

## Social Structure, Power, and Justice: An Analysis of Structural Inequality

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### Abstract

This study examines the relationship between social structure, power distribution, and justice in the context of structural inequality in Indonesia. Structural inequality persists across various sectors, including natural resource governance, law enforcement, and access to education, indicating that injustice is embedded within institutional arrangements rather than arising solely from individual factors. This research aims to critically analyze how social structures distribute power and reproduce inequality, and to assess their implications for substantive social justice. The study employs a qualitative design using a critical socio-legal and political economy approach. Data were collected through document analysis, in-depth interviews, and cross-case comparison across selected contexts, including mining governance, environmental enforcement, and education access. The data were analyzed using thematic coding and interpretative analysis to identify recurring structural patterns of inequality. The findings reveal that centralized authority, capital dominance, and unequal institutional access systematically marginalize vulnerable groups. Inequality manifests in asymmetrical law enforcement, exclusion from decision-making processes, and uneven resource distribution. The discussion highlights that justice cannot be understood merely in procedural terms but must address substantive redistribution and structural reform. In conclusion, structural inequality is sustained by entrenched power configurations, and achieving social justice requires institutional transformation and equitable redistribution of power and resources.

**Keywords:** Social structure; Structural inequality; Power relations; Social justice; Institutional reform

### 1. Introduction

The persistence of social inequality in contemporary societies cannot be separated from the configuration of social structures that regulate the distribution of roles, resources, and authority. Social structure is not merely an abstract arrangement of statuses and institutions; it is an organizing framework that shapes access to economic opportunities, political participation, and social recognition. When social structures become hierarchical and rigid, they tend to produce unequal distributions of power, thereby generating structural inequality as a systemic problem of social justice. In this regard, inequality should not be viewed solely as a consequence of individual failure or market dynamics, but as a manifestation of institutional arrangements that privilege certain groups while marginalizing others. This condition calls for a critical analytical approach capable of uncovering how power relations operate within social structures and how policy gaps reproduce injustice over time.

Empirical studies demonstrate that social structures inherently contain hierarchies of roles, classes, and institutions that regulate the distribution of authority and obligations. Research on indigenous communities, religious institutions, and regional development illustrates that social structure always embodies stratification, whether formal or informal, which determines who holds decision-making power and who remains subordinate (Putri, 2022; Lupiana & Posha, 2025; Nawwal et al., 2025). In the case of the Sambas Sultanate, for example, the position of Labai formally occupies a lower layer within the official structure, yet holds significant moral authority at the village level. This case reveals that power is not solely derived from formal institutional status but also from



social legitimacy and religious function (Lupiana & Posha, 2025). Such findings highlight that power circulates through both formal bureaucratic arrangements and cultural recognition, reinforcing complex layers of authority within society.

Similarly, in indigenous communities, individuals are positioned as integral parts of the collective rather than as autonomous bearers of individual rights. Rights and responsibilities are socially embedded and closely tied to communal roles and functions, making customary structures mechanisms for distributing collective authority and obligations (Nawval et al., 2025). While such arrangements may foster solidarity and cohesion, they can also produce exclusion when external policies intersect with internal hierarchies. The transformation of spatial policies, such as those observed in Geopark Ciletuh and the Bontang ring road development, further illustrates how state interventions reshape class structures, social roles, and institutional dynamics, ultimately redefining who gains access to economic opportunities and political voice (Putri, 2022; Iskandar et al., 2024). These cases reveal that development policies are not neutral technical instruments; rather, they actively restructure social relations and redistribute power.

The phenomenon of structural inequality becomes more evident when examining specific socio-legal and economic contexts. In the case of Galian C mining in Bone Bolango, centralized licensing mechanisms and the dominance of state–corporate alliances resulted in local communities losing control over their living spaces. Ecological degradation combined with restricted access to natural resources led to increased poverty and vulnerability among residents, demonstrating how structural arrangements can systematically disadvantage local populations (Podungge et al., 2025). This situation reflects a deeper issue of social justice: those who bear the environmental and social costs are often excluded from decision-making processes and from the economic benefits generated by extractive activities.

Similar patterns are observed in the development of Geopark Toba and Ciletuh, where investors and central government policies appear to benefit more significantly than indigenous or economically marginalized communities. Issues of spatial justice, customary land rights, and meaningful participation emerge as central concerns (Putri, 2022; Iskandar et al., 2024; Azmi et al., 2025). Spatial development thus becomes a site of contestation over access, recognition, and representation. Structural inequality in these contexts is not accidental; it is embedded in policy frameworks that prioritize macroeconomic growth over equitable distribution and participatory governance.

