

Merit-Based Affirmative Action in the Career Development of Civil Servants in Southwest Papua Province

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ABSTRACT:

Career development of civil servants (ASN) in Southwest Papua Province operates under two mandates with different logics—the merit system and affirmative action for Indigenous Papuans (OAP)—making it prone to becoming discretion that is difficult to hold accountable. This study analyzes the implementation of merit-based affirmative action across three dimensions of the career cycle: merit in selection, development, and promotion. Using an interpretive qualitative approach with an embedded case study design at the Personnel and Human Resource Development Agency (BKPSDM) of Southwest Papua Province, the study involved 25 informants, with data collected through in-depth interviews, documentation study, and limited observation, then analyzed through theory-driven thematic analysis and pattern matching. The findings show that in selection, competency standards are not detailed, the placement of affirmative action shifts inconsistently, decision documentation is weak, and a qualified pool has not been formed; in development, competency mapping, training, assignment, and performance evaluation run separately without forming a pipeline, so that job placement often precedes competency preparation; and in promotion, decisions are not evidence-based and not traceable, so that the stigma of “being promoted by quota” grows from the absence of documentation rather than from low competence. The three dimensions lock into one another and converge on weak measurability and traceability as the basis for career decisions. The core problem is not a conflict between affirmative action and merit, but the failure of merit to function as documented and auditable rules of the game—so that affirmative action has not yet produced a sustainable supply of eligible OAP candidates.

Keywords: affirmative action; merit system; qualified pool; civil servant career development; Indigenous Papuans

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INTRODUCTION

Career development of civil servants (ASN) in Southwest Papua Province is prone to being misdesigned from the outset because it must carry two mandates that are equally strong but different in logic. On one side, national civil-service governance demands a merit system in which career decisions rest on testable measures—qualifications, competence, and performance—so that selection, development, and promotion do not depend on personal preference. On the other side, the Papuan context introduces an affirmative-action mandate as a correction of historical inequality, which operationally grants priority to OAP in ASN recruitment and appointment within a range of 60% to at most 80%, with an exception for positions requiring special competence. Affirmative action is therefore not merely a quota target but a personnel-management policy with limits, requirements, and institutional consequences (Kellough, 2006).

The problem is that affirmative action translated as a number without a stable merit apparatus tends to shift the issue from inequality of access to uncertainty of procedure. During bureaucratic consolidation, the need to fill positions quickly often encourages practical but hard-to-audit approaches: competency standards are not always clearly formulated, assessment mechanisms are inconsistent across units, and documentation of the reasons for career decisions is weak. Under these conditions, the merit system loses its core function as the *rule of the game*—not because merit norms are unrecognized, but because the procedures are not sufficiently grounded in consistent practice. As a result, affirmative action is easily perceived as discretion while merit is easily perceived as an administrative pretext, and both erode trust in the career system (Firmino et al., 2023; Sunam et al., 2022).

Operationally, this problem appears in three interrelated arenas. First, selection: affirmative action requires expanding OAP access to the pool of eligible candidates, yet selection must still culminate in a transparent and competitive final eligibility test with clear criteria and assessment

methods (Kellough, 2006; Naff & Kellough, 2003). Second, development: sustainable affirmative action requires planned coaching—mapping competency gaps, strategic training and assignment, and consistent performance evaluation—rather than waiting for candidates to become ready on their own (Makasau et al., 2025; Naff & Kellough, 2003). Third, promotion: as the stage of legitimacy for the career system, promotion demands evidence-based assessment, explicit affirmation procedures, and auditable decisions to reduce quota stigma while strengthening the legitimacy of strategic positions.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the family of merit-system theories: Classical Merit Theory, strong in building objectivity and procedural standardization but assuming an equal starting point across individuals (Dash & Padhi, 2020; Page, 2008; Rahman, 2025); Competency-Based Theory (Açıkgöz & Babadoğan, 2021; McClelland, 1967; Podmetina et al., 2018), which broadens merit beyond formal testing toward behavioral competence but is vulnerable to rater subjectivity; Affirmative Action Theory (Anderson, 2010; Crosby et al., 2006; Park, 2024), which corrects structural injustice but risks producing stigma when it stands alone without clear merit standards; and Performance Management Theory (Andrews et al., 2005; Ding et al., 2021; Nankervis, 2006; Rozhdestvenskaya et al., 2025), which verifies merit continuously through measurable performance evaluation.

