

The Social Construction of Unequal Road Repair: Evidence from Karangpoh Village, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Community participation;
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Road infrastructure deterioration remains a persistent public service challenge in many Indonesian urban villages. While pothole damage is widespread, repair interventions are often implemented unevenly despite comparable levels of road deterioration. Existing studies primarily emphasize technical aspects of infrastructure development, whereas the social mechanisms shaping repair priorities at the local level remain underexplored. This study investigates how social relations influence the distribution of pothole repair in Karangpoh Village, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis involving 25 participants, including residents, neighborhood leaders, and village officials. The findings reveal that repair prioritization is socially constructed through three interrelated mechanisms: residents' proximity to local authorities, the public visibility of damaged roads, and the presence of influential community actors who actively advocate for infrastructure improvements. Rather than being determined solely by technical urgency or budgetary considerations, road repair decisions are shaped by informal power relations and everyday governance practices. These findings extend Social Construction Theory by demonstrating how local infrastructure policies are negotiated through social interactions and unequal access to decision-making processes. The study highlights the importance of transparent, participatory, and needs-based infrastructure governance to reduce spatial inequality and strengthen public trust in local government.

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INTRODUCTION

Road infrastructure constitutes one of the most fundamental forms of public infrastructure that supports socioeconomic development, spatial connectivity, and the equitable delivery of public services. Beyond facilitating mobility, road networks influence citizens' access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and commercial activities, making their quality an

important indicator of local governance performance. (Alquraiddi & Awad, 2024) argues that public infrastructure should not merely be understood as a physical asset but also as an institutional instrument through which governments demonstrate accountability and responsiveness to community needs. Likewise, (Ríos et al., 2024) emphasize that the sustainability of local development is closely associated with the government's capacity to maintain infrastructure in an equitable and transparent manner. Consequently, disparities in infrastructure maintenance have increasingly attracted scholarly attention because they reflect not only differences in physical conditions but also broader issues of governance, social justice, and public trust.

Indonesia continues to face substantial challenges in maintaining local road infrastructure despite sustained public investment in transportation development. While national and provincial road networks have experienced considerable improvements over the last decade, road deterioration remains widespread at the village and urban-neighborhood levels, particularly in densely populated settlements where traffic intensity, flooding, and limited maintenance budgets accelerate pavement degradation. In many localities, potholes persist for extended periods and significantly disrupt residents' daily mobility, increase transportation costs, and reduce access to essential public facilities. Previous studies have generally attributed these conditions to technical constraints such as inadequate funding, poor construction quality, weak maintenance planning, and environmental factors (Mazele & Amoah, 2022). Meanwhile, (Cord et al., 2022) demonstrates that local infrastructure management is also influenced by administrative capacity and institutional coordination among government agencies. Although these explanations are important, they tend to conceptualize road maintenance primarily as an engineering and managerial issue, leaving the social dimensions of infrastructure prioritization relatively underexplored.

Existing scholarship has produced valuable insights into infrastructure development from various disciplinary perspectives. Several researchers have examined the economic implications of road improvement and its contribution to regional development, demonstrating that better road conditions stimulate productivity, market accessibility, and community welfare (Gebresilashe, 2023). Other studies have highlighted the significance of community participation, environmental communication, and social capital in strengthening collective action for infrastructure maintenance (Tamasiga et al., 2024). More recently, scholars have argued that local governance practices, institutional relationships, and community engagement shape the effectiveness of public infrastructure programs (Afieroho et al., 2023). Despite these contributions, previous research has predominantly focused on infrastructure development at the macro level or evaluated the effectiveness of completed projects. Comparatively little attention has been paid to understanding why roads with relatively similar physical

conditions receive different repair priorities within the same administrative area. As a result, the informal social processes through which infrastructure maintenance decisions are negotiated and prioritized remain insufficiently explained, particularly within the context of neighborhood-level governance in Indonesia (Hasmin et al., 2026).

