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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE MODERNIZATION OF LOCAL PUBLIC FACILITIES MANAGEMENT: EVIDENCE FROM TLEMCEN PROVINCE, ALGERIA

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Abstract. *This study examines how digital transformation contributes to modernizing the management of local public facilities in Tlemcen Province, Algeria. Despite increasing attention to digitalization, limited research addresses the key enablers of its success in local governance. Based on data from 273 public sector employees that were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via Smart PLS, the study finds that human, physical, legal, and security requirements positively influence digital transformation. In turn, digital transformation significantly improves the efficiency, responsiveness, and quality of public facility management. The results underscore the need for strategic resource integration and institutional readiness. This research adds empirical evidence from Algeria and offers insights for policy and reform in developing countries.*

Keywords: *digital transformation, public facilities, PLS-SEM, Algeria*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Skaitmeninė transformacija; viešosios įstaigos; valdymo modernizavimas; PLS-SEM; Alžyras.*

JEL classification*: *H83, O33, H76

Introduction

Digital transformation represents a strategic shift involving the integration of digital

technologies across all public facility management functions, aligning stakeholders with the demands of the digital economy (Bondar et al. 2017). It relies on data exchange, advanced analytics, and algorithmic evaluation to enhance decision-making within interconnected systems. In the public sector, this shift incorporates tools such as social media, mobile platforms, and big data analytics to foster more efficient governance and increased public value (Fitzgerald et al. 2013; Verhoef et al. 2021). Empirical studies confirm that digital service delivery strengthens transparency, performance, and service quality (Kraus et al. 2022). Globally, digitalization has become central to public sector reform, especially at the local level (Mergel et al. 2019). Emerging technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and big data facilitate real-time monitoring and resource optimization, leading to reduced costs and improved effectiveness (Atta and Talamo 2020; Naji et al. 2024; Erhueh et al. 2024). Accordingly, digital transformation is now considered a strategic obligation, requiring a shift from traditional metrics to broader capability-based management systems (Amaratunga and Baldry 2002; Marks and AL-Ali 2020). Recent research highlights the importance of digital frameworks and smart reporting systems in sectors such as education, healthcare, and finance for accelerating responses and reducing inefficiencies (Santos et al. 2024; Yadav 2024). At the local level, digital transformation contributes to better governance and more equitable access to services, helping address disparities between urban and rural areas (Omweri 2024). However, challenges remain, including resistance to change and insufficient infrastructure, emphasizing the need for strong readiness models tailored for local administrations (Aristovnik et al. 2024; Novienty and Febiayu 2025; Akbar et al. 2025). This study investigates (1) how critical prerequisites—human resources, infrastructure, legal frameworks, and information security—affect digital transformation implementation, and (2) how this transformation improves local governance in public facility management. Using data from five sectors in Tlemcen Province, it applies the PLS-SEM approach to explore causal relationships and inform digital governance reforms, supported by a literature review, conceptual framework, methodology, and empirical findings with practical implications.

1. Literature Review and Hypotheses

Recent literature highlights the growing importance of digital transformation in improving the management of local public facilities and how it enhances service quality, resource efficiency, and citizen engagement. In their studies, Latupeirissa et al. (2024) and Das (2024) demonstrate that smart governance initiatives and targeted technological investments—such as Smart Villages—can significantly improve service delivery at the community level. However, persistent challenges such as urban-rural infrastructure gaps and risks of digital exclusion remain significant (Omweri 2024; Sampetoding and Mahendrawathi 2024). Sectoral applications, including healthcare and education, illustrate how

digital tools (e.g., artificial intelligence and Internet of Medical Things) and smart systems improve operational efficiency and transparency (Iyamu et al. 2021; Hameed et al. 2024; Benavides et al. 2020). Building on this foundation, the study proposes:

H1: Digital Transformation Applications have a significant positive effect on the management of local public facilities.

Human competencies are key to digital transformation success. Training, adaptability, and leadership support have been repeatedly emphasized. Noe (2009) highlighted the value of adult learning in skill development, while Berman (2012) emphasized the need for adaptability and technical skills. Leadership vision and support also enhance digital innovation (Schiuma et al. 2024), especially in key sectors such as health and education. Continuous capacity building remains crucial for public institutions, especially at the local level (Paul et al. 2024).

H2: Human Requirements (competencies and training) have a significant positive effect on Digital Transformation Applications in local public facilities.

Physical infrastructure is another foundational pillar. The adoption of technologies such as IoT and cloud computing depends on reliable systems aligned with institutional objectives (Nagy et al. 2018; Bharadwaj et al. 2013). Despite the enabling potential of digital infrastructure, many institutions still face constraints due to outdated systems and insufficient funding (Das 2024; Naji et al. 2024). Addressing these issues requires strategic reforms and technological modernization.

H3: Physical Requirements (infrastructure and equipment) have a significant positive effect on Digital Transformation Applications in local public facilities.

Legal and administrative frameworks underpin successful digital transitions by providing regulatory clarity and institutional support. Effective governance depends on laws that foster accountability and transparency (Mergel et al. 2019) and a shift in institutional culture (Ciancarini et al. 2024). Forradellas et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of coherent legal structures in sustaining digital change, while Fang (2002) noted how e-government has already reshaped public administration practices.

H4: Legal and Administrative Framework (legislation and regulations) has a significant positive effect on Digital Transformation Applications in local public facilities.

Information security is essential to ensure the credibility and continuity of digital transformation. As public services digitalize, risks such as data breaches and cyberattacks grow (Saeed et al. 2023). Weak cybersecurity can erode public trust and compromise systems (Stewart 2023). Hence, robust cybersecurity strategies aligned with institutional architecture are critical (Judijanto et al. 2023).

H5: Information Security (cybersecurity) has a significant positive effect on Digital Transformation Applications in local public facilities.

Drawing from these insights, this study builds a conceptual model to explore how key digital transformation requirements influence the modernization of local public facility management. Despite Algeria's growing focus on digital governance (Mokhtari 2024),

practical implementation remains challenged by institutional fragmentation, skill gaps, and resource constraints (Bouberka et al. 2023; Ratiba and Benamrouche 2024). Existing Algerian research tends to focus on national strategies or single sectors, neglecting local-level dynamics. Addressing this gap, the present study uses Tlemcen Province as a case study to investigate five key sectors—health, higher education, electricity and gas, municipalities, and tax administration—using PLS-SEM to analyze causal relationships and support evidence-based policy recommendations.

2. Methods

2.1 Sample and Data Collection Procedures

In Algeria, local governments—particularly provinces and municipalities—are central to public service delivery. Tlemcen Province was selected for its strategic importance and institutional diversity, reflecting national public management dynamics. The study focused on five key institutions: the University Hospital Center, the University of Tlemcen, the Municipality of Tlemcen, Sonelgaz's provincial branch, and the Directorate of Taxation, covering the sectors of healthcare, education, municipal services, energy, and finance. A purposive sampling approach was used to target individuals directly involved in digital transformation efforts, with participation being voluntary and purpose-driven. The final sample consisted of 273 respondents: 50 from the University Hospital, 48 from the university, 35 from the municipality, 81 from Sonelgaz, and 59 from the tax directorate, ensuring a balanced representation across critical public sectors.

2.2 Measures

To achieve the study's objectives and based on the literature review and research hypotheses, a structured, closed-ended questionnaire was used as the main data collection tool. It included three sections: (1) demographic variables, gathering data on gender, age, education, and professional experience; (2) the independent variable—digital transformation—measured across four core dimensions, i.e., Human Requirements (competencies and training), Physical Requirements (infrastructure and equipment), Legal and Administrative Framework (laws and regulations), and Information Security (cybersecurity), using 20 statements (five per dimension); and (3) the dependent variable—modernization of public facility management—assessed through eight statements related to administrative development and service improvement. The final questionnaire included 28 positively worded items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). It was administered during field visits to selected institutions, with voluntary participation, over a four-month period to ensure comprehensive data collection and reliable responses.

2.3 Data Analysis Methods

Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used via Microsoft Excel to analyze demographic data such as gender, age, education, and professional experience. To examine the relationships among key variables, the study employed PLS-SEM using Smart PLS 4.0. This method was chosen for its suitability with small sample sizes, complex models, and non-normal data (Wong 2013; Hair et al. 2014a), making it appropriate for analyzing the impact of digital transformation on the modernization of local public facility management. The analysis followed three stages: (1) the measurement model was evaluated using outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE) for convergent validity and the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity; (2) the structural model was assessed through R^2 (explanatory power), Q^2 (predictive relevance), and f^2 (effect size) (Hair et al. 2014b); and (3) hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping to determine the significance and strength of path coefficients. This method is widely adopted in public administration research due to its accuracy in handling complex relationships.

3. Findings

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 273 respondents. Males accounted for 60.07% and females 39.93%, indicating a gender distribution skewed slightly toward males. Most participants were between 30 and 49 years old, reflecting mid-career professionals with relevant experience. About 48.72% held a bachelor's degree, while 36.85% had postgraduate or professional qualifications, indicating a well-educated sample. Additionally, 60.81% had more than 10 years of professional experience, which strengthens the credibility and depth of their insights into institutional practices and digital transformation.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Variables (N = 273)

Demographic variable	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	164	60.07
	Female	109	39.93
Age (years)	20–30	32	11.72
	30–40	108	39.56
	40–50	88	32.23
	50+	45	16.49

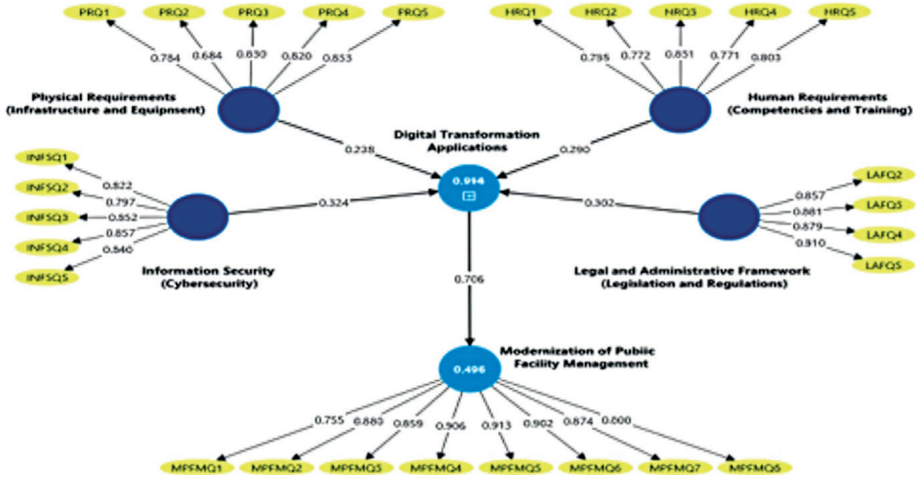
Educational level/Professional field	Bachelor's	133	48.72
	Engineering	40	14.65
	Master's	69	25.27
	Doctorate	08	2.93
	Doctor	11	4.03
	Paramedic	12	4.40
Professional experience (years)	5-	29	10.62
	5–10	78	28.57
	10–15	82	30.04
	15+	84	30.77

Source: Authors, based on survey data

3.2 Measurement Model Evaluation

Within the PLS-SEM framework, most indicators in Figure 1 displayed outer loadings above 0.70, confirming measurement reliability. One item from the Legal and Administrative Framework was removed due to low loading and minimal impact on the AVE. An item from the Physical Requirements construct, although slightly below 0.70, was retained for theoretical and statistical reasons. Overall, the results support the model's convergent validity and reliability.

Figure 1. Outer Loadings of Measurement Items for Each Construct



Source: Author's computation using SMART PLS.4 software

Construct reliability and validity were confirmed through Table 2. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeded 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency (Fornell and Larcker 1981; Hair et al. 2014b). Convergent validity was supported by AVE values above 0.50 (Hair et al. 2014a). Discriminant validity, verified using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, showed that the square root of each AVE was greater than inter-construct correlations, confirming distinctiveness (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Table 2. Reliability and Validity of Constructs

Reliability and AVE						
Construct	Cronbach's alpha		Composite reliability		AVE	
DTA	0.943		0.945		0.510	
HR	0.846		0.847		0.619	
INFS	0.890		0.893		0.695	
LAF	0.879		0.882		0.735	
PR	0.851		0.865		0.627	
MPFM	0.951		0.955		0.746	
Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker)						
	DTA	HR	INFS	LAF	PR	MPFM
DTA	0.714					
HR	0. 787	0.859				
INFS	0.834	0.632	0.874			
LAF	0.857	0.639	0.726	0.878		
PR	0.792	0.719	0.622	0.653	0.845	
MPFM	0.706	0.598	0.583	0.686	0.541	0.864
Note. DTA, Digital Transformation Applications; HR, Human Requirements; INFS, Information Security; LAF, Legal and Administrative Framework; PR, Physical Requirements; MPFM, Modernization of Public Facility Management						

Source: Author's computation using SMART PLS.4 software

3.3 Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model was assessed using R^2, Q^2predict, and f^2 to evaluate explanatory power, predictive relevance, and effect sizes (Hair et al. 2017). As shown in Table 3, R^2 for Digital Transformation Applications was 0.998, and for Public Facility Management Modernization it was 0.498—indicating high and moderate explanatory power, respectively.

Adjusted R^2 values (0.998 and 0.496) confirmed the model's robustness. Q^2predict values of 0.998 and 0.481 exceeded zero, supporting strong predictive relevance (Stone 1974).

Table 3. Explanatory and Predictive Power of the Structural Model

	R^2	R^2 adjusted	Q^2predict
Digital Transformation Applications	0.998	0.998	0.998
Modernization of Public Facility Management	0.498	0.496	0.481

Source: Author's computation using SMART PLS.4 software

Effect sizes (f^2) were examined to assess the strength of relationships between variables. As shown in Table 4, all predictors had strong effects (Hair et al. 2017). Information Security had the largest impact on Digital Transformation Applications (f^2 = 28.742), followed by Legal and Administrative Framework (23.627), Human Requirements (22.872), and Physical Requirements (15.331). The effect of Digital Transformation Applications on Public Facility Management Modernization was also significant (f^2 = 0.992), confirming the structural model's robustness.

Table 4. Effect Sizes (f^2) of the Structural Model Relationships

	f^2
Digital Transformation Applications -> Modernization of Public Facility Management	0.992
Human Requirements -> Digital Transformation Applications	22.872
Information Security-> Digital Transformation Applications	28.742
Legal and Administrative Framework -> Digital Transformation Applications	23.627
Physical Requirements -> Digital Transformation Applications	15.331

Source: Author's computation using SMART PLS.4 software

3.4 Hypothesis Testing Using the Bootstrapping Procedure

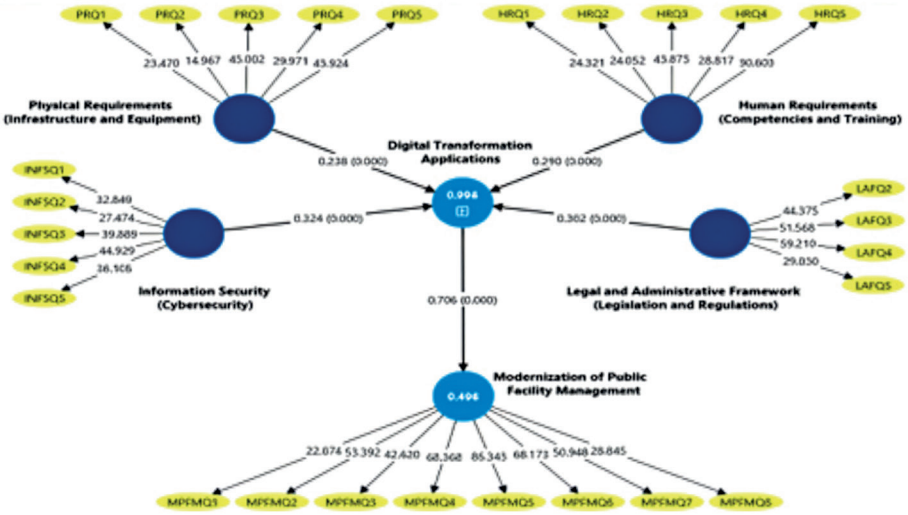
Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples in Smart PLS. As shown in Table 5, all five hypotheses were statistically supported, with T-values > 1.96 and p-values < 0.001. Digital Transformation Applications (DTA) had a strong positive effect on Public Facility Management Modernization (MPFM) (H1). Human Requirements, Physical Requirements, Legal and Administrative Framework, and Information Security significantly influenced DTA (H2–H5). These findings confirm the theoretical model, with Figure 2 illustrating the strength and direction of all relationships.

Table 5. Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values	Conclusion
H1: DTA -> MPFM	0.706	0.707	0.043	16.300	0.000	H1 is accepted
H2: HR -> DTA	0.290	0.290	0.011	26.888	0.000	H2 is accepted
H3: PR -> DTA	0.238	0.238	0.010	23.302	0.000	H3 is accepted
H4:LAF -> DTA	0.302	0.302	0.012	24.652	0.000	H4 is accepted
H5: INFS -> DTA	0.324	0.324	0.014	23.613	0.000	H5 is accepted
Note. DTA, Digital Transformation Applications; HR, Human Requirements; INFS, Information Security; LAF, Legal and Administrative Framework; PR, Physical Requirements; MPFM, Modernization of Public Facility Management						

Source: Author's computation using SMART PLS.4 software

Figure 2. Final Structural Model Results with Path Coefficients and Significance Levels



Source: Author's computation using SMART PLS.4 software

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The empirical results validate all five hypotheses, confirming that digital transformation significantly enhances the management of local public facilities. This effect is reinforced by

the availability of key enablers: human competencies, physical infrastructure, legal-administrative frameworks, and information security.

The positive influence of human requirements aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of digital skills, training, and leadership in public sector innovation (Noe 2009; Berman 2012; Paul et al. 2024). Similarly, the role of infrastructure confirms that technological readiness—through ICT equipment and connectivity—is a foundational element for effective digitalization (Bharadwaj et al. 2013; Das 2024). Legal and institutional frameworks also emerged as critical, supporting findings that regulatory coherence and adaptive governance structures are essential for sustaining transformation (Mergel et al. 2019; Forradellas et al. 2021). Moreover, the confirmed impact of cybersecurity highlights its strategic value in safeguarding digital systems and maintaining citizen trust (Saeed et al. 2023; Judijanto et al. 2023).

In light of these findings, the following points summarize the main conclusions of the study and highlight their implications.

1. This study confirms that digital transformation serves as a catalyst for modernizing the management of local public facilities, leading to improvements in service quality, operational efficiency, and citizen engagement, particularly at the local level where its effects are most tangible. The findings provide empirical support for the proposed conceptual model and contribute to addressing the limited Algerian literature on digital transformation in local public administration.
2. The results indicate that successful digital transformation is not merely a technical endeavor but a strategic process that requires coordinated investment in human resources, digital infrastructure, legal and administrative frameworks, and cybersecurity. These insights offer practical implications for public policymakers and local decision-makers seeking to enhance service delivery and institutional performance in Algeria and similar developing-country contexts.
3. Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The empirical analysis is limited to Tlemcen Province, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions. In addition, the use of cross-sectional data does not allow for capturing dynamic changes over time. Future research could extend the analysis to multiple provinces, adopt longitudinal research designs, or conduct comparative studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital transformation in the management of local public facilities.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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SKAITMENINĖ TRANSFORMACIJA IR LOKALINIŲ VIEŠŲJŲ ĮSTAIGŲ VALDYMO MODERNIZAVIMAS: ĮRODYMAI IŠ ALŽYRO TLEMCEN PROVINCIJOS

Santrauka. Šiame tyrime nagrinėjama, kaip skaitmeninė transformacija prisideda prie lokalinių viešųjų įstaigų valdymo modernizavimo Tlemcen provincijoje, Alžyre. Nepaisant didėjančio dėmesio skaitmeninimui, nedaug tyrimų nagrinėja pagrindinius jo sėkmės veiksnius vietos valdyme. Remiantis 273 viešojo sektoriaus darbuotojų duomenimis ir analize naudojant PLS-SEM per „Smart PLS", tyrime nustatyta, kad žmogiškieji, fiziniai, teisiniai ir saugumo reikalavimai teigiamai veikia skaitmeninę transformaciją. Savo ruožtu skaitmeninė transformacija žymiai pagerina viešųjų įstaigų valdymo efektyvumą, reagavimą ir kokybę. Rezultatai pabrėžia strateginės išteklių integracijos ir institucinio pasirengimo poreikį. Šis tyrimas papildo empirinius duomenis iš Alžyro ir pateikia įžvalgų dėl politikos ir reformų įgyvendinimo besivystančiose šalyse.

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PROMOTING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: LESSONS FROM HO CHI MINH CITY

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Abstract: *This paper explores how Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has successfully cultivated a culture of innovation within its public sector amid the challenges of digital transformation. Using a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative policy analysis and quantitative assessment of key national indicators (DTI, PAR INDEX, SIPAS, PII, and DDCI), the study demonstrates that HCMC's achievements stem from a well-structured three-pillar model encompassing (1) institutional framework, (2) digital technology, and (3) human and innovation ecosystem. Empirical evidence from 2020 to 2024 indicates that this model has enhanced governance efficiency, improved citizen satisfaction, and strengthened the city's competitiveness. HCMC has transitioned from a traditional administrative government to a "facilitating government" that fosters experimentation, risk-taking, and collaboration. The findings offer valuable insights for other local governments in Vietnam seeking to institutionalize an innovation culture as a foundation for sustainable development in the digital era.*

Keywords: *innovation culture, public governance, digital transformation, Ho Chi Minh City, institutional reform*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Inovacijų kultūra, viešasis valdymas, skaitmeninė transformacija, Hošimino miestas, institucinė reforma.*

1. Introduction

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the global wave of digital transformation and the profound impacts of the Fourth Industrial Revolution created a new competitive landscape among nations and cities, where the pace of innovation has now become a vital factor determining position and competitiveness.

Ho Chi Minh City is a special urban area—a center of economy, culture, education and

training, science and technology in Vietnam. It serves as a hub for international exchange and integration, a driving force for regional development, and a major contributor to the national budget (Nga et al., 2025). However, complex and unprecedented social issues have emerged, placing pressure on the city government's leadership, management, and operations. On one hand, the city grapples with the "hot" issues of a mega-urban area undergoing rapid urbanization: prolonged traffic congestion, flooding, overloaded healthcare and education infrastructure, and pressure on housing and the environment. The dense population also poses major challenges in ensuring employment and social welfare (Nga et al., 2025). On the other hand, in the context of a digital economy and society reshaping all aspects of life, HCMC faces the risk of falling behind if it fails to adapt and transform. The previous growth model, heavily reliant on capital, resources, and cheap labor, has revealed limitations and is no longer suitable for the new era. Meanwhile, citizens and businesses increasingly expect a transparent, efficient government capable of delivering high-quality public services quickly and conveniently.

In this context, finding a breakthrough governance model is no longer simply optional—it is an absolute necessity. Recognizing this, HCMC has determined that the key to transformation lies not in the fragmented application of digital technology but in a systemic and fundamental shift: public sector reform must be driven by embedding innovation as a cultural value.

Innovation culture is understood as an environment where breakthrough thinking, a spirit of daring to think and act, controlled experimentation and risk-taking, and continuous learning become core values forming the foundation for institutional, technological, and procedural initiatives to emerge and thrive. The National Assembly's issuance of Resolution 98/2023/QH15, piloting special mechanisms and policies for HCMC's development, including 44 mechanisms across seven sectors, is a testament to the urgent need for a "legal space" tailored to foster an innovation culture. This study is not merely academic; it has profound practical significance, helping answer a key question: how can local governments proactively build and nurture an innovation culture to create sustainable momentum for development in a volatile digital era?

2. Theoretical Framework

WInnovation in the public sector is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as "a new or significantly improved product or process (or a combination thereof) that differs substantially from previous ones and has been made available to users or implemented by the organization" (OECD, 2018). According to the OECD, public sector innovation involves "finding new and better ways to achieve public purposes" (OECD, 2016). Unlike the private sector, the ultimate goal of public innovation is not profit but the creation of public value, a concept proposed by Mark Moore,

which emphasizes the value society receives through public services and policies, thereby strengthening public trust in government. Moore's theory asserts that the success of a public organization is measured by its ability to create values that citizens and society deem important (Moore, 1995).

Scholars such as Geoff Mulgan and David Albury developed a theory of innovation levels, from Level 1 (incremental improvements—typically applying technology to optimize existing processes) and Level 2 (service innovation—developing new service models) to the highest level being system innovation, which requires changes in thinking, policy, and stakeholder relationships. The shift from lower to higher levels of innovation marks the transition from "doing existing things better" to "doing entirely new things," which is the core domain of innovation culture (Mulgan & Albury, 2003).

An innovation culture is a work environment where values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors are widely shared, encouraging and rewarding breakthrough thinking, experimentation, calculated risk-taking, and continuous learning from both success and failure. In the public sector, with its hierarchical structure, risk aversion, and procedural compliance, building such a culture is a major challenge that requires systemic change. Scholars such as Sandford Borins and Christian Bason have identified key characteristics of a healthy innovation culture: strong and accountable leadership support; empowerment and autonomy for staff at all levels; mechanisms for rapid experimentation and learning from failure; reward and recognition systems for innovation efforts; and openness to collaboration with external stakeholders (Borins, 2014).

For a comprehensive analysis, this study proposes an integrated analytical framework based on the three-pillar model: institutional framework, digital technology, and human and innovation ecosystem.

+ Institutional framework plays the role of creating a "safe space" for innovation, including flexible legal frameworks (e.g., sandbox mechanisms), specific incentive policies, and most importantly, political vision and commitment from leadership. Institutional theory emphasizes that rules, norms, and regulations fundamentally influence organizational behavior.

+ Digital technology acts as a catalyst and tool to realize ideas. Technology-driven innovation theory posits that digital technology not only automates old processes but also enables entirely new service and governance models.

+ Human and innovation ecosystem focuses on the capacity, mindset, and motivation of civil servants in relation to external networks. Organizational learning theory (Argyris & Schön, 1996) and innovation ecosystem theory (Adner, 2017) emphasize that innovation does not occur in a vacuum but results from continuous interaction and learning within a network of stakeholders.

The interaction and mutual reinforcement among these three pillars form a dynamic system, where institutions pave the way for technology, technology empowers people, and people use that space to innovate, thereby feeding back to improve institutions (Ostrom, 2005).

3. Research Methodology

The article employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis during the period 2020–2024 (with selective updates to 2025). On the qualitative side, the study conducts systematic content analysis of policy documents, reports from the HCMC People's Committee, and sectoral programs, using a deductive coding framework based on the three-pillar model (institutions, technology, and people/ecosystem) and dimensions of innovation culture, while also adding inductive codes for emerging themes. On the quantitative side, the study analyzes national and local indices (DTI, PAR INDEX, SIPAS, PII, and DDCI), integrating trend description, process tracing, and interrupted time-series logic to examine the relationship between institutional change, technology implementation, and governance outcomes. The analysis is further strengthened by comparative benchmarking and sensitivity checks to ensure validity and caution in causal inference.

To address weak operationalization, we define innovation culture as a set of values and routines evidenced by observable indicators. Table 1 maps dimensions to measurable indicators and assessment approaches.

Dimension	Measurable indicator	Assessment approach
Leadership signals	Frequency and specificity of policy directives enabling experimentation (e.g., special mechanisms; safe-to-fail guidance)	Document analysis of resolutions, decrees, and city directives; coding of "innovation-enabling" clauses
Empowerment and autonomy	Share of departments/districts with delegated authority and experimental budgets; number of pilots approved	Budget/expenditure reviews; pilot registries under Resolution 98; internal circulars
Experimentation routines	Number of sandbox/pilot projects; duration-to-decision; iteration cadence	Program logs; decision timelines; case summaries
Risk protection	Presence and application of protective provisions for responsible risk-taking (e.g., Decree 73/2023/NĐ-CP)	Policy content analysis; recorded use in personnel/disciplinary cases (where available)
Learning and feedback	Frequency of post-implementation reviews; documented process redesigns vs "digitization only"	Post-action reports; service redesign documentation; internal audits
External collaboration	Number and diversity of partnerships (universities, startups, associations); joint initiatives	MoUs; event/contest records; center of innovation activities
Workforce capacity	Participation rates in AI/digital training; certifications; skill audits	Training rosters; HR competency frameworks; evaluation records
Citizen centricity	Two-way digital channels; usage metrics; service satisfaction changes	App analytics; SIPAS; user feedback loops
Data governance maturity	Open datasets; interoperability standards; data governance roles	Portal inventories; data policy documents; organizational charts
Incentives and recognition	Awards; performance metrics tied to innovation (e.g., DDCI sub-indices weighting)	DDCI methodology; performance appraisal criteria

Shifting the focus to the institutional and individual level, the bibliometric analysis allowed for the identification of key players in Lithuania's climate research. The dataset includes 160 institutions across the globe, led by Vytautas Magnus University (114 publications), Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (110), and Kaunas University of Technology (107), among others. A long list of other institutions, both domestic and foreign, contributed between 10 and 14 publications each.

The publication output among Lithuanian climate researchers is highly uneven, with a few individuals accounting for a substantial share. *Dalia Štreimikienė* leads with 122 publications (18% of the total), focusing on energy economics and sustainability, and is a key node in international collaborations. *Tadas Baležentis* (48 publications) works on sustainable agriculture and efficiency modelling, with strong ties to China, Poland, and Ukraine. *Paulo Pereira* (32 publications) brings an international dimension to the field, specializing in land use and ecosystems. The dominance of economists and engineers among top authors points to a strong techno-economic focus in Lithuania's climate research, with limited representation of social or ethical perspectives. With the top 10 authors producing around 45% of all publications, the research landscape is highly concentrated, offering both cohesion and a potential risk if key individuals exit the field.

Keyword analysis of Lithuanian climate publications reveals six main thematic clusters: (1) sustainability and resource management, focusing on ecosystem services, circular economy, and carbon footprints; (2) renewable energy and climate economics, with strong attention to policy, CO_2 emissions, and economic growth; (3) energy security and decision-making, using methods such as multicriteria analysis for evaluating energy options; (4) sustainable development and innovation, linking climate goals with digitalization and Industry 4.0; (5) agriculture and land use, addressing emissions, bioenergy, and rural development; and (6) energy efficiency and environmental impacts, particularly in the Baltic context, using performance benchmarking tools. These clusters emphasize techno-economic and policy-oriented approaches, with strong ties to EU climate priorities. Again, less apparent in these clusters are purely social or behavioral themes.

Finally, Lithuanian climate-related research is published across a wide array of journals, though a substantial portion appears in a few open-access outlets. The most dominant is *Sustainability* (MDPI), which accounts for 122 publications (about 18% of the total corpus). While the journal's broad scope and accessibility contribute to its popularity, its high volume has raised concerns about quality control in the scientific community. Still, the articles published there are widely cited, with over 3,000 citations collectively. Other key journals include *Energies* (40 publications), *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* (31), and the *Journal of Cleaner Production* (20), all of which reflect the strong emphasis on energy and sustainability topics in Lithuania's research landscape. The broader set of journals includes high-impact outlets such as *Science of the Total Environment* and *Sustainable Development*, as well as more regional or niche publications such as *Contemporary Economics*, *Zemdirbyste-Agriculture,* and *Journal of Security and Sustainability Issues*. This

distribution supports findings from the keyword analysis: the research is concentrated in applied sustainability, energy systems, and policy, rather than in core climate science or social science for climate change.

3.2. Results of quantitative analysis of projects funded

Project-level data from the Research Council of Lithuania (LMT) were also examined to understand how climate-related research has been supported over time. Using a keyword-based identification strategy, 773 projects were classified as climate-related between 2009 and 2023. The vast majority (i.e., approx. 87% of 569 projects) originated from investigator-initiated competitive schemes. Government-commissioned initiatives accounted for 77 projects, and internationally funded programs made up another 127 projects, reflecting the country's participation in broader European research frameworks. Three targeted national programs, i.e., LEK (Climate Change Program), ATE (Energy Transition Program), and SIT (Smart Technologies and Innovation), account for most of the state-commissioned climate projects, with 38, 17, and 17 projects, respectively.