In the environmental and wildlife protection sector, law enforcement practices often display asymmetrical patterns. Studies indicate that marginalized local communities face stricter legal sanctions, while actors with greater economic or political power encounter weaker enforcement. This imbalance reveals a gap between formal legal norms and substantive justice, illustrating how social inequality influences access to justice and the differential application of law (Pramana et al., 2025). Structural inequality therefore operates not only through economic mechanisms but also through institutionalized legal processes that reproduce unequal treatment.

Educational access in underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost regions (3T areas) further exemplifies structural inequality. Although formal policies may guarantee universal access to education, indirect costs and infrastructural limitations disproportionately burden low-income families, limiting their ability to pursue schooling. This situation perpetuates the reproduction of unequal educational opportunities across generations (Susanto et al., 2025). Here, inequality is embedded in systemic conditions rather than in individual choices, reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage.

Collectively, these empirical cases demonstrate that justice cannot be measured solely by the existence of formal legal provisions. What matters is substantive justice: who bears the burdens, who enjoys the benefits, and who has access to decision-making processes (Podungge et al., 2025; Iskandar et al., 2024; Pramana et al., 2025; Susanto et al., 2025). Structural inequality persists when institutional architectures systematically privilege certain actors while marginalizing others. Therefore, analyzing inequality requires moving beyond surface-level indicators toward an examination of structural power configurations.

Despite the richness of existing studies, several analytical gaps remain. First, many analyses of geopark development and infrastructure projects adopt technocratic perspectives that emphasize economic growth, tourism potential, or engineering feasibility. The power relations among the state, investors, and indigenous communities often become visible only when examined through frameworks of spatial justice or social justice theory (Putri, 2022; Iskandar et al., 2024; Azmi et al., 2025). This indicates a tendency to treat inequality as a secondary issue rather than as an inherent dimension of structural arrangements.

Second, ecological degradation is frequently attributed to local activities without sufficient attention to centralized power structures, mining licenses, and weak regulatory oversight that benefit elites (Podungge et al., 2025; Pramana et al., 2025). Such reductionist explanations obscure the structural roots of environmental injustice and shift responsibility away from institutional actors. Third, legal scholarship often remains confined to textual analysis of statutes and regulations, overlooking the sociological gap between normative frameworks and practical

implementation. Socio-legal studies reveal that vulnerable groups are more easily criminalized, while capital owners often enjoy relative immunity, reflecting entrenched structural asymmetries (Pramana et al., 2025).

These gaps underscore the significance of adopting a critical approach that integrates analysis of social structure, power relations, political economy, and theories of justice. By drawing on perspectives such as Rawlsian justice, Soja's spatial justice, structuration theory, and critical social analysis, researchers can uncover how structures and policies actively produce inequality rather than merely reflecting it (Podungge et al., 2025; Putri, 2022; Iskandar et al., 2024; Azmi et al., 2025; Nawval et al., 2025). A critical framework shifts attention from individual misconduct to institutional design, revealing how mining permits, conservation schemes, infrastructure planning, and educational financing systems create repetitive patterns of injustice.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative analysis of social structure, power, and justice within a unified framework of structural inequality. While prior research has examined individual sectors such as mining, geopark development, environmental enforcement, or education, few studies synthesize these dimensions to demonstrate how structural configurations consistently shape unequal outcomes. By connecting spatial policies, legal enforcement, ecological governance, and educational access within a broader structural perspective, this study advances a multidimensional understanding of inequality. It highlights the interconnectedness of institutional arrangements and power distributions across sectors, thereby enriching theoretical debates on structural justice.

Based on the empirical phenomena and identified analytical gaps, the objective of this study is to critically analyze how social structures distribute power and reproduce structural inequality, and to assess the implications of these dynamics for substantive social justice. Through this objective, the study seeks to contribute to the development of a comprehensive analytical framework capable of illuminating the structural roots of inequality and informing more equitable policy interventions.