From this synthesis emerges the framework of *merit-based affirmative action* (Kellough, 2006; Naff & Kellough, 2003; Selden, 2015). Affirmative action is understood not as a substitute for merit but as a strategy to ensure that marginalized groups can enter the pool of candidates meeting the minimum qualification (the *qualified pool*). This is where affirmative action works most powerfully—improving access, expanding opportunity, and reducing structural barriers—without forcing the final outcome. Once candidates are within the qualified pool, the final decision remains locked by testable merit

assessment. The framework shifts the focus from “what percentage of representation” to “whether the career system produces eligible candidates sustainably” by building a competency *pipeline* (Becker, 2014; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Gonzalez, 2013).

Affirmation–merit integration is read empirically through three dimensions of the career cycle (Kellough, 2006). *Merit in selection* assesses whether selection is transparent and competitive with clear standards and instruments, so that affirmative action expands OAP access to the qualified pool without eliminating the final eligibility test. *Merit in development* examines whether coaching operates as a planned process—gap mapping, training, assignment, mentoring, and performance evaluation—so that affirmative action accelerates capacity rather than merely granting entry. *Merit in promotion* tests whether promotion is evidence-based, accompanied by explicit affirmation rules and auditable decisions, so that quota stigma diminishes and the legitimacy of strategic positions strengthens. Several studies reinforce this framework: integrating affirmative action into competency-based recruitment yields more stable representation (Basu Roy & Ray, 2025; Karimi et al., 2019a, 2019b); a deliberately

designed qualified pool reduces post-selection competence stigma (Alteri, 2025; Charles, 2003; Guy & Fenley, 2014); and a merit-based competency pipeline produces a more adaptive bureaucracy (Matei & Gogu, 2021; Wilson, 2000).

Research Gap and Objectives

Studies of merit-based affirmative action in ASN career development in Indonesia remain limited, especially on post-access dimensions such as competency development, promotion, and career legitimacy. Most literature stops at recruitment design and quantitative representation, while the mechanism of sustainably integrating affirmative action and merit within a special-autonomy regional bureaucracy is barely addressed. As a policy matter, Southwest Papua Province—a newly formed province—does not yet have a grand design for OAP career development that coherently and measurably integrates merit and affirmation, which risks creating implementation inconsistency and eroding the legitimacy of special autonomy. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze *merit in selection*, *merit in development*, and *merit in promotion* in the career development of OAP civil servants in Southwest Papua Province, in order to produce OAP civil servants who are both qualified and competitive. The analytical framework is presented in Figure 1.

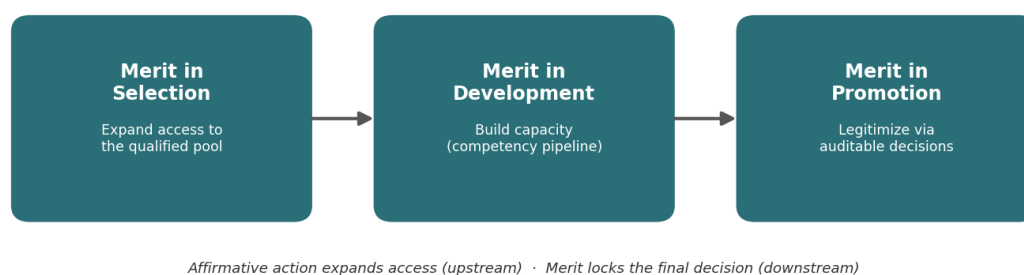


Figure 1. Analytical framework: merit-based affirmative action across the career cycle

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm and an embedded case study design, chosen because the focus is an in-depth understanding of how affirmation–merit integration works procedurally across the three arenas of the OAP career cycle rather than quantitative measurement. The research was conducted at the BKPSDM of Southwest Papua

Province, Sorong City, as the main institutional actor responsible for ASN management, covering the units handling selection/job placement, competency development, and promotion.