The number of funded projects shows peaks in 2012, 2017, and 2023, which coincide with key EU and national climate initiatives and calls (i.e., Horizon 2020 and Green Deal-aligned programs). Annual climate research funding (estimated as project budget × duration) reflects these cycles, with notable surges in 2017 and 2021. Cumulatively, investigator-led projects account for ~77% of climate research funding, with state-commissioned projects contributing 12%, and international sources 11%. Although climate-related projects make up only 5–10% of all LMT-funded projects per year, their relative share has grown significantly from nascent levels in the late 2000s to more than 10% in 2023, signaling increased alignment with national and EU climate priorities.

Finally, disciplinary patterns show a strong tilt toward the natural and technical sciences, especially in fields such as physics (~27 projects), materials engineering (~24 projects), biology and ecology (~19 projects), chemistry (~15 projects), and environmental engineering. Some projects in the social sciences are present, particularly in the areas of public adaptation and environmental sociology, though they remain comparatively few. This disciplinary distribution mirrors the bibliometric findings, where technical and policy-oriented research dominate.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results of Building an Innovation Culture Based on Three Pillars

a. Institutional framework

The innovation policies of Ho Chi Minh City are built on a systemic and strategic

vision, beginning with the creation of a breakthrough legal "sandbox" through Resolution 98/2023/QH15 of the National Assembly. This resolution acknowledges the rigidity of the current legal framework and grants the city the authority to pilot special mechanisms and policies, thereby removing the greatest institutional bottlenecks for initiatives. At the same time, it serves as the highest legal foundation to create space for innovation and build an innovation culture for Ho Chi Minh City. Instead of waiting for amendments to national laws, the city can proactively propose and pilot new governance solutions, especially in sensitive and complex areas such as high technology and urban management. Moreover, Resolution 98/2023/QH15 positions Ho Chi Minh City as a "laboratory" for institutional reform nationwide, where both successes and failures provide valuable lessons for replication or adjustment.

In HCMC, the strongest political-legal driver for innovation is the National Assembly's Resolution No. 98/2023/QH15, which pilots special mechanisms and policies for the development of Ho Chi Minh City (National Assembly, 2023). This resolution is considered a high-level legal experiment, allowing the city to pilot unique mechanisms and policies. The rigidity of existing legal regulations is often the biggest barrier to implementing new initiatives, especially in high-tech and complex urban management. The legislative body's approval of this special mechanism clearly acknowledges that the national legal framework is not flexible enough to support the development speed and scale of innovation in a mega-city such as HCMC. This mechanism provides the necessary space for the city government to experiment, learn, and propose creative governance solutions, thereby anchoring the city's "leap forward" on a solid institutional foundation. Resolution No. 98/2023/QH15 creates a legal "sandbox," allowing HCMC to pilot special mechanisms and remove institutional bottlenecks. The city becomes a "laboratory" for reform, where both successes and failures are replicable.

Additionally, the government's Decree No. 73/2023/NĐ-CP on encouraging and protecting dynamic, innovative officials who dare to think, act, and take responsibility for the common good is a crucial legal basis for fostering innovative thinking in the public sector. The provisions of "encouragement" and "protection" for innovation proposals create a mindset and legal foundation for civil servants to confidently perform their duties. Decree No. 73/2023/NĐ-CP directly supports Resolution 98. It establishes a dual-impact mechanism: motivating innovation and building a legal "shield" to reduce personal risk. This is key to changing the fear-of-mistakes mindset and fostering a culture of accountability.

The program "Research and Development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Applications in Ho Chi Minh City from 2020 to 2030" aims to make AI a key economic sector, promoting rapid and sustainable economic development and positioning AI as a core technology for innovation. The main goals are to enhance the research, implementation, and technology transfer of AI; apply AI in state management, education, healthcare, and transportation; and by 2030, establish AI as a foundational industry contributing to GRDP growth.

The city government has planned nine projects to develop AI, including: (1)

infrastructure development for digital platforms; (2) high-performance computing infrastructure; (3) an AI solutions and application portal; (4) an IT and AI enterprise festival; (5) a survey on AI application needs; (6) policy and mechanism development for AI; (7) establishment of an AI development and transfer support center; (8) a network of AI research institutes and centers at academic institutions; (9) an international-standard AI workforce training program.

These projects, however, pose potential challenges. In terms of implementation, success depends on the ability to translate high-level policies (Resolution 98) into detailed, accessible, and applicable procedures and guidelines. Regarding innovation culture, Decree 73 must be realized as a truly safe working environment, where experimentation mistakes are treated as lessons rather than grounds for punishment. For measuring outcomes, a set of specific evaluation indicators should be developed for each policy (e.g., number of new mechanisms piloted, number of innovative proposals protected, indicators of AI ecosystem growth).

The institutional system is not merely a management tool but also reshapes core values, shifting the government's role from administrative control to that of a "facilitating government," prioritizing citizen service and development. The combination of legal "gateways" from the central government and proactive local action plans creates an institutional environment flexible enough to allow creativity and robust enough to guide and manage risks. This is the foundational condition for technological and procedural innovation ideas, often constrained by rigid regulations to be implemented in practice, thereby gradually forming and spreading an innovation culture throughout the government system.

Overall, Ho Chi Minh City's innovation culture policies reflect a comprehensive, visionary, and bold approach to fostering innovation. The focus is on removing institutional and psychological barriers while concentrating resources on a key technological field (AI). The success of these policies will not only determine the city's development pace but also carry pioneering significance, paving the way for institutional innovation nationwide. These policies embody a philosophy of governance transformation from "administrative government" to "enabling government" and "ecosystem builder," in which the state plays a leading, facilitating role, oriented toward serving citizens and businesses, gradually shaping and spreading an innovation culture throughout the entire system.

b. Digital technology

Technology serves as the vehicle to translate innovation values into tangible benefits for citizens and businesses. According to the Ministry of Information and Communications, HCMC's Digital Transformation Index (DTI) consistently ranks among the top nationwide from 2020 to 2024 (ranked second in 2022, 2023, and 2024).

Table 1. Digital Transformation Index Rankings of Ho Chi Minh City (2020–2024) (moha.gov.vn, 2023).

Year	Digital Transformation Index (DTI)	Ranking (nationwide)
2020	0.3848	5
2021	0.5609	3
2022	0.7163	2
2023	0.8020	2
2024	0.8455	2

HCMC has strategically built and operated a shared data platform, considered to be the city's "digital backbone." It has deployed the Data Integration Platform (DIP) and the File Storage Platform (FSP) for unstructured data. The city's data center is accessible via https://data.hochiminhcity.gov.vn, and its open data portal at https://opendata.hochiminhcity.gov.vn includes 91 datasets across 12 sectors.

In 2023, the city focused on implementing its Data Governance Strategy, targeting three data groups: (1) citizen data—administrative, civil status, healthcare, education, and social welfare; (2) financial-enterprise data—budget statistics, public investment management, business, and household; (3) land-urban data: land records, geographic information systems, construction, transportation, and planning-architecture (dti.gov.vn, 2025).

In 2024, the city completed the digitization of four civil status registers: marriage, birth, death, and parent-child recognition. These were synchronized with the Ministry of Justice's database, enabling citizens to obtain extracts regardless of registration location or residence.

In November 2024, the city launched the "Digital Citizen App," a smart mobile application enabling two-way interaction between citizens and government through convenient "one-touch" communication (People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, 2024).

Administrative services in HCMC have been upgraded with AI-integrated RPA systems provided by VNPT. These systems automatically process paper documents (via scanning), classify and verify them intelligently, and input data into electronic systems, saving over 2,000 labor hours daily (equivalent to 175 full-time staff annually), nearly eliminating errors, and improving citizen satisfaction to over 95% (Vietnam.vn, 2025).

In transportation, traffic surveillance cameras can recognize car license plates with 95.5% accuracy and motorbike plates with 87.1% accuracy, enhancing incident detection and citizen alerts via SMS, Zalo, or electronic boards. The city also implemented UniPass electronic payment cards and QR code scanning on 200 buses across 26 urban routes.

Innovation has also driven positive changes in HCMC's digital economy. The E-commerce Index rose steadily from 2020 to 2024 (except for a dip in 2021 due to COVID-19), consistently ranking first nationwide.

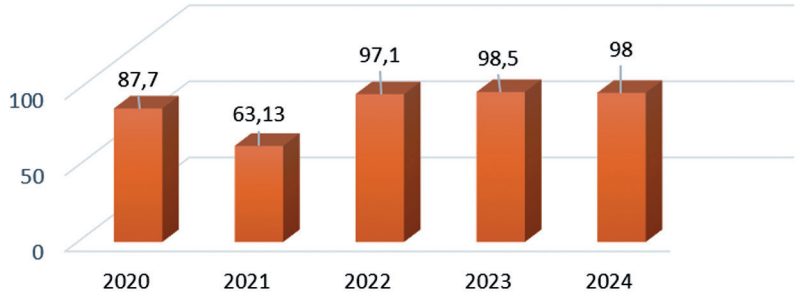

Figure 1. E-commerce Index of Ho Chi Minh City (2020–2024) (https://vecom.vn, 2020–2024)

The Human Resources and Information Technology Infrastructure Index of the city has also shown a positive development trend from 2020 to 2024, ranking first nationwide among all localities since 2022.

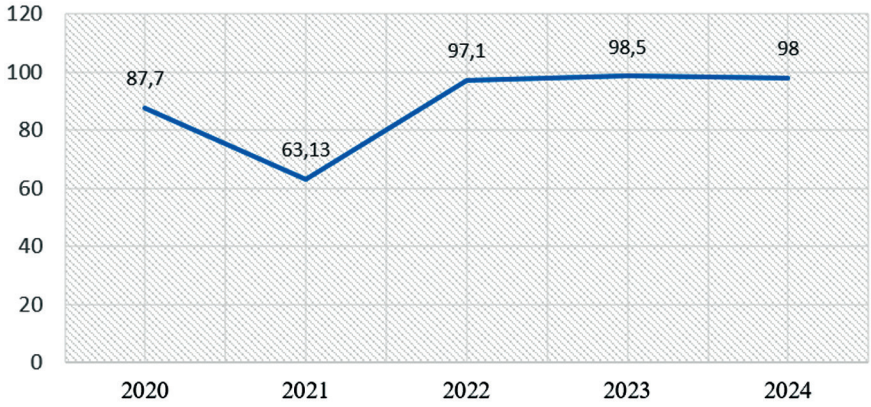

Figure 2. Human Resources and Information Technology Infrastructure Index, 2020–2024 (https://vecom.vn)

c. Human and innovation ecosystem

HCMC focuses on building capacity and mindset for civil servants—the individuals directly implementing and interacting with citizens. Through specialized workshops, AI training programs, and startup forums, the city equips its workforce with the necessary knowledge and tools to avoid falling behind and confidently propose and implement new ideas. Annually, to seek practical solutions, the Department of Science and Technology

collaborates with other units to organize the "AI Application Solutions Contest in HCMC," along with other innovation competitions in technology (tuoitre.vn, 2024).

In 2023, HCMC was the only locality in Vietnam honored with the ASOCIO Award in South Korea for the category of Outstanding Digital Government (vpub.hochiminhcity.gov.vn, 2024). In 2024, the city government established the "Ho Chi Minh City Innovation Startup Center," not just a physical location but a dedicated entity for connecting, supporting, and incubating innovation projects. This center plays a pivotal role in mobilizing resources, transforming the city from a regulator into an active partner in the startup ecosystem, marking a milestone in building an innovative urban model.

In 2025, the city organized competitions such as "AI Challenge" and "AI.Star," creating platforms to connect researchers, startups, and tech enterprises with the city's policy and investment ecosystem (dost.hochiminhcity.gov.vn, 2025).

In 2024, HCMC's innovation startup ecosystem continued to thrive, scoring 55.81 points, ranking second nationwide and 111th out of 1,000 global cities, and third in Southeast Asia (tuoitre.vn, 2024).

As of May 20, 2025, HCMC rose one spot to 110th globally, its highest ranking ever, and entered the top 5 innovation startup ecosystems in Southeast Asia for the first time, especially in Fintech, with rapid growth and a top 30 global ranking in Blockchain, second in Southeast Asia (https://vecom.vn).

The Satisfaction Index of Public Administrative Services (SIPAS) in HCMC reached 83.85% in 2024, up 2.07% from 2023. This positive improvement shows that innovation solutions in the public sector have been effective, marking a clear step forward in service quality and affirming the commitment to citizen-centric governance.

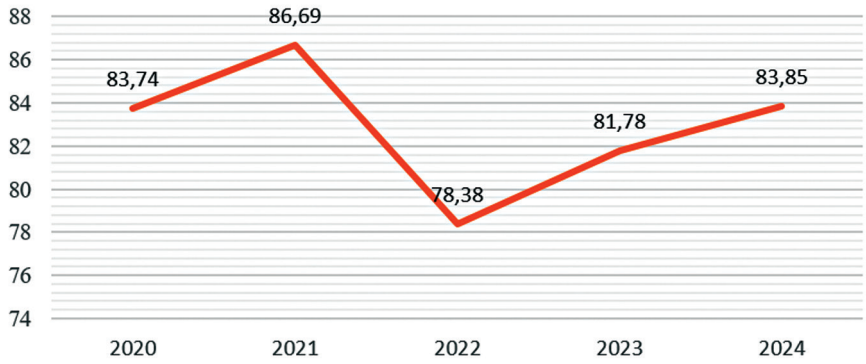

Figure 3. *Satisfaction Index of Public Administrative Services in HCMC (2020–2024) (https://vecom.vn)*

4.2. Discussion

The successful establishment of an innovation culture in HCMC has had a comprehensive impact on governance effectiveness, clearly reflected in the positive shifts of key national indicators. These figures not only demonstrate the effectiveness of specific solutions but, more importantly, reveal a causal relationship between a culture that encourages innovation and improvements in internal performance and citizen satisfaction. This impact is evident in three main dimensions: internal administrative performance, public service quality, and overall competitiveness of the system.

Moreover, an innovation culture has profoundly influenced public service quality and citizen perception, affirming that innovation efforts have been transformed into tangible public value. This increase correlates closely with citizen-centered initiatives. The simultaneous improvement of both PAR INDEX (internal performance) and SIPAS (external satisfaction) creates a positive feedback loop: internal performance improves through innovation, shortening service time and enhancing quality; better services increase citizen satisfaction and trust; and citizen trust generates positive pressure and motivation for continued innovation. This is the essence of transforming innovation culture into tangible public value.

Innovation culture has also enhanced HCMC's competitiveness and position on the regional innovation map. Maintaining second place nationwide in the Provincial Innovation Index (PII) with 55.81 points, and especially the rise of the city's startup ecosystem into the top 5 in Southeast Asia (ranked 110 globally), proves that innovation culture is not confined to the public sector but has strong spillover effects across the entire socio-economic landscape. The government's role as a facilitator—through connection forums, startup support centers, and special mechanisms—has created a nurturing environment for tech enterprises and startups to flourish.

However, the most challenging issue in public management is how to turn momentum into sustainable action. HCMC has found a creative solution: integrating indicators of "dynamism, innovation, and operational effectiveness" into the Department and District Competitiveness Index (DDCI). This is an innovation in the evaluation mechanism itself. By doing so, the city has transformed innovation from an abstract concept or spontaneous movement into a concrete evaluation criterion with weight and direct impact on the reputation and performance of each department leader. This mechanism creates positive pressure, compelling administrative units to proactively explore, improve processes, and enhance performance to avoid falling behind. It ensures that innovation is no longer the choice of a few pioneers but a mandatory requirement in the "job description" of the entire system.

4.3. Challenges and Limitations in HCMC's Innovation Model

Dependence on temporary special mechanisms: Resolution 98/2023/QH15 created a

"legal sandbox" for experimentation, but its success raises questions about sustainability once the pilot phase ends. There is a risk of forming an "innovation enclave" that widens development gaps with other regions.

Gap between indicators and real experiences: Progress is reflected in indices such as DTI, PAR INDEX, and SIPAS, yet these do not fully capture the lived experiences of all citizens. Digitalization and automation may unintentionally deepen digital inequality and obscure persistent urban problems such as traffic, flooding, or housing.

Pressure on civil servants and risk of superficial innovation: Adding "Dynamic and Innovative" criteria to the DDCI index encourages competition but may lead to short-term, easily measurable projects rather than deeper reforms. Building a psychologically safe culture that accepts risk and failure remains difficult.

Risk of technocratic thinking: Heavy focus on AI risks technology being treated as the sole solution, while foundational issues such as data ethics, social consensus, and grassroots change management receive less attention.

Execution and scalability challenges: There is a gap between progressive policies and local implementation capacity. Dependence on major technology providers poses risks, and HCMC's unique conditions make replication in other provinces difficult.

These challenges do not diminish HCMC's achievements but highlight the next stage of transformation: moving from innovation based on temporary mechanisms to sustainable institutional foundations, and from index-driven innovation to comprehensive, human-centered innovation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

The study of the process of building and developing an innovation culture in Ho Chi Minh City presents a comprehensive and vivid picture of how a local government can proactively engineer transformation in the digital age. HCMC's success is not accidental nor the result of fragmented efforts; it is the outcome of a deliberate, strategic approach implemented through a well-integrated model based on three key pillars: institutional framework, digital technology, and human and innovation ecosystem.

However, the study also identifies several bottlenecks that need to be addressed. Notably, the proportion of HCMC's online public services synchronized with the National Public Service Portal remains low relative to the city's potential and status. This highlights the urgent need for stronger innovation at the level of inter-agency process integration and technical standardization.

The success story of HCMC affirms that building an innovation culture in the public sector is a long-term journey requiring perseverance, a strategic long-term vision, and

coordinated efforts between "political will" from the top and "grassroots creativity" from the bottom. The three-pillar model adopted by HCMC can serve as a valuable reference framework for other localities across Vietnam.

5.2. Recommendations

- Strengthen the institutional framework for innovation culture: HCMC should propose sustainable special mechanisms that allow for controlled experimentation and risk-taking. Civil service reform should move toward greater flexibility, with special incentive policies to attract talent in technology, data, and public policy. Codify internal safe-to-experiment procedures, post-implementation reviews, and performance incentives independent of special authority; document pilot-to-policy pathways to reduce reliance on exceptional mechanisms.

- Breakthroughs in technology and data governance: Shift from digitizing processes to redesigning public services based on data. Establish a centralized data governance agency to ensure interoperability and data quality across administrative levels. Apply AI and automation in document processing, analytics, forecasting, and decision-making (e.g., transportation, healthcare, public investment). Form a special task force to review and standardize online public service procedures and integrate them with the National Public Service Portal. Establish a centralized data governance function with clear standards; prioritize reimagining high-volume services end-to-end; embed AI and automation where measurable cycle-time reduction and error reduction are demonstrated.

Performance integration: Incorporate innovation culture indicators (Table 1) into department-level KPIs and link DDCI sub-indices to leadership appraisals; reward documented learning and responsible risk-taking.

- Human and innovation ecosystem: Empower grassroots units with autonomy and experimental budgets to encourage creativity. Train leaders and managers in service design thinking and agile governance. Integrate the PII and DDCI indicators into civil servant performance evaluations, especially for department heads, to link innovation with personal accountability.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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Pham Thi Ninh

INOVACIJŲ KULTŪROS SKATINIMAS VIEŠAJAME SEKTORIUJE: PAMOKOS IŠ HOŠIMINO MIESTO

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip Hošimino miestas (HCMC) sėkmingai puoselėjo inovacijų kultūrą viešajame sektoriuje, susidūręs su skaitmeninės transformacijos iššūkiais. Tyrime, taikant mišrių metodų metodą, kuris integruoja kokybinę politikos analizę ir kiekybinį pagrindinių nacionalinių rodiklių (DTI, PAR INDEX, SIPAS, PII ir DDCI) vertinimą, parodoma, kad HCMC pasiekimai kyla iš gerai struktūrizuoto trijų ramsčių modelio, apimančio (1) institucinę struktūrą, (2) skaitmenines technologijas ir (3) žmonių ir inovacijų ekosistemą. 2020–2024 m. empiriniai duomenys rodo, kad šis modelis padidino valdymo efektyvumą, pagerino piliečių pasitenkinimą ir sustiprino miesto konkurencingumą. HCMC valdžia iš tradicinės administracinės valdžios tapo „pagalbine valdžia“, kuri skatina eksperimentavimą, rizikos prisiėmimą ir bendradarbiavimą. Šie rezultatai suteikia vertingų įžvalgų kitoms Vietnamo vietos valdžios institucijoms, siekiančioms institucionalizuoti inovacijų kultūrą kaip tvaraus vystymosi pagrindą skaitmeniniame amžiuje.

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OPTIMIZATION OF THE PUBLIC GOVERNANCE SYSTEM IN THE NATIONAL SECURITY OF UKRAINE IN VIEW OF HYBRID THREATS

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Abstract. *The article examines the issue of optimizing the public governance system in the national security of Ukraine in view of the growing hybrid threats. The aim of the study was to identify structural imbalances to find the role of public governance as a factor in strengthening national security. The research employed the following methods: an integrative approach that combines elements of content analysis of strategic documents, indicator assessment, data normalization, construction of an Integral Index of National Security, and graphical analysis. The need to transform traditional governance approaches is emphasized, taking into account the multidimensionality of current challenges. The proposed Integral Index of National Security covers key areas: military, political, economic, social, and cyberinformation. The results of the assessment demonstrate an imbalance between priority (military and cyber) and vulnerable*

(economic and political) components. The need for the implementation of hybridized public administration, integrating public and private resources, is identified, and the importance of proactive threat forecasting is emphasized. Conceptual models of management response to hybrid threats are proposed, which involve the active integration of civil society, digital technologies, and the private sector into security processes.

Keywords: *national security, hybrid threats, governance, vulnerability, terrorism, security policy, public administration*

Reikšminiai žodžiai*: nacionalinis saugumas, hibridinės grėsmės, valdymas, pažeidžiamumas, terorizmas, saugumo politika, viešasis administravimas.*

Introduction

The current global security environment is characterized by complexity and dynamism and requires a review of traditional approaches to national security and public governance. Under conditions of an ongoing full-scale hybrid war against Ukraine, optimization of the public governance system in the field of national security holds critical importance, since existing mechanisms often prove inert when facing asymmetric threats. The state response must combine institutional stability, digital security, multilevel coordination, and anti-corruption mechanisms. The traditional vision of security, focused mainly on military defense, has significantly expanded to encompass a multidimensional understanding of approaches that go beyond purely military aspects (Loshytskyi et al. 2023).

The research gap lies in the absence of an integrated conceptual model that enables proactive public governance under conditions where the boundary between peacetime and wartime is blurred. The national security system of Ukraine is viewed as a multidimensional construct that integrates economic resilience, political stability, technological advantage, and legal certainty. The main issue is to optimize the public governance system for effective security management in various areas, including cyberspace, psychological impact, and socio-political dimensions (Viter and Rudenko 2025).

The aim of the research is to study the directions of optimization of public governance in the sphere of national security of Ukraine in the conditions of hybrid threats, with emphasis on the formation of paradigms for ensuring the national interests of the state. Based on the above, the study formulates the following research objectives:

- Identify imbalances in the implementation of public governance in the field of security
- Determine the integrated level of national security on the basis of available indicators
- Develop conceptual approaches to an optimal governance model for responding to hybrid threats

National security in the study is considered an object of public policy, which implies an

analysis of the policy-making cycle, from threat identification to the selection of regulatory instruments. The relevance of the methodology is driven by the need to transition toward evidence-based public policy, where managerial decisions are grounded in quantitative measurement of the system resilience index.

Literature Review

Security no longer refers only to territorial defense but is understood as the capacity of society for rapid recovery. The traditional paradigm of public administration, grounded in rigid hierarchy and realpolitik, now conflicts with the modern paradigm of network security, which emphasizes decentralization and the involvement of non-state actors. This study relies on the paradigm of hybridized governance, which combines strategic state leadership with the flexibility of civil society.

Nilsson et al. (2025) and Khidasheli (2024) agree that the main threat of hybrid attacks is their ambiguity and ability to operate below the threshold of traditional military responses. At the same time, other features have been emphasized. Nilsson et al. (2025) provide more detail on the range of sectors in which they manifest themselves, while Khidasheli (2024) emphasizes the difficulties of detection and counteraction. The issue of EU security policy formation arises, especially in the context of the fight against terrorism and for Eastern European countries. Kryshtanovych et al. (2022) consider security mainly through the prism of European integration processes and the challenges of terrorism, while Bondarenko et al. (2022) focus on the internal structural shortcomings of the national security system of Ukraine.

Goncharuk et al. (2023) and Schmitt and Koutroumpis (2025) agree on the importance of digital resilience and the role of technology but differ on the proposed tools. Goncharuk et al. (2023) analyze public governance reform in general, while Schmitt and Koutroumpis (2025) focus specifically on artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool to counter cyberthreats. The novelty of this study, compared with existing research, lies in the development of an original Integral Index of Ukraine's National Security (IIUNS). Unlike general governance indices, the index focuses on the points of interaction between public administration mechanisms and security indicators under conditions of martial law.

Method

Research design

The research procedure consisted of the following stages:

1) Determining the level of progress in optimizing public governance in the national security based on the adoption of the National Security Strategy of Ukraine (President of

Ukraine 2020) for 2021–2024 and indicators reflecting the results of the strategy's implementation (Democracy Index, World Governance Indicators, Cybersecurity Index, Corruption Index, Rule of Law Index, Terrorism Index)

2) Analyzing the dynamics of public governance indicators for 2019–2023 (World Bank 2023)

3) Calculating the Integral Index of National Security of Ukraine based on the author's methodology

Methods

Different time horizons are deliberately applied across analytical stages. A comparison between 2021 and 2024 enables assessment of the impact of the National Security Strategy of Ukraine before and during the active phase of the war, while data for 2019–2023 support analysis of long-term trends in state regulation. The IIUNS calculation relies on data available at the beginning of 2024, reflecting the current condition of the system. It is important to note that under wartime conditions, data collection is constrained; the use of indicators from international institutions constitutes a necessary measure to ensure the objectivity and validity of the results.

In order to determine the results of the implementation of the National Security Strategy of Ukraine, the indicator monitoring method was applied. The method of a graphical comparison was used to clarify the dynamics of the implementation of public governance functions in terms of the efficiency of state authorities and the capacity of regulatory activities for 2019–2023 (with the latest data available). The level of national security of Ukraine was determined by using the author's method of the IIUNS.

Sample

Five key areas (military, political, economic, social, and cyberinformation) were used to select the components of the IIUNS, with each area characterized by two specific indicators. Each reflects critical dimensions of the functioning of the national security space in accordance with the provisions of the National Security Doctrine of Ukraine (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2018; President of Ukraine 2020) and the approaches of NATO (NATO 2022). The corresponding indicators are distributed as follows:

- Military sphere: Defense spending (% of GDP) (SIPRI 2025), GFP Index (Global Firepower 2026)

- Political sphere: Stability Index (WGI) (World Bank 2023), Democracy Index (EIU) (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024)

- Economic sphere: GDP per capita (World Bank 2024), inflation rate (International Monetary Fund 2026)

- Social sphere: Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme 2025), unemployment rate (World Bank 2021)

- Cyberinformation sphere: Cybersecurity Index (International Telecommunication Union 2025), e-government survey (United Nations 2024)

The capabilities of Microsoft Excel and gretl were used as tools.

The IIUNS was calculated by using the formula:

$IIUNS = \Sigma (w_i \times S_i)$,

where $S_i = (I_{i1} + I_{i2})/2$,

where Si—security sub-indices (military, political, etc.); w_i—sphere weight (determined by the entropy method to objectify the impact of indicators on data variance); I_{i1} and I_{i2}—indicators' Min–Max values. Reverse normalization was applied for indicators with negative interpretation (unemployment, GFP rating).

The use of a linear additive model combined with the entropy method for determining weighting coefficients w_i makes the contribution of each domain objective. Weights follow data dispersion. Higher variability leads to higher weight. Such a rule reduces the risk of subjective neutralization of critical problems within a specific domain. Min–Max normalization aligns heterogeneous measurement units to a common scale from 0 to 1.

The interpretation of the result is possible according to the corresponding scale of the IIUNS value: from 0.8 to 1.0—high level of national security; from 0.6 to 0.79—acceptable level, requires improvement; from 0.4 to 0.59—increased risk, turbulence zone; from 0 to 0.39—critical threat to national security. Threshold values rely on widely accepted development index assessment approaches, including the UNDP Human Development Index. This approach enables comparison of the obtained results with those of other countries under conflict conditions.

Results

Monitoring the indicators of implementation of the National Security Strategy of Ukraine (Table 1) is treated as an instrument for assessing public policy effectiveness. The results indicate that the most substantial progress occurred in policy priority areas, particularly cybersecurity and digital transformation, where the Cybersecurity Index increased from 65.93 to 83.93. At the same time, a decline in the Democracy Index from 5.57 to 4.9 serves as a direct indicator of the temporary restriction of selected political instruments in order to secure national defense.

Table 1. Key directions for the implementation of the National Security Strategy of Ukraine and the dynamics of its changes

Action (Strategy Section)	Description	Index	
		2021	2024
Strengthening democratic civilian oversight (IV, 63)	Ensuring the legality of the actions of security agencies through democratic control mechanisms	Democracy Index	
		5.57	4.9
Improving governance and accountability (IV, 63)	Increasing the efficiency and transparency of the work of government agencies	Worldwide Governance Indicators	
		35.24	37.74
		Regulatory Quality	
		42.38	43.40
Strengthening the national cybersecurity system (III, 52)	Modern capabilities of cybersecurity and cyber defense entities	Cybersecurity Index	
		65.93	83.93
Eliminating anti-corruption (III, 53)	Increasing transparency and accountability of state bodies to reduce corruption	Corruption Index	
		32	35
Advocating justice reform (III, 53)	Improving access to justice and fair justice	World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index	
		0.51	0.49
Implementing digital transformation (III, 51)	Introducing IT technologies to simplify access to public services and improve their quality	eGovernance Index	
		0.8029	0.8841
Countering challenges for law enforcement (III, 45)	Countering separatism, terrorism, and extremism	Terrorism Index	
		2.304	1.686

Source: Created by the authors based on World Bank (2023), Economist Intelligence Unit (2024), International Telecommunication Union (2025), Transparency International (2024), World Justice Project (2024), United Nations (2024), Institute for Economics & Peace (2024), President of Ukraine (2020).

A moderate improvement in the fight against corruption indicates increased transparency in public administration. A deterioration in the Rule of Law Index indicates a slowdown in reform processes in the justice sector. The decreased Terrorism Index indicates a strengthening of internal security and counterterrorism. Overall, current trends indicate an asymmetric development of national security sectors.

We track the dynamics of the implementation of public governance functions in terms of the efficiency of state authorities and the capacity of regulatory activities for 2019–2023 (Figure 1).

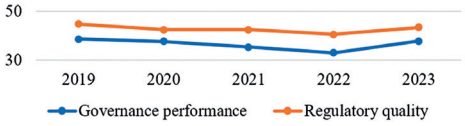

Figure 1. *Dynamics of public governance indicators (World Bank 2023)*
Source: Developed by the authors

An analysis of the dynamics of public governance indicators for 2019–2023 (Figure 1) demonstrates the stability of "Regulatory Quality" relative to "Government Effectiveness." This pattern indicates that Ukraine's security-related legal and regulatory framework proved more resilient to systemic shocks than the operational mechanisms of the executive branch.