## 2. Method, Data, and Analysis

This study employs a qualitative research design with a critical socio-legal and political economy approach to analyze how social structures distribute power and reproduce structural inequality, and how these dynamics affect substantive social justice. The research adopts a multi-case study strategy to capture variations of structural inequality across different contexts, including natural resource governance, spatial development, environmental law enforcement, and access to education. Data collection is conducted through three main techniques. First, document analysis is applied to examine policy documents, regional regulations, licensing frameworks, court decisions, development master plans, and official reports related to mining, geopark development, environmental enforcement, and education policy. Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews are conducted with key informants, including local community members, customary leaders, civil society representatives, government officials, and policy observers, to explore perceptions of power distribution, participation, and access to justice. Third, limited field observations are undertaken to understand the social dynamics and institutional practices within selected case locations. These data collection techniques are designed to triangulate institutional narratives with lived experiences of affected communities.

Data analysis is conducted using critical thematic analysis combined with a socio-legal interpretative framework. The analytical process begins with open coding to identify patterns related to power relations, access to resources, institutional arrangements, and justice claims. These codes are then categorized into broader themes such as centralized authority, participatory exclusion, legal asymmetry, and spatial marginalization. Subsequently, the findings are interpreted using critical theories of justice and social structure to assess whether existing institutional arrangements reflect procedural justice only or achieve substantive justice. Cross-case comparison is applied to identify recurring structural patterns that reproduce inequality across sectors. Through this analytical strategy, the study systematically examines how policies and institutional architectures produce, sustain, or legitimize unequal power distributions, thereby addressing the research objective of uncovering the structural foundations of social injustice.

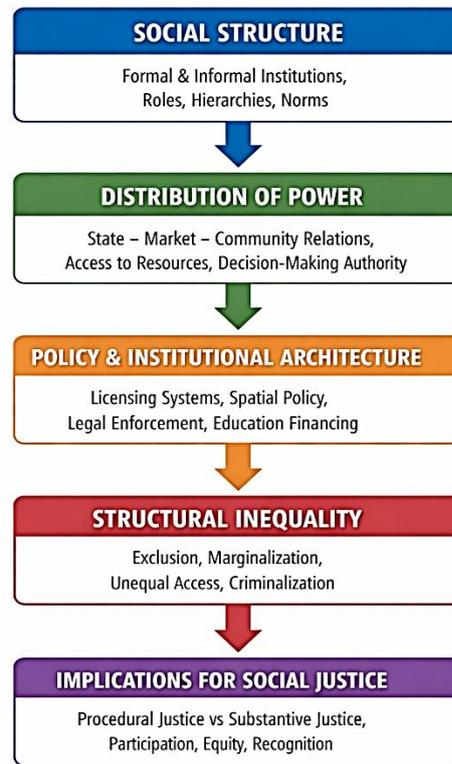


Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

### 3. Results

Based on the qualitative analysis using thematic coding and cross-case comparison across mining governance, geopark development, environmental law enforcement, and access to education in 3T (underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost) regions, consistent patterns were identified regarding the relationship between social structure, power distribution, and their implications for substantive justice. The main findings are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Patterns of Structural Inequality and Implications for Social Justice

Case Context	Dominant Power Structure	Form of Structural Inequality	Impact on Local Communities	Justice Dimension Affected
<b>Mining (Bone Bolango)</b>	Centralized licensing; state–corporate dominance	Loss of community control over land and resources	Ecological degradation; economic marginalization	Substantive justice deficit
<b>Geopark Development (Toba &amp; Ciletuh)</b>	Central policy and investor-driven planning	Unequal access to spatial benefits; limited participation	Marginalization of indigenous and low-income groups	Spatial justice gap
<b>Environmental Law Enforcement</b>	Asymmetrical legal application	Criminalization of vulnerable groups; weak enforcement toward elites	Unequal access to legal protection	Procedural–substantive justice gap
<b>Education Access in 3T Areas</b>	Unequal allocation of public resources	High indirect education costs; limited infrastructure	Reproduction of intergenerational inequality	Distributive justice imbalance

The table demonstrates that structural inequality does not emerge randomly but is produced by centralized power configurations and exclusive institutional architectures. In the mining and geopark cases, the dominance of state and investor actors restricts meaningful community participation and redistributes economic benefits toward those with greater structural power. In environmental law enforcement, inequality is reflected in the differential treatment between vulnerable communities and powerful actors, revealing a gap between procedural justice and substantive justice. Meanwhile, in the education sector within 3T regions, uneven resource distribution reinforces intergenerational inequality, limiting upward social mobility. Overall, these findings confirm that social structures and policy designs play a central role in producing and sustaining inequality. Therefore, justice analysis must move beyond individual accountability and instead focus on transforming institutional architectures and power distributions that systematically reproduce injustice.