Informants were determined purposively by role (policy makers, technical implementers, supervisors, and policy recipients) to ensure each

dimension was analyzed comprehensively. The total number of informants was 25 (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of Research Informants

Informant Group	Roles	No.
Core policy makers (BKPSDM)	Head; Secretary; Head of Mutation/Promotion/Talent Management; Head of Competency Development; Head of Personnel Planning & Data	5
Technical implementers	Personnel analysts (selection–placement); SIMPEG/SI-ASN/talent-pool managers; assessors/competency-assessment unit officials	5
Senior-executive promotion process	Chair/members of the selection committee (internal and external)	3
Policy recipients (OAP civil servants)	OAP via affirmation/recruitment; those who took selection/promotion; those undergoing competency development	8
	Total	25

Source: Authors (2026)

The unit of analysis is the mechanism and procedure of OAP career development across the three dimensions of merit-based affirmative action. Data were reconstructed to assess actual practice, the basis of decisions, and administrative evidence at each stage, so that affirmation–merit integration could be evaluated in terms of procedural consistency, merit measurability, and decision auditability. Data collection used three techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews (probing policy logic, procedural practice, and career experience); documentation study to test the consistency of interview narratives against administrative evidence—selection documents (announcements, requirements, minutes, score recaps), development documents (competency plans, training lists, e-performance), and promotion documents (nomination files, assessment results, committee minutes, recommendations); and non-participant limited observation of technical meetings and administrative processes.

Analysis used theory-driven thematic coding. Data from interviews, documents, and observation were coded according to the three dimensions, followed by pattern matching to

compare empirical patterns with the principles of affirmation–merit integration—particularly qualified-pool formation, procedural consistency, and decision auditability. Trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking with key informants, and an audit trail ensuring the inference process is traceable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results follow the three dimensions of merit-based affirmative action, which form one sequential career cycle—from selection, to development, to promotion (Figure 1). At each stage, affirmative action should expand OAP candidate access, while the final decision is still determined by testable merit assessment.

Merit in Selection: Selection and Qualified-Pool Formation

The findings show that job competency standards are not uniformly established. Senior executive (JPT Pratama) positions have competency references aligned with national provisions, whereas for administrator and supervisor positions the competency formulations remain general and provide no clear measure. Consequently, selection relies more on

work experience and length of service than on measurable competency indicators. This relates to the underused translation of job analysis and workload analysis into operational competency

profiles, so that the boundary between positions fillable through affirmation and those requiring special competence is not firmly drawn (Figure 2, Table 2).

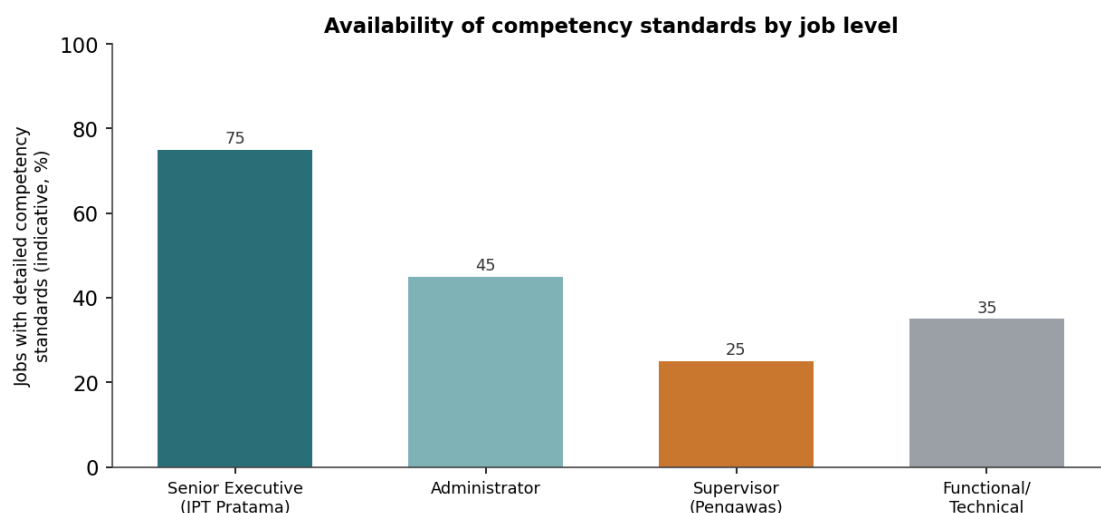


Figure 2. Availability of competency standards by job level

Source: BKPSDM (2026)