In accordance with the specified research methodology, the data of the IIUNS components are shown below (Table 2). To ensure transparency of the IIUNS calculations, raw statistical data were processed using Min–Max normalization, which reduced them to a unified scale of [0;1]. The use of the entropy method to determine weighting coefficients eliminated the subjectivity inherent in expert surveys. The calculations showed that the military and cyberinformation (w = 0.25) sectors exert the greatest influence on data dispersion and, accordingly, on the overall level of security.

Table 2. The author's calculation of the IIUNS component values

Sector	Indicator	Normalized	Subindex
Military	Defense spending in GDP (34.48%) (SIPRI 2025)	1	0.97615
	GFP index (0.369) (Global Firepower 2026)	0.9523	
Political	Stability Index (-1.43) (World Bank 2023)	0.2908	0.3886
	Democracy Index (4.9) (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024)	0.4864	
Economic	GDP per capita (5389.5 USD) (World Bank 2024)	0.0204	0.0904
	Inflation Rate (12.6%) (International Monetary Fund 2026)	0.07	
Social	HDI (0.779) (UNDP 2025)	0.6695	0.6934
	Unemployment rate (9.8%) (World Bank 2021)	0.7173	
Cyber-information	Cybersecurity Index (83.93) (International Telecommunication Union 2025)	0.8357	0.86135
	E-Government Survey (0.8841) (United Nations 2024)	0.8870	

Source: Developed by the authors

The contribution of each component to the overall model is shown in Table 3. The political sector and the economic component received low values.

Table 3. Components of the IIUNS model

Sector	Subindex	Sector Weights	Contribution
Military	0.97615	0.25	0.24
Political	0.3886	0.2	0.08
Economic	0.0904	0.1	0.01
Social	0.6934	0.2	0.14
Cyberinformation	0.86135	0.25	0.22

Source: Developed by the authors

To test model reliability, a sensitivity analysis was conducted. When weighting coefficients varied within ±10%, the IIUNS value remained within the range of 0.67–0.71, which confirms the stability of the obtained result (0.69) and its classification within the "acceptable level" zone. Model validation through comparison with real-world events confirmed that a sharp increase in the military sub-index (0.97) correlates with the actual rearmament of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the transition to NATO standards, as reflected in the Global Firepower ranking.

The lowest values are in the political and economic spheres, which require increased optimization of public governance and economic activity. The model verification showed that the standard deviation for different aggregation methods is $\sigma = 0.03$. The identified asymmetry in sectoral development (Table 3) does not represent an accidental governance failure. It reflects a deliberate choice of state policy priorities under conditions of limited resources. The low contribution of the economic sector (0.01) and the political sector (0.08) indicates the vulnerability of civilian institutions, which are sacrificed to maintain a critical level of defense capability. This finding supports our argument for a transition toward a hybridized model in which economic resilience is integrated into defense planning as an equal component.

Based on the results of the study, a comparative analysis with the experience of Israel is conducted. Israel's military spending in 2024 increased by 65%, reaching approximately 8.8% of GDP ($46.5 billion), which is comparable to Ukraine's ($64.7 billion) (SIPRI 2025). In the cyberinformation sector, Israel updated its National Cybersecurity Strategy, emphasizing a comprehensive approach to strengthening national cyber resilience (INCO 2025), which reflects a similar Ukrainian trend in the growth of the Cybersecurity Index.

Discussion

Optimizing Ukraine's public governance system in the field of national security in the context of hybrid threats is a multifaceted and key task. The obtained results are confirmed in the studies that emphasize a proactive approach (Ferris et al. 2025), which indicates a fundamental paradigm shift in national security. The specified change consists of a shift

from a reactive model, defined as a response to an act of aggression, to a preventive "state-as-sensor" model capable of identifying hybrid influences at the stage of their emergence. Separate works also coincide with the author's conclusions that public administration should actively shape the security environment (Viter and Rudenko 2025) and prevent threats before they escalate.

The complexity of hybrid threats makes interoperability and standardization critical for effective optimization of public administration. The ultimate goal is to build a system where information flows freely, actions are precisely coordinated, and vulnerabilities are minimized, thereby enhancing overall national security (Jungwirth et al. 2023), which is consistent with the obtained results.

The study of Aristovnik et al. (2022) confirms our conclusion about the coexistence of different management models within the framework of one public administration system, demonstrating that elements of different models complement, rather than replace, each other. This correlates with our results on the asymmetric development of national security sectors and the need for hybridized public administration. Similarly, the study on the digital transformation of public administration in the face of constant threats emphasizes that digital transformation has become a necessity for the state in response to crises, which is consistent with our conclusions about the dominance of the cyberinformation component in the IIUNS (Eom and Lee 2022).

At the same time, existing studies emphasize the primacy of economic security as the basis of national security, which differs from our results. The emphasis is on the integration of economic security and national security, demonstrating an integrated approach to economic and national security, which contrasts with our model, where the economic component is given low priority (Vakkuri et al. 2025).

The dynamics of democratic indicators require separate attention. The decline in the Rule of Law Index from 0.51 to 0.49 and in the Democracy Index from 5.57 to 4.9 is statistically significant and reflects objective restrictions on rights and freedoms associated with martial law. In our view, a direct correlation exists. Stronger security control aimed at reducing the "terrorism index" inevitably leads to a temporary narrowing of democratic space.

For comparative validation of our model, Israel was selected as a country with a similar profile of security threats. A comparison of military expenditures, 8.8% of GDP in Israel versus over 30% in Ukraine, and updated cybersecurity strategies (INCO 2025) shows that successful optimization of governance under conditions of war requires the creation of a "security ecosystem" in which the private sector becomes the driver of the economy.

Based on the obtained results, several approaches can be proposed for the formation of optimal public governance systems in the field of national security (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparative analysis of models for resilience to hybrid threats

Model name	Main focus	Contribution to the optimization of public governance	Relevance for Ukraine
Integrated resilience system	Systemic resilience of society as a whole to hybrid threats; strategic decision-making support for policymakers	Provides a holistic understanding of societal vulnerabilities, guides systemic resilience building, allows for impact monitoring, and serves as a strategic framework for comprehensive countermeasures	Provides a basis for a holistic approach to Ukraine's national security in the context of hybrid aggression
Tactical action model	Emphasis on short-term responses versus long-term resilience building	Emphasizes the need for dynamic adaptation, continuous vulnerability identification, and understanding the interplay between immediate responses and long-term resilience	Helps to plan both immediate and strategic measures
Concept of hybridized public governance	Understanding and managing hybridity in the context of public governance	A foundation for the development of effective organizational structures and governance mechanisms to support stakeholder cooperation, goal alignment management, and accountability	Provides tools for integrating civil society and the private sector into the security system

Source: Developed by the authors

The models proposed by the authors (Table 4) shift the paradigm of public administration in Ukraine toward a hybridized governance framework. The most significant obstacle to implementation lies in the need for deep reform of the law enforcement and judicial systems, since, in the absence of institutional trust, the involvement of civil society in security processes remains fragmented.

The limitations of this study include the following:

- The use of a linear aggregation formula tends to smooth extreme failures in individual subsectors, which necessitates a future transition to nonlinear multiplicative models.

- Time lags in reports produced by international organizations do not fully capture operational changes in governance systems.

- The high intensity and volatility of military operations render any predictive models short-term in nature.

Despite these limitations, the proposed methodology and models are transferable and adaptable to other countries experiencing sustained pressure from hybrid threats and requiring rapid transformation of the public sector. In contrast to traditional approaches, our model proposes a concept of hybridized public governance and specific public policy instruments for integrating civil society into security decision-making processes. The outcome is a predictive model for responding to asymmetric influences.

Conclusions

1. The study confirmed that traditional hierarchical structures under conditions of full-scale aggression need to be replaced with proactive and networked management mechanisms. The main result of the work was the creation of the Integral Index of National Security of Ukraine, which covers five key areas (military, political, economic, social, and cyberinformation) and allows for a quantitative assessment of the level of state security. The calculated index (IIUNS = 0.69) indicates a very acceptable level of security in wartime.
2. The assessment results revealed a profound asymmetry: high levels of military and cybersecurity coexist with critical vulnerabilities in the economic and political sectors. This imbalance is a consequence of the total concentration of resources on defense needs, which is justified in the short term. The interdependence between security measures and the state of democracy was confirmed. A decline in democracy and rule-of-law indices alongside improvements in counterterrorism performance indicates a complex "security trade-off" that Ukraine is experiencing.
3. Complementary models of public governance are proposed: a comprehensive resilience system, a tactical response model, and a concept of hybridized public administration, which together form a multi-level response to hybrid challenges. The models have high potential for generalization and can be used by other countries (in particular, the Baltic and Eastern European states) facing hybrid threats, serving as a roadmap for strengthening national resilience.
4. For further optimization of the public governance system in the field of Ukraine's national security, with due regard to hybrid threats, it is proposed to develop legislative instruments to formalize the participation of the private sector and civil society in security processes based on cofinancing and joint governance mechanisms. Additionally, it is advisable to implement common standards for operational coordination and information sharing among all actors within the security sector. Further research should focus on developing dynamic monitoring tools that account for the nonlinear nature of hybrid influences and allow for real-time adjustment of state policy.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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UKRAINOS NACIONALINIO SAUGUMO VIEŠOJO VALDYMO SISTEMOJE OPTIMIZAVIMAS, ATSIŽVELGIANT Į HIBRIDINES GRĖSMES

Santrauka. *Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas viešojo valdymo sistemos optimizavimo Ukrainos nacionalinio saugumo srityje klausimas, atsižvelgiant į augančias hibridines grėsmes. Tyrimo tikslas buvo nustatyti struktūrinius disbalansus, siekiant išsiaiškinti viešojo valdymo, kaip nacionalinio saugumo stiprinimo veiksnio, vaidmenį. Tyrime taikyti šie metodai: integruotas*

požiūris, apjungiantis strateginių dokumentų turinio analizės elementus, rodiklių vertinimą, duomenų normalizavimą ir integralaus nacionalinio saugumo indekso sudarymą, grafinę analizę. Akcentuojamas poreikis transformuoti tradicinius valdymo metodus, atsižvelgiant į dabartinių iššūkių daugialypiškumą. Siūlomas integralus nacionalinio saugumo indeksas apima pagrindines sritis: karinį, politinį, ekonominį, socialinį ir kibernetinės informacijos. Vertinimo rezultatai rodo disbalansą tarp prioritetinių (karinių ir kibernetinių) ir pažeidžiamų (ekonominių ir politinių) komponentų. Nustatytas hibridizuoto viešojo administravimo, integruojančio viešuosius ir privačius išteklius, įgyvendinimo poreikis ir pabrėžiama proaktyvaus grėsmių prognozavimo svarba. Siūlomi konceptualūs valdymo reagavimo į hibridines grėsmes modeliai, apimantys aktyvų pilietinės visuomenės, skaitmeninių technologijų ir privačiojo sektoriaus integravimą į saugumo procesus.

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THE PRICE OF EFFICIENCY: URBAN-RURAL DIVIDES IN LITHUANIA'S PATIENT-ORIENTED APPROACH DURING HEALTHCARE REFORM

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Abstract. *Healthcare systems face ongoing challenges that require reforms to enhance innovation, accessibility, and efficiency. Lithuania's healthcare reform aims to enhance equity, quality, and sustainability by reorganising its service network. However, implementation has revealed unintended effects, including "network compression", where large hospitals absorb services from smaller regional facilities, deepening regional inequality and limiting accessibility for rural populations. A qualitative research method with 22 informants was employed. Healthcare professionals are reporting growing fatigue, increased administrative burdens, and a decline in empathy in patient care. These outcomes highlight how efficiency-oriented policies can unintentionally depersonalise services and marginalise regional healthcare providers. Based on interviews with healthcare professionals, this study examines how reforms transform everyday clinical practices and local service delivery. The findings underscore the need to balance efficiency-driven reforms with empathy, professional autonomy, and equitable access to healthcare.*

Keywords: *unintended consequences, urban–rural divide, health service, reform*

Raktiniai žodžiai: *nenumatytos pasekmės, miesto ir kaimo atskirtis, sveikatos paslaugos, reforma.*

1. Introduction

Healthcare systems continually face numerous challenges that necessitate the implementation of significant reforms aimed at enhancing innovation in services, improving accessibility, and increasing efficiency. Several key factors are driving change in health systems. First, there is a critical need for these systems to move beyond merely responding to disease symptoms and instead prioritise prevention, early diagnosis, and effective disease management (Alyousef et al. 2022). Second, despite global efforts to enhance universal health coverage, a significant disparity remains in the accessibility, quality, and health outcomes of services between rural and urban populations (Weeks et al. 2023). Third, the ongoing shortage of medical professionals presents a notable challenge, particularly in remote regions (Adynski and Morgan 2022). The emphasis on a patient-centred approach to healthcare is fundamentally transforming perceptions of healthcare quality (Khatri et al. 2023). Finally, one of the most pressing challenges is the lack of adequate budgets and financial resources necessary to implement effective health policies (Lim et al. 2023). Such challenges prompt governments to swiftly implement policy changes, either as isolated actions in specific situations or as comprehensive public policy reforms (Tynkkynen et al. 2022; Balasubramanian and Short 2021; Chen et al. 2021; Schulmann et al. 2024). Unfortunately, the changes that are initiated do not always achieve the planned results, and it is not always possible to accurately predict and evaluate their impact at the policy planning stage (Head 2022).

The Lithuanian healthcare system faces common issues seen in many countries, including demographic challenges such as migration to larger cities and abroad, a general shortage of healthcare specialists, especially in rural areas, and inefficiencies in budget spending due to uneven infrastructure utilisation in different regions. Access to healthcare services remains inconsistent, with high service standards difficult to maintain in remote areas. These social problems have prompted policy reforms aimed at ensuring accessible, high-quality medical care that meets patient needs (Vanckavičienė et al. 2024).

Despite extensive discussions on improving the efficiency of health systems at both the national and international levels, there is still a lack of empirical evidence on how the pursuit of health system efficiency affects less controllable dimensions of reform, and in this case, how the pursuit of efficiency and unified quality standards actually affects the dimension of service accessibility. The aim of the study is to assess how the focus of healthcare reforms on efficiency and institutional coordination affects the availability of services in the regions and to reveal the systemic consequences of centralisation for territorial equality.

The study is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical background of the research; Section 3 describes the methodology; Section 4 presents the findings of the research, comprising the reform impact on healthcare systems, the reform communication to the healthcare institutions and municipalities, the reform implementation processes, and the attitudes towards the reform evaluation on the performance of healthcare institutions; Section 5 offers a discussion on possible wider implications of the findings obtained; and Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Background

Policy changes in healthcare serve as a transformative reform

Reforming the health sector has become urgent in many countries due to demographic shifts, rising chronic disease burdens, inequalities in healthcare access, shortages of specialists, changing patient needs, and limited funding. Scientific studies describe reforms where central governments establish policies and standards and where local authorities define their roles and functions to support and improve service accessibility and quality for specific populations (Kwon and Choi 2023).

Factors determining changes in the healthcare sector policy

Urban–rural divide in healthcare. Differences in access to healthcare services between rural and urban areas are well documented. Urban residents tend to use preventive and specialised services more frequently than those in rural areas, due to factors such as physical distance, limited service availability, and lower confidence in service quality (Liepins, Nixon, and Stokes 2024). Regional inequality arises because services, capital, and resources are often concentrated in urban centres, creating a geographic imbalance that favours city residents and leads to centralisation that disadvantages remote regions (Fayet et al. 2020).

Shortage of healthcare professionals. Europe faces a persistent shortage of healthcare professionals, threatening the long-term stability of healthcare systems (Kuhlmann 2025). This issue is not just about having fewer professionals overall but also about their unequal distribution across cities and regions.

Orientation of health services to patient needs. The healthcare system is shifting from a traditional approach that focuses on symptom management to a patient-centred model that emphasises the needs and experiences of the patient. This transition requires healthcare professionals' efforts. Patients' perceptions of care quality depend on staff behaviour and organisational and financial accessibility (Servetkienė et al. 2023).

Unintended consequences of policies. Reforming a healthcare system is a complex process, influenced by human factors, organisational choices, budgets, infrastructure, geographic differences, and the inherent "wicked" nature of the problem (Head 2022). This complexity makes predicting the outcomes of reforms challenging. Health policy initiatives

often fall short of their goals due to the influence of political, economic, and cultural factors (Bayat et al. 2023).

The scope of reforms in Lithuania and their connections with the regions

In 2023, Lithuania launched several health system reforms, including overhauls of public healthcare, centralisation of emergency medical services, expansion of the personal healthcare network, mental healthcare reform, implementation of a patient transport service, and enhancement of long-term care services. These initiatives aim to ensure all residents have access to high-quality, safe public and personal healthcare, regardless of their location or socioeconomic status, by improving service availability across geographical, communication, organisational, and economic aspects (SAM 2023). It is essential to note that although each of these reforms has its own objectives, they were all directly initiated in response to regional needs.

3. Methodology

Region: The Marijampolė geographical area, situated in southwestern Lithuania, was chosen as a case study to examine the regional effects of healthcare policy reform. This area comprises five municipalities: Kalvarija, Kazlų Rūda, Marijampolė, Šakiai District, and Vilkaviškis District, with a total population of approximately 150,000. There are 24 healthcare facilities of varying sizes and functions, including a hospital, emergency medical services, several private healthcare providers, and other primary care centres, all serving the local community.

Study design: A qualitative research method was used, specifically employing semi-structured interviews. This approach enables a detailed exploration of issues and uncovers the experiences of participants (Tümen-Akyıldız and Ahmed 2021). The interviews aimed to understand how healthcare policy reform was introduced and influenced the daily operations of healthcare institutions from the perspective of medical personnel, focusing on their attitudes and skills related to the changes.

Sample: The study employed a targeted sampling approach combined with snowball sampling to select participants from the population, specifically individuals working in healthcare or involved in healthcare reform decision-making in the Marijampolė region. Twenty-two respondents took part, a number determined by data saturation, when additional responses no longer yielded new information. Details regarding the sample are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Study participants

No.	Informant's code	Occupation	Managerial duties	Municipality
1	G1-G8	Doctors	Six of them perform managerial functions	Šakiai, Marijampolė, Vilkaviškis
2	S1-S7	Nurses	Six of them perform managerial functions	Šakiai, Marijampolė, Vilkaviškis
3	V1-V3	Administrators/ Directors	Top-level managers	Šakiai, Marijampolė, Vilkaviškis, Kalvarija
4	P1-P4	Politicians	Top-level policy makers	Šakiai, Marijampolė, Vilkaviškis, Kalvarija

Data collection instrument. A 10-question semi-structured questionnaire was created to identify key managerial aspects of the reform and gather data on its implementation. Respondents shared their 1) experiences with the latest healthcare reform, 2) views on its positive and negative elements, and 3) opinions on regional healthcare services and their abilities to meet the reform goals.

Data collection. Interviews with respondents were conducted by four researchers from 20 May 2025 to 29 May 2025, using the Microsoft Teams platform. The conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed. The average duration of each interview was approximately 30–60 minutes. The names and surnames of the informants and any other names mentioned in the interviews were changed to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity.

Data analysis. All transcribed texts were analysed using an inductive qualitative content analysis approach (Elo et al. 2014), which does not rely on a predefined theory or specific hypotheses.

For this study, a list of qualitative categories was created to facilitate the thematic coding process. These categories were deduced from official reform policy documents and prior research on healthcare system reform. They mainly represent the objectives and strategic directions outlined in the new healthcare policy.

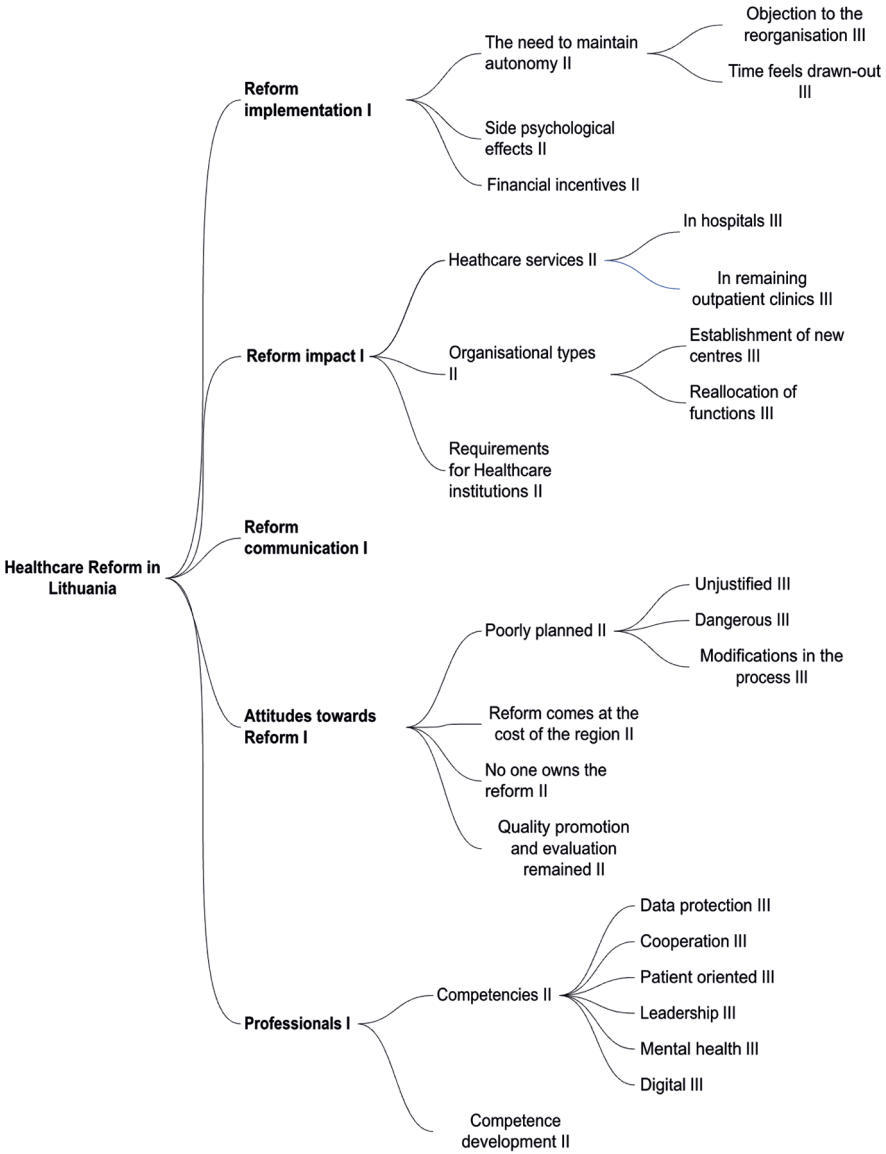

Fig. 1 The hierarchy tree of categories for data coding

The qualitative content analysis was based on coding categories, which were structured into a category tree that extended to level IV. Level IV corresponds to the raw data

categorisation from the observed data, and level I corresponds to the main themes of the study. The category tree with I, II, and III levels of categories is shown in Fig. 1. The initial list of coding categories corresponding to level I of the hierarchy was created according to the research objectives (reform impact, reform communication, reform implementation, and attitudes towards reform). To ensure coding consistency, the initial coding was performed by a single coding specialist according to the list of level I categories, aiming to identify the lowest possible level categories. During the second reading, another coding researcher double-checked the categories, grouping them into level II and level III category codes.

It is important to note that the category "unintended consequences" was not included in the initial coding model. This decision was deliberate. The concept of unintended consequences is regarded here as a new construct rather than a predefined analytical category. It is expected to emerge inductively from the empirical material by identifying discrepancies between policy intentions and observed outcomes. By not including "unintended consequences" in the initial list of codes, the study maintains analytical openness and avoids interpretative bias. This approach ensures that the construct emerges naturally from the data rather than being influenced by preconceptions.

Ethical consideration. The scientific research and its implementation were based on the Declaration of Helsinki as well as the following ethical principles: reliability, integrity, respect, and accountability.

4. Findings

The interview analysis clarified the common regional views on healthcare issues targeted by the reform. While the study aimed to equally explore all categories, certain problems garnered more focus. The shortage of specialists and their skills were discussed more extensively than the content or progress of the reform. The themes identified during coding, along with their occurrence frequency, are shown in Fig. 2.

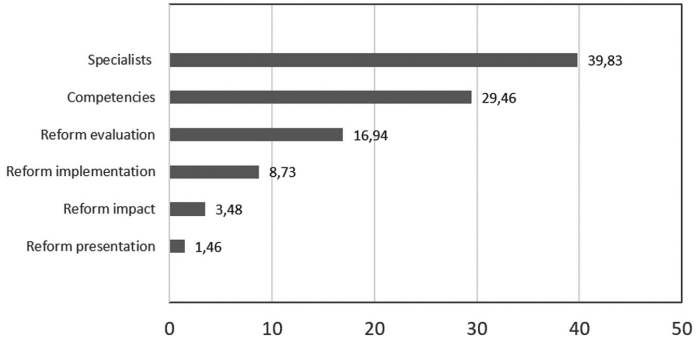

Fig. 2 Principal themes of the research, based on the frequency of categories

Despite the stated objectives, the implementation of the reform unveiled numerous challenges. Below, we address the most significant topics corresponding to level I of the category tree (Fig. 1) and the underlying constructs of the category tree elements that elucidate them.

Reform impact (level I)

• **Healthcare services (level II).** The impact of healthcare system reforms on services varies across different levels of care, both in **hospitals** and **outpatient clinics**.

a) The reform had a dual impact **on hospitals (category level III)**. On the one hand, "The range of competencies and services has expanded" (S1), and there are increased transport services (S7), which means that hospitals have strengthened their functions and can now offer **new services (category level IV)** and improve accessibility, especially in the area of patient mobility.

b) The situation of the remaining **outpatient clinics (category level III)** appears to be much more complicated. In most of them, "There is a noticeable decline in outpatient services; We do not know if they will survive and what will happen in a year's time" (P3), which indicates a sense of uncertainty and **a decline in the availability of services in the regions (category level IV)**.

• **Organisational types (level II).** The reform is clearly changing the organisational structures of healthcare institutions and their interrelationships. There is a noticeable **creation of formal structures** and a **redistribution of functions**.

• **New established integrated centres (category level III)**. According to the informants, most municipalities "have decided to establish health centres" (S4). Such centres should ensure a wider range of services and coordinated activities between primary and secondary healthcare providers.

• **Functional distribution (category level III)**. Others, however, refused to join the new entity and agreed only **to share functions (category level IV)**. "We will join the centre at the functional level" (G2), which signifies a concerted effort to consolidate services and enhance cooperation among various healthcare institutions. In terms of the redistribution of functions, a positive aspect is noticeable in some cases: "It is easier to share those functions and responsibilities; <...> to monitor and control activities" (S4), which shows that the new structure allows for a more flexible distribution of responsibilities and improved work organisation among institutions.

However, these changes are not proceeding smoothly everywhere due to **the dominance of the "stronger" (category level IV)**. According to some informants, "Another municipality offered more" (S4); unfortunately, these reforms are not designed to benefit remote regions/municipalities (G3). This indicates that stronger regional centres tend to dominate in the formation of health centres and the redistribution of functions, while smaller municipalities experience greater inequality.

• **Requirements for healthcare institutions (level II)**. The reform has had a significant impact on the operating conditions of healthcare institutions, particularly in terms of their compliance with new standards and requirements. It has been noted that these

requirements are often **disproportionate to the size of the institutions (category level IV)** or regional resources, which poses challenges for smaller regional centres in ensuring continuity of operations. According to the informants, "It is more difficult in the regions" (G8) and "Requirements are increasing" (S4), which shows that in the context of reform, smaller or more remote institutions face greater pressure to adapt to new standards.

Reform communication (level I)

The way in which the ideas and objectives of the reform were presented to healthcare institutions and municipalities was crucial to its success.

• **Threat rhetoric (level IV)**. The evaluations indicate that the communication process was not always constructive, as it was often dominated by threat rhetoric and formal slogans rather than clear dialogue or reasoned arguments. The informants' statements, "Everyone threatened that we would close those regions; Maybe you should stop scaring people" (G8), show that the presentation of the reform was accompanied by pressure and intimidating messages in some cases.

• **Slogans (level IV)**. The informants' observation that "There have been slogans from the ministry and the government, at least until now" (G8) reflects excessive declarativeness and a lack of specificity.

Reform implementation (level I)

• **The need to maintain autonomy (level II)**. The process of implementing healthcare system reforms reveals a strong need to preserve autonomy, which becomes a key factor in shaping institutions' attitudes towards change.

• **Objection to the reorganisation (category level III)**. There is noticeable resistance to centralisation, a desire to maintain independence, and a preference for local control, while the pace of reform is considered slow and often accompanied by uncertainty. The desire of institutions to maintain self-government is clearly reflected in the assessments that "There were all kinds of resistance" (S1). This indicates that the idea of reforming institutions into joint structures is not universally welcomed. Although there is resistance, there are also positive attitudes – "There is now even stronger cooperation between all of us, between local government and healthcare institutions" (S4) and "We communicate with both private and public institutions" (P3). This shows that constructive **cooperation is possible when the partnership is based on the principle of equality (level IV)** rather than hierarchical subordination.

• **Time feels drawn out (category level III)**. When assessing the pace and style of implementation of the reform, several informants emphasise that "Time is constantly being dragged out without anything concrete being said" (S5), and the reform is perceived as delayed and lacking clear guidelines.

• **Side psychological effects (level II)**. The implementation process of reform is characterised by tension between centralisation and maintaining autonomy. Although institutions value cooperation and sharing of functions, they want to do so as equal partners, not as subordinate participants.

• **Financial incentives (level II)**. Financial instruments are becoming one of the

primary tools for implementing the reform, with the goal of attracting and retaining specialists, particularly in the region of Marijampolė.

Most attention is focused on direct financial support, compensation, and incentives. The informants said, "We compensate, we cover the costs of attracting doctors; Everything is expressed in financial terms; A three-year payment is provided as needed" (S4), indicating that the reform emphasises financial motivation as a means of addressing the problem of human resource shortages.

Attitudes towards reform (level I)

The evaluation of healthcare reform among sector participants remains quite critical.

• **Poor planning (level II)**

a) **Unjustified**. The uncertainty that has arisen complicates planning and raises doubts about the direction of the reform. However, when evaluating the current situation, some changes are viewed more positively – "There are no drastic decisions, everything is being implemented gradually" (G5).

b) **Threat (level III)**. Critical attitudes are further reinforced by statements such as, "It is somewhat unmeasured, perhaps threatening" (G8) and "What are you doing? You will destroy the districts" (G7). Some also note political dishonesty – "A politician comes and lies" (P2) – which means that the presentation of the reform is sometimes perceived as declarative.

c) **Modification of the process (level III)**. It is perceived as insufficiently planned, overly risky, and unstable. Many informants report that changes are occurring without a clear, long-term vision, and that **the process itself is often adjusted (level IV)** along the way, which creates a sense of uncertainty and hinders systematic work. Some informants emphasise poor planning, stating that the reforms are "somewhat unfounded, perhaps even threatening (G8)", which reflects the opinion that the changes are being implemented without **a detailed impact assessment (level IV)**.

• **Reform on the cost of regions (level II)**

The impact of the reform has been particularly acute in regions where access to services and staffing have become major challenges. Although the aim of the reform is to ensure a higher quality and more coordinated healthcare system, some of its decisions are actually implemented at the expense of the regions, **weakening the local service base (level IV)** and **deepening the divide between cities and villages (level IV)**. The informants' opinion that "Outpatient services have been reduced" (S1) shows that **financial savings decisions (level IV)** are often implemented by reducing the volume of services.

• **No one owns the reform (level II)**

One of the most notable shortcomings of the reform is the lack of responsibility and leadership. Representatives of institutions argue that the reform process seems to be proceeding without a clear "owner". According to the informants, "There could be more clarity" (G6) and "The overall healthcare strategy is unclear" (G8). These observations reflect a general sense of uncertainty in the sector.