Understanding unequal infrastructure maintenance requires moving beyond conventional technical explanations toward perspectives that recognize infrastructure as a socially embedded phenomenon. Social Construction Theory posits that social reality is continuously produced, interpreted, and legitimized through interactions among individuals, institutions, and shared meanings rather than existing as an entirely objective condition (Ocasio, 2023). Within this perspective, decisions concerning infrastructure development and maintenance are not merely administrative outcomes but are also shaped by everyday negotiations, institutional routines, social relationships, and power dynamics. (Ege et al., 2023) argue that public policies are frequently influenced by informal interactions occurring outside formal bureaucratic procedures, while (Kiwi et al., 2025) demonstrate that institutional visibility and social legitimacy often affect governmental priorities in allocating public resources. Applying this perspective to local infrastructure governance suggests that the prioritization of pothole repairs may reflect socially constructed processes through which certain public problems become more visible, more persuasive, and ultimately more deserving of governmental attention than others.

Although previous studies have acknowledged the importance of governance and community participation in infrastructure development, important gaps remain within the existing literature. First, empirical investigations rarely explore why roads exhibiting relatively similar levels of physical deterioration receive substantially different maintenance responses within the same administrative jurisdiction. Second, most studies evaluate infrastructure outcomes after development projects have been completed, rather than examining the social processes through which repair priorities are formulated and negotiated before implementation. Third, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how informal relationships between residents, neighborhood leaders, and local government influence infrastructure decision-making beyond officially prescribed procedures (Amankwaa & Gough, 2022). Consequently, the micro-level social mechanisms underlying unequal infrastructure maintenance remain insufficiently theorized, particularly within the context of urban village governance in Indonesia (Suswanto et al., 2025).

Responding to these gaps, this study offers both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, it investigates the distribution of pothole repairs at the neighborhood level, where unequal maintenance can be directly observed despite relatively comparable physical conditions. Theoretically, this research

extends the application of Social Construction Theory by demonstrating that infrastructure maintenance should not be understood solely as a consequence of engineering assessments, fiscal capacity, or administrative regulations. Instead, repair prioritization emerges through the interaction of three interrelated social mechanisms: residents' proximity to local authorities, the visibility of damaged roads within institutional spaces, and the presence of influential community actors who consistently advocate for infrastructure improvement. By integrating these dimensions into the analysis of local infrastructure governance, the study provides a more comprehensive explanation of how informal social practices contribute to the production and reproduction of spatial inequality in public service delivery (Lavee & Kaplan, 2022).

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine how unequal road repair is socially constructed within the local governance system of Karangpoh Village. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the social mechanisms underlying repair prioritization and to explain how interactions among residents, community leaders, and local government shape infrastructure maintenance decisions. Through this analysis, the study is expected to contribute to the development of a more socially informed understanding of infrastructure governance while providing practical insights for promoting more transparent, participatory, and equitable public infrastructure management.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a single-case study design to examine the social mechanisms underlying unequal road repair within the local governance system of Karangpoh Village, Indonesia. A qualitative case study was considered appropriate because the research sought to explain how and why roads with relatively similar physical conditions received different maintenance priorities, emphasizing the social interactions, institutional practices, and informal decision-making processes that could not be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. Karangpoh Village was purposively selected as the research site due to the persistent occurrence of pothole damage, the observable disparity in road repair distribution across neighborhoods, and the absence of previous empirical studies specifically addressing this phenomenon. The unit of analysis comprised the social processes through which infrastructure repair priorities were constructed and negotiated among local actors. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques based on predetermined criteria, including residents who had lived in the village for at least five years, had directly experienced road deterioration, and had previously reported infrastructure damage to neighborhood or village authorities. To obtain multiple perspectives, the study involved 25 participants consisting of 18 residents, three neighborhood leaders

(RT/RW), two village officials responsible for infrastructure management, and two community representatives. Data were collected between April and May 2026 through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant field observations, and document analysis of infrastructure reports, meeting records, demographic data, and village administrative documents.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing with continuous verification throughout the research process. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and systematically coded through iterative reading to identify recurring concepts, which were subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes reflecting the social mechanisms influencing infrastructure repair prioritization. Cross-source comparisons were conducted to identify convergent and divergent patterns among residents, neighborhood leaders, and village officials. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking with selected key informants to verify the consistency and credibility of the interpretations. Ethical principles were maintained throughout the research by obtaining informed consent from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring confidentiality through anonymization of personal identities, and emphasizing participants' voluntary involvement and right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Through these procedures, the study sought to produce a rigorous and credible interpretation of the socially constructed processes shaping unequal road infrastructure maintenance at the local level.