Table 2. Availability of Competency Standards by Job Level

Job Level	Competency-Standard Status	Notes
Senior Executive (JPT Pratama)	Available, aligned with national standards	Relatively clear, not yet adapted to local needs
Administrator	Partly available, still general	Not detailed into assessable measures
Supervisor (Pengawas)	Largely undetailed	Assessment rests on work experience
Functional/Technical	Varies across fields	Special-competence jobs not firmly mapped

Source: Research findings (2026)

The openness of selection varies by job type. Senior-executive positions are generally filled through open, publicly announced selection, whereas administrator and supervisor positions are more often filled through mutation or appointment based on internal considerations, usually linked to the need to fill positions quickly during the institutional set-up of a new province. Competency assessment through an assessment

center is not applied consistently, and in several cases functions as an administrative formality rather than a substantive basis for the decision (Figure 3). Because most structural positions sit at the administrator and supervisor levels, open competitive space for OAP candidates has not formed optimally, so affirmation is more easily perceived as a basis for placement than as an instrument for expanding fair competition.

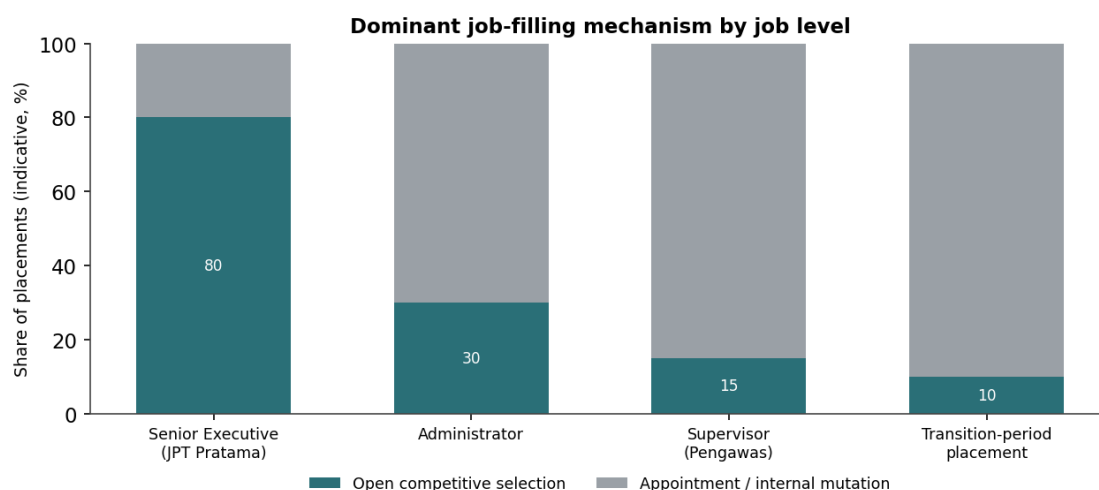


Figure 3. Dominant job-filling mechanism by job level

Source: BKPSDM (2026)

The placement of affirmation across selection stages is not consistent. Conceptually, affirmation should be applied early to expand access to the qualified pool, while the selected candidate is determined by competency assessment. In practice this varies: in some processes affirmation is used as an early priority, in others as a

consideration at final determination, and in certain cases it is not stated explicitly (Table 3). This variation produces differing understandings of affirmation's function—not only between OAP and non-OAP but also among implementers—so its implementation depends on each implementer's interpretation.