• **Service quality promotion and evaluation remain unchanged (level II)**

Although the reform sought to change the structure and operating principles of the healthcare system, the evaluation and performance measurement system remained largely unchanged. Institutions continue to be evaluated based on quantitative indicators, most often related to quotas. The informants said, "We are bound by quotas that we cannot meet" (G8) and "The quotas between districts are not fair" (S1). This means that the performance of institutions is still assessed according to pre-set quantitative indicators.

5. Conclusion

Lithuania's healthcare reform aims to enhance equity, efficiency, and quality in healthcare, thereby creating a sustainable network that addresses both urban and regional needs.

1 Network restructuring leads to:

1.1 Network compression

The reform has led to the concentration of healthcare services within larger hospital networks, a trend that is also prevalent throughout Europe (Kristensen and Olsen 2021). It results in what can be described as "network compression".

1.2 Regional inequality

The pursuit of standardised quality and operational efficiency through network restructuring has led major healthcare institutions to concentrate their efforts on expanding complex, technology-dependent services in large, integrated hospitals – predominantly located in urban areas.

1.3 Limited physical equity

A hallmark of the reform has been the creation of new centralised healthcare centres. However, these new institutions have often replaced local outpatient clinics, reducing the overall number of care points available to rural residents.

2 Compensation for losses → specialist shortage and resource drain

The reform has also intensified pre-existing shortages of medical specialists. Despite clear evidence of workforce strain, the issue has not been prioritised within policy implementation. The new service structure – shaped by efficiency and specialisation goals – often fails to align with specialists' career aspirations or competencies, discouraging retention and recruitment.

3 Development of geriatric and nursing-oriented services → nursing service gaps

One of the reform's notable gaps lies in the lack of progress in developing nursing and long-term care services. Policy criteria for efficiency, quality, and reimbursement were primarily designed around the needs of specialised, hospital-based care – particularly surgical services – rather than community or nursing care.

4 Concentration of specialised care → service elitisation

The reform has spurred the development of sophisticated and high-value medical services that necessitate advanced technology and specialised expertise. These services – such as plastic surgery, ophthalmology, and kidney procedures – have recently emerged and

present significant commercial potential. While this focus on high-end services encourages technical excellence and innovation, it also results in the elitisation of healthcare, neglecting other essential services that are more urgently needed in the community. This outcome contradicts the original goals of the policy change.

5 Better overall quality → reduced patient-oriented quality approach

Although research indicates that patient-centred care enhances patient satisfaction, improves health outcomes, increases patient engagement in their care, and can reduce healthcare costs (Alsagoor et al. 2024), recent policy shifts have demonstrated a trend towards change. Discussions with informants regarding the competencies of healthcare specialists have been quite revealing. Among the six competencies evaluated, patient orientation emerged as the most significant, often regarded as a defining characteristic of regional healthcare institutions (see Fig. 3). This competency fosters strong relationships with patients through long-term contact.

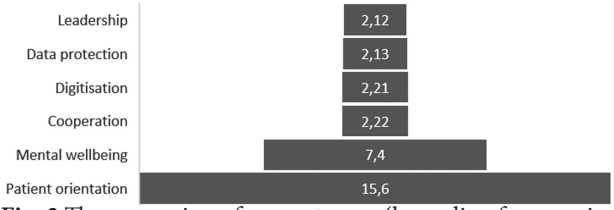

Fig. 3 The expression of competences (by coding frequencies)

6 Unified quality requirements → compliance pressure

Finally, the reform's emphasis on quantitative performance metrics has produced a new form of compliance pressure. Healthcare institutions are compelled to adapt their strategies to meet stringent and often disproportionate requirements. While institutions aspire to act as autonomous partners in reform implementation, they often experience manipulative pressure to conform to unrealistic performance standards. This dynamic has particularly negative effects on smaller regional centres, which lack the resources to meet these expectations and therefore struggle to ensure operational continuity.

6. Conclusions

1. The results of this study show that the focus on the effectiveness of healthcare reform and improving institutional coordination reflects a forward-looking approach that is in line with broader trends in European healthcare. Nonetheless, prioritising efficiency in health policy does not shield against systemic unintended consequences that mainly impact geographically remote areas.
2. The results of the study complement research on the vulnerability of regions in terms of access to health services, as regions often suffer more than they benefit

from large-scale efficiency efforts, because systemic optimisation policies tend to favour centralisation over territorial equity. Phenomena such as the elitisation of services, rather than the pursuit of accessibility for the most popular services, only prove that efficiency alone is insufficient for the realisation of reform.

3. Therefore, policymakers could pay closer attention to regions by differentiating both the performance indicators being reformed and maintaining the health quality results already achieved, such as patient orientation.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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EFEKTYVUMO KAINA: MIESTO IR KAIMO SKIRTUMAI TAIKANT Į PACIENTĄ ORIENTUOTĄ POŽIŪRĮ SVEIKATOS PRIEŽIŪROS REFORMOS METU

Santrauka. *Sveikatos priežiūros sistemos susiduria su nuolatiniais iššūkiais, dėl kurių būtina įgyvendinti reformas, siekiant didinti inovacijų diegimą, sveiktos paslaugų prieinamumą ir jų efektyvumą. Lietuvos sveikatos priežiūros reforma siekia didinti lygybę, paslaugų kokybę ir tvarumą, reorganizuojant sveikatos priežiūros paslaugų tinklą. Tačiau įgyvendinant reformą paaiškėjo, kad ji turi nenumatytų padarinių, įskaitant „tinklo suspaudimą", kai didelės ligoninės perima paslaugas iš mažesnių regioninių įstaigų, didindamos regioninę nelygybę ir ribodamos prieinamumą kaimo gyventojams. Buvo atliktas kokybinis tyrimas naudojant pusiau struktūrizuotą interviu su 22 informantais. Informantai įvardijo didėjantį nuovargį, didėjančią administracinę naštą ir mažėjančią empatiją pacientų atžvilgiu. Šie rezultatai parodo, kaip į efektyvumą orientuota sveikatos politika gali netikėtai depersonalizuoti paslaugas ir marginalizuoti regioninius sveikatos priežiūros paslaugų teikėjus. Remiantis interviu su sveikatos priežiūros specialistais, šiame tyrime nagrinėjama, kaip reformos keičia kasdienę klinikinę praktiką ir vietinių paslaugų teikimą. Rezultatai pabrėžia būtinybę suderinti efektyvumu grindžiamas reformas su empatija, profesine autonomija ir lygiateise prieiga prie sveikatos priežiūros.*

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ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STUNTING POLICY IN IMPROVING NUTRITION: A CASE STUDY OF BANYUMAS REGENCY, INDONESIA

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Abstract. *This study aims to assess the impact of public policies on improving nutrition to reduce stunting in Banyumas Regency. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines the effectiveness of Banyumas Regent Regulation Number 25 of 2020 in reducing the prevalence of stunting through targeted and sensitive nutritional interventions. Quantitative data were collected through a survey of families (with toddlers) participating in the program, while qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews with stakeholders. The interim analysis reveals that, although there was a significant decrease in the prevalence of in 2022, the resurgence in 2023 highlights the program's sustainability challenges. Factors such as program implementation, cross-sector coordination, and public awareness determine the success of the policy. This research offers strategic recommendations to enhance interventions, bolster organizational capacity, and expand program reach, aiming to achieve the national target of reducing stunting to below 20%.*

Keywords: *policy, stunting, nutrition, impact evaluation, Banyumas Regency, Indonesia*

Raktiniai žodžiai: *viešoji politika, vystymosi sulėtėjimas, mityba, poveikio vertinimas, Banjumaso regionas, Indonezija.*

1. Introduction

Stunting is a global concern in various countries. One of the global nutrition targets for 2025 is to reduce the prevalence of stunting in toddlers by up to 40%. Currently, efforts to combat stunting are more focused on the period from pregnancy to toddlerhood. However, prevention during preconception is also important, with intervention targets including women of childbearing age, including adolescents, brides-to-be, and mothers who delay pregnancy (Lestari et al., 2023). The World Health Organization (WHO) describes stunting as a developmental problem in children caused by chronic malnutrition, recurrent infections, and inadequate psychosocial stimulation. Stunting occurs when a child's height falls below -2 standard deviations from the median growth standard set by WHO (WHO, 2015). According to the standard criteria of the Multicentre Growth Reference Study (WHO-MGRS), stunting is characterized by a height that is far below average (WHO, 2018). WHO reports that in 2018, 22% of toddlers worldwide were stunted. In Indonesia, the findings of the National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) and the 2019 Indonesian Child Nutrition Status Study (SSGBI) showed a stunting prevalence of 27.67%, exceeding the WHO global threshold of 22% (Riskesdas, 2018). Stunting is a growth disorder in children under five that is caused by chronic malnutrition, so children have a height that is not appropriate for their age. In Indonesia, around 30.8% of, or nearly 8 million, children are stunted (Riskesdas, 2018). Indonesia ranks fifth in the world for the highest prevalence of stunting. Children who experience stunting tend to have suboptimal intelligence levels, are more susceptible to diseases, and face the risk of decreased productivity in the future. The impact can be widespread, resulting in the hindering of economic growth, increased poverty rates, and exacerbated social inequality (Banyumas Regent Regulation Number 25 of 2020).

The Indonesian government addresses this through specific nutrition interventions and sensitive nutrition interventions. Specific nutrition interventions focus on the first 1,000 days of life (HPK) and contribute about 30% to stunting reduction. Implemented mainly in the health sector, they produce relatively quick results, such as providing supplementary food (PMT) for pregnant women to prevent deficiencies in energy, protein, iron, folic acid, and iodine, as well as malaria prevention and deworming (Sumarni, 2015). This intervention also promotes early initiation of breastfeeding (IMD), exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, and continued breastfeeding with complementary foods afterward. Other efforts include iron fortification, immunization, and diarrhea treatment. Sensitive nutrition interventions are reduced indirectly through long-term measures involving the government, private sectors, cross-sectoral programs, and community participation (Ridua & Djurubassa, 2020). According to Banyumas Regent Regulation Number 25 of 2020, the prevalence of stunting in toddlers in Banyumas Regency has reached 32%, whereas the national target is less than 20%. Therefore, immediate and sustainable solutions are needed through collaboration among the government, the private sector, and the community. As part of these efforts, the Regent Regulation on the Regional Action Plan (RAD) for the Prevention and Handling of Stunting in Banyumas was formulated to significantly

reduce the prevalence of stunting in the region. According to the National Team for the Acceleration of Poverty Alleviation (TNP2K, 2017), the Indonesian government pays great attention to the problem of stunting, especially in finding solutions to address and reduce its prevalence. The stunting intervention recommendations consist of five main pillars, namely: the commitment and vision of state leaders, national campaigns that focus on improving understanding and behavior change, political commitment and accountability, convergence and coordination of programs between the central government, regions, and communities, as well as policies related to food security and program evaluation (TNP2K, 2017). According to Nurcahyanti & Rahmansyah (2023), Banyumas Regency set a target to reduce stunting cases to 14% by 2024. Various efforts are made by local governments, one of which is by instructing all local government organizations (OPD) to carry out activities such as child nutrition interventions, improving home conditions, and increasing water availability. Table 1 details the achievements in handling stunting in Banyumas Regency from 2021 to 2023.

Table 1. Achievements of Stunting Handling in Banyumas Regency, 2021–2023

Year	Achievements	Information
2021	21.6%	Stunting incidence rate in Banyumas Regency
2022	16.6%	The stunting rate in Banyumas Regency was successfully reduced by 5%
2023	20.9%	The stunting rate in Banyumas Regency increased by 4.3% from the previous year

Source: Primary data

Stunting in Banyumas fell from 21.6% (2021) to 16.6% (2022) but rose to 20.9% (2023), revealing sustainability gaps and implementation weaknesses in nutrition programs. The government has targeted 15 high-burden villages and issued Regent Regulation Number 25 of 2020 to guide planning and coordination. This study evaluates the regulation's impact, the factors shaping outcomes, and lessons from Banyumas' stunting-reduction efforts. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How has Banyumas Regent Regulation Number 25 of 2020 been implemented across sectors involved in stunting reduction?
2. What impact has the policy produced at the individual, organizational, and system levels?
3. What factors explain the fluctuating stunting rates between 2021 and 2024?
4. What challenges impede the achievement of the national target of <14%?

Literature Review

Public Policy Evaluation

In the modern era, many governments prioritize public policies that promote social inclusion, aiming to reduce inequality and ensure justice. Through concrete measures, these policies foster an inclusive society where all citizens have equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from development (Melati & Asmorowati, 2023). According to Permatasari (2020), policy evaluation is the final stage of the policy process, assessing implementation by identifying strengths, weaknesses, and impacts. It also serves as a key reference for formulating future policies. A careful assessment of the implementation and results of these policies is an important factor in determining whether the policy has achieved its stated objectives and in identifying ways to improve its effectiveness in the future. Winarno's (2012) public policy evaluation involves assessing implemented policies in terms of substance, implementation, and impact. Although usually the final stage of the policy cycle, it plays a crucial role and can also be applied to other policy activities. Thus, all consequences of the policy process can be evaluated without having to wait for the policy to be implemented (Abubakar, 2011).

According to Winarno (2008), policy evaluation serves to describe a policy's impact and assess its success against set criteria. It measures implementation, outcomes, and impacts to guide future steps. While often seen as the final stage of the policy cycle, some view it as followed by a further stage. Although aimed at solving problems, public policy often falls short of its targets. Evaluations are conducted to assess achievements and identify the causes of failure, with a primary focus on assessing policy benefits (Maulana, 2015). Evaluation is an assessment of the program that has been implemented. According to Judge (2015), policy evaluation measures how far public policies achieve their goals by comparing outcomes with targets. It examines not only results and impacts but also the policy's development and implementation processes. According to Rahman et al. (2015), evaluation functions as a monitoring tool to assess policy effectiveness and identify gaps between expectations and outcomes. It examines not only results or impacts but also how well policies are implemented. Overall, evaluation is an objective, systematic, and empirical process to measure the extent to which policy targets and objectives are achieved.

Impact Evaluation

According to Anderson (2010), impact evaluation examines outputs vs. outcomes, intended vs. unintended impacts, and direct vs. indirect effects. It measures changes caused by a policy by comparing conditions before and after, as well as between affected and unaffected groups. Key dimensions include timing, the gap between expected and actual impacts, the level of impact aggregation, and the types of impacts—economic, policy-making, public attitudes, and overall quality of life. Wibawa et al. (1994) state that policy impacts can be seen at four levels: individual (psychological, environmental, economic, social, and personal effects), organizational (direct or indirect effects on goals, morale, and

discipline), societal (capacity to serve its members), and relating to social institutions or systems (measured through factors such as resource sufficiency, coordination, legitimacy, and adaptability). In this study, the theory used is the Wibawa theory, which includes individual impacts, organizational impacts, and impacts on social institutions and systems. The theory was chosen because it was grounded in the specific situation, conditions, and characteristics of this research.

Factors Influencing the Implementation or Evaluation of Public Policies

Van Meter & Van Horn (1975) identify six key variables influencing policy implementation: policy standards and objectives, resources, communication, implementing agency characteristics, socio-economic and political environment, and implementers' disposition. According to Lipsky (1980), four factors affect the implementation or evaluation of public policies, namely: 1) executive discretion; 2) direct interaction with the public; 3) limited time and resources; and 4) bureaucratic work pressure. In his book *Public Policy Analysis: An Introduction*, William N. Dunn (1981) presents six policy evaluation criteria that can be used to assess the effectiveness and feasibility of a policy. These criteria are:

1. Effectiveness: This criterion measures the extent to which the policy achieves the goals it has set. The focus is on the tangible results produced by the policy. According to Ariyani et al. (2024), effectiveness refers to the level of success achieved by a person or organization through specific methods that align with the goals to be achieved. In other words, the more goals that are successfully realized, the more effective an activity will be. Effectiveness is a measure that shows the extent to which management has succeeded in achieving pre-set targets, both in terms of quantity, quality, and time (Ajefri, 2017). In addition, according to Julianto & Carnarez (2021), effectiveness is a broad concept influenced by internal and external factors. It reflects the success of individuals or organizations in achieving goals through appropriate methods, measured by target attainment in terms of quantity, quality, and time.

2. Efficiency: This assesses how the results achieved compare with the resources or costs used. Efficient policies deliver maximum results at minimal cost. Samsudin et al. (2024) state that achieving organizational goals requires aligning human resources with the company's vision, while efficiency means using resources optimally to minimize waste and maximize productivity. It also involves completing tasks with minimal input, on time, and appropriately. Additionally, this ability encompasses completing tasks in a timely and appropriate manner. In addition, according to Susanti & Pratiwi (2023), efficiency is the optimal and effective management of financial, human, and material resources to achieve organizational goals. It emphasizes using minimal input to maximize output while aligning resource use with the company's vision and productivity.

3. Adequacy: This measures whether the policy is sufficient to solve the problem or achieve the desired goal. That is, whether the policy is adequate in providing a comprehensive solution. According to Jasmine (2014), adequacy refers to the extent to which the level

of effectiveness can meet the needs, values, or opportunities that trigger the emergence of a problem. Meanwhile, according to Nuramalia & Rantau (2024), sufficiency is reached when achieved goals are deemed adequate, closely tied to effectiveness in meeting needs, values, or opportunities for problem-solving. In short, adequacy measures how well effectiveness addresses these aspects.

4. Equity: This assesses whether policies are fair and provide equal benefits to all groups of society, without discrimination. According to Vandito et al. (2023), equality refers to a situation in which every person or group has equal opportunities and access to the resources and rights that are available in society. Meanwhile, according to Heywood (2015), political equality aims to reduce economic, social, and other disparities by ensuring equal opportunities and access to resources and rights, thereby fostering a more just society.

5. Responsiveness: This evaluates the extent to which the policy can respond to the needs, demands, or aspirations of the targeted community. According to Ramadan (2021), responsiveness is an indicator of public service that reflects the ability of the state apparatus to respond to the needs of the community through regulations. Responsiveness is very important in public service because it shows the organization's ability to understand the needs of the community (Ramadan, 2021). Meanwhile, according to Lestari (2022), responsiveness in public services is the ability of the state to understand community needs, set priorities, and design programs that align with public expectations.

6. Feasibility: This measures whether policies are in accordance with the values, norms, and socio-cultural context of the affected communities. Feasibility can be interpreted as the effort made to provide financial and non-financial benefits to achieve the desired goals (Arnold et al., 2020). Feasibility means an in-depth analysis that will result in a decision as to whether the undertaking will provide greater benefits compared to the costs incurred (Sukmawati & Nasution, 2019). So, feasibility is an in-depth analysis to determine whether a venture provides greater benefits than the costs incurred, both financially and non-financially, in support of its desired purpose.

This study applies to William N. Dunn's theory of effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy, equity, responsiveness, and feasibility. It fits the study's context and helps ensure policies are effective, fair, and relevant to community needs.

The Concept of Stunting

Stunting is a growth disorder in children caused by prolonged malnutrition, resulting in below-average height and delayed development (Hartati et al., 2024). According to Nurfadillah & Rahim (2024), defining stunting as a health problem is crucial, as it can impact the quality of human resources in the future. As the next generation of the nation, adolescents need to be aware of the importance of adequate and balanced nutritional intake, as well as maintaining health through good habits and avoiding the risk of early marriage. According to Aziz et al. (2024), stunting is a condition in which a child is malnourished, resulting in delayed growth and development. Meeting dietary needs is crucial

for ensuring children's nutritional intake, and steps need to be taken toward reducing and addressing stunting in the community. According to Yuliastri & Indawati (2024), stunting—caused by poor nutrition, infections, and inadequate parenting during the first 1,000 days—leads to disease, disability, reduced intelligence, lower productivity, and long-term impacts such as poverty, inequality, and slowed economic growth. Children are considered stunted when their height falls below age standards, reflecting growth failure during the first 1,000 days—a critical period for physical, cognitive, and future productivity (Dewi et al., 2023). In this regard, according to Jatmiko & Muzajjad (2024), stunting is a global problem due to its impact on reducing children's intellectual capacity, which in turn can reduce the competitiveness and quality of Indonesia's human resources in the future. Stunting, caused by chronic malnutrition during the first 1,000 days, is a serious health issue that harms children's growth, intelligence, and future competitiveness. Its impacts extend to poverty, inequality, and slowed economic growth, making proper nutrition, parenting, and public awareness crucial for prevention. International evidence shows that stunting reduction is strongly associated with multi-sectoral governance (Bhutta et al., 2020), stable funding (UNICEF, 2024), and frontline worker capacity (Victora et al., 2021). Studies in Bangladesh, Peru, and Rwanda demonstrate that long-term integrated interventions—such as providing clean water, sanitation, social protection, and maternal education—produce sustained improvements in child growth. In Indonesia, evaluations in Central Java, NTT, and West Sumatra highlight the importance of community-based delivery systems and convergent planning. Incorporating implementation-science frameworks such as CFIR or RE-AIM would further strengthen analysis of organizational readiness, context, and intervention fidelity.

Research Methods

Data were collected through a household survey of 114 beneficiary families in 15 priority villages and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The survey's 28-item questionnaire covered nutrition practices, service use, household conditions, and program perceptions, administered by trained enumerators during home visits. Interviews with government offices, village midwives, and community cadres examined implementation, coordination, challenges, and behavioral changes, and were recorded with consent. Although primarily qualitative, the study used descriptive analysis of quantitative data to support and triangulate findings. Simple cross-tabulations compared nutrition behaviors and service use across villages, without inferential statistics due to the absence of a control group and a non-causal focus. Future research should employ quasi-experimental or longitudinal designs for stronger causal inference. Qualitative data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's model, involving data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Transcripts were inductively coded, yielding 52 codes later grouped into themes such as coordination challenges, resource limitations, behavioral changes, and implementation

bottlenecks. Two researchers cross-checked and reconciled coding decisions to ensure inter-rater reliability. To enhance representativeness, the analysis included interviews with three village midwives, five community health cadres, and two TPPS village officials. Their input offered valuable insights into frontline implementation and community engagement. They also highlighted operational challenges not captured at the district level.

Analysis and Results

The results of in-depth interviews with representatives from the Banyumas Regency Health Office (Dinkes), Agency for Development Planning, Research, and Development (Bapedalitbang), Department of Social Affairs, Community and Village Empowerment (Dinsospermades), and Department of Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (DP2KBP3A) show that stunting policies have had a significant impact both directly and indirectly on individuals, organizations, and social systems.

Impact on Individuals and Organizations

Health Office respondents noted that the stunting policy provides psychological support to affected families and improves surveillance, anthropometric use, and SIGIZI-KESGA monitoring. Bappedalitbang emphasized its role in promoting behavior changes through nutrition education and supplementary feeding at health centers. It also contributed to shaping stunting-intervention planning for 2025.

Environmental, Economic, and Social Impacts

The policy improves sanitation and clean water access, provides economic support through PMT assistance and empowerment programs for mothers, and raises public awareness of nutrition and healthy parenting.

Policy Achievements and Impacts

Table 2. Fluctuations in the Achievement of Stunting Reduction

Year	Decline Achievement (%)
2022	16.6%
2023	20.9%
2024	Estimated at 19.6% (The Health Office has not yet issued an official SSGI)

Year	Decline Achievement (%)
2025	The interview results show that the data for 2025 has not been released yet

Source: Primary data

This indicates that although the achievement initially decreased, it has risen again, suggesting that there are challenges to the program's sustainability. Two speakers emphasized that the target of <14% in 2024 is still difficult to achieve due to the dynamics of the field.

Institutions and Social Systems

The Health Office noted overwork, uneven task distribution, and a shortage of nutritionists, while Bapedalitbang viewed task distribution as balanced under the TPPS decree. Both acknowledged suboptimal inter-agency coordination, with TPPS roles at sub-district and village levels seen as vital for strengthening policy implementation.

Evaluation Based on Dunn's Criteria

The stunting policy in Banyumas shows partial effectiveness, with improvements in TTD coverage, exclusive breastfeeding, and growth monitoring, though stunting rates remain inconsistent. Efficiency is seen in high budget absorption (98.95% in 2024), but the drastic drop in allocation from IDR 21.9 billion (2023) to IDR 180 million (2025) threatens sustainability. The reduction from IDR 21.9 billion to IDR 180 million requires clarification, as officials indicate it may partly reflect a reclassification of stunting-related spending into sectoral budgets. However, there are signs of a real decrease in dedicated funding, potentially affecting program sustainability. A detailed financial audit is needed to determine whether this change reflects reclassification, decentralization, or an actual budget cut. Human resources were limited until 2024, with improvements seen in 2025, though technical and reporting skills still need strengthening. The program remains fair and feasible, reaching remote areas, addressing complaints, and aligning with local values through food-based PMT and MSME support. Based on Dunn's framework, implementation can be evaluated across six dimensions and the factors shaping policy success.

Analysis Based on Dunn's Evaluation Criteria

The stunting policy in Banyumas shows limited effectiveness, with prevalence fluctuating from 16.6% in 2022 to 20.9% in 2023 and an estimated 19.6% in 2024, reflecting unresolved systemic factors such as food security, water quality, and parenting. Although there was a high budget realization in 2024 (98.95%), the drop from IDR 21.9 billion in 2023 to IDR 180 million in 2025 threatens progress toward the <14% target. The cut is misaligned with program complexity and fluctuating stunting rates, risking reduced coverage, service quality, workforce capacity, and coordination. It also endangers the sustainability of

sensitive interventions that provide clean water, sanitation, and economic support, which require stable long-term funding. At the same time, services and education are relatively adequate, but shortages of nutritionists, unclear OPD roles, and weak reporting integration limit sufficiency. Equity is well maintained through cadres, TPK, and local PMT reaching remote villages, ensuring fair access to food, health, and education. Responsiveness is demonstrated by the quick handling of complaints and integration of community input into planning, while feasibility is reflected in culturally grounded strategies such as local food-based PMT that also support MSMEs and align with Banyumas' social values.

Analysis Based on Dunn's Six Implementation Factors

The stunting policy targets <14% prevalence, but gaps between national goals and local capacity persist due to limited human resources, shrinking budgets, and weak data integration despite generally good OPD coordination. Implementation shows adaptive institutions and strong community acceptance, yet unclear task delegation, uneven structures, heavy workloads, and minimal training undermine consistency and accuracy. Overall, progress is positive but unstable, requiring stronger institutions, improved coordination, better staffing, and integrated cross-sector data for sustainable, inclusive results.

Quantitative Findings

Survey results show that 72% received nutrition education, 64% attended monthly growth monitoring, and 48% obtained supplementary food. Yet only 37% reported improved sanitation and 29% still faced clean-water difficulties, revealing gaps in sensitive interventions. Participation also varied by location, with the lowest coverage in remote hamlets. Frontline workers raised concerns about heavy workloads, with midwives noting that limited staff make timely data entry and follow-up difficult. Cadres similarly reported fatigue when activities accumulate at once. These issues reveal operational capacity gaps that may have contributed to the 2023 rise in stunting cases. The 2022 decline likely resulted from stronger breastfeeding promotion, intensified home visits, and expanded PMT distribution after pandemic recovery. The 2023 increase, however, may reflect rising food prices, reduced purchasing power, uneven WASH programs, and delays in SIGIZI-KESGA updates. These shifts stem not from the Regent Regulation alone but from interacting household, institutional, and environmental factors.

Conclusion

The implementation of Banyumas Regent Regulation Number 25 of 2020 has had multidimensional positive impacts, improving nutrition awareness, healthy behaviors, and access to services, especially for high-risk families. However, fluctuating stunting rates

(16.6% in 2022, 20.9% in 2023, and 19.6% in 2024) highlight sustainability challenges, driven by unequal workload distribution, limited resources, and weak cross-sector integration. While evaluations show effectiveness, responsiveness, and cultural feasibility, gaps remain in efficiency, adequacy, and institutional equity. Achieving the national target of <14% requires stronger human resources, clearer institutional roles, consistent funding, and enhanced community participation rooted in local data and wisdom. Overall, Banyumas' stunting policy is on the right track but needs a more integrated, adaptive, and sustainable approach for lasting results.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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Amud Sunarya, Milwan, Jayanti Armida Sari

SUSTIPRINTO AUGIMO POLITIKOS VEIKSMINGUMO GERINANT MITYBĄ VERTINIMAS: BANYUMAS REGIONO, INDONEZIJOJE, ATVEJO ANALIZĖ

Santrauka. *Šiame tyrime nagrinėjamas viešosios politikos poveikis mitybos gerinimui siekiant sumažinti augimo sulėtėjimo paplitimą Banyumas Regione. Taikant mišrų metodų metodą, šiame tyrime nagrinėjamas 2020 m. Banyumas Regent reglamento Nr. 25 veiksmingumas mažinant augimo sulėtėjimo paplitimą taikant tikslines ir jautrias mitybos intervencijas. Kiekybiniai duomenys buvo surinkti apklausus programoje dalyvaujančias šeimas su mažamečiais vaikais, o kokybiniai duomenys gauti atliekant išsamius interviu su suinteresuotosiomis šalimis. Tarpinė analizė rodo, kad nors 2022 m. augimo sulėtėjimo paplitimas reikšmingai sumažėjo, jo atsigavimas 2023 m. pabrėžia programos tvarumo iššūkius. Tokie veiksniai kaip programos įgyvendinimas, tarpsektorinis koordinavimas ir visuomenės informuotumas lemia politikos sėkmę. Šiame tyrime pateikiamos strateginės rekomendacijos, kaip sustiprinti intervencijas, sustiprinti organizacinius pajėgumus ir išplėsti programos aprėptį, siekiant nacionalinio tikslo – sumažinti augimo sulėtėjimo paplitimą iki mažiau nei 20 procentų.*

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EXAMINING PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS AND METHODS IN KAZAKHSTAN'S PUBLIC SECTOR

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Abstract. *This article analyses the application of project management tools and methods in the public sector. The relevance of the chosen research topic was determined by the need to optimise public resource management to achieve major goals within clearly defined deadlines, which in international practice is often achieved through the implementation of project management, approval, and implementation of national and local projects. The aim of the study was to identify trends and challenges in the development of project management in government agencies of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyse the data. The implementation of national projects approved and implemented in Kazakhstan between 2021 and 2023, and the current state of national project management, were analysed. A survey of civil servants was also conducted, to determine their willingness to participate in project activities, knowledge of project tools and attitudes towards the organisation of project activities in Kazakhstan's government agencies. It was concluded that the*

current project management system in Kazakhstan's government agencies has some problems, including the underdevelopment of implementation tools and methods and the unwillingness of many civil servants to participate in project management.

Keywords: *Project management, project-based approach, national projects, project management in the public sector, project execution, project management tools, project readiness.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Projektų valdymas, projektais pagrįstas požiūris, nacionaliniai projektai, projektų valdymas viešajame sektoriuje, projektų vykdymas, projektų valdymo įrankiai, projekto pasirengimas.*

1. Introduction

Project management, as a field of professional practice and academic research, has a long history. In the modern context, it is increasingly viewed as an effective tool for improving organisational performance. As Mir and Pinnigton (2014, p. 203) explain, a variety of project management methodologies and tools have been implemented by numerous organisations, leading to widespread recognition of project management as an important factor in achieving organisational benefits. This includes the ability to effectively operate within a limited budget, manage tight time frames, cope with outcome uncertainty and address issues related to human resources and organisational dynamics (Abbasi and Al-Mharmah, 2000, p. 104). Project management can be defined as the systematic application of knowledge, skills, tools, methods and frameworks to effectively complete project tasks and achieve established requirements and expected project results (Opalka, 2024, p.132). Pūlmanis (2014, p. 179) notes that project management tools and methods should be introduced in stages and considered mandatory when implementing large-scale projects in the public sector. The use of proven standards and modern management tools has had a positive impact on the overall success of project management (Sjekavica Klepoa and Radujković, 2019, p. 509), and the introduction of advanced approaches to project management has had a major impact on improving the efficiency of government agencies (Arnaboldi et al., 2004, p. 220).