RESULT

Overview of Research Findings

Field observations, interviews, and document analysis consistently revealed that the unequal distribution of road repair in Karangpoh Village was not random. Although pothole damage was found across nearly all neighborhood roads, the prioritization of maintenance followed recurring social patterns rather than purely physical conditions. Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis: (1) social proximity to local authorities, (2) institutional visibility of damaged roads, and (3) community advocacy through influential local actors. These themes collectively explain how infrastructure repair priorities were socially constructed within the local governance system.

Table 1. Major Themes Identified from the Study

Theme	Main Findings	Evidence Sources
Social proximity	Roads reported by residents having close relationships with village officials or neighborhood leaders tended to receive faster responses.	Residents, RT/RW, Village officials

Institutional visibility	Roads located on main routes or frequently passed by officials were prioritized for repair.	Observation, Residents, Village officials
Community advocacy	Areas represented by active community leaders obtained more consistent infrastructure attention.	RT/RW, Community leaders, Residents

Social Proximity Influenced Infrastructure Repair Prioritization

Interviews with residents demonstrated that interpersonal relationships constituted an important factor influencing the responsiveness of infrastructure maintenance. Residents who maintained frequent interactions with neighborhood leaders or village officials generally experienced quicker responses after reporting pothole damage. These relationships were not limited to formal administrative communication but also emerged through long-standing social interactions, including neighborhood meetings, religious gatherings, and community activities. Several participants explained that repeated informal encounters with local officials facilitated direct communication regarding infrastructure problems and accelerated follow-up actions.

Conversely, participants living in neighborhoods with limited interaction with village authorities reported repeated but unsuccessful attempts to obtain road repairs. Formal reporting mechanisms were often perceived as insufficient unless accompanied by continuous interpersonal communication or support from individuals possessing stronger institutional access. Consequently, infrastructure complaints originating from socially less-connected neighborhoods were more likely to experience prolonged delays.

Institutional Visibility Determined Repair Priority

Field observations identified clear spatial differences between repaired and unrepaired roads. Roads located along primary access routes, near the village office, public facilities, or frequently traversed by government officials generally exhibited better physical conditions than roads situated within narrow residential alleys. Although the severity of road damage appeared comparable across locations, maintenance interventions were concentrated in areas characterized by higher institutional visibility.

Interviews with village officials confirmed that practical considerations influenced maintenance prioritization. Limited budgets and workforce capacity encouraged the allocation of available resources toward locations perceived as strategically important or publicly visible. Consequently, roads hidden within residential areas were less likely to receive immediate attention despite serving essential daily mobility functions for local residents.

Community Advocacy Strengthened Repair Responsiveness

Another consistent finding concerned the role of influential community actors in advocating infrastructure improvements. Neighborhoods represented by proactive RT/RW leaders or respected community figures demonstrated greater success in securing road maintenance than neighborhoods lacking similar representation. Active local leaders routinely documented road conditions, communicated directly with village officials, monitored the progress of submitted reports, and repeatedly reminded authorities during formal and informal meetings.

By contrast, neighborhoods without active advocacy often submitted complaints only once and received little subsequent attention. Several residents described feelings of frustration after repeated unsuccessful reporting attempts, eventually reducing their willingness to participate in future complaint mechanisms. This condition contributed to prolonged infrastructure neglect in several residential areas.

Patterns of Unequal Road Repair

Synthesizing findings across interviews and observations revealed a consistent pattern distinguishing repaired from unrepaired roads. Roads that received maintenance generally possessed three simultaneous characteristics: they were located in highly visible areas, connected to neighborhoods maintaining closer relationships with village authorities, and supported by active community representatives. Conversely, roads remaining unrepaired were commonly situated within less visible residential alleys, represented by weaker institutional networks, and characterized by limited community advocacy.

These findings indicate that infrastructure repair priorities emerged through interconnected social processes operating within everyday local governance rather than through physical road conditions alone.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting Unequal Road Repair Through Social Construction Theory

The findings demonstrate that unequal road repair in Karangpoh Village cannot be adequately explained through technical indicators alone, such as the severity of road damage, engineering considerations, or budget limitations. Instead, infrastructure maintenance emerged as a socially constructed process in which repair priorities were continuously negotiated through interactions among residents, neighborhood leaders, and village authorities. From the perspective of Social Construction Theory, public problems do not automatically receive governmental attention because of their objective characteristics; rather, they become institutional priorities after being interpreted, communicated, and legitimized through social interaction (Grelle & Hofmann, 2024). In this study,

roads located within socially connected neighborhoods acquired greater institutional recognition because their conditions were repeatedly communicated by actors possessing stronger access to decision-makers. Consequently, infrastructure inequality should be understood not merely as an outcome of resource scarcity but also as the product of socially embedded governance practices (Kamjou et al., 2024).