Table 3. Placement of Affirmation across Selection Stages

Point of Application	Form of Practice	Observed Consequence
Early stage (access)	Registration priority / OAP formation quota	Consistent with qualified-pool logic, not yet standard
Final stage (determination)	Affirmation considered at candidate selection	Creates the perception that outcomes are quota-driven
Not stated explicitly	Affirmation as an unwritten consideration	Decisions hard to trace and prone to misreading

Source: Research findings (2026)

Decision traceability is also weak. Selection documentation generally exists as announcements, requirements, and minutes, but documents explaining the substantive reasons for selecting or rejecting a candidate are inadequate. Most fundamentally, the provincial government does not yet have a mechanism to form and manage a qualified pool; positions are still filled by searching for candidates when a vacancy arises rather than selecting from a pre-prepared group. Within the qualified-pool framework, the unclear standards mean affirmation and merit cannot be

reconciled from the earliest point of the career cycle: when the pool of eligible candidates is never formed, affirmation is forced to operate at the outcome-determination stage rather than at access expansion—precisely the reversal of the theory's core logic that, per Kellough (2006), breeds stigma and delegitimation. This finding enriches a literature that generally assumes the qualified pool already exists (Bradbury & Kellough, 2022; Guy & Fenley, 2023): in a newly formed regional bureaucracy, the problem is not optimizing the pool but building it from scratch.

Merit in Development: Capacity Building and the Competency Pipeline

Competency-gap mapping for OAP civil servants is not done systematically. Basic personnel data (education, training, and work history) exist but have not been developed into competency profiles depicting the gap between competencies held and those required by a position. As a result, the selection of training participants is driven more by program availability than by real needs, and coaching tends to be general and uniform even though each OAP official has a different background and development need—so an

individualized-development approach has not materialized.

The link between training and job needs is also weak. The most-attended training is dominated by basic and administrative training, while leadership training at the administrator and senior-executive levels has not been taken by most OAP officials. A misaligned pattern emerges: some OAP officials perform leadership functions first and only later—or not yet—take equivalent leadership training. The ideal sequence of preparing competence before placement shifts to placement first, with competence strengthened after the official is already in post (Figure 4).

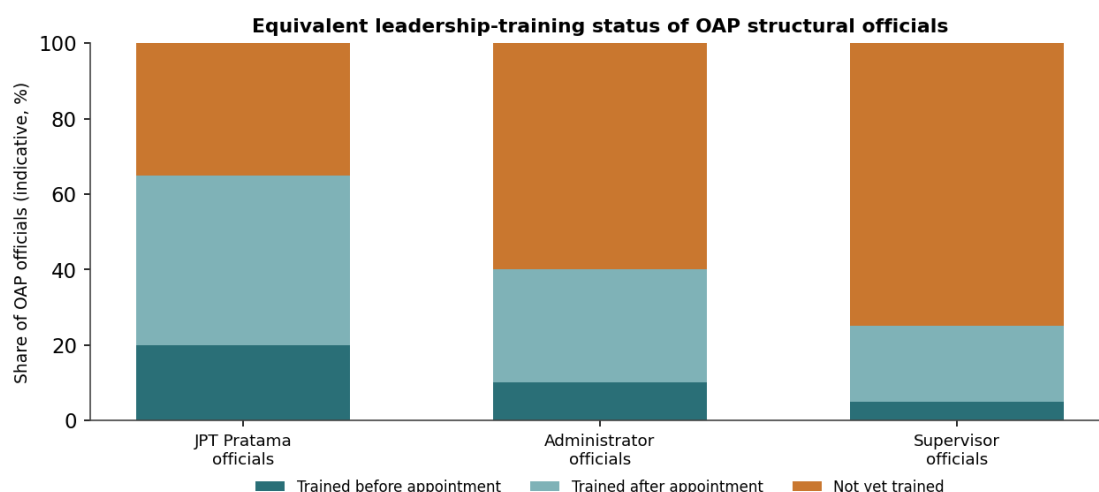


Figure 4. Equivalent leadership-training status of OAP structural officials

Source: BKPSDM (2026).