However, despite positive experiences reported by international researchers, employees in public sector institutions in Kazakhstan lack in-depth knowledge of the application of project management tools and methods. Research by domestic authors shows that Kazakhstani civil servants lack project management knowledge and skills, as demonstrated in 2017 (Taizhanova, 2017, p. 50) and in subsequent studies (Issenova, 2023, p. 7). The underdevelopment of project management skills in government agencies is due to a combination of factors, including the lack of a unified project management system in government agencies, insufficient administrative support from management in the implementation of project management tools, and a limited understanding of the potential effects and benefits

associated with the use of project tools (Issenova, 2017, p. 70).

Therefore, the aim of this article is to identify trends and challenges in the development of project management in government agencies of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

2. Literature Review

Scientific literature on the use of the project approach in public administration can be divided into studies that reveal the general essence and benefits of using the project approach, those that examine the specific experiences and problems of implementing the project approach in public administration, and those that examine the details of using the project approach in a given country or context (in this case, in Kazakhstan's public sector).

In the scientific literature relating to the first group, the project approach is defined as an effective management mechanism that requires necessary changes to be implemented within established deadlines and within a limited budget, including investments, thereby positively affecting the organisation's effectiveness (Cleland, 1998, p. 27). A project is defined as a temporary activity carried out under limited deadlines and budgets, while simultaneously being a temporary structure for implementing these activities. Project management methodology comprises a set of methods, techniques, procedures, rules, templates and best practices in this field (Anantatmula, 2020, p. 3). Abbasi and Al-Mharmah (2000, p.105) point out that project management is the art and science of planning, designing and coordinating activities at all stages of the project life cycle. Project management is also defined as a systematic approach or process that includes planning, developing, scheduling, managing and controlling interrelated project activities to achieve predetermined objectives within a specified time frame, within a budget and of an established quality (Lewis, 2007, p. 40). Notably, the project approach can be applied in both the private and public sectors.

Scientific literature and publications relating to the second group examine issues and problems related to the implementation of project expenditure in the public (state) sector. For example, Crawford and Helm (2009) emphasise that introducing project management methodologies into state institutions increases transparency, responsibility and risk management. Stuckenbruck and Zomorrodian (1987, p. 169) stress that effectively implemented project management can address the natural needs of developing countries, enabling more efficient and economical ways to manage the increasing number of projects. At the same time, many authors highlight that the success of implementing a project-based approach is heavily dependent on the level of project management maturity, competence development and capacity for change (Aubry and Brunet, 2005, p. 109). Ideally, the application of project management methods in the public sector should improve the performance of government agencies in terms of planning, execution and control of projects, provided that project management tools are successfully implemented as part of the activities of government agencies (Miroshnichenko and Shpiro, 2019, p. 365). The growth of project

activities in the public sector generates an increasing demand for developing and enhancing competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) among public officials (Jałocha, 2014, p. 247). Knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument and technique is crucial for improving the overall efficiency of project work, especially when combined with relevant management processes (Andongndou et al. 2009, p. 39). In his research on the level of awareness among project managers regarding the utilisation of project management tools and technologies, Thamhain (1999, p. 74) found that just 28% of the suggested instruments are actually applied in practice, while the baseline awareness of managers regarding their usage stood at a mere 50%. Difficulties associated with adopting the project-based approach in public administration are frequently described as being due to the following reasons: uncertainty in defining the roles and responsibilities of project participants, ineffective communication between project team members and decision-makers, inadequate supply of precise and timely information needed for sound decision-making, lack of synergy in resource allocation across different projects, and restricted use of experience and lessons learned from prior projects (Janką and Kosieradzką, 2019, p. 149). Dildar et al. (2014) studied the limited adoption of project management tools and techniques and concluded that their effectiveness remains poorly understood. Many researchers concur that the limited application of project management tools and techniques in complex projects stems from the fact that these tools often do not align with the unique demands of such projects.

When considering the scientific literature and publications on the implementation of project management in Kazakhstan's public sector, it is necessary to consider the articles of such authors as Taizhanova (2017), Issenova (2017; 2023), Sembieva and Alikulova (2022) and Kuntuov (2024). The authors refer to the fact that in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the transition to project management began in 2020, the first national projects were approved in 2021 (when three new national projects were approved), local departmental projects are being implemented, the rules for the implementation of project management have been approved (Order of the Minister of Digital Development dated July 31, 2023 No. 301 / NK), the National Project Office (NPO) was created and project offices are located within government agencies. However, it is also noted that the lack of project management qualifications among civil servants and a lack of understanding among some managers of the essence and prospects of the project-based approach hinder the full implementation of the project-based approach in Kazakhstan's government agencies, although there is room for improvement in this area, including in the implementation of strategic projects and national projects for the development of industries and regions (Kuntuov, 2024, p. 604). The role of underdeveloped information support in this area is also noted, although this is important for the coordination and control of projects implemented by several government agencies and institutions (Issenova, 2023, p. 8). However, overall, there has been a lack of relevant research exploring the specifics and challenges of implementing project management in Kazakhstan. Few studies have evaluated project maturity and civil servants' readiness to apply project management tools in their work.

Materials and Methods

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse the project management tools and methods used in Kazakhstan's public sector.

First, regulatory acts and the current institutional framework for project management in Kazakhstan's public sector were examined.

Second, the specifics, results and implementation challenges of the first national projects, which were implemented between 2021 and 2023, were examined.

Third, a survey of civil servants was conducted to obtain information on project management practices in the public sector, the motivations for using project management tools, their advantages, and the existing challenges and barriers to adopting a project-based approach in Kazakhstan's public sector. This approach was chosen for its advantages: identifying the characteristics of a large group of people, cost-effectiveness and the speed of data collection (Luthans and Davis, 1982, p. 48). Questionnaires were completed in June and July 2025 via Google Forms. The questionnaire was sent to 39 civil servants, and 35 responses (n = 35) were obtained for the analysis. Table 1 presents the respondents' personal characteristics.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents

Gender	No	%
Male	20	52
Female	19	48
Highest qualification		
BSc/HND	11	28.9
Master's degree	15	39.5
PhD	07	18.4
Professional qualification Specialist	02 05	5.4 13.2
Work experience (years)		
1-5	13	34.2
6-10	12	31.6
11-15	04	10.5
16-20	01	2.6
> 20 years	08	21.1

The questionnaire collected responses to questions such as:

Which project management tools and methods do you use in your work?

What are the perceived benefits of using project management tools and methods?

On a 5-point scale, to what extent has your organisation's work been optimised since

the implementation of project management?

Responses were broken down by gender, skill level and years of experience in the public sector. A correlation was established between the dependent and independent variables based on the results.

Results

The transition to project management in the Republic of Kazakhstan took place following the Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Kazakhstan in the New Reality: Time for Action", which determined the cancellation of state programmes and their replacement with national projects that had a 5-year implementation period. Ten national projects came into force in 2021, with a further three subsequently adopted. However, the first nine projects were cancelled in 2023, due to a failure to achieve the set goals and the complex and inconsistent management of the projects, many of which were highly heterogeneous in size, number of participants and number of indicators (Kuntuov, 2024, p. 604). This is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Integration and financing of national projects that were put on hold

National project	Number of indicators and activities			Budget for 2023			
	In national projects	Integrated into the documents of the SGP	Discrepancy	Financing, billion tenge	Budget utilisation, billion tenge	Deviation, billion tenge	% of execution
Development of the agro-industrial complex	22 indicators, 77 events	21 indicators, 77 events	1 indicator	1,010.2	933.6	-76.8	92.4
High-quality and accessible healthcare for every citizen, 'Healthy Nation'	21 indicators, 73 events	21 indicators, 73 events	None	783.3	781.3	-1.9	99.8
Ulttyk rukhani zhangyru	21 indicators, 66 events	20 events, 65 indicators	1 indicator, 1 event	21.8	21.2	-0.5	97.5
Quality education, 'Educated Nation'	15 indicators, 26 events	15 indicators, 26 events, including 2 completed	None	183.2	183.2	0	100

Technological advancement through digitalisation	44 indicators, 224 events	42 indicators, 206 events, including 51 completed	2 indicators, 18 events	415.8	206.3	-209.5	49.6
Entrepreneur development for 2021–2025	30 indicators, 70 events	23 indicators, 63 events, including 15 completed	7 indicators, 7 events	1,620	1 357, 9	-262.1	83.8
Strong regions are the driver of the country's development	20 indicators, 94 events	18 indicators, 80 events, including 5 completed	2 indicators, 14 events	1,348.6	1,293.1	-55.4	95.9
Sustainable economic growth aimed at improving the well-being of Kazakhstanis	13 indicators, 56 events	11 indicators, 52 events, including 3 completed	2 indicators, 4 events	3,022.4	1,096.7	-1,925.7	36.3
Green Kazakhstan	19 indicators, 50 events	19 indicators, 50 events	None	157.6	55.3	-102.3	35.1
TOTAL	205 indicators, 736 events	190 indicators, 692 events, including 76 completed	15 indicators, 44 events	8,562.9	5,928.6	-2,634.3	69.2

Source: Supreme Audit Chamber of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023)

According to the Supreme Audit Chamber of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 8.6 trillion tenge (from all sources of funding) were allocated for the implementation of nine national projects (excluding the Safe Country national project) in 2023, of which 5.9 trillion tenge (69.2%) were spent, including funds from the republican budget: - 1.9 trillion tenge (31.2%), the local budget - 0.901 trillion tenge (15.2%), the National Fund - 0.57 trillion tenge (9.6%) and extra-budgetary funds - 2.6 trillion tenge (44%). Thus, considerable funds were planned to be attracted from extra-budgetary sources, specifically, more than 5.4 trillion tenge, of which 2.6 trillion tenge (48%) were actually attracted in 2023 (Supreme Audit Chamber of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). The report notes that the extent to which the objectives set in the national projects were being achieved raised serious questions. In particular, the socioeconomic impact of the national projects did not correspond to the planned indicators (Supreme Audit Chamber of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

Next, we present the results of the responses to the questionnaires, the composition of the questions and the sample for which were described above.

Table 3 shows the project management methods and tools used in government organisations.

Table 3. What tools and methods for project management do you use in your work, broken down

		Work breakdown structure	Critical path method	Project sensitivity analysis	PRINCE 2	Gantt chart	
Floor	Men	3	5	2	4	6	20
	Women	0	3	6	3	3	15
Total		3	8	8	7	9	35

Respondents were presented with several project management tools they could choose from in the questionnaire.

Table 4 shows the expected benefits of using project management methods and tools broken down by the respondents' level of education.

Table 4. Perceived benefits from the use of project management tools and techniques, broken down by level of education/qualifications

		Good resource management	Known progress of work	Defined goals and objectives	High quality	Better work organisation	Total
Education/ qualifications	Bachelor's degree	4	3	1	2	1	11
	Master's degree	7	4	2	0	0	13
	PhD	3	1	1	0	0	5
	Specialist	3	2	0	1	0	6
Total		17	10	4	3	1	35

Respondents indicated that they considered the appropriate use of project management tools and techniques would lead to greater project success, including by reducing costs and time overruns. Seventeen respondents believed this would enable effective resource management, while 10 believed it would provide a clear understanding of the workflow. The remaining respondents shared four specific goals and objectives, with three claiming that using project management tools improved their work quality, and one suggesting these tools improve work organisation.

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of employees' perceptions of labour optimisation in a government organisation after applying a project management approach.

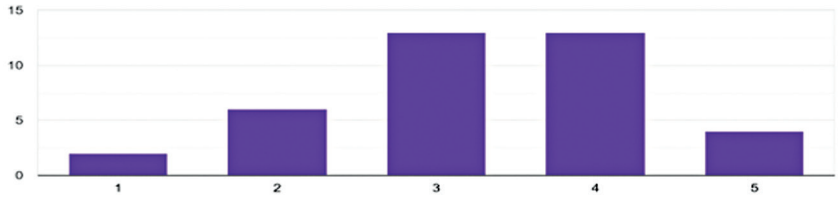

Figure 1. Responses to the question 'On a 5-point scale, rate the extent to which the institution's work has been optimised following the implementation of project management'

Thus, more than 78% of respondents said that their work was optimised to some degree.

Table 5 shows correlations between the dependent and independent variables.

Table 5. Correlations between dependent and independent variables

	What project management tools and methods do you use in your work?	On a 5-point scale, rate to what extent your institution's work has been optimised following the implementation of PM	On a 5-point scale, rate the reduction in bureaucratic procedures following the application of PM	On a 5-point scale, rate the reduction in the level of corruption following the application of PM	On a 5-point scale, rate your level of professional competence in the field of PM
What project management tools and methods do you use in your work?	1,000	0.317	-0.008	0.055	-0.034
On a 5-point scale, rate to what extent your institution's work has been optimised following the implementation of PM	0.317	1,000	0.636	0.596	0.526
On a 5-point scale, rate the reduction in bureaucratic procedures following the application of PM	-0.008	0.636	1,000	0.622	0.637

	What project management tools and methods do you use in your work?	On a 5-point scale, rate to what extent your institution's work has been optimised following the implementation of PM	On a 5-point scale, rate the reduction in bureaucratic procedures following the application of PM	On a 5-point scale, rate the reduction in the level of corruption following the application of PM	On a 5-point scale, rate your level of professional competence in the field of PM
Rate on a 5-point scale the reduction in the level of corruption following the application of PM	0.055	0.596	0.622	1,000	0.707
On a 5-point scale, rate your level of professional competence in the field of PM	-0.034	0.526	0.637	0.707	1,000

PM, project management

The reduction in bureaucratic procedures following the implementation of the project management approach correlates with the optimisation of work following the implementation of this approach. A coefficient of 0.636 indicates a strong positive correlation: the implementation of the project management approach, aimed at reducing bureaucratic barriers, contributed to a significant increase in the institution's performance. In practice, the optimisation of work increases most significantly with the reduction of bureaucracy, then with the degree of implementation of project management tools, and finally with the reduction in corrupt procedures; the contribution of competencies is significantly less when accounting for other factors.

Discussion

A key factor determining such outcomes was the lack of formalised and adequately functioning project management structures. A particularly critical factor was the lack of multi-stakeholder collaboration in the initial stages of the life cycle, when uncertainty in the distribution of functions and responsibilities among participants triggered a pronounced negative 'bullwhip effect', which had a long-term destructive impact on the implementation process, as Edkins et al. (2013) document in international practice. It was for this reason that the first 10 national projects were abandoned prematurely. Uncertainty in planning and implementation, as well as insufficient adaptation to changing economic conditions, were also observed in these national projects. Thus, despite a relatively high level of financial implementation and the achievement of most planned objectives, the overall results of the national projects remained unsatisfactory (7 out of 10 national projects demonstrated

low effectiveness) (Kuntuov, 2024, p. 604). The analysis also showed that the expected benefits from reducing bureaucracy, reducing corruption and improving the organisation of work were tangible due to the successful application of the project approach in the public sector and the clear flexibility and efficiency in achieving the goals and objectives of the project. This is also confirmed in the work of the author, where as a recommendation it is proposed to control the bureaucracy entrenched in all government structures, in all government projects, in order to prevent its inefficiency and unproductivity, as indicated by such authors asSembieva, L.M., and Alikulova, L.B. (2022, p.15).

Policy recommendations can be made to develop project management in Kazakhstan's public sector. Project offices should be developed in all government agencies, and civil servants should be trained in project management. The development of methodological guidelines for coordinating project implementation is also crucial. Unified software and instructions for its use should be introduced for the development, coordination and monitoring of project implementation. The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan must also develop and approve a new, more detailed list of national projects that are focused, address specific objectives and facilitate easier monitoring.

A further area of research needed is an analysis of the practice and challenges of implementing a project-based approach in Kazakhstan's government agencies. This will require an exploration of the views of government agency leaders on the opportunities and challenges of applying the project-based approach, as well as the views of civil servants (including those implementing the approach) who either are involved or who may in the future be involved in project-based activities.

Conclusions

1. The Republic of Kazakhstan began transitioning to project management in 2020, and in 2021, an attempt was made to replace state programmes with national projects. However, the cumbersome nature of many of the initial national projects (a large number of participants, tasks and target indicators), as well as the generally underdeveloped project management system in government agencies, which was only just beginning to emerge at that time, prevented the initial projects from being implemented, and in 2023, they were cancelled. Three new projects had a narrower focus and are currently being implemented. However, a new network of national projects in critical areas of socioeconomic development has yet to be established.
2. Based on our survey of civil servants regarding their use of project management methods and tools, it was concluded that not all civil servants currently fully utilise project management tools, although some utilise them to a greater extent than others. Furthermore, only half of the respondents understood that project management helps manage resources effectively and ensures a consistent workflow. Few respondents highly valued the potential of projects to achieve goals and objectives,

improve work quality or enhance work organisation. Furthermore, a significant proportion of respondents rated their institution's work as 3 or 4 out of 5 for how it was optimised following the implementation of project management. However, many recognised that the use of project management tools can reduce bureaucracy, thereby increasing efficiency in government agencies. Despite this, it is still important to note that not all civil servants are fully prepared for, or have a positive attitude towards, project-based work in government agencies, a problem that reflects the limited maturity of project management in Kazakhstan's public sector.

3. Based on the results of this study, the following conclusions are drawn, and proposals are recommended. Firstly, de-bureaucratisation is the main driver of optimisation: less paperwork and fewer approvals are closely linked to the efficiency of work processes. Secondly, this is the depth of application of project management tools: not just their "availability", but their regularity and comprehensiveness: responsibility matrices, Gantt charts/SWOT analysis, etc. Thirdly, there are anti-corruption measures (e.g. transparency, digital traces), which provide an additional and tangible contribution to optimisation, and should be a mandatory requirement for project regulations. Fourthly, these are competencies that need to be targeted.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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PROJEKTŲ VALDYMO ĮRANKIŲ IR METODŲ TYRIMAS KAZACHSTANO VIEŠAJAME SEKTORIUJE

Santrauka. *Šiame straipsnyje pateikiama projektų valdymo priemonių ir metodų taikymo viešajame sektoriuje analizė. Pasirinktos tyrimo temos aktualumą lemia poreikis įdiegti viešųjų išteklių valdymo optimizavimo metodus, siekiant pasiekti reikšmingus tikslus per aiškiai apibrėžtus terminus, o tai tarptautinėje praktikoje dažnai pasiekiama įgyvendinant projektų valdymą, tvirtinant ir įgyvendinant nacionalinius ir vietos projektus. Tyrimo tikslas – nustatyti projektų valdymo plėtros tendencijas ir iššūkius Kazachstano Respublikos vyriausybinėse įstaigose. Duomenų analizei buvo naudojami kokybiniai ir kiekybiniai metodai. Buvo analizuojamas 2021–2023 m. Kazachstane patvirtintų ir įgyvendintų nacionalinių projektų įgyvendinimas ir dabartinė nacionalinio projektų valdymo būklė. Taip pat buvo atlikta valstybės tarnautojų apklausa, atspindinti jų norą dalyvauti projektinėje veikloje, žinias apie projektinius įrankius ir požiūrį į projektinės veiklos organizavimą Kazachstano vyriausybinėse įstaigose. Padaryta išvada, kad dabartinė projektų valdymo sistema Kazachstano vyriausybinėse įstaigose turi problemų, be kita ko, dėl nepakankamai išvystytų įgyvendinimo priemonių ir metodų bei daugelio valstybės tarnautojų nenoro dalyvauti projektų valdyme.*

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CO-GOVERNANCE OF SOCIAL SERVICES: A CASE STUDY OF CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE ADMINISTRATION OF MARIJAMPOLĖ MUNICIPALITY AND NGOS

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Abstract. *Constructive co-operation between municipal administrations and independent public service providers, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), establishes favourable conditions for the development and dissemination of best practices in the delivery of high-quality social services. This research aimed to assess the development and effectiveness of co-operation between a municipal administration and NGOs in delivering social services, using Marijampolė municipality as a case study. A qualitative empirical approach, comprising interviews and focus group discussions, was employed. The Stakeholder Relationship Management Maturity (SRMM) model was used to evaluate the level of co-operation. The municipality chosen for the present analysis is distinguished by a substantial presence of NGOs actively delivering services. The research findings indicate that, according to the SRMM model, the*

maturity of co-operation between municipal administrations and NGOs in providing social services is primarily at the procedural level, whereas relational aspects are evident within the process standardisation dimension. To foster mature co-operation, it is recommended that participants within the co-operation network establish a shared vision regarding the future of social service provision and the role of NGOs. The findings of the empirical research underscore the necessity for participants in a co-operation network to cultivate competencies essential for sustaining and enhancing co-operation (e.g. communication and conflict resolution) and highlight the importance of establishing a unified culture of co-operation.

Keywords: *NGOs, social services, maturity of co-operation, municipality, co-creation, provision of public services*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *NVO, socialinės paslaugos, bendradarbiavimo branda, savivaldybė, bendrakūra, viešųjų paslaugų teikimas*

Introduction

The involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the delivery of social and other public services, as well as their collaboration with public sector institutions, has been an important area of research for several decades. However, with shifts in service provision models and the transition from co-production to co-creation and co-governance, there is an increasing need to advance this research. Specifically, it is important to examine in greater detail the dynamics of cross-sectoral co-operation, the evolving distribution of decision-making authority among stakeholders, and the maturity of participation of organisations within the service provision network.

Historically, social services in Lithuania were delivered primarily by the public sector; however, national legislation now allows municipalities to select the model of social service provision that best aligns with their specific needs, considering factors such as population demographics and the existing service infrastructure. Certain municipalities have opted for a more flexible approach, outsourcing some services to NGOs or other external providers.

The authors of this article posit that constructive co-operation between municipal administrations and independent service providers (NGOs) can foster the development of best practices in delivering high-quality social services. However, under a more liberalised model of service provision, NGOs delivering social services may vary considerably in terms of organisational culture and operational methods, creating challenges for municipal administrations in managing and ensuring the quality of these services for residents.

Marijampolė municipality was selected for this case study for the following reasons:

i. Lithuania has a pressing need to strengthen NGO participation in the delivery of public services. The 2021–2030 National Progress Plan includes a target that by 2030, at

least 30% of municipal public services should be delivered by NGOs. In the selected municipality, the majority of social service providers (29/34) are NGOs.

ii. Demographic challenges are driving the need to expand the availability of social services and develop new services, in light of societal ageing, the need to reduce poverty, and the increasing demand for services among specific groups such as families and people with disabilities (the Programme of the 19th Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024). In the selected municipality, 21% of the population is classified as elderly.

iii. Lithuania exhibits regional social inequalities, and the Marijampolė region has the greatest demand for social services and assistance, as 40.2% of its population experiences poverty or social exclusion (Office of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025).

This article examines the maturity of co-operation between municipal administrations and NGOs in the delivery of social services, using Marijampolė municipality as a case study. The steps undertaken to achieve this objective were as follows: (i) to review the theoretical foundations regarding the maturity of co-operation between the public sector and NGOs; and (ii) to carry out an empirical qualitative study assessing the maturity of co-operation between Marijampolė municipality and NGOs in the provision of social services.

Literature Review

Ever since the concept of the welfare state first emerged, social services have been recognised as a fundamental component intended to ensure that citizens' basic needs are met (Klenk and Reiter, 2023). Nevertheless, academic literature has traditionally focused primarily on the provision of social benefits and support to disadvantaged populations, rather than on the development of social services, the quality of these services, or improvements in the mechanisms for their delivery. In the contemporary context, as the importance of social services extends beyond crisis situations (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic and the management of migration flows) and they are increasingly recognised as a form of social investment that generates added value, European Union Member States are placing increasing emphasis on this issue.

From a practical standpoint, while the scope, diversity, and accessibility of social services may differ across countries, scholars generally identify their objectives as follows: providing support to socially vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals; assisting in addressing emerging problems and enhancing the capacities of service recipients; and promoting societal social security by supporting the most vulnerable groups (Klenk and Reiter, 2023; Taber, 2012). Consequently, the scope of social services encompasses a variety of preventive measures, general and specialised services, and programmes targeted at specific groups, ranging from one-time consultations on immediate concerns to ongoing care provided by inpatient service facilities. This classification of social services enables not only the identification of key stakeholders in the provision of specific services but also the assessment of the diverse interests and motivations of various actors, including municipal institutions,

professional staff, and service users, as well as the differing incentives of service providers to engage in the co-operative delivery of social services (Pestoff, 2012).

When examining stakeholder involvement in the provision of social services, it is important to highlight the critical role of co-operation between public sector institutions and NGOs. NGOs are conceptualised not merely as representatives of specific interests or as voluntary organisations but as 'equal partners' in the public management process, actively participating in both service delivery and decision-making as well as in initiatives aimed at reforming this sector (Voorberg et al., 2014; Pestoff, 2012). In other words, they are viewed as partners striving to ensure that decisions and services align with societal needs and are delivered more effectively.

When examining the factors essential for such co-operation, the literature highlights the influence of legal frameworks, public administration traditions, and the culture of participation in different countries. In the case of Lithuania, it is noteworthy that, like other Central and Eastern European nations, the country has experienced three main stages of public administration development, i.e. traditional public administration, new public management (NPM), and new public governance (NPG), during which the role of NGOs has evolved considerably. Nowadays, many countries recognise co-operation between municipalities and NGOs as a fundamental component of public service delivery. According to Reinholde et al. (2020), while NPM initially gained appeal for its emphasis on efficiency, market-oriented reforms, and the inclusion of new service providers – which facilitated the active participation of NGOs in service delivery – it has subsequently faced criticism for being socially irresponsible and for its potential to exacerbate inequality. Consequently, NPG – with its focus on social welfare, justice, and active citizen participation – is often viewed as a means to mitigate the negative effects of NPM by expanding opportunities for NGO and civil society involvement and enhancing their role in public governance.

NPG highlights that non-governmental actors, including NGOs, citizens, and informal groups, serve not only as service providers but also as active contributors to the development of social services. Co-operation between public institutions and NGOs is regarded as advantageous, as partnerships and networks can accomplish outcomes that individual organisations alone may not achieve. The effectiveness of such co-operation depends not only on organisational capacities but also on the personal qualities of leaders within NGOs and public institutions, which can either facilitate or impede joint efforts (Zajda et al., 2020). In this context, Brandsen and Honingh (2015) note that the co-production type (see Table 1) is defined by (i) the degree of citizen involvement, encompassing not only the implementation but also the design of professionally delivered services, and (ii) the closeness of the tasks performed by citizens to the organisation's core services. These are the factors determining not only the initiative and capacity of the organisations to engage in service provision but also the role assigned to them by the public sector and the importance of the socially sensitive services entrusted to them.

Table 1. Types of Co-production

	Implementation	**Design and Implementation**
Complementary	Complementary co-production in implementation	Complementary co-production in service design and implementation
Non-complementary	Co-production in the implementation of core services	Co-production in the design and implementation of core services

Source: Brandsen and Honingh (2015, p. 432).

The authors contend that only through sustained and intensive co-operation between sectors can a level of 'community governance' or 'citizen power' be attained, wherein NGOs function as equal partners at all stages of governance, aligning with the ladder of citizen participation proposed by Arnstein in 1969. Nevertheless, in practice, a substantial gap persists between these theoretical participation models and their real-world implementation. Effective empowerment calls for not only public sector initiatives and well-designed policies supporting participation but also an understanding of how the empowerment process itself enhances capacity and influences public sector accountability. However, despite the advantages of co-operation, in practice it is often challenging to reconcile citizen involvement with structural and cultural barriers, institutional inefficiencies, power asymmetries, bureaucratic rigidity, uncertainty over the division of responsibilities, and fears of losing control of decision-making. These factors may lead institutions to avoid engaging interest groups, thereby limiting the potential for successful co-operation (Lester et al., 2015; Bäck et al., 2025).

Another important factor that can impede effective co-operation is that NGOs providing services risk becoming financially dependent on external sectors or funding sources. This dependency may shift focus towards financial considerations, while funding instability and short project cycles further undermine their capacity to participate as equal partners. Furthermore, while NGO involvement in service provision enhances legitimacy and accountability, it can also impose an additional administrative burden on municipalities that lack the capacity to manage participation processes effectively (Denis et al., 2015; Sidor et al., 2021). Therefore, it is evident that in the shift towards less centralised service provision, many countries encounter challenges in engaging diverse service providers and face the risk of service fragmentation. An uneven distribution of providers can result in unequal access to services (Eppel and Allen, 2023), highlighting the need to develop mechanisms that ensure the consistent involvement of stakeholders, including NGOs, in service delivery.

Given that effective co-operation between municipalities and NGOs relies on institutionalised mechanisms, joint decision-making structures, stable resources, and mutual accountability, the provision of social services and related practical aspects should be examined through the lens of stakeholder involvement, with particular emphasis on the maturity of their co-operative relationships.

The maturity of stakeholder co-operation, as a research subject, is employed to examine

various challenges in cross-sectoral collaboration. Its primary value lies in enabling the identification of stages through which organisations or co-operation networks progress, from fragmented or ad hoc co-operation to formalised, managed, and continuously improved co-operation processes (Magdaleno et al., 2011). Maturity models do not diminish the value of one-off co-operation initiatives in addressing specific or crisis situations. However, the literature highlights the importance of clear legal frameworks, transparent funding mechanisms, and organisational capacities that support sustained co-operation rather than ad hoc arrangements (Sidor et al., 2021). These factors are shaped by a country or region's developmental level, the relationships among actors, their characteristics, and the prevailing culture of participation and administrative traditions.

Maturity models offer a measurement framework, or 'ladder', ranging from passive consultation, where stakeholders simply provide information, to active engagement, where there is a two-way exchange of information between stakeholders who collaborate to develop an area of public policy (Gimenez et al., 2017; Bourne, 2008). This framework enables the identification of the current level of co-operation and the planning of transitional actions to achieve greater levels of capacity and improved outcomes.

Another benefit of these models is their capacity to identify and mitigate potential obstacles to stakeholder co-operation. As noted above, successful co-operation can be hindered by factors such as unequal power among partners (e.g. dependence on funding, limited decision-making authority, or the excessive influence of a dominant stakeholder), the absence of consistent inclusion mechanisms, and/or low co-operative capacity. Consequently, theoretical models provide matrices and indicators to assess and improve the capacity for co-operation among partners.

One model designed for such assessment is the SRMM framework, which assists in targeting an appropriate level of process and practice based on an organisation's level of 'readiness' (Bourne, 2008). The framework provides a tool for evaluating standardised procedures (legal regulations, protocols, etc.) established for stakeholder involvement, as well as the central support offered to stakeholders. It also offers methodological guidance on effective co-operation, promotes organisation-wide stakeholder engagement across all stages of activity planning and implementation, encourages partnerships that extend beyond individual projects, and provides common standards for typical stakeholder communities, including their roles in risk management and organisational 'health reviews' (see Table 2).

Table 2. SRMM Methodology

SRMM stages	Standardised processes	Central support	Organisation-wide use	Beyond projects	Typical 'stakeholder communities'	Risk handling and organisational 'health reviews'
Ad hoc: some use of processes	Some	No	No	No	No	No
Procedural: focus on processes and tools	Yes	Some	No	Some	No	No

SRMM stages	Standardised processes	Central support	Organisation-wide use	Beyond projects	Typical 'stakeholder communities'	Risk handling and organisational 'health reviews'
Relational: focus on stakeholders and mutual benefits	Yes	Yes	Some	Some	Some	No
Integrated: methodology repeatable and integrated	Yes	Yes	Yes	Some	Some	Some
Predictive: health checks and other predictive assessments	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Bourne (2008)

Based on these criteria, SRMM defines stages of co-operation, ranging from one-off, ad hoc initiatives to address specific issues, in which network members recognise the need to manage stakeholders using simple tools, to continuous, ongoing co-operation. At this advanced stage, co-operation is not only predictable but also characterised by a management focus on collecting experience (historical) data and regularly using this information to 'check the status' of projects (e.g. whether a project is proceeding 'normally') and to predict possible risks in the future.