#### 4. Discussion

The objective of this study is to critically analyze how social structures distribute power and reproduce structural inequality, and to assess the implications of these dynamics for substantive social justice. The findings summarized in Table 1 demonstrate that inequality across sectors such as mining governance, spatial development, environmental law enforcement, and education access is not incidental but structurally embedded within institutional architectures. The discussion below integrates these findings with established scholarly literature to demonstrate that structural inequality in Indonesia is deeply rooted in the interaction between social structure, power accumulation, and distributive justice.

The concept of social structure provides the foundational lens through which inequality must be understood. In indigenous legal communities, individuals are not positioned as autonomous rights-bearing agents detached from collective identity; rather, they are embedded within kinship and customary associations that regulate rights and obligations collectively (Nawval et al., 2025). This communal orientation illustrates that justice is structurally mediated, meaning that access to resources and authority is shaped by one's position within the social order. The findings of this study confirm that structural configurations determine who participates in decision-making and who remains excluded. For example, in mining and geopark development cases, local communities often occupy peripheral structural positions, limiting their influence over licensing processes and spatial planning. Thus, inequality arises not because communities lack initiative, but because structural arrangements allocate authority asymmetrically.

At the macro level, structural inequality is reinforced by the transformation of economic capital into political power. Money, as conceptualized in critical political economy, functions not merely as an economic medium but as a vehicle of impersonal domination that sustains hierarchical social orders while appearing neutral (Saputra & Pratama, 2023). This perspective helps explain why centralized licensing systems in mining governance disproportionately benefit state–corporate alliances. Capital accumulation translates into political leverage, enabling elite actors to shape policy frameworks in their favor. The structural pattern observed in Bone Bolango mining aligns with this analysis, as ecological degradation and community marginalization coexist with institutional arrangements that formally comply with regulatory procedures. The dominance of capital-backed actors exemplifies how structural inequality is reproduced through economic power embedded within governance systems.

The phenomenon of structural poverty further illustrates this dynamic. The case of Bajo fishers demonstrates that poverty should not be interpreted as individual incapacity but as structural marginalization resulting from unfavorable policies, unequal economic relations, and weakened social solidarity (Nurfadia et al., 2025). Similarly, the findings of this study indicate that communities affected by resource extraction or spatial development often face restricted access to productive assets and political participation. Structural marginalization thus generates intergenerational inequality, reinforcing patterns of exclusion that persist over time. This confirms that structural inequality is self-reinforcing: once communities are excluded from institutional power, their capacity to influence redistributive reforms diminishes.

The issue of justice becomes particularly salient when examining law enforcement practices. The table's findings show asymmetrical legal application in environmental and wildlife protection cases, where marginalized groups face stricter sanctions while economically and politically powerful actors often evade accountability. This pattern corresponds with socio-legal research demonstrating that access to justice is unevenly distributed, resulting in formal legality without substantive fairness (Pramana et al., 2025). Law, in this sense, functions within existing power structures rather than above them. The gap between procedural justice and substantive justice reflects structural bias embedded within enforcement mechanisms. Consequently, justice must be evaluated not only in terms of normative compliance but also in relation to the distribution of power that shapes enforcement outcomes.

In the broader national economy, economic growth measured through GDP expansion does not automatically translate into equitable distribution of resources and services. Studies emphasize that poverty

alleviation must be understood as an ethical and distributive justice issue rather than a mere growth strategy (Noer et al., 2025). The persistence of poverty alongside macroeconomic growth reveals structural imbalances in resource allocation and governance. The education access disparities in 3T regions identified in this study further illustrate this contradiction. Although formal policies may endorse equal opportunity, unequal infrastructure and indirect costs reproduce disadvantage. Structural inequality in education therefore mirrors broader distributive imbalances within national development.

Fiscal mechanisms, including progressive taxation, also reveal structural limitations. Although progressive tax systems are theoretically designed to reduce inequality, ineffective design and implementation limit their redistributive impact (Rahmawati, 2024). This finding underscores that structural reform requires not only normative frameworks but also institutional capacity and political will. When tax systems fail to redistribute wealth effectively, economic inequality becomes entrenched, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations across sectors.

A critical perspective on money–power relations provides additional explanatory depth. The accumulation of capital supports forms of domination that appear administratively neutral yet systematically privilege certain actors (Saputra & Pratama, 2023). This mechanism can be observed in infrastructure and spatial development projects where investor-driven planning overshadows community participation. Structural inequality is thus reproduced through technocratic narratives that prioritize efficiency and growth while sidelining equity considerations. By embedding capital interests within policy design, institutions normalize unequal outcomes as inevitable consequences of modernization.

