepens these perspectives by asking who sets standards, who gains convenience, and whose experiences are discounted. This does not mean treating every procedure as domination; it means examining whether technical decisions have different consequences for different groups. In digital services, the experiences of users who succeed in entering the system are more easily recorded than those of citizens who never gain access, so the groups least able to reach services risk being least visible in evaluation. This risk should be tested rather than asserted as fact for all agencies. Stronger complaint channels, as discussed by the Ombudsman and the ministry, are relevant here, but the question remains whether those channels are usable by citizens facing digital barriers; the report does not detail the accessibility of each channel (Victoria, 2026). Citizens need ways to report barriers, correct information, and obtain follow-up without facing the same barriers as the service they are complaining about.

Bureaucratic Reform and Public Ethics

Bureaucratic reform in Indonesia often focuses on organisational restructuring, merit systems, digitalisation, and performance measurement. These are important but not sufficient; purely technical reform can produce a bureaucracy that is administratively efficient yet unresponsive to citizens, and Indonesia's reform experience shows how difficult it is to translate formal mandates into changed practice (Turner et al., 2022). Public service should be oriented to citizens rather than efficiency alone (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). In the Indonesian context, this means that officials must be trained not only in procedures but also in understanding the social context of those they serve. Sub-district officers, for example, need to know not only how to issue documents but also how to respond sensitively to citizens facing economic, linguistic, or disability-related constraints. Indonesian evidence confirms that staff capability, leadership, and accountability shape whether digital services work as intended (Pribadi et al., 2024).

In the authors' analysis, the greatest challenge for bureaucratic reform in Indonesia is a paternalistic culture in which the state positions itself as giver and citizens as recipients. Under the New Public Service, citizens are owners of the public interest and partners of government, and value is co-created with them (Osborne et al., 2016; Torfing et al., 2019). This shift requires philosophical reflection, not merely structural change, and it is linked to public trust: social equity in administrative processes is associated with greater trust in government institutions (Lee, 2021).

Toward a Plural Approach

No single philosophical approach is sufficient for public administration. Positivism provides rigorous data, the interpretive approach provides depth of meaning, the critical approach exposes inequality, and postmodernism reminds us that truth is always contextual. Indonesian public administration therefore needs a plural approach. Data must still be used, but must not replace dialogue with citizens; efficiency must be pursued, but not at the expense of justice; and service modernisation should be encouraged while attending to groups vulnerable to exclusion.

CONCLUSION

The philosophy of science provides a foundation for understanding social science and public administration more critically. Through ontology, epistemology, and axiology, it helps examine the nature of social reality, the ways knowledge is obtained, and the values that should orient public policy. Positivism contributes measurement, evaluation, and data-based policymaking, but it is limited when confronted with social, cultural, and power complexities; in Indonesia's still paternalistic context, it risks treating citizens as objects of data rather than subjects of policy. The interpretive approach emphasises understanding citizens' meanings and experiences, the critical approach exposes inequality and domination in public policy, and postmodernism reminds us that no single model of public administration is universally valid. These approaches do not cancel each other out but can complement one another. In the authors' analysis, Indonesian public administration needs a plural and critical philosophical approach in which policy is judged not only by targets and budgets but by justice, participation, accessibility, and effects on citizens' lives.

Four recommendations follow. First, government should strengthen officials' capacity for critical thinking, not only their mastery of procedures, by including the philosophy of science, public ethics, and citizen-centred policy analysis in bureaucratic training. Second, policy evaluation should combine quantitative data with qualitative methods, complementing surveys and statistics with in-depth interviews, field observation, and participatory forums so that citizens' experiences are genuinely represented. Third, digital public services must be designed inclusively, with alternative service channels for those with limited access to technology. Fourth, students of public administration should habitually ask philosophical questions of every policy: for whom it is made, who benefits, who is marginalised, and which values are being pursued.

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DH: conceptualization, investigation, formal analysis, and writing–original draft preparation. RM: methodology, theoretical framework development, validation, and writing–review and editing. HP: literature review, data curation, and writing–review and editing. N: supervision, interpretation of findings, and writing–review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

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