Research Method

A qualitative empirical study was conducted to assess the maturity of co-operation between municipal administrations and NGOs in the provision of social services, focusing on the case of Marijampolė municipality. Marijampolė municipality was selected because it is situated in a region that has the greatest demand for social services and support in Lithuania, where as many as 40% of the population experience poverty or social exclusion (Office of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025). Marijampolė municipality ranks among the ten largest municipalities in Lithuania by population and is distinguished by its well-developed social services infrastructure and the active involvement of NGOs in service provision. Social services, primarily aimed at enhancing personal independence, seek to promote the social inclusion of vulnerable groups and to prevent social challenges or risks. Marijampolė municipality, like many others in Lithuania, faces various social challenges, such as an ageing population, an increasing number of families and children at social risk, and a growing number of children with disabilities (Marijampolės savivaldybė, 2021). An analysis of the municipality's demographic indicators showed that the population has remained generally stable, with a slight increasing trend. However, nearly one-fifth of the municipality's population has used social services, and people aged more than 65 years make up approximately 21% of the population.

Demographic changes are driving the expansion of the municipality's social services infrastructure, the broadening of service provision, and increased municipal budget allocations for social services. Municipal budget expenditure on social services increased from €46.09 to €68.47 per resident between 2021 and 2024 (Marijampolės savivaldybė, 2022, 2023, 2024). Measures to address the social challenges identified in the municipality's strategic planning documents include developing community-based social services, increasing the involvement of the non-governmental sector in service provision, and boosting funding for social services. Accordingly, the Marijampolė municipal administration faces the challenging task of ensuring the delivery of high-quality social services to residents through co-operation with a diverse range of NGOs.

Empirical research method

Given the complexity of the topic and the aim of capturing the characteristics of the research subject in detail, a qualitative research method was employed. This approach enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Tidikis, 2003). According to Bailey (1995), the primary distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods lies in their scope and depth: quantitative research targets a larger sample to demonstrate the prevalence of a social phenomenon, whereas qualitative research seeks to explore the same phenomenon through the 'eyes and minds' of informants, uncovering its relationships with other factors and the depth of the issue.

The qualitative research methodology employed is based on the developmental phenomenography approach pioneered by Marton (1986). Phenomenography facilitates an understanding of how informants experience, perceive, conceptualise, and interpret phenomena or the world around them. In recent years, developmental phenomenography has become increasingly prevalent in research addressing public policy issues. As noted by Žydžiūnaitė and Sabaliauskas (2017), developmental phenomenography aids in deepening understanding and uncovering the conditions that enable a more accurate perception of reality.

Interviews are recognised as one of the most effective methods in qualitative research (Tidikis, 2003). The present research employed semi-structured interviews, in which the researcher prepares a set of questions and topics to guide the discussion with the informant. There is no fixed order or exact wording of questions; the researcher has the flexibility to pose additional questions, seek clarification, explore respondents' statements in greater depth, inquire about the meaning of their responses, guide the conversation as desired, and develop a personalised approach to conducting the interview. This type of interview facilitates a free-flowing exchange between the researcher and the respondent, allowing key issues and topics to be explored collaboratively.

This research also employed the focus group discussion method,[1] which is particularly well-suited to identifying, describing, and analysing problems and generating new ideas. Additionally, by sharing their own perspectives and listening to the views of others, participants can contribute to, comment on, or respond to the opinions and insights of fellow group members. Focus group discussions provide a more nuanced understanding of the issue under consideration by capturing diverse perspectives and revealing new aspects of the problem, thereby generating insights that are often difficult to obtain through other data collection methods (Patton, 2001). Similar observations have been made by other methodologists, who note that interactions among participants facilitate a deeper understanding of the problem and support the generation and justification of new ideas (Gaižauskaitė and Valavičienė, 2016).

The interview guide and focus group discussion questionnaires were developed based on the SRMM model (Bourne, 2008), with adjustments made to reflect the context of co-operation between the Marijampolė municipal administration and NGOs in the provision of social services.

Informants in the empirical research

According to Patton (2001), in qualitative research, a researcher should prioritise collecting rich, informative data over focusing on the size of the sample. Relevant literature offers various recommendations for appropriate sample sizes in qualitative research. According to Nielsen (2003, cited in Bitinas et al. 2008, 104), 'a theory explaining 85% of the problems of the research subject can be developed with a sample of fewer than five participants.' Neal (2005, cited in Bitinas et al. 2008, 104) suggests increasing this number to 15. Other authors emphasise that sample size is less important than the informativeness of the data, recommending that new participants be added until the additional data no longer substantially enhances understanding (cited in Bitinas et al. 2008). In planning the stages of the qualitative research, a targeted non-probability sampling method was employed as follows:

- Respondents for the semi-structured interviews were selected based on their work experience, professional competencies, and their connections or relationships with the research subject. Experts for the semi-structured interviews included individuals responsible for decision-making and the strategic direction of co-operation between the municipality and NGOs in the provision of social services, such as the mayor, the deputy mayor responsible for social services, and the head of the social services department. The experts were randomly assigned the codes E1, E2, and E3.
- Informants for the focus group discussions included representatives of NGOs providing social services (two focus groups comprising 13 and 15 participants) and municipal

[1] Note. V. Žydžiūnaitė and S. Sabaliauskas (2017) refer to this approach as the focused group discussion method.

employees responsible for administering social services (one focus group with seven participants). The informants were randomly assigned the codes I1, I2, I3, etc.

The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted between 16 June and 3 July 2025.

Research ethics

This research was guided by ethical principles of research (Bitinas et al., 2008). All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the use of the obtained domains, and adherence to the principles of research ethics.

Results

The findings of the empirical research enabled the identification of specific characteristics of co-operation between municipal administrations and NGOs in the provision of social services. The interviewees noted that transferring the responsibility to NGOs to provide social services to municipal residents was justified for several reasons:

i. It reduces the administrative burden on the municipal administration ('...no need for buildings and related infrastructure, employee recruitment, etc.' [E1]).

ii. Service quality remains high, and costs remain at the same level due to the creation of a competitive environment, with most service provision operating on market principles (E1 and E2).

iii. It fosters a favourable environment for exchanging best practices and improving the quality of services (E2).

However, some interviewees noted that it is more challenging to monitor external service providers (NGOs) (E2 and E3), it is difficult to assess the ratio of resources used to outcomes achieved (E2), and, in some cases, NGOs may exploit the system to increase unjustified demand for services and secure additional funding (E3). Therefore, effective co-operation, partnership, and trust are crucial (E2 and E3). During the interviews, it was observed that although NGOs play a dominant role in providing social services, there remains no clearly defined vision or strategy (E1 and E2) to guide and support further co-operation between the municipal administration and NGOs.

During the focus group discussions, including those with NGO representatives and municipal administration staff, informants indicated that co-operation is evolving, with the municipal administration setting the direction of this collaboration (I5, I8, I17, and I23); municipal administration employees are assigned to the NGOs they supervise, providing information and guidance (I7, I8, and I25); and the municipal administration intermittently organises meetings to disseminate information on specific topics, such as legislative changes (I2 and I24). However, NGO representatives suggested that these meetings should

be held regularly, at least twice per year and on predetermined dates, with a pre-agreed agenda that includes input from NGOs (I8 and I10), to enable common issues related to the provision of social services to be discussed (I8 and I11). Participants in the municipal administration focus group discussion noted that NGO representatives could be more proactive, take greater initiative in convening meetings, and contribute to agenda-setting for such joint sessions (I2 and I4). NGO representatives in the focus group discussions also observed that communication and information exchange among the organisations themselves were not seamless. At the time of the research, no formal network to facilitate co-operation among service-providing NGOs existed, nor was there leadership to establish one (I7, I12, and I26), although a few long-established organisations have maintained active co-operation with each other for many years (I27 and I29). Service-providing organisations employ a variety of working methods and manage documentation in different ways (I5, I14, and I16); therefore, when feedback is received, it would be highly beneficial to consult municipal administration representatives to establish a uniform practice and a consistent approach to service provision (I17, I19, and I27). Participants in the NGO focus group discussions indicated that it would be useful to develop a shared vision (I9, I15, and I24) of '…how the NGO and social services sector might develop over the next five years' (I10).

Notably, the perspectives of NGO focus group discussion participants on co-operation with the municipal administration varied. Two groups of organisations can be distinguished: the first consists of larger organisations that deliver social services on a broad scale to large population groups (e.g. older people), often functioning as branches of national organisations and operating more in line with business principles; and the second consists of smaller organisations serving smaller population groups (e.g. individuals with physical or mental disabilities, or those who are deaf or hard of hearing), which were often established 10 or more years ago to unite people directly affected by the issue, such as family members. The second group, comprising smaller organisations, expressed greater expectations regarding three main issues: (i) more consultations with the municipal administration and increased support in managing internal service administration tasks (e.g. documentation and administrative correspondence related to feedback received) (I22 and I25); (ii) the creation of conditions to enable professional development of NGO staff (I23); and (iii) greater attention paid to addressing emerging challenges in relation to managing the provision of NGO services (I24 and I26).

During the interviews and focus group discussions, indicators reflecting the level of maturity of co-operation between the municipal administration and NGOs in the provision of social services were identified, based on Bourne's (2008) SRMM model. The findings of the empirical research indicated that the municipal administration has established procedures governing stakeholder participation in service provision and decision-making, including involvement in service delivery and in individual decisions through municipal councils (I2, I4, I5, and I6). However, stakeholder engagement is inconsistent, and only a few individuals demonstrate a clear understanding of the significance of the SRMM. As a result, the organisation's internal focus is generally directed more towards evaluating and

standardising ongoing activities or individual projects (I5) rather than on fostering stakeholder engagement and maintaining co-operative networks.

Assessing the centralised support dimension of the SRMM, the empirical research indicates that the municipal administration department co-ordinating this co-operative network lacks the knowledge and methodological guidance necessary to strengthen partnerships and social capital. Existing legislation and other documents offer clear directives only on the provision of services themselves (I5 and I6); they do not address, for example, communication, conflict resolution, and the management of potential co-operation risks (I3 and I5).

The research also revealed that the effectiveness of the existing co-operative network and its SRMM level largely depends on the initiative of individual actors within the system. Co-operation within the network, in areas not subject to strict regulation, relies primarily on personal, informal relationships (I5, I7, and I10). Consequently, there is an ongoing risk that stakeholder involvement may decrease if the NGO leaders who currently assume this responsibility informally within the co-operation network change jobs, positions, or roles.

Our findings indicated that the municipal administration has established procedures regulating stakeholder participation in service provision and decision-making (I4, I11, and I26). While elements of stakeholder inclusion exist in the service planning process, this practice is neither permanent nor formally approved. Thus, the management of stakeholder engagement is inconsistent, and only a few individuals demonstrate a clear understanding of the importance of SRMM. As a result, the organisation's internal focus is generally directed more toward evaluating and standardising ongoing activities or individual projects rather than on fostering stakeholder engagement and maintaining co-operative networks.

Therefore, based on the empirical findings, it can be concluded that the maturity of co-operation between municipal administrations and NGOs in the provision of social services, according to Bourne's (2008) framework, is primarily characterised by procedural features, while relational aspects are evident within the process standardisation category. Efforts should focus on achieving higher levels of maturity, more integrated and identity-based, within the co-operation network, where participants are committed to continuous improvement and the reinforcement of co-operative relationships, and they can rely on robust internal support. Drawing on prior co-operation experience, future trends should be anticipated and leveraged to further strengthen co-operation and improve service quality.

Conclusions

1. The empirical research confirmed the hypothesis that NGOs providing social services are highly diverse, with a variety of organisational cultures and working methods, which creates challenges for the Marijampolė municipal administration in managing and ensuring the quality of these services for residents. Accordingly,

fostering mature co-operation between the Marijampolė municipal administration and service providers (NGOs) would facilitate the development of a unified vision and the establishment of best practices in delivering high-quality social services.

2. When evaluating the maturity of co-operation between the municipality and NGOs, using the SRMM model (Bourne, 2008), it can be concluded that procedural characteristics dominate across most categories, with higher-level, relational characteristics appearing only within the process standardisation category. The joint activities of the municipal administration for co-ordinating co-operation are generally directed more towards evaluating and standardising ongoing activities or individual projects rather than fostering stakeholder engagement and maintaining co-operative networks. The legal framework for co-operation provides clear guidance on the provision of services but does not address communication, conflict resolution, or the management of potential co-operation risks.
3. To foster mature co-operation, it is recommended that the Marijampolė municipal administration establish a vision regarding the future of social service provision and the role of NGOs. This would enable the identification of directions for developing and strengthening the co-operation network. The findings of the empirical research underscore the necessity for participants in a co-operation network to cultivate competencies essential for sustaining and enhancing co-operation (e.g. communication and conflict resolution) and highlight the importance of establishing a unified culture of co-operation.
4. The empirical research enabled the identification of two types of NGOs involved in social service provision: (i) those serving a larger number of beneficiaries (e.g. older people and children), which possess greater financial and human resources and have more capacity to develop staff skills; and (ii) those providing services to a smaller group of beneficiaries (e.g. children with disabilities), which have more limited resources and fewer opportunities for employee professional development. Accordingly, this factor should be considered when establishing and designing co-operation networks.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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SAVIVALDYBĖS ADMINISTRACIJOS IR NEVYRIAUSYBINIŲ ORGANIZACIJŲ BENDRADARBIAVIMO BRANDOS VYSTYMAS TEIKIANT SOCIALINES PASLAUGAS: MARIJAMPOLĖS SAVIVALDYBĖS ATVEJO ANALIZĖ

Santrauka. *Savivaldybės administracijos ir nepavaldžių viešųjų paslaugų teikėjų NVO konstruktyvus bendradarbiavimas sudaro sąlygas formuoti geriausias patirtis teikiant kokybiškas paslaugas gyventojams. Atliktu tyrimu buvo siekiama ištirti savivaldybės administracijos ir nevyriausybinių organizacijų bendradarbiavimo brandos teikiant socialines paslaugas vystymą atliekant Marijampolės savivaldybės atvejo analizę. Atliktas kokybinis empirinis tyrimas (interviu ir fokus grupės), bendradarbiavimo brandai matuoti taikytas „Stakeholder Relationship Management Maturity" (SRMM) (Bourne, 2008) modelis. Analizei pasirinktas savivaldybės atvejis pasižymi dideliu skaičiumi teikiančių paslaugas NVO. Remiantis tyrimo rezultatais, galima teigti, kad savivaldybės administracijos ir NVO bendradarbiavimo teikiant socialines paslaugas branda, pagal SRMM, pasižymi procedūriniu (angl. Procedural) lygmeniu, procesų standartizavimo kategorijoje stebimi santykių (angl. Relational) požymiai. Siekiant vystyti bendradarbiavimo brandą, tikslinga yra bendradarbiavimo tinklo dalyviams formuoti bendrą veiklos ateities viziją dėl socialinių paslaugų teikimo ir NVO vaidmens. Empirinio tyrimo rezultatai pagrindė bendradarbiavimo tinklo dalyvių kompetencijų susijusių su bendradarbiavimo palaikymu ir vystymu (pvz. komunikacijos, konfliktų sprendimo ir t.t.) poreikį, bendradarbiavimo vieningos kultūros formavimo svarbą.*

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ADMINISTERING REGIONAL APPEAL TO YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE SUDOVIA REGION IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract. *The attractiveness of regional areas to young people has gained growing academic attention, particularly within the context of demographic shifts, urban-rural disparities, and education. In focusing on the Sudovia region of Lithuania, the paper examines how education can be strategically used as a lever to administer regional appeal among young people. By analysing the interplay between local educational institutions and broader regional development goals, the study highlights context-specific solutions for youth attraction and retention. Existing research emphasises that regional attractiveness is multifaceted, encompassing economic opportunities, quality of life, social infrastructure, cultural identity, and connectivity. Education is one of the factors that influences young people's decision to relocate and settle in specific regions.*

Methodology. *This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and interviews to assess the Sudovia region's attractiveness for young people through education. This approach enables data triangulation for robust insights. Quantitative data were analysed with descriptive stats and regression to find key factors of education attractiveness. Qualitative data*

were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify themes and perspectives that contextualise survey results.

Findings. *The integration of quantitative and qualitative data presents a compelling view of Sudovia's appeal to young people through education, emphasising both its promising opportunities and the challenges that must be addressed.*

Conclusions. *The findings highlight that administering regional appeal through education requires integrating academic opportunities with cultural, social, and economic dimensions of regional life. However, aligning local education with emerging industries is critical for enhancing Sudovia's vibrant attraction for youth.*

Keywords: *Youth retention, administering, regional attractiveness, education policy*

Introduction

The ability of a region to attract and retain young people is increasingly recognised as a crucial factor in its long-term socio-economic vitality. In Europe, especially in peripheral and rural areas, demographic changes, labour market shifts, and migration patterns have heightened concerns about the sustainability of regional development. The Sudovia region in Lithuania, like many non-metropolitan areas, faces ongoing youth out-migration. This trend not only diminishes its human capital but also restricts its potential for innovation, entrepreneurship, and cultural vibrancy.

Education plays a vital role in shaping these dynamics. Research indicates that the presence and quality of higher education institutions significantly enhance perceived quality of life and influence the residential choices of young people (Drummond et al. 2020; Hanssen and Mathisen 2018). Education opportunities that align closely with local economic needs and promote entrepreneurial activities are linked to higher rates of youth retention and return migration (Hu et al. 2020; Waligóra 2024). However, studies suggest that education alone is insufficient; factors such as cultural amenities, recreational facilities, business opportunities, and inclusive regional policies also shape young people's perceptions of a place (Vidickienė 2017; Zenkienė and Leišytė 2024).

The relationship between education and regional attractiveness is therefore complex. While some studies have explored these factors in rural and peripheral areas of Europe, few have specifically examined them within the Lithuanian context, and even fewer have provided an in-depth region-specific analysis of Sudovia. Furthermore, existing research often relies on either quantitative indicators or qualitative narratives, creating a gap for studies that integrate both methods to capture the intricacies of youth decision-making. By linking regional appeal with the role of education, this paper highlights how targeted educational strategies can serve as a foundation for strengthening Sudovia's competitiveness. In doing so, it situates the case of Sudovia within the broader European discourse on how education

can administer regional attractiveness to young people.

This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how education influences the attractiveness of the Sudovia region for young people aged 18 to 35. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines quantitative survey data with qualitative open-ended responses to assess perceptions of education opportunities, their alignment with local labour markets, and their interaction with broader regional development factors. The goal is to generate evidence-based, region-specific insights that can inform policy and strategic planning to enhance youth retention, attract return migrants, and foster a vibrant, inclusive regional environment.

Related Research and Hypothesis Development

The relationship between education and regional attractiveness has been studied from various theoretical perspectives, including human capital theory, endogenous growth theory, and the Quadruple Helix model. These frameworks emphasise that education plays both an economic and a social role in shaping regional competitiveness. However, in Lithuania – and particularly in the Sudovia region – empirical evidence on how education contributes to administering regional appeal remains limited. Administering regional appeal through education involves not only improving the quality of study opportunities but also connecting them with regional innovation systems, labour market needs, and inclusive social environments that encourage young people to stay or return. This study addresses this research gap by examining how education quality and related socio-economic factors influence youth perceptions of regional attractiveness in Sudovia.

Research indicates a complex relationship between education and regional attractiveness. Universities and other higher education institutions can improve a region's perceived quality of life, making it more appealing to both potential students and residents who may not directly engage with higher education. (Drummond et al. 2020). Furthermore, student mobility in higher education is influenced more by institutional traits – such as university quality and reputation – rather than regional factors, with degree mobility focused in a few countries and quality-driven institutions drawing the largest share of mobile students (Giambona et al. 2017; Sanchez and Flisi 2017).

In rural areas, it is essential to understand and address the needs of local high school graduates through appropriate study programmes, quality teaching, and student communities to retain young talent (Hanssen and Mathisen 2018). Additionally, gender-specific considerations emerge in this area of research. Vidickienė (2017) highlights that in post-industrial societies, rural areas are becoming more attractive to young, educated women, not only as places to reside but also as environments for entrepreneurship and leadership. This trend necessitates targeted rural policy measures to support innovative business models and boost female participation in decision-making.

Research consistently shows that education opportunities significantly influence youth

migration patterns. When access to higher education is limited in rural regions, young people are often compelled to relocate to urban areas (Dolinska et al. 2020; Eversole 2001). In many instances, this move becomes permanent, worsening regional inequalities. For example, in Poland, education migration has been associated with persistent demographic imbalances and economic difficulties (Szydlik-Leszczyńska 2021; Waligóra 2024). Similar trends are observed in other countries, where the lack of strong regional universities contributes to a 'brain drain' from economically weaker areas (Sudekum 2003).

Spatial and economic factors also shape regions' attractiveness. Hu et al. (2020) find that talent attraction strongly correlates with economic development, quality of life, and tertiary industry performance, with education and transport services acting as decisive elements. The role of universities in fostering regional innovation is emphasised by Zenkienė and Leišytė (2024), who demonstrate that participation in European University Alliances strengthens cross-sectoral collaboration and drives socio-economic transformation through the Quadruple Helix framework. In addition to their traditional academic roles, universities can boost regional attractiveness through innovative activities, such as education tourism (Maryani and Sugito 2018) and targeted marketing campaigns (Waligóra 2024).

Szymczak and Gajderowicz (2023) show that while prospective students are willing to travel significant distances for preferred study programs, regional disparities in the feasibility of commuting risk deepening inequalities in human capital distribution. Similar migration dynamics are discussed by Dolinska et al. (2020), who find that post-secondary migration from small towns to large urban centres often becomes permanent, intensifying regional disparities.

International perspectives further enrich this discussion. For instance, Apsite-Berina et al. (2023) illustrate that international students' choices of study destinations are influenced not only by academic factors but also by cultural and lifestyle considerations. Szymczak and Gajderowicz (2023) found that spatial accessibility significantly affects student decision-making, as longer travel times can decrease willingness to enrol in certain institutions, potentially widening spatial inequalities in human capital.

The literature cautions against overly simplistic policy solutions, emphasising that enhancing regional and institutional attractiveness requires a multifaceted approach. In the context of Industry 4.0, investment attractiveness is critical for universities, with public–private partnerships playing a key role in driving digital modernisation and global competitiveness (Savelyeva et al. 2019). At the same time, regional development strategies in the era of digitalisation must go beyond education alone, focusing on improving living and business environments, strengthening regional image, and adapting to technological change to sustain competitiveness (Ruohomaa and Salminen 2019). However, research warns that in economically lagging regions, education subsidies may unintentionally accelerate brain drain unless paired with strategies to improve local employment opportunities (Suedekum 2003). Addressing disparities in education quality, as noted by Kuranov and Luk'yanenko (2020), requires targeted interventions in infrastructure, staffing, and services.

While investing in higher education is generally beneficial, it may inadvertently exacerbate the outflow of skilled individuals from less-developed areas unless complemented by measures to improve local employment prospects and living conditions (Kuranov and Luk'yanenko 2020; Suedekum 2003). Effective strategies, therefore, necessitate a holistic approach that integrates education with regional development initiatives.

In summary, existing research positions education as a vital component of regional attractiveness and competitiveness. However, its ability to retain and attract young people depends on the quality, accessibility, and relevance of its education offerings, as well as the broader socio-economic environment in which it is situated. This conceptual foundation frames the present study's analysis of how education can enhance the appeal of the Sudovia region for young people and contribute to its sustainable development.

We specifically explore how perceived education quality affects regional attractiveness to youth and how this link may differ across age groups. Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

(H1): Higher perceived quality of education in the Sudovia region is positively associated with the region's attractiveness for young people.

This hypothesis is based on findings that link institutional quality and the significance of education offerings to youth retention and regional appeal (Drummond et al. 2020; Hanssen and Mathisen 2018).

(H2): Age moderates the relationship between perceived education quality and regional attractiveness, such that the influence of education quality varies across different youth age groups.

This hypothesis reflects the idea that younger and older youth groups may assess education and regional opportunities differently, shaped by their life stage, mobility expectations, and socio-economic priorities (Szymczak and Gajderowicz 2023; Apsite-Berina et al. 2023).

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative survey data with open-ended qualitative responses to explore how education enhances the attractiveness of the Sudovia region to young people. The design aligns with previous research indicating that regional appeal relies not only on measurable factors such as education and employment but also on subjective perceptions, lifestyle goals, and social engagement (Drummond et al. 2020; Hanssen and Mathisen 2018; Vidickienė 2017; Apsite-Berina et al. 2023).

A structured questionnaire was distributed to 171 young residents of the Sudovia region (ages 18–35), representing both students (32.7%) and employed respondents (61.4%). Most participants were women (83%), with a majority aged 31 and older (62.6%). The largest groups came from Marijampolė (35.7%) and Vilkaviškis (22.8%), reflecting the region's demographic and spatial composition.

Consistent with research linking education quality and accessibility to young people's migration decisions (Eversole 2001; Szydlik-Leszczyńska 2021; Dolinska et al. 2020), the survey aimed to quantify the education factors that influence regional attractiveness. Open-ended questions complemented the quantitative analysis by asking participants to discuss education's strengths and weaknesses, share hopes, and propose ways to boost Sudovia's attractiveness through education. This aligns with literature urging a deeper understanding of young people's decision-making around education opportunities and quality of life (Hu et al. 2020; Waligóra 2024).

To examine how education quality contributes to perceived regional attractiveness, a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models was estimated using quantitative survey data (N = 171). The dependent variable, regional attractiveness (ATTR), was measured by asking this question: Q10_Do you think that Sudovia is attractive to young people who want to live or build their future there? Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. Likert scales were used to measure both the perceived importance and current satisfaction regarding aspects such as the diversity of study programs, teaching quality, connections between education and employment opportunities, and access to lifelong learning (Tvaronavičienė et al. 2018). The explanatory variable, education quality (EDU_Quality), was created by grouping the following questions that measure satisfaction with education institutions in Sudovia:

- Q6_Are study opportunities an important factor in assessing the attractiveness of the Sudovia region?
- Q7_Are the study opportunities in the Sudovia region attractive to you, and do they meet your needs?
- Q8_Do educational institutions (schools, universities, libraries) meet the needs of young people in Sudovia?

The responses to these questions were averaged to produce a single variable representing the quality of education in the Sudovia region. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient is 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency.

Demographic data, such as age group (Q1), gender (Q2), place of origin (Q3), current residence in Sudovia (Q4), and current occupation (studying, working, or other) (Q5), served as control variables to help understand perception patterns, as previous findings suggest that attractiveness often varies according to gender, age, and socio-economic background (Lovšin 2014; Vidickienė 2017)

We developed two models to analyse how perceived education quality relates to the regional appeal of Sudovia, as well as to explore whether age acts as a moderating factor (conditional hypothesis).

The first model tested the direct effects of perceived education quality and age group on regional attractiveness:

$$s_ATTR_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 (s_EDU_Quality)_i + \alpha_2 (s_Q1_AgeGroup)_i + C_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

s_Q1_AgeGroupi represents the standardised age-group variable, indicating the respondent's position within the defined age categories for young people. The vector of control variables, Ci, includes gender, origin, current living place, and occupation status, all of which may also influence perceived regional attractiveness.

To investigate whether age influences how education quality affects perceived regional attractiveness, we built a second model including an interaction term between standardised education quality and age.

$$s_ATTR_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 (s_EDU_Quality)_i + \beta_2 (s_Q1_AgeGroup)_i + \beta_3 (s_EDU_Quality \times s_Q1_AgeGroup)_i + C_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

The multiplicative term $s_EDU_Quality_i \times s_Q1_AgeGroup_i$ allows us to examine how the respondent's age moderates the effect of perceived education quality on regional attractiveness in the Sudovia region. All main variables were standardised (z-scored) prior to estimation to ensure comparability of coefficients and to mitigate potential scale effects. The interaction term between education quality and age group was also based on standardised variables to facilitate the interpretation of the moderating effect. Estimation was conducted using OLS with robust standard errors to address potential heteroskedasticity identified by White's test ($p = 0.001$).

Research Findings

The study shows that young people's views of the Sudovia region are complex and rich in different aspects. Qualitative findings reveal that nearly one-third of respondents (27.5%) found the region very attractive as a place to live, while almost half (49.1%) saw it as attractive only in certain aspects. This suggests that, although the region has potential for keeping young people, its appeal is not consistent across various areas of life. When asked about the key factors affecting the region's appeal, 61% of participants cited education opportunities as a vital factor in whether young people choose to remain in Sudovia. About 40% (15.8% 'completely agree' and 24% 'agree') confirmed that study opportunities in the region are attractive and meet youth needs. Open-ended responses further emphasised the importance of education, employment, and urban development as interconnected drivers of regional appeal. Participants highlighted the need to strengthen study programmes aligned with local labour market needs, create jobs, and expand modern, accessible city spaces to support social and cultural life:

'Promote a variety of businesses that could be suitable for young people with various degrees.'

'Expand and modernise city spaces (installing one small square is of little use – people will come to take a picture once and never come back; we need large spaces where people

can walk longer distances, play sports, spend time with their children, etc.).'

'Promote the attraction of modern teaching methods to the city; large cities offer various dedicated methodologies, so parents can decide which methodology, which directions are acceptable to them and suitable for their children.'

'To organise a higher education institution, to offer work immediately after studies in the Sudovia region; to pay attention not only to the youth who are residents of Marijampole, but also to those who are from other districts; to encourage them, because most often, young people from other districts come to work, study, buy housing, and raise children in this city, and they do not receive anything from it.'

'First, create jobs, involve young people in various activities, sports...'

'Educate young people more about the various support measures available to start or develop their own business. There are also many financial instruments available to organise various events, etc. Because a large part of young people do not know this.'

These statements reflect a common view that the education system is key to the region's appeal, serving not just as a source of knowledge but also as the basis for innovation, entrepreneurship, and cultural life.

The quantitative analysis reinforces and expands upon these qualitative insights. Regression results indicate that education quality is the strongest predictor of regional attractiveness for young people (see Table 1).

Table 1. OLS estimates of the relationship between education quality and regional attractiveness for young people

Full variable name	Short variable name	Parameter	OLS estimates of Eq. (1) using robust standard errors (HAC)	OLS estimates of Eq. (2) using robust standard errors (HAC)
			ATTR as dependent variable	ATTR as dependent variable
Constant	Const	α	0.0103** (0.3867)	0.0148** (0.3895)
Education quality	s_EDU_Quality	β_1	<0.0001 *** (0.0666)	<0.0001 *** (0.0673)
Respondents' age	s_Q1_AgeGroup	β_2	0.0755* (0.0974)	0.0702* (0.0749)

Full variable name	Short variable name	Parameter	OLS estimates of Eq. (1) using robust standard errors (HAC)	OLS estimates of Eq. (2) using robust standard errors (HAC)
			ATTR as dependent variable	ATTR as dependent variable
The interaction between education quality and age	s_EDU_Quality . s_Q1_AgeGroup	β_3		0.4011 (0.0640)
Respondents' gender	Q2_Gender	c_1	0.6191 (0.1997)	0.7243 (0.2006)
Respondents' origin (from Sudovia or not)	Q3_Origin	c_2	0.1359 (0.2298)	0.1435 (0.2306)
Respondents' current living place	Q4_CurrentLiving	c_3	0.8033 (0.231756)	0.8610 (0.233252)
Respondents' occupation (studying, working, or neither)	Q5_Occupation	c_4	0.0145** (0.131682)	0.0142** (0.130705)
Number of observations		n	171	171
Within R^2			0.294873	0.293335

*Notes: Robust (HAC [Heteroskedasticity and Autocorrelation Consistent]) standard errors are presented in parentheses; P-values are presented in the square brackets. *, **, *** indicate statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% levels, respectively.*

In Estimation 1, the standardised perception of education quality (s_EDU_Quality) exerted a strong, highly significant influence on regional attractiveness. This finding highlights that respondents who view Sudovia's educational institutions as accessible, relevant, and of high quality are considerably more inclined to see the region as an attractive place to live, study, and work. These results empirically support previous research indicating that education serves both as a developmental and symbolic element of regional identity and quality of life (Drummond et al. 2020; Hu et al. 2020).