Strategic assignment and mentoring are not part of a formally designed coaching system; both are driven more by operational needs and leaders' discretion than by a planned development strategy, and mentoring proceeds informally without designated mentors, learning targets, or monitoring. A supporting role by non-OAP officials or staff who cover competency gaps also appears—a symptom resembling *shadow leadership*—which conceals the need for coaching and removes the organization's impetus to fix its system. Meanwhile, performance appraisal is conducted routinely but remains dominated by administrative purposes and is not used as feedback to determine training needs,

assignments, or promotion preparation. These elements—competency mapping, training, strategic assignment, mentoring, and performance evaluation—still operate as stand-alone activities, so one does not become the basis for the next (Table 4). Read through the logic of the competency pipeline, this explains why affirmative action in Southwest Papua stops at entry access: without a pipeline, there is no mechanism to convert presence into readiness. This aligns with Groeneveld and Verbeek (2022) while revealing its negative side—when the pipeline is absent, affirmation yields representation that is fragile in capacity.

Table 4. Condition of Competency-Pipeline Elements

Pipeline Element	Finding	Status
Competency-gap mapping	Not done systematically	Not started
Job-linked training	Still general and routine	Weak
Strategic assignment & mentoring	Unplanned and uneven	Weak
Performance evaluation for growth	Not used for career coaching	Not started
Continuity as a single track	Elements run separately, unconnected	Not started

Source: Research findings (2026)

Merit in Promotion: Promotion and the Legitimacy of Career Decisions

The basis of promotion does not fully rest on measurable performance and competence evidence. For senior-executive positions, the selection committee provides a relatively objective basis; but for administrator and supervisor positions, length of service, rank, and the leader's degree of trust remain dominant, while performance records and assessment results are not used consistently. Affirmation is still considered, but its mechanism is not openly formulated—when it is used, its position in the

assessment, and its weight relative to competency indicators—so its implementation develops as a practice understood through implementers' experience rather than a procedure with uniform guidance. The principle of evidence-based promotion is therefore not fully reflected.

The absence of explicit rules is reflected in the varied meanings attached to affirmation (Table 5). When the limits and mechanism of affirmation are not clearly formulated, each party constructs its own interpretation, making shared understanding of promotion outcomes difficult.

Table 5. Varied Understandings of Affirmation's Role in Promotion

Understanding of Affirmation	How Affirmation Is Believed to Work	Group That Tends to Hold It
Complement to merit	Considered after competence is assessed	Some technical implementers and supervisors
Tie-breaker when equal	Distinguishes candidates deemed comparable	Some policy makers
Primary preference	Seen as more decisive than other assessment	Some policy recipients

Source: Research findings (2026)

Traceability of promotion decisions is likewise limited. Administrative documents such as nomination files, minutes, and appointment decrees exist but generally record only the final outcome, not the reasoning process—the reasons for selecting a candidate, the consideration of other candidates, or affirmation's position in the decision (Table 6). As a result, the legitimacy of decisions rests more on the appointing official's authority than on verifiable evidence, so auditability has not been adequately formed. This limited auditability is closely tied to the stigma

faced by OAP officials promoted through affirmation: some civil servants—both OAP and non-OAP—view their promotion as a policy consequence rather than a recognition of competence. Notably, this perception also arises for high-performing OAP officials, so the core problem is not individual capability but weak procedural transparency. This finding directly supports Kellough's (2006) thesis while refining it: the “promoted by quota” stigma is a product not of affirmation itself but of the absence of documentation—implying that stigma is

addressed not by reducing affirmation but by strengthening decision auditability.

Table 6. Traceability of Promotion-Decision Documents

Document/Information	Availability	Notes
Nomination files and minutes	Available	Record the final outcome
Candidate assessment recap	Partly available	Not always complete across units
Notes on candidate selection rationale	Generally unavailable	Considerations largely verbal
Record of affirmation applied	Undocumented	No record of affirmation weight

Source: Research findings (2026)

On work discipline, the relationship between performance and promotion opportunity is not clearly perceived by some employees, so promotion loses its function as an incentive for achievement and, over the long term, risks weakening a performance-based work culture.

Synthesis: An Interlocking Chain of Weaknesses

Read as a whole, the three dimensions are not three separate problems but one interlocking

chain (Figure 5, Table 7). Blurred standards in selection hamper competency mapping in development; undirected development leaves candidates unready at promotion; and non-evidence-based promotion reinforces the perception that selection and development are indeed unmeasured. A weakness in one dimension does not stop there but propagates and amplifies weaknesses in the others.