The three mechanisms identified in this study—social proximity, institutional visibility, and community advocacy—illustrate how infrastructure priorities are constructed through everyday governance rather than exclusively through formal administrative procedures. Social proximity facilitated more frequent communication between residents and village officials, thereby increasing the likelihood that infrastructure complaints would receive immediate attention. Likewise, roads located along highly visible public routes were more likely to become institutional priorities because they symbolized governmental performance in the eyes of visitors and the broader community. These findings support previous arguments that public decision-making is frequently shaped by informal institutional relationships operating alongside formal governance structures (Cheng et al., 2025). However, this study extends existing literature by demonstrating that these informal mechanisms operate simultaneously and reinforce one another in determining infrastructure maintenance priorities at the neighborhood level (Meydani & Leander, 2024).

Another important finding concerns the role of community advocacy in reducing institutional distance between citizens and local government. Active neighborhood leaders functioned not merely as administrative intermediaries but also as social entrepreneurs capable of transforming individual complaints into collective public concerns. Their continuous engagement increased the visibility and legitimacy of infrastructure issues within village decision-making processes. Conversely, neighborhoods lacking influential local actors experienced weaker representation, resulting in lower governmental responsiveness despite facing comparable infrastructure conditions. This pattern suggests that access to public infrastructure is partially mediated by the capacity of communities to construct and sustain institutional attention toward local problems, thereby reinforcing unequal patterns of public service delivery (Utomo et al., 2025).

Implications for Local Infrastructure Governance

These findings contribute to the growing literature on infrastructure governance by demonstrating that road maintenance should be conceptualized as a governance process rather than solely as a technical intervention. Previous studies have predominantly emphasized engineering quality, financial capacity, or administrative efficiency as primary determinants of infrastructure

development (Bhattacharya et al., 2025). In contrast, this research demonstrates that informal institutional practices significantly shape the distribution of maintenance resources at the local level. By integrating Social Construction Theory into the analysis of infrastructure governance, this study expands existing explanations of infrastructure inequality beyond conventional technical perspectives and highlights the importance of understanding how public priorities are socially negotiated within everyday governmental practice (Tichenor et al., 2022).

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that improving infrastructure equity requires more than increasing maintenance budgets or engineering capacity. Local governments should strengthen transparent reporting mechanisms, establish objective criteria for repair prioritization, and ensure that infrastructure decisions are guided by documented community needs rather than by institutional visibility or interpersonal proximity. Furthermore, participatory monitoring systems involving residents, neighborhood organizations, and village authorities could reduce informal inequalities in infrastructure allocation while strengthening public trust in local governance. Such measures would support a more inclusive and accountable model of infrastructure management in which maintenance priorities are determined through equitable public participation rather than unequal social access.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that unequal road repair in Karangpoh Village is not solely the consequence of technical considerations such as the severity of road damage or limited financial resources, but rather the result of socially constructed governance processes operating within local institutional practices. The findings reveal that infrastructure repair priorities are shaped through the interaction of three interconnected social mechanisms, namely residents' social proximity to local authorities, the institutional visibility of damaged roads, and the presence of influential community actors who actively advocate for infrastructure improvements. These mechanisms collectively determine which infrastructure problems receive governmental attention and which remain marginalized. By applying Social Construction Theory, this study reconceptualizes road infrastructure maintenance as a product of everyday social interaction, institutional negotiation, and informal power relations, thereby extending existing discussions on infrastructure governance beyond conventional engineering and administrative perspectives. This contribution enriches the literature by offering an alternative framework for understanding how social processes influence the distribution of public infrastructure at the neighborhood level.

From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of developing more transparent, participatory, and evidence-based infrastructure governance systems to ensure equitable maintenance decisions. Local governments should establish objective criteria for infrastructure prioritization, strengthen accessible public reporting mechanisms, and encourage broader community participation to minimize the influence of informal institutional relationships in public service delivery. While this study provides an in-depth understanding of unequal road repair within a single urban village, its findings remain context-specific. Future research is therefore encouraged to examine similar governance dynamics across different geographical settings and infrastructure sectors to refine the applicability of Social Construction Theory in explaining inequality in local public service provision.

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