The respondents' age (s_Q1_AgeGroup) showed a slight positive effect, suggesting that perceptions of attractiveness tend to increase with age. Younger respondents (18–24) primarily assess the region based on education and social opportunities, while older respondents (30–35) focus more on employment and family-related factors. This trend aligns with previous research indicating that different life stages influence how young people perceive regional appeal (Hu et al. 2020; Zenkienė and Leišytė 2024). However, the interaction

between education quality and age (s_EDU_Quality x s_Q1_AgeGroup) was found to be statistically insignificant. This suggests that age does not significantly impact how education quality influences regional attractiveness. In simpler terms, high-quality education positively affects a region's attractiveness across all age groups, acting as a universal factor rather than being specific to certain age groups. This indicates that everyone, regardless of age, perceives the value of quality education similarly when judging regional appeal; control variables offer additional insights.

Occupation had a notable positive effect, indicating that respondents who are employed or pursuing professional studies tend to view Sudovia as more attractive than those who are unemployed or still in secondary education. This supports the argument that economic integration and education experiences jointly foster regional attachment (Waligóra 2024; Hu et al. 2020). The respondents' origin (Q3_Origin) also showed a positive, though non-significant, coefficient, indicating that people born in Sudovia are more likely to view the region favourably, probably due to emotional connections or local familiarity. Both models demonstrate strong explanatory power for perceptual data, with an R2 of 0.32 and an adjusted R^2 of 0.29, meaning that nearly one-third of the variance in regional attractiveness is accounted for by the predictors. The overall F-statistic ($F = 12.55$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that the variables collectively have a significant effect.

Both qualitative and quantitative findings clearly indicate that education is the key factor behind the attractiveness of the Sudovia region for young people. Young residents value accessible, high-quality, and locally relevant education opportunities, seeing them as essential for personal growth and for the region's economic and social strength. The lack of a moderating effect of age implies that these views are consistent across different youth age groups, emphasising education's common role as a driver of regional development.

Both data streams emphasise that education itself is not enough. Respondents repeatedly stress the importance of better connections between education, employment, and urban infrastructure to maintain regional competitiveness and keep young people. As the qualitative feedback highlights, young individuals aspire not just to study in Sudovia but also to live, work, and develop there.

Discussion

The results confirm that education plays a vital role in boosting regional appeal, aligning with the Quadruple Helix model that emphasises collaboration among education, business, government, and civil society as crucial for sustainable regional growth. In Sudovia, education serves not just to develop skills but also as a link connecting young people with local innovation hubs and community involvement. However, the results also show that education alone is not sufficient to ensure youth retention. As highlighted by Suedekum (2003) and Kuranov and Luk'yanenko (2020), strategies centred on education must be complemented with job creation, cultural infrastructure, and inclusive community environments.

Respondents in this study echoed these needs, emphasising that contemporary study programmes must align with regional labour markets and broader lifestyle expectations.

Notably, the impact of education quality was consistent across age groups, suggesting it improves regional attractiveness universally rather than targeting specific cohorts. This supports the idea that education is a structural rather than a situational factor in how young people evaluate regional opportunities (Hu et al. 2020; Drummond et al. 2020). The importance of occupational status emphasises that economic involvement strengthens attachment to a place, connecting education achievement with regional identity and stability. Overall, these results imply that managing regional appeal via education should adopt an integrated, cross-sector strategy – one that links learning opportunities with meaningful employment, innovation, and improved quality of life.

Conclusions

1. This study confirms that education is a critical pathway for administering regional appeal to young people, yet it must be embedded in a wider socio-economic and cultural framework to be fully effective. In Sudovia, the attractiveness of the region depends not only on the existence of study opportunities but also on how these opportunities are aligned with labour market needs, entrepreneurship, and the creation of a vibrant student and community life.
2. The quantitative analysis confirmed that education quality exerts the strongest positive effect on how young people perceive the attractiveness of Sudovia, while occupational status reinforces this relationship through the link between education engagement and economic participation. The absence of a moderating effect of age suggests that education contributes to regional appeal across all youth cohorts, underscoring its structural rather than situational role. Nevertheless, limited cultural, recreational, and social opportunities continue to weaken the region's capacity to retain and attract young residents.
3. The findings indicate that limited cultural, recreational, and social opportunities diminish the region's capacity to retain and attract young people. Establishing a student-oriented environment, in which educational institutions offer comprehensive academic, social, cultural, and community infrastructure, is essential for reversing youth out-migration.
4. Education is central to the process of enhancing regional appeal, and education programs should be explicitly linked to the local economy, with specialisations aligned to regional sectors and entrepreneurship opportunities. Additionally, education should involve community hub-like activities: organising events, promoting cultural engagement, and supporting inclusivity throughout both urban and rural areas.

5. Integrating lifelong learning would further increase regional attractiveness by positioning Sudovia as a centre for both initial and ongoing personal and professional development. This approach aligns with young people's demand for institutions that are closely connected to regional identity and daily life.
6. Administering regional appeal through education in Sudovia requires more than providing formal study opportunities; it calls for a holistic approach that includes a driver of economic alignment, cultural vitality, social inclusivity, and lifelong learning. By embedding these dimensions into education policy and practice, Sudovia can strengthen its competitiveness and emerge as a region where young people choose not only to study but also to live, work, and build their future.
7. As the research revealed that education policies should be related to the local economy, further research is needed to identify education policy directions to align with regional economic sectors and business opportunities.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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REGIONINIO PATRAUKLUMO JAUNIMUI DIDINIMAS PER ŠVIETIMĄ: SŪDUVOS REGIONO ATVEJIS LIETUVOJE

Santrauka. *Regioninių vietovių patrauklumas jaunimui sulaukia vis daugiau akademinio dėmesio, ypač atsižvelgiant į demografinius pokyčius, miesto ir kaimo skirtumus bei švietimą. Straipsnyje, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant Sūduvos regionui Lietuvoje, nagrinėjama, kaip švietimas gali būti strategiškai panaudotas kaip svertas regioniniam patrauklumui jaunimui didinti. Analizuojant vietos švietimo įstaigų ir platesnių regioninės plėtros tikslų sąveiką, tyrime išryškinami kontekstui būdingi jaunimo pritraukimo ir išlaikymo sprendimai. Esami tyrimai pabrėžia, kad regioninis patrauklumas yra daugialypis, apimantis ekonomines galimybes, gyvenimo kokybę, socialinę infrastruktūrą, kultūrinį identitetą ir ryšius. Švietimas yra vienas iš veiksnių, darančių įtaką jaunų žmonių sprendimui persikelti ir apsigyventi konkrečiuose regionuose.*

Metodologija. *Šiame tyrime naudojamas mišrus metodų metodas, derinant apklausas ir interviu, siekiant įvertinti Sūduvos regiono patrauklumą jaunimui per švietimą. Šis metodas leidžia atlikti duomenų trianguliaciją, kad būtų gautos patikimos įžvalgos. Kiekybiniai duomenys buvo analizuojami naudojant aprašomąją statistiką ir regresiją, siekiant rasti pagrindinius švietimo patrauklumo veiksnius. Kokybiniai duomenys buvo transkribuoti ir analizuojami temiškai, siekiant nustatyti temas ir perspektyvas, kurios kontekstualizuoja apklausos rezultatus.*

Kiekybinių ir kokybinių duomenų analizė. *Kiekybinių ir kokybinių duomenų integravimas pateikia įtikinamą Sūduvos regiono patrauklumo jaunimui per švietimą vaizdą, pabrėžiant tiek perspektyvias galimybes, tiek iššūkius, kuriuos reikia spręsti.*

Išvados. *Išvados pabrėžia, kad norint valdyti regioninį patrauklumą per švietimą, reikia integruoti akademines galimybes su kultūriniais, socialiniais ir ekonominiais regiono gyvenimo aspektais. Tačiau vietos švietimo derinimas su ateities pramonės šakomis yra labai svarbus siekiant padidinti gyvybingą Sūduvos regiono patrauklumą jaunimui.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Sūduvos regiono konkurencingumas; Jaunimo išlaikymas; Administravimas; Regiono patrauklumas; Švietimo politika.*

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IMPLEMENTATION ACCOUNTABILITY, REPORTING ROUTINES, AND SOCIAL TRUST IN LOCAL SERVICE DELIVERY

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Abstract. *Public policy is often judged at delivery points, community forums, and the routine administrative work that keeps programmes running. In capacity-constrained settings, accountability can become a paradox: documentation and reporting strengthen procedural control, while trust remains fragile when verification is costly. This study explains how implementation accountability routines shape social trust and perceived legitimacy in a performance-oriented local service programme linked to minimum service standards. We use a qualitative explanatory case study. Data were combined from 38 semi-structured interviews across key local actors and programme documents. Using an abductive thematic approach, we trace mechanism pathways connecting accountability routines, verification constraints, and citizen perceptions. We find (i) a persistent trust deficit tied to information asymmetry*

and principal–agent vulnerabilities; (ii) extensive accountability work through audit trails, bank-based disbursement, compulsory bookkeeping, and routine reporting, including downward accountability within groups; and (iii) performance accountability through outcome reporting alongside risks of paper compliance and indicator-driven distortion under limited field verification. We contribute a mechanism-based explanation of when procedural accountability becomes socially recognised legitimacy and when it does not, and we derive design implications for accountability under high transaction costs, including capacity support, usable citizen-facing transparency, and risk-based verification.

Keywords: *implementation accountability, reporting routines, social trust, minimum service standards, risk-based verification.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *įgyvendinimo atskaitomybė; ataskaitų teikimo tvarka; socialinis pasitikėjimas; procedūrinis teisėtumas; minimalūs paslaugų standartai; rizika pagrįstas patikrinimas.*

1. Introduction

Implementation is evaluated where citizens meet the state: at service units, community meetings, and the everyday work that translates programme rules into action. Public programmes, therefore, rely on documentation, routine reporting, and indicators to signal control. Yet citizens often judge programmes through lived experience, fairness, and whether oversight feels credible. Recent research shows that accountability can strengthen legitimacy, but its effects depend on design quality and citizen experience rather than on administrative artefacts alone (Brummel and de Blok 2024; Pérez-Durán 2023; Vasiljević et al. 2025).

A key gap remains. We know too little about how procedural accountability becomes socially recognised legitimacy when oversight is expensive and information access is unequal. Transparency studies show that disclosure rarely improves legitimacy unless correction and appeal features are credible (Grimmelikhuijsen 2022; Martin and Waldman 2022; Honig, Lall, and Parks 2022). Research on performance information similarly shows that trust depends on the credibility and reputation of the data source (Schmidthuber, Willems, and Krabina 2023).

This article addresses the gap by theorising accountability as a chain of mechanisms linking (i) principal–agent dynamics under information asymmetry, (ii) procedural justice as citizen-facing assessments of fairness, and (iii) performance governance through indicators and incentives. Procedural justice evidence shows that legitimacy is shaped by fairness perceptions and relational experience (Chan, Bradford, and Stott 2023; Vasiljević et al. 2025). Street-level perspectives add that when verification is costly, implementers substitute intensive checking with documentation and reporting, which can stabilise administration

while leaving trust deficits unresolved (Nuesiri 2022; Peeters and Campos 2022).

Empirically, we examine a performance-oriented local service programme linked to minimum service standards. We explain when accountability routines generate legitimacy and when they remain procedural. We also offer implications for designing accountability under resource constraints, including capacity support, usable transparency, and risk-based verification (Gazali, Hisanuddin, and Rasmuin 2024; Salomo and Rahmayanti 2023; Anugraheni, Setiawati, and Trisnawati 2022).

Figure 1 illustrates the mechanism pathways identified in the study. Procedural accountability routines generate administrative effects on paper, but their translation into socially recognised legitimacy is constrained by verification costs and limited field checks. Where correction mechanisms and usable transparency are present – such as in risk-based verification and accessible complaint channels – citizen interpretations shift, allowing procedural accountability to support social trust.

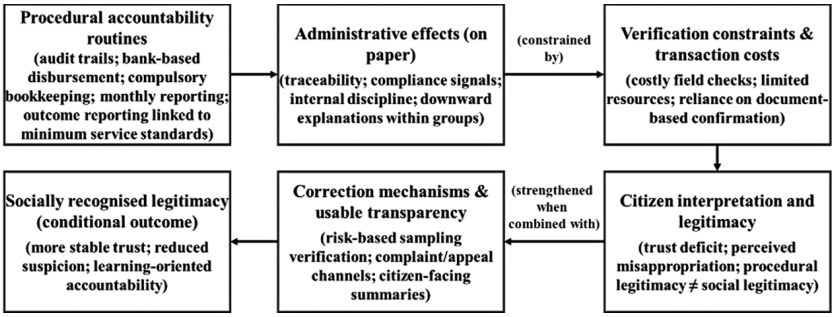

Figure 1. Mechanism pathways linking implementation accountability and social trust
Source: Authors' synthesis.

2. Literature Review

Accountability combines supply-side mechanisms and citizen-side recognition (Pérez-Durán 2023). Social accountability directed towards citizens tends to strengthen legitimacy more consistently than accountability directed upward (Brummel and de Blok 2024). Procedural justice research shows that legitimacy depends on perceived fairness and on how procedures are enacted in frontline interactions (Chan, Bradford, and Stott 2023; Vasiljević et al. 2025). Transparency and performance information studies caution that disclosure and notices are insufficient; explainability, credible appeals, and enforcement matter, and trust depends on source credibility (Grimmelikhuijsen 2022; Honig, Lall, and Parks 2022; Martin and Waldman 2022; Schmidthuber, Willems, and Krabina 2023). Where capacity is limited, verification costs shape oversight. Street-level actors adapt by relying on documentation and pragmatic control, which can deepen gaps between procedural and social legitimacy (Nuesiri 2022; Peeters and Campos 2022). In Indonesia, risk-based audit reforms

show promise, but accountability systems may remain formalistic, reinforcing the need to align technical oversight with capacity support and citizen-facing credibility (Anugraheni, Setiawati, and Trisnawati 2022; Gazali, Hisanuddin, and Rasmuin 2024; Ginting et al. 2023; Indra and Khoirunurrofik 2022; Salomo and Rahmayanti 2023).

This study, therefore, examines how reporting routines, audit trails, and indicator monitoring shape trust under costly verification, and under what conditions procedural accountability can become socially recognised legitimacy.

3. Methodology

We adopt a qualitative explanatory case study design (Creswell and Poth 2018) to trace mechanism pathways in a local implementation system linked to minimum service standards. Participants were selected purposively across the implementation chain to capture role variation and information access. Data comprise 38 semi-structured interviews with facilitators, group leaders/community representatives, sector officials (health/education), local government actors, and community members, alongside programme documents (templates, guidelines, and administrative artefacts). Interviews focused on reporting cycles, verification practices, indicator use, and perceived fairness.

All interviews were conducted with informed consent, transcribed, and anonymised. Data were analysed abductively through iterative coding, mechanism clustering, and explanation building across actor roles, with triangulation across interviews and documents to test emerging explanations. Interviews continued until additional accounts yielded limited new insights for the targeted mechanisms. Table 1 documents the interview composition and sources, while Table 2 consolidates the mechanism domains and the empirical signals used to link interview evidence to the explanatory claims.

Table 1. Interview participants and documentary materials used in the study

Actor category	Data source	N (interviews)	Fieldwork window (as recorded)	Main analytic contribution
Programme facilitators (programme, village, finance)	Semi-structured interviews	8	Jul–Dec 2025	Reporting routines; coaching/monitoring; verification constraints; delivery-point accountability work

Actor category	Data source	N (interviews)	Fieldwork window (as recorded)	Main analytic contribution
Group leaders/ community representatives (community implementation unit/ community group/ community health post)	Semi-structured interviews	7	Nov–Dec 2025	Downward accountability; allocation/asset tracking; peer legitimacy through meetings and explanations
Sector officials (health & education)	Semi-structured interviews	4	Nov 2025	Outcome reporting logic; minimum service standards-linked performance accountability; coordination constraints
Local government/ technical agency	Semi-structured interviews	1	Jul 2025	Institutional context; oversight expectations; coordination baseline
Community members/ beneficiaries	Semi-structured interviews	18	Nov–Dec 2025	Trust perceptions; fairness interpretations; credibility cues; lived experience of targeting and contributions
Programme documents	Guidelines; templates; administrative artefacts	–	–	Formal accountability design; required reporting formats; documentary corroboration of audit trails

Table 2. Mechanism domains, empirical signals, and observed patterns

Mechanism domain	What was examined in the data	Observed pattern
Principal–agent vulnerabilities & information asymmetry	Interpretations of contributions; visibility of checks; perceived misuse	Requests for contributions trigger suspicion when verification is not publicly credible
Procedural accountability routines	Bookkeeping, bank-based disbursement, routine reports, and audit trails	There are strong traceability and compliance signals, but a limited effect on citizen trust
Downward accountability within groups	Meeting explanations; internal allocation records; peer scrutiny	Peer-level transparency can stabilise internal legitimacy even when external trust is low

Mechanism domain	What was examined in the data	Observed pattern
Performance accountability (minimum service standards-linked)	Outcome reporting in health/ education; indicator use; reporting deadlines	Results orientation increases, but there are risks of paper compliance under weak verification
Verification constraints & transaction costs	Field checks vs document confirmation; logistics and budget constraints	Document-based confirmation substitutes direct verification, widening credibility gaps
Correction mechanisms & usable transparency	Complaints/appeals; public summaries; corrective actions	Where weak or implicit, oversight remains symbolic, and credibility remains fragile

These tables link theoretical expectations to observed implementation patterns identified through abductive thematic analysis. Analytical rigour was strengthened through role-based triangulation, attention to negative cases, and systematic documentation of analytic decisions. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent; role-based labels are used throughout the article to protect confidentiality.

4. Findings

4.1 Trust deficit and perceived misappropriation

Findings indicate a persistent trust deficit around programme resources, especially when communities are asked to contribute funds or comply with administrative requirements. Several accounts suggest that contribution requests are quickly interpreted as signals of misuse by local authorities. This reflects a fragile principal–agent relationship under information asymmetry and low visibility of verification. As one community informant (community member; MAM.NS-INF-01) stated, *"…if people are asked to contribute, they immediately think the officials have already committed corruption or misappropriation. This has been happening for a long time."*

This distrust is reinforced by practical verification constraints. Field checks are often replaced by document-based confirmation because direct visits to service points are viewed as financially and logistically burdensome in dispersed settings. A facilitator (facilitator; MAM.NS-FAS-01) described how verification is limited by operational costs and distance: *"…we avoid direct checking at service points because transport costs are high, so we rely on documents."* In this context, procedural requirements can exist without becoming credibility signals for beneficiaries. Informants also described how reporting itself is locally treated as proof of transparency. One beneficiary (beneficiary; MAM.NS-ANG-05) explained that the key signal is whether records exist, not whether verification is visible: *"…as long as there are written records, people see it as transparent and accountable."* This pattern highlights

a governance gap between administrative compliance and socially recognised legitimacy.

4.2 Accountability work and audit trails

Despite trust challenges, the data show extensive accountability work embedded in routine implementation. Accountability is materialised through administrative artefacts such as bank-based disbursement, compulsory bookkeeping, and routine financial and activity reporting. Funds are channelled through group accounts, and groups are expected to keep records that link proposals, disbursements, and reported activities. A beneficiary-group member (beneficiary; MAM.NS-ANG-04) described this routine in practical terms: "*…the funds go through the group's bank account, and we must record all inflows and outflows.*" When assistance is delivered in non-cash form, group leaders also document recipients and quantities, extending accountability beyond cash management to asset tracking.

A notable pattern is the prominence of downward accountability. Group leaders emphasised obligations to explain decisions to members and beneficiaries, not only to programme authorities. One leader (group leader; MAM-ANG-01) described documenting allocations and explaining them in meetings: "*…I record who receives assistance and explain the allocation openly during group meetings.*" These practices strengthen internal legitimacy and help prevent conflict within groups. At the same time, reporting rhythms and documentation demands can become burdensome when administrative skills are uneven. Several accounts indicate growing dependence on facilitators for forms, deadlines, and data consistency, which underscores the importance of capacity support for routine accountability to function as intended.

4.3 Performance accountability under capacity constraints

Beyond financial accountability, findings indicate that the programme institutionalises performance accountability by linking reporting to service outcomes in health and education aligned with minimum service standards. Monthly reports are used to document progress on priority outcomes. As one implementation actor noted, "*…reports must be submitted every month, including progress in maternal health, child nutrition, and education outcomes…*" (sector-related informant; MAM.NS-INF-01). This integration reflects a shift from purely procedural control towards results-oriented accountability.

Yet the effectiveness of performance reporting is constrained by uneven administrative capacity, data consistency challenges, and coordination demands across actors. Where verification is limited, performance reporting can drift towards paper compliance, especially when targets are tied to incentives. Implementation actors described how funding and rewards can be linked to indicator achievement, which can encourage a narrow focus on measurable targets. Under weak verification, this creates risks of indicator-driven prioritisation and measurement distortion. Overall, the findings suggest that accountability in local service delivery depends not only on rules and reporting routines but also on

administrative capability and verification that is credible and visible enough to shape citizen trust.

5. Discussion

5.1 Procedural accountability and socially recognised legitimacy

The case shows that accountability can be procedurally strong while legitimacy remains contested. Empirically, this separation was evident across the interview material: beneficiaries and community members often judged legitimacy through observable checks and explanations rather than through the existence of reports alone (see Sections 4.1–4.2; Table 1). This aligns with work that treats accountability as both mechanisms and public recognition (Pérez-Durán 2023). Social accountability towards citizens is more likely to support legitimacy than upward accountability (Brummel and de Blok 2024). Here, routines were designed for compliance and traceability, but trust depended on credible verification in practice.

Our findings refine the accountability–legitimacy link by separating two outputs that are often treated as the same. Procedural accountability generates traceability and control signals for administrative audiences. Socially recognised legitimacy depends on whether citizens can observe credible checks and understand the reasons behind allocations. In this sense, accountability is not only a set of mechanisms but also a communicative and relational achievement. This distinction helps explain why programmes can look "well controlled" on paper and still be contested in everyday conversations. It also aligns with the idea that accountability research should pay attention to how mechanisms are received and interpreted, not only how they are designed (Brummel and de Blok 2024; Pérez-Durán 2023).

5.2 Explaining trust deficits: information asymmetry and procedural justice

Trust deficits reflect principal–agent vulnerabilities under information asymmetry. When citizens cannot observe oversight, they may infer abuse even when procedures exist. In the interview accounts, contribution and co-financing requests were repeatedly interpreted as cues of misappropriation when checks were not visible to citizens (see Section 4.1; Table 1). Fairness perceptions and frontline interactions also matter: procedural justice shapes legitimacy through experience, not rules alone (Chan, Bradford, and Stott 2023; Vasiljević et al. 2025).

The trust deficit documented here is not simply a deficit of information; it is also a deficit of procedural reassurance. Citizens evaluate fairness through simple questions: who decides, by what rules, and who can challenge decisions? When the answers are unclear, contributions and co-financing requests are easily interpreted as extraction rather than

collective problem-solving. Procedural justice research suggests that legitimacy grows when people experience neutrality, respectful treatment, and voice – even if outcomes are imperfect (Chan, Bradford, and Stott 2023). The present case extends this insight to implementation settings where "voice" is constrained by limited complaint pathways and by the practical distance between citizens and verification practices. Where frontline interactions are caring and explanatory, suspicion can soften; where interactions are rushed or defensive, suspicion can harden (Vasiljević et al. 2025).

5.3 Oversight under transaction costs: transparency, indicators, and verification

Transparency and reporting are limited substitutes for verification. Consistent with the findings, field checks were often substituted by document-based confirmation because direct verification was constrained by distance and transport costs (see Section 4.1; Table 2). Explainability, appeals, and enforcement features matter more than disclosure alone (Grimmelikhuijsen 2022; Honig, Lall, and Parks 2022; Martin and Waldman 2022). Trust in performance data also depends on source credibility (Schmidthuber, Willems, and Krabina 2023). When verification is costly, street-level systems substitute checking with documentation (Nuesiri 2022; Peeters and Campos 2022). This can protect administrative order while leaving trust fragile and creating risks of indicator-driven distortion.

The evidence supports a clear interpretation of the transparency literature: disclosure can become symbolic when it does not enable understanding or contestation. In settings like this case, notices and reports may circulate among implementers but remain weak signals for citizens because they do not change what citizens can see or do. Studies on algorithmic and programme legitimacy converge on a similar point. What matters is not only that information exists, but that it is explainable, and that credible correction mechanisms exist when citizens believe something is wrong (Grimmelikhuijsen 2022; Martin and Waldman 2022). Large-scale evidence from development programming further shows that transparency improves performance most reliably when accompanied by independent appeals or enforcement features (Honig, Lall, and Parks 2022).

5.4 Policy implications

Three implications follow. First, strengthen administrative capacity at delivery points so reporting supports learning rather than paperwork. This includes simple templates, coaching, and periodic data-quality checks that reduce dependence on a few key facilitators. Second, make transparency usable for citizens. Short public summaries should clarify eligibility, allocation rules, and whom to contact, using non-technical language and predictable update cycles. Third, improve credibility through risk-based and sampling verification that targets high-risk points (e.g. co-financing requests, asset distribution, and indicator-linked incentives). Such designs lower transaction costs while increasing the visibility of oversight. Indonesian evidence suggests risk-based audit approaches can improve

efficiency, but reforms must avoid becoming compliance rituals by connecting oversight to capacity support and citizen-facing trust signals (Anugraheni, Setiawati, and Trisnawati 2022; Gazali, Hisanuddin, and Rasmuin 2024; Salomo and Rahmayanti 2023).

5.5 Limitations

The study supports explanation building but does not offer statistical generalisation. Interview accounts may reflect role incentives, although triangulation across actor groups and documents reduces this risk. Future research could compare cases with different verification designs or test how trust evolves when complaint and verification mechanisms are strengthened.

6. Conclusion

1. Accountability routines can strengthen compliance and traceability, but they do not automatically produce social trust when verification is not publicly credible.
2. Trust deficits reflect principal–agent vulnerabilities under information asymmetry and are reinforced when contributions and allocations are interpreted through prior suspicion.
3. Audit trails, bookkeeping, and routine reports support downward accountability inside groups, yet they can become burdensome where administrative capacity is uneven.
4. Performance accountability linked to service standards can support results orientation, but limited field checks and indicator incentives create risks of paper compliance and distortion.
5. Capacity support, usable citizen-facing transparency, and risk-based verification are key design levers to translate procedural accountability into socially recognised legitimacy under high transaction costs.

Back matter

A. Author Contributions (CRediT)

Umi Farida: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Corresponding author

Hasmin: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Supervision; Validation; Writing – review & editing

Muh. Ramli: Investigation; Data curation; Validation; Writing – review & editing

B. Funding

This research received no external funding.

C. Ethical Statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of PPPM STIE Amkop Makassar (Ethical Clearance No. 114/KomTik-PPPM/STIEAMKOP/IX/2024; approval date: 30 September 2024). All participants provided informed consent. Data were collected voluntarily, anonymised, and reported using role-based identifiers to protect confidentiality.

D. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

E. Data Availability

Due to confidentiality commitments and the sensitive nature of interview materials, the qualitative data are not publicly available. De-identified excerpts may be provided upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to ethical restrictions.

F. Acknowledgements

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Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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ĮGYVENDINIMO ATSKAITOMYBĖ, ATASKAITŲ TEIKIMO TVARKA IR SOCIALINIS PASITIKĖJIMAS TEIKIANT LOKALINES VIEŠĄSIAS PASLAUGAS

Santrauka. *Viešoji politika dažnai vertinama įgyvendinimo vietose, bendruomenių forumuose ir atliekant įprastą administracinį darbą, kuris užtikrina programų vykdymą. Pajėgumų ribojimo aplinkoje atskaitomybė gali tapti paradoksu: dokumentavimas ir ataskaitų teikimas stiprina procedūrinę kontrolę, o pasitikėjimas išlieka trapus, kai tikrinimas yra brangus. Šiame tyrime paaiškinama, kaip įgyvendinimo atskaitomybės procedūros formuoja socialinį pasitikėjimą ir suvokiamą teisėtumą į rezultatus orientuotoje vietos paslaugų programoje, susietoje su minimaliais paslaugų standartais. Buvo naudotas kokybinis aiškinamojo atvejo tyrimas. Duomenys apjungia 38 pusiau struktūrizuotus interviu su pagrindiniais vietos veikėjais ir programos dokumentais. Taikydami abdukcinį teminį metodą, atsekėme mechanizmų kelius, jungiančius atskaitomybės procedūras, tikrinimo apribojimus ir piliečių suvokimą. Nustatėme (i) nuolatinį pasitikėjimo deficitą, susijusį su informacijos asimetrija ir kliento bei agento pažeidžiamumu; (ii) išsamų atskaitomybės darbą taikant auditą, bankų atliekamas išmokas, privalomą buhalteriją ir įprastinį ataskaitų teikimą, įskaitant atskaitomybę grupėse; ir (iii) atskaitomybę už veiklą taikant rezultatų ataskaitas kartu su atitikties popieriniams dokumentams ir rodikliais pagrįsto iškraipymo rizika, esant ribotam patikrinimui vietos lygmeniu. Pateikėme mechanizmais pagrįstą paaiškinimą, kada procedūrinė atskaitomybė tampa socialiai pripažintu teisėtumu, o kada ne, ir nustatėme atskaitomybės projektavimo*

implikacijas esant didelėms sandorių sąnaudoms, įskaitant pajėgumų palaikymą, tinkamą naudoti piliečių atžvilgiu skaidrumą ir rizika pagrįstą tikrinimą.

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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN VIETNAM: POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract. *This study employs legal document analysis and data from the Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) to examine the evolution of citizen participation in local governance in Vietnam and the policy–practice gap. The legal framework has continuously expanded the scope of actors, participatory forms and levels, and mechanisms for exercising citizens' democratic rights. However, PAPI trends suggest that actual citizen participation remains limited and progress is slow, especially in terms of information transparency and local government accountability. A significant gap persists between policy and implementation: while participatory rights have expanded on paper, their enforcement in practice is often formalistic and has a low impact. The study contributes an integrated legal–empirical approach to assessing grassroots democracy (GRD) and offers empirically grounded implications for more effective and democratic local governance.*

Keywords: *citizen participation, local governance, PAPI, grassroots democracy, Vietnam.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *piliečių dalyvavimas, vietos valdymas, PAPI, visuomenės demokratija, Vietnamas.*

Introduction

Globally, citizen participation is regarded as a cornerstone of good governance, and initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership foster transparency and empower citizens (Giao and Thu 2020). In Vietnam, the longstanding motto "the people know, the people discuss, the people do, and the people supervise" reflects the government's emphasis on GRD. Since the late 1990s, the Vietnamese state has introduced policies on GRD aimed at strengthening citizen participation and preventing social conflict (Kwak 2019). Over the past two decades, the legal framework for grassroots democracy has been strengthened, most notably by the 2013 Constitution (which enshrined citizens' participatory rights) and the 2022 Grassroots Democracy Law (which further expands those rights and mechanisms). Meanwhile, since 2011, the annual PAPI survey has collected citizens' feedback on local governance, providing evidence to assess how sound policies translate into practice.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following questions:

(1) How has Vietnam's legal framework for grassroots democracy evolved in strengthening the three pillars of transparency, citizen participation, and accountability in local governance?

(2) To what extent do PAPI indicators reflect actual citizen participation, particularly with respect to transparency, grassroots participation opportunities, and local government accountability?

(3) What are the main gaps between the legal provisions and practice as evidenced by PAPI, and what policy implications could help substantively strengthen citizen participation?

This article integrates legal and empirical analysis to provide a comprehensive assessment of GRD in Vietnam. It provides an updated analysis through 2024, along with evidence-based policy implications, to help bridge the gap between formal regulations and practice.