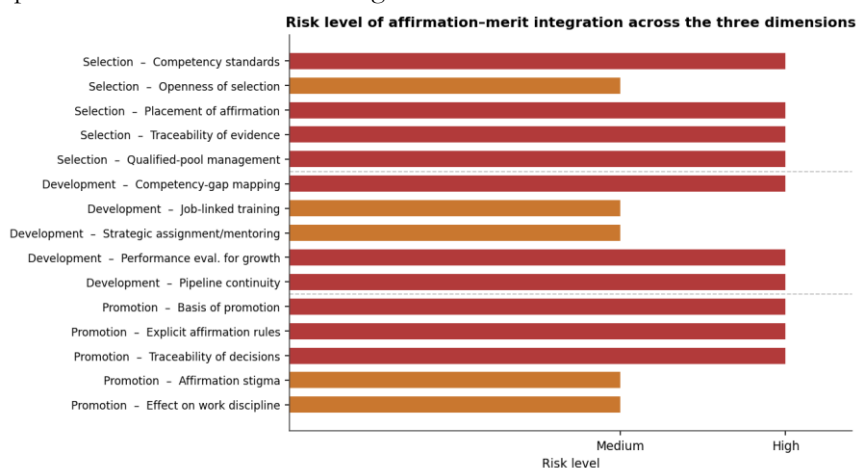


Figure 5. Risk level of affirmation–merit integration across the three dimensions

Source: BKPSDM (2026).

Table 7. Synthesis of Cross-Dimension Findings

Dimension	Key Finding	Link to Other Dimensions
Merit in Selection	Competency standards not detailed, weak documentation, no qualified pool	Hampers competency mapping in development

Dimension	Key Finding	Link to Other Dimensions
Merit in Development	Capacity building not arranged as a sequential track	Leaves candidates unready at promotion
Merit in Promotion	Promotion not evidence-based, not traceable, breeds stigma	Reinforces perception that selection and development are unmeasured

Source: *Research findings* (2026)

The thread uniting all three is weak measurability and traceability as the basis for career decisions. Affirmative action does not fail because it conflicts with merit, but because merit has not yet appeared as documented, auditable rules of the game. This is the study's main contribution: in a newly formed affirmative bureaucracy, the weak point is not the choice between affirmation and merit but the absence of the procedural infrastructure that lets the two meet measurably. Consequently, Southwest Papua Province does not yet have a set of procedures enabling affirmation to produce a sustainable supply of eligible OAP candidates—affirmation has opened access, but selection, development, and promotion are not yet arranged as one system that safeguards measurability and openness.

CONCLUSION

The career development of OAP civil servants in Southwest Papua Province shows that affirmative action has functioned as a policy mandate, but the merit procedures that should bind it are not yet measurably arranged along the career cycle, so that the qualification and competitiveness of OAP civil servants risk stagnating in the coming years. In *merit in selection*, competency standards are not uniformly detailed, competitive space is uneven, affirmation placement shifts, documentation is weak, and no qualified pool exists—so affirmation is forced to operate at outcome determination. In *merit in*

development, competency mapping, training, assignment, mentoring, and performance evaluation run separately without forming a pipeline, so placement often precedes competency preparation. In *merit in promotion*, decisions are not evidence-based and not traceable, so the “promoted by quota” stigma grows from the absence of documentation rather than from low competence. The three dimensions lock together, and their common thread is weak measurability and traceability as the basis for career decisions.

Accordingly, the BKPSDM of Southwest Papua Province should strengthen *merit in selection* by formulating job competency standards, forming a qualified pool of OAP civil servants, and improving selection documentation; integrate competency mapping, training, mentoring, and performance evaluation into a sustainable *career-development pipeline* under *merit in development*; and apply evidence-based promotion through measurable indicators, explicit affirmation rules, and traceable decision documentation under *merit in promotion*. When these three steps are taken, OAP civil servants who are qualified and nationally competitive are expected to emerge. This study is limited to a single institution and is qualitative; further research could test the resulting procedural model in other special-autonomy regions or measure its effectiveness longitudinally.

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