Power relations are also embedded in knowledge production and discourse. Studies employing Foucauldian frameworks demonstrate how media structures reproduce gender stereotypes and legitimize patriarchal norms through the interplay of power and knowledge (Thabrani, 2022). Although this study focuses primarily on economic and legal structures, the insight remains relevant: inequality persists when dominant narratives shape public perception and legitimize hierarchical arrangements. Similarly, legislative processes, such as those observed in the deliberation of the RUU TNI, reveal legitimacy crises when elite political actors dominate public discourse, marginalizing broader societal aspirations (Utami, 2025). These examples confirm that structural inequality is not confined to material resources but extends to symbolic and discursive power.

The implications for justice are therefore multidimensional. Structural inequality affects distributive justice, procedural justice, spatial justice, and recognition. Islamic economic scholarship offers alternative frameworks emphasizing redistributive mechanisms such as zakat, infaq, and waqf, alongside prohibitions against exploitative practices like riba (Ate & Chasani, 2025; Kasmawati & Mawardi, 2025; Putri et al., 2025; Chalid & Zubaidah, 2025; Parwati et al., 2025). These models underscore the role of the state and community in correcting structural imbalances through ethical redistribution. Such approaches align with the study's findings that structural inequality requires institutional reform rather than isolated policy adjustments.

Customary inheritance practices in Javanese and corporate share distribution contexts further demonstrate that justice can be conceptualized as a balance between rights and obligations within kinship and cultural structures (Wasurip & Mahmudi, 2025; Maskuri & Dija, 2025). Deliberation (*musyawarah*) functions as a mechanism to prevent domination and ensure equitable outcomes. This communal orientation contrasts with purely individualistic distributive models and suggests that structural reform may draw upon culturally embedded principles of balance and collective responsibility.

Taken together, the discussion confirms that structural inequality in Indonesia is sustained by interconnected mechanisms: centralized authority, capital-driven policymaking, asymmetrical law enforcement, and uneven resource allocation. These mechanisms operate within broader social structures that normalize hierarchy and legitimize exclusion. The study's objective to analyze how social structures distribute power and reproduce structural inequality has been addressed through empirical and theoretical integration. The findings demonstrate that substantive justice cannot be achieved without transforming institutional architectures that systematically privilege certain actors over others.

Therefore, advancing social justice requires a shift from focusing on individual accountability toward reforming structural configurations of power. Redistributive fiscal policies, participatory governance mechanisms, equitable spatial planning, and culturally grounded justice frameworks must be integrated into comprehensive reform strategies. Without such structural transformation, inequality will continue to be reproduced across sectors, undermining the legitimacy and sustainability of social institutions.

## 5. Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

### Conclusion

This study concludes that structural inequality in Indonesia is fundamentally rooted in the configuration of social structures that regulate the distribution of power, resources, and institutional authority. Consistent with the research objective, the analysis demonstrates that inequality is not merely the result of individual shortcomings or isolated policy failures, but is systematically reproduced through centralized governance, capital-driven decision-making, asymmetrical law enforcement, and unequal allocation of economic and educational opportunities. The findings confirm that social structures shape who participates in decision-making processes, who benefits from development policies, and who bears social and ecological burdens, thereby creating persistent gaps between procedural and substantive justice. Consequently, achieving social justice requires not only formal legal compliance or economic growth, but structural reform that redistributes power, strengthens participatory mechanisms, and reorients institutional design toward equitable and inclusive outcomes.

### Limitation and suggestions

This study is limited by its qualitative multi-case design, which, while providing in-depth insights into structural inequality and power relations, does not allow for broad statistical generalization across all regions or sectors in Indonesia. The reliance on document analysis and selected case contexts may also reflect contextual specificities that differ in other institutional or cultural settings. Future research is therefore encouraged to complement critical qualitative approaches with quantitative or mixed-method designs to measure the extent and comparative patterns of structural inequality across regions. Longitudinal studies examining policy reforms over time would also provide stronger evidence of causal relationships between institutional change and distributive justice outcomes. Additionally, further exploration of gender, digital governance, and fiscal redistribution mechanisms could enrich the analysis of structural reform and contribute to more comprehensive strategies for achieving substantive social justice.

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