Literature Review and Research Model

In contrast to top-down administration, modern governance approaches prioritize openness, transparency, and collaboration between authorities and citizens, treating citizens as active partners (Bajrami and Bajrami 2024). This orientation aligns with the "new governance" trend, emphasizing deliberation and stakeholder participation (Bingham et al. 2005).

Citizen participation is typically understood as any activity by private citizens aimed at influencing governmental decision-making (Huntington and Nelson 1976, 4). Arnstein's (1969) seminal "ladder of citizen participation" illustrates levels ranging from nonparticipation (manipulation) and tokenism (informing and consultation) to citizen power (delegated power and citizen control). She argued that without actual power redistribution,

participation becomes an "empty ritual," offering only symbolic involvement. Many later frameworks echo this point. Fung (2006), for example, proposed a "democracy cube" that classifies participatory mechanisms by the participants, the nature of discussions, and the impact of decisions on policy. Overall, a common challenge is moving beyond formalistic, one-way participation toward genuine power-sharing with citizens.

Studies suggest that citizen participation can yield significant benefits for governance, and a greater citizen voice is positively related to public sector performance (Neshkova and Guo 2012; Rivenbark et al. 2019). At the same time, participation is not a panacea: if poorly designed, it can impose high costs and frustration for both officials and citizens (Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Kwak 2019). Researchers have noted that in Vietnam, the government has become more open to consulting citizens and civil society organizations on policy issues, particularly since the 2000s (Kwak 2019). There has been an increase in community consultations on draft laws and local development plans (e.g., Bui 2013; Wells-Dang et al. 2015). However, citizen engagement remains largely shaped by local authorities' willingness to listen, and its depth is still limited by a centralized power structure (Nguyen and Nguyen 2021).

A prominent strand of governance and open government scholarship conceptualizes meaningful citizen participation as resting on an integrated set of conditions that combine transparency, opportunities for participation, and accountability. UNESCAP (2009) identifies participation, transparency, and accountability as core characteristics of good governance, while OHCHR (n.d.) frames them as mutually reinforcing safeguards underpinning anti-corruption and good governance. In the open government literature, the OECD (n.d.) defines open government as a governance culture that promotes transparency, integrity, accountability, and stakeholder participation, reinforcing the view that these elements function as an integrated package. Consistent with this logic, transparency can reduce information asymmetries that limit participation, while participation can generate demands for justification and response, thereby strengthening accountability. The World Bank explicitly describes this pathway from transparency to accountability via citizen engagement (World Bank 2017). Building on these perspectives, our research model structures the analysis around these three pillars, namely Participation at Local Levels, Transparency in Local Decision-Making, and Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens, to compare legal expansion with practical implementation as reported by citizens.

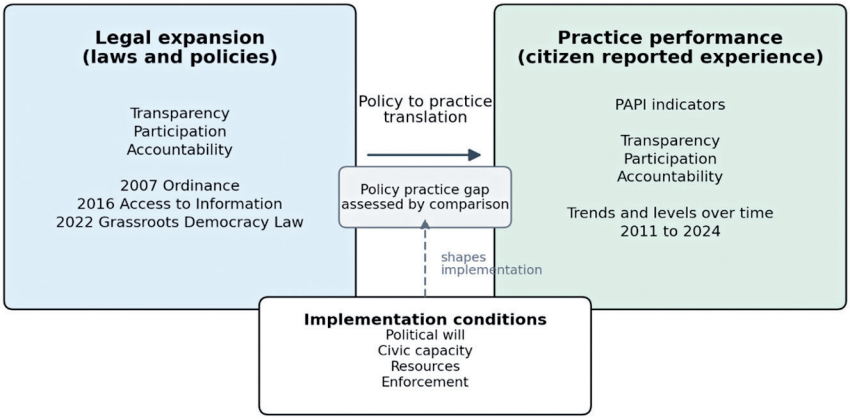

Figure 1. Analytical framework for examining citizen participation in local governance with respect to legal provisions and practical implementation.
Source: Developed by the authors based on relevant legal documents and the PAPI framework

Data and Method

To address the research questions, we employ two approaches: legal document analysis and PAPI survey data analysis. First, we review key legal documents that define citizen participation in Vietnam's local governance, including the 2013 Constitution and major grassroots democracy instruments—most notably the 2007 Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy and the 2022 Law on Grassroots Democracy Implementation—together with related implementation documents. These texts are analyzed to track changes in the range of participants, participatory forms and levels, and enforcement mechanisms for grassroots democracy.

Second, we examine annual data from the PAPI for the period 2011–2024. PAPI is a nationwide survey of citizens' experiences with local governance (CECODES et al. 2025). We use annual national average scores reported in the PAPI national reports and focus on three PAPI dimensions that closely capture participation-related practices: Participation at Local Levels, Transparency in Local Decision-Making, and Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens. Because accountability indicators were introduced later in the PAPI series, the analysis for Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens covers 2016–2024. For each analytical pillar, we use the corresponding PAPI dimension score as a proxy and, where relevant, reference selected sub-dimensions and illustrative indicators (e.g., access to budget and land-use information; perceived opportunities to participate; interactions with local authorities and grievance handling) to map observed practices onto specific legal provisions on grassroots democratic rights. We summarize patterns using descriptive trends and a simple linear time–trend regression, with the year as the predictor and the relevant PAPI

score as the outcome, to characterize the direction and pace of change. This strategy is descriptive and does not identify the causal effects of legal reforms. Because PAPI is perception-based and some survey items and aggregation may change over time, longitudinal comparisons should be interpreted cautiously. Accordingly, we present results as indicative of the policy–practice gap and triangulate them with the legal analysis.

Legal Foundations for Citizen Participation in Vietnam

Vietnam's Constitution provides the foundation for grassroots democracy. Article 28 of the 2013 Constitution guarantees the citizens' right to participate in managing the state and society, and it commits the state to create conditions for citizen input and to respond to their petitions. Other provisions (e.g., Articles 6 and 25) affirm direct democracy and ensure fundamental civil liberties (National Assembly of Vietnam 2013).

Vietnamese law has progressively strengthened and expanded transparency requirements in local governance. The 2007 Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy obliges commune authorities to publicly disclose a broad range of information, including land use plans, local budgets, and the financing of development projects, to ensure that citizens are informed about decisions affecting their communities (Standing Committee of the National Assembly of Vietnam 2007). The 2016 Law on Access to Information further institutionalizes the citizens' right to request information from public authorities and requires agencies to proactively disclose specified categories of information, thereby deepening the transparency regime (National Assembly of Vietnam 2016). Further to these developments, the 2022 Law on Implementation of Grassroots Democracy reinforces transparency by requiring public disclosure of official decisions within five working days and by mandating that local authorities report back to citizens on how their opinions and complaints are handled (National Assembly of Vietnam 2022).

Vietnamese law has progressively expanded the channels for citizens to participate in local governance. The 2007 Ordinance affirms citizens' rights to directly discuss and decide certain local matters, such as contributions to public works or the election of village leaders, and it requires authorities to consult citizens on other matters before making decisions (Standing Committee of the National Assembly of Vietnam 2007). The 2022 Grassroots Democracy Law further broadens participatory opportunities by recognizing the residential community as a collective actor alongside individual citizens, thereby enabling community-wide deliberation and decisions on local affairs. It also expands participation beyond traditional village meetings, allowing citizens to provide feedback via electronic portals, social media, and regular dialogue conferences with local officials (National Assembly of Vietnam 2022). This modernization is intended to lower barriers to participation and encourage broader citizen input.

Vietnamese law has progressively strengthened mechanisms to hold local authorities accountable to citizens through representative oversight, grievance redress, and social

monitoring. The 2015 Law on the Organization of Local Government bolsters the People's Councils' oversight through supervisory activities, the questioning of key officials, and confidence voting, and it requires competent bodies to consider voters' recommendations and report on follow-up actions, thereby reinforcing electoral accountability (National Assembly of Vietnam 2015). The Law on Complaints requires state agencies and competent persons to receive and resolve complaints lawfully and promptly, address violations, and implement resolution decisions, strengthening remedial accountability (National Assembly of Vietnam 2011). Most recently, the 2022 Law on the Implementation of Grassroots Democracy affirms citizens' rights to supervise, make recommendations, complain, denounce, and initiate lawsuits; obliges commune authorities to organize and report on the implementation of residential community decisions; and provides administrative, disciplinary, or criminal sanctions for violations or obstruction of petitions and complaints (National Assembly of Vietnam 2022).

Figure 2 summarizes these legal developments by depicting citizen participation as a graduated set of levels. It highlights the expansion from the 2007 Ordinance's focus on being informed, discussing and deciding, giving opinions, and monitoring to the 2022 Law's broader framework, which adds citizen inspection and the principle that citizens enjoy benefits from policy outcomes.

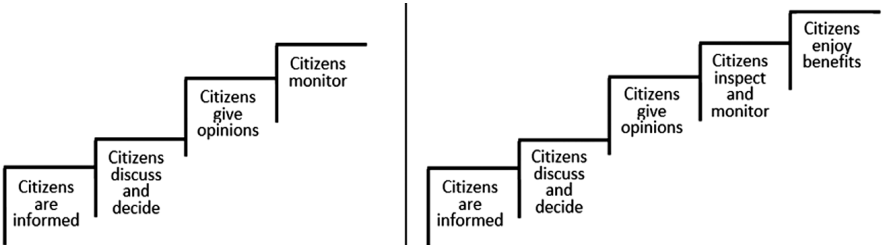

Figure 2. The expansion of levels of citizen participation from Ordinance No. 34/2007 (left) to the Law No. 10/2022/QH15 (right).
Source: Compiled by the authors based on Ordinance No 34/2007/PL-UBTVQH11 and Law No. 10/2022/QH15

In summary, Vietnam's legal framework for citizen participation is relatively coherent and comprehensive. The Constitution outlines fundamental principles and rights, while substantive laws establish an enabling institutional environment for public participation. Table 1 synthesizes the principal legal instruments and their provisions.

Table 1. Key legal instruments governing citizen participation

Year	Legal Instrument	Key Provisions (Transparency, Participation, Accountability)
2007	Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy	**T:** mandatory disclosure of key local information (e.g., budgets, land-use plans); **P:** "people know–discuss–do–supervise," direct decision-making on selected local matters; **A:** community oversight/monitoring arrangements
2011	Law on Complaints	**A:** formal channels and procedures for citizens' complaints and responses by authorities (grievance handling)
2013	Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2013)	**P:** right to participate in state and social management; **T/A:** openness, state duties to receive and respond to citizens' petitions
2015	Law on Organization of Local Government	**T:** public sessions of People's Councils, openness of council activities (with limited closed sessions); **P:** citizen attendance at open council sessions, voter contact, channels to raise opinions/petitions via elected representatives; **A:** strengthened oversight role of People's Councils, questioning/interpellation with required responses; supervision of People's Committees
2016	Law on Access to Information	**T:** right to request information, proactive disclosure obligations for public authorities
2022	Law on Implementation of Grassroots Democracy	**T:** strengthened disclosure requirements; **P:** expanded subjects and channels of participation (including resident communities); **A:** clearer responsibilities and report-back/feedback expectations

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Constitution and related legal instruments

To demonstrate the link between the legal framework discussed above and the empirical assessment that follows, Table 2 provides an illustrative mapping of selected legal anchors to the PAPI proxy measures for transparency, participation, and accountability.

Table 2. Mapping selected legal provisions to PAPI proxy indicators (illustrative)

Pillar	Selected Legal Provisions (Examples)	Expected Practice	PAPI Proxy (Dimension; Illustrative Indicators)
Transparency	GRD instruments (2007 Ordinance; 2022 Law; 2016 Law on Access to Information)	Timely public disclosure and easier citizen access to key local information	Transparency in Local Decision-Making (e.g., access to budget information, access to land-use information/plans)
Participation	GRD instruments (2007 Ordinance; 2022 Law)	More meaningful opportunities for residents to engage in local affairs (discussion, input, monitoring)	Participation at Local Levels (e.g., perceived opportunities to participate)

Pillar	Selected Legal Provisions (Examples)	Expected Practice	PAPI Proxy (Dimension; Illustrative Indicators)
Accountability	GRD instruments (2022 Law) and the Law on Complaints (2011)	More responsive interactions and more effective grievance handling	Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens (e.g., interactions with local authorities, grievance handling/responsiveness)

Note: PAPI measures in this table are illustrative proxies based on annual national average scores reported in the PAPI national reports. Because PAPI is perception-based and items and/or aggregations may change over time, longitudinal comparability is limited.

Citizen Participation in Local Governance: PAPI Evidence (2011–2024)

To evaluate how these policies have been realized in practice, we analyze trends in relevant PAPI indicators from 2011 to 2024. We focus on three dimensions capturing core aspects of citizen participation: (i) Transparency in Local Decision-Making; (ii) Participation at Local Levels; and (iii) Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens. Figure 3 presents the national average PAPI scores for these dimensions over time.

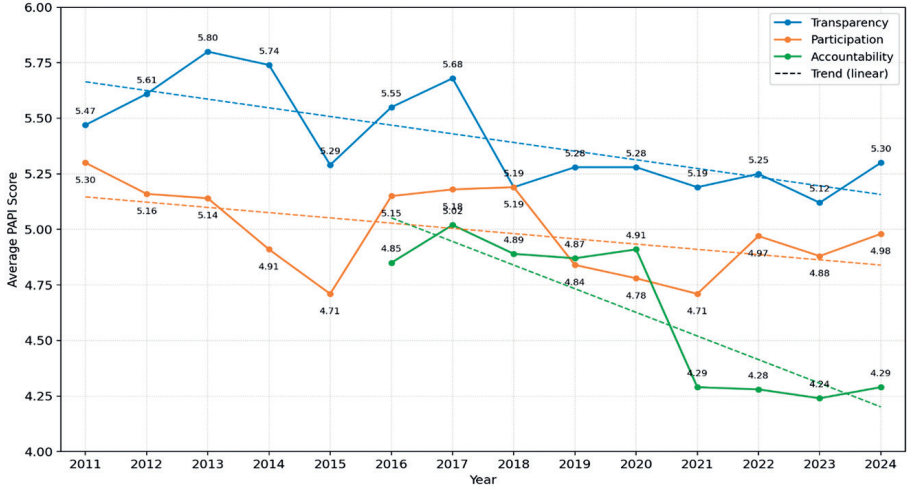

Figure 3. Average PAPI Scores for Transparency in Local Decision-Making (2011–2024), Participation at Local Levels (2011–2024), and Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens (2016–2024) in Vietnam. *Source: Authors' calculations based on PAPI national reports, 2011–2024*

Transparency in Local Decision-Making remains modest and has declined slightly over the past decade. The national transparency score peaked at 5.61 out of 10 in 2012, declined to 5.19 in 2018, and then rose to 5.30 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2020; CECODES et al.

2025). Overall, the 2024 level remained below that of the early 2010s, and the linear trend is negative (β = -0.039 per year, $p < 0.01$). Sub-indicators point to persistent shortcomings. The budget transparency score declined from about 1.74 out of 2.5 in 2016 to 1.31 out of 2.5 in 2023 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). Transparency in land-use planning is also low: 16 to 20 percent of citizens report awareness of local land-use plans, and only 4 to 5 percent report being invited to contribute to related decisions. Consistently, the land use plan disclosure score declined from 1.77 out of 2.5 in 2016 to 1.35 out of 2.5 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). Even the strongest indicator, publication of the list of local poverty beneficiaries, declined from 2.17 out of 2.5 in 2015 to 1.72 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). Together, these patterns suggest that grassroots transparency is often more formal than substantive, with information channels remaining largely symbolic and underused.

Participation at Local Levels also appears stagnant. Nationally, the index was 5.30 in 2011 and 4.98 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025), with fluctuations but no clear upward trend. The estimated decline over 2011–2024 ($\beta = -0.024$ per year, $p = 0.064$) is not statistically significant, indicating a broadly stable long-term pattern at a moderate level. Detailed data points to several barriers. Civic knowledge remains limited: in 2024, about 65 percent of citizens reported some awareness of current local policy, and around 40 percent could name a key local leader (CECODES et al. 2025). Opportunities for direct involvement are also limited. A sub-index capturing participation opportunities in local organizations and decision-making declined from 1.88 out of 2.5 in 2011 to 1.39 in 2024, placing it in the low and declining category (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). Only about 15 percent of respondents report membership in local voluntary associations, and turnout in village leader elections remains modest at around 65–70 percent (CECODES et al. 2025). By contrast, perceived election quality remained relatively high, at around 1.4 to 1.5 out of 2.5, from 2011 to 2024 (CECODES et al. 2012; CECODES et al. 2025). Community contributions show a slight improvement, with the contribution index increasing from 0.85 to 1.08 out of 2.5 between 2011 and 2024 (CECODES et al. 2012; CECODES et al. 2025), indicating a low but upward trend. Overall, however, PAPI evidence suggests that substantive grassroots participation has not improved significantly over the past decade.

Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens is the weakest of the three pillars and has deteriorated in recent years. After averaging 4.8–5.0 from 2016 to 2019 (CECODES et al. 2020), the accountability score declined sharply during the COVID-19 period, reaching a low of 4.24 in 2023 before rising slightly to 4.29 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2025). The estimated linear trend over 2016 to 2024 is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.106$ per year, $p < 0.01$). The indicator capturing citizen interaction with local authorities, such as attending meetings or contacting officials, during 2016–2019 averaged about 2.0 out of 3.3, roughly 61 percent of the maximum possible score, and has remained relatively stable (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). In contrast, the handling of complaints and petitions is highly ineffective, as evidenced by a decline in the average grievance-resolution score

from 1.47 to approximately 0.47 out of 3.3 between 2016 and 2022 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). In 2018, approximately 26 percent of citizens reported lodging a complaint or recommendation (CECODES et al. 2020); by 2024, this figure had declined to 20.6 percent, and among those who did so, fewer than 20 percent were satisfied with the response (CECODES et al. 2025). Access to justice, measured from 2018 to 2024, remained at around 1.8 out of 3.4 (approximately 55 percent of the maximum possible score), with no statistically significant change over time (CECODES et al. 2020; CECODES et al. 2025). The pronounced decline in accountability during 2020 and 2021 may reflect pandemic-related pressures that led local governments to prioritize top-down control over citizen engagement. Overall, accountability to citizens remains the most problematic pillar of local governance, with low levels persisting and, in several key areas, deteriorating.

Discussion

The findings reveal an apparent disconnect between Vietnam's policy framework and the reality of citizen participation. On one hand, the legal framework for GRD has expanded significantly over the past two decades across all three pillars (broadening who can participate, how they can participate, and how authorities must facilitate participation). On the other hand, PAPI data (2011–2024) show that citizens' actual involvement in local governance remains constrained: participation and transparency scores hover around only 5 out of 10, and accountability scores are even lower, at roughly 4.5 out of 10. Voter turnout in local elections is high but has gradually declined, and beyond voting, citizens have few effective avenues to voice their concerns. Core elements of grassroots democracy include open access to information, regular consultation, and responsive grievance handling, yet show little substantive progress. Transparency in local planning and budgeting remains weak, and complaint resolution mechanisms perform poorly, contributing to public dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, certain other aspects of governance have improved (e.g., control of petty corruption and public service delivery), indicating that administrative reforms have advanced more rapidly than democratic reforms. In effect, local governance has become somewhat more efficient but not much more participatory or responsive to citizens.

A substantial gap thus persists between an increasingly "open" participatory framework in theory and a "limited" level of participation in practice. In Arnstein's (1969) terms, citizen involvement in Vietnam often remains at the lower rungs of participation, primarily informing and consulting, rather than advancing to partnership or delegated power, where citizens wield genuine influence. Many participatory processes remain top-down and one-way. Likewise, from Fung's (2006) perspective, Vietnamese citizens typically lack two crucial elements for meaningful participation: complete information and genuine authority to affect outcomes. In short, much of current participation is tokenistic or symbolic.

Conclusions

1. This study finds a two-sided picture of grassroots democracy in Vietnam. On the one hand, the legal framework for citizen participation has expanded significantly since 2007, with an increasing emphasis on openness, transparency, and accountability. On the other hand, PAPI data for 2011–2024 show that actual participation levels remain low with only marginal improvement. The gap between policy and practice is evident: although the law formally confers participatory rights, citizens have not become much more engaged, and local authorities have shown little change in responsiveness to public input. Persistent bottlenecks in transparency, inclusive consultation, and accountability mechanisms help explain why grassroots democracy has not fully realized its potential.
2. To address these bottlenecks and narrow the gap between formal rights and practical engagement, the policy implications highlight three complementary measures to strengthen meaningful participation. First, enhance civic education and public awareness through schools and community programs to improve citizens' knowledge of participatory rights and build trust with local authorities. Second, reinforce accountability by enforcing the 2022 GRD Law, including sanctions for non-compliance, and incorporating citizen feedback into the performance evaluations of local officials. Third, diversify participation channels by strengthening face-to-face community meetings and the representative role of mass organizations, such as the Vietnam Fatherland Front, while expanding digital platforms, including online portals and social media, to broaden opportunities for public feedback.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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Nguyen Tuan Anh, Nguyen Trung Kien, Cao Ky Nam

PILIEČIŲ DALYVAVIMAS VIETOS VALDYME VIETNAME: POLITIKA IR PRAKTIKA

Santrauka. *Šiame tyrime, remiantis teisinių dokumentų analize ir PAPI duomenimis, nagrinėjama piliečių dalyvavimo vietos valdyme Vietname raida ir politikos bei praktikos atotrūkis. Teisinė sistema nuolat plėtė veikėjų, dalyvavimo formų ir lygių bei piliečių demokratinių teisių įgyvendinimo mechanizmų ratą. Tačiau PAPI tendencijos rodo, kad tikrasis piliečių dalyvavimas išlieka ribotas, o pažanga lėta, ypač informacijos skaidrumo ir vietos valdžios atskaitomybės srityse. Tarp politikos ir įgyvendinimo išlieka didelis atotrūkis: nors dalyvavimo teisės teoriškai išsiplėtė, jų įgyvendinimas praktikoje dažnai yra formalus ir turi mažą poveikį. Tyrimas pateikia integruotą teisinį-empirinį požiūrį į vietos demokratijos*

(GRD) vertinimą ir pateikia empiriškai pagrįstas išvadas dėl veiksmingesnio ir demokratiškesnio vietos valdymo.

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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN IN KAZAKHSTAN'S ELECTORAL PROCESSES

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Abstract. *This study analyzes the impact of electoral system reforms on the level of civic engagement in Kazakhstan in the context of political transformations initiated after the 2019 power transition. Special attention is given to gender stratification within the electoral system and its influence on political representation. The case of Kazakhstan is explored within the broader context of post-Soviet transitional societies, where electoral reforms play a key role in the institutionalization of democratic norms. The applied methodology has a universal character and can be adapted to studies of similar processes in countries with comparable political conditions.*

Keywords: *democracy, elections, civic engagement, gender quotas, process, development, participation.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *demokratija, rinkimai, pilietinis įsitraukimas, lyčių kvotos, procesas, vystymasis, dalyvavimas.*

Introduction

During the early years of its independence in the 1990s, Kazakhstan set a strategic course toward building a democratic, legal, and socially oriented state (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995). Achieving this goal required comprehensive political, economic, and institutional reforms. One of the key areas of transformation was the reform of the public administration system, including mechanisms for electoral participation across different levels of government. Despite these declared objectives, over the following three decades, Kazakhstan's political system maintained a high degree of centralization. The formation of key state institutions largely followed a vertical power model, which limited the development of civic participation and weakened the accountability of governmental bodies.

Since 2019, following the power transition from President Nursultan Nazarbayev to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a new stage of political transformation has been initiated (Nazarbayev, 2019). This phase places particular emphasis on modernizing the political system by expanding civic participation and increasing institutional transparency. In this context, electoral reform has emerged as a central instrument for fostering a more inclusive political process.

Among the key changes are the introduction of gender and youth quotas in party lists, the reduction of the electoral threshold from 7% to 5%, the reinstatement of the "against all" option on ballots, the transition to a mixed electoral system, and the implementation of direct elections for local executive officials (akims) (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). These measures reflect a broader attempt to institutionalize a more open and accountable model of governance.

This study aims to analyze the outcomes of recent electoral campaigns in Kazakhstan, including parliamentary elections as well as elections for local representative bodies (maslikhats) and the positions of akims. Particular attention is given to women's participation.

Methodological Approach

This article examines the impact of gender on the transformation of political culture and the dynamics of civic engagement in Kazakhstan's electoral processes. The analysis is based on the application of quantitative methods, including statistical processing of electoral data, which enabled the identification of key trends and structural features of voting behavior.

The empirical basis of the research includes a nationwide online survey conducted among women aged 18 and above across all regions of Kazakhstan. The final sample consisted of 30,030 respondents. The survey was administered between February 2 and 16, 2025. Data collection relied on a snowball sampling technique, which allowed broad geographic coverage within a limited timeframe and budget. Although quota sampling was

not applied, post-survey data cleaning and filtering were conducted in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to enhance the representativeness of the sample and ensure internal consistency of the results. The main limitations of the study are the short fieldwork period and restricted financial resources, which influenced the choice of sampling method.

Literature Review

Given the advanced level of scholarly development on this issue, the present study adopts an alternative strategy for conducting the literature review. The relevance and depth of existing research are assessed based on a selection of the most cited and methodologically significant works available in the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases (Table 1). The review focuses on publications featuring keywords such as "gender quota" from the period 2000 to 2025.

Table 1. Most Cited Recent Scientific Publications on Gender Representation

No.	Author(s)	Article Title	Date of Publication	Citation Count
1	Aili Mari Tripp, Alice Kang	The global impact of quotas: On the fast track to increased female legislative representation	2008/3	830
2	Mona Lena Krook, Joni Lovenduski, Judith Squires	Gender quotas and models of political citizenship	2009/10	244
3	Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer	Making quotas work: The effect of gender quota laws on the election of women	2009/2	459
4	Mona Lena Krook	Quotas for women in politics: Gender and candidate selection reform worldwide	2010	1,610
5	Pamela Paxton, Melanie M. Hughes, Matthew A. Painter	Growth in women's political representation: A longitudinal exploration of democracy, electoral system and gender quotas	2010/1	408
6	Melanie M. Hughes	Intersectionality, quotas, and minority women's political representation worldwide	2011/8	481
7	Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, Jennifer M. Piscopo	The impact of gender quotas	2012/3/2	732
8	Drude Dahlerup	Women, quotas and politics	2013/5/13	1,267

Source: the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases

Studies on the impact of gender quotas on women's political representation have maintained a prominent position in political science discourse. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a noticeable increase in academic interest in this topic, driven both by the global expansion of quota practices and the need to assess the effectiveness of such mechanisms across diverse political-institutional and cultural contexts. Contemporary literature on gender quotas can be broadly divided into two main categories:

- Research assessing the overall effectiveness of quotas in increasing women's political representation.
- Studies focusing on national and regional specificities in the implementation of quota mechanisms.

One of the key scholars in this field is M. Krook, who, in a series of works (Krook, 2006; 2007; Krook and Zetterberg, 2014; Krook, 2025), analyzes how quotas influence the expansion of women's political participation, particularly in developing democracies. In Krook's most cited monograph, Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide, Krook et al. (2009) provide a systematic analysis of the reasons behind the introduction of quotas and their consequences, classifying quota models (reserved seats, party, and legislative quotas) and examining conditions for their effectiveness.

Continuing the discussion on the effects of quotas, Franceschet et al. (2012) in their work The Impact of Gender Quotas note that academic literature has long focused predominantly on quantitative changes – namely, the increase in the number of women in parliaments. However, as the authors emphasize, there remains a shortage of empirical studies evaluating how elected women actually influence policymaking, initiate legislative changes, and participate in the transformation of political agendas.

A significant contribution to the study of national cases and comparative analyses was made by a team led by D. Dahlerup (2013) in the monograph Women, Quotas and Politics. Based on an analysis of a broad spectrum of countries – from Latin America and South Asia to Europe and the United States – this work investigates the institutional and socio-cultural conditions under which quotas lead to expanded female representation and when they remain merely formal measures without real impact.

While the above studies mainly focus on institutional aspects, Krook et al. (2009), in their article Gender Quotas and Models of Political Citizenship, offer a different perspective by introducing the concept of political citizenship. According to the authors, quota effectiveness depends not only on legal frameworks but also on deep-rooted social attitudes, participation norms, and the type of political culture.

The study by Paxton et al. (2010), Growth in Women's Political Representation, is based on a longitudinal analysis of data from 110 countries covering 1975–2000. The research highlights that the presence of quotas does not always immediately increase the number of women in parliaments. Furthermore, the authors point out that proportional electoral systems are generally more effective than majoritarian ones in promoting female representation.

Contrary to institutionally oriented approaches, Tripp and Kang (2007), in The Global

Impact of Quotas, argue that gender quotas foster increased female representation regardless of levels of democratization, institutional maturity, or cultural barriers. This underscores the universal potential of quotas as a tool for political inclusion. Among regional studies, particular attention has been given to Latin American countries (Htun and Jones, 2002; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008; Murray, 2010), where the introduction of legislative quotas was accompanied by active transformation of party systems and increased roles for women in politics.

Overall, analysis of the current scholarly base highlights that gender quotas should be viewed within a broader context – through the lens of institutional design, political culture, socio-economic conditions, and transformations in civic engagement. Among the scientific works devoted to gender quotas, the analysis of Kazakhstan is insufficiently represented; therefore, this article will make a practical contribution to the analysis of the implementation of gender quotas.

Results and Discussion

Entering the fourth decade of independence, Kazakhstan embarked on a new phase of political transformation (Bohr et al., 2019). The primary focus has been on expanding formal citizen participation in decision-making processes at various levels of government. This new course is implemented through electoral system reforms and the introduction of new mechanisms for political representation. However, the extent to which these reforms correspond to their practical implementation remains a subject of scholarly analysis and public debate.

One of the key innovations was the holding of the first direct elections of rural district akims in 2021. This measure was positioned as part of a decentralization policy and the development of local self-government, aimed at strengthening the accountability and responsibility of local authorities to the population, as well as stimulating civic engagement at the grassroots level. This was not the first attempt to introduce mechanisms for the direct election of local executive bodies in Kazakhstan. In December 2004, a presidential decree was signed as part of a pilot project to conduct elections for akims of certain districts on an experimental basis (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2004). However, by 2007, this experiment was effectively discontinued. A subsequent decree reinstated the vertical appointment system (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2007), demonstrating the limited political will for decentralization at that stage. As a result, the reforms of 2021 were implemented against the backdrop of a complex institutional legacy, where the formal expansion of democratic procedures had not always been accompanied by their sustainable integration into practice.

The next step was the 2023 parliamentary and local elections, conducted under a mixed majoritarian-proportional system. This model was intended to enhance competition, broaden the political spectrum, and increase accessibility of the political process for

independent candidates (self-nominees). Additionally, gender, youth, and disability quotas were introduced. However, an analysis of the implementation process shows that formal changes to the rules of the game do not always translate into qualitative changes in political behavior and culture.

The 2021 rural district akim elections were accompanied by high voter turnout, which, according to data from the Central Election Commission, exceeded 80% in several regions (Central Election Commission, 2021). The electoral statistics obtained can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, they may indicate increased public interest in local governance issues. On the other hand, they could reflect the mobilizational nature of the campaigns and administrative influence, traditionally characteristic of electoral processes in post-Soviet states.

However, contrary to the official statistics reporting high voter turnout, the results of a sociological survey conducted by the authors among the rural population present a less optimistic picture of electoral activity. According to the survey, only 57.7% of respondents stated that they regularly participate in elections of rural district akims. Of these, 32.9% reported voting every time, while another 9.9% participate in most cases. Meanwhile, 30.1% of respondents admitted that they have never taken part in elections at this level.

Building on the results of quantitative analysis, it is appropriate to examine the internal structure of electoral engagement. In particular, it is important to analyze parameters such as the gender composition of election participants. This approach allows moving beyond superficial turnout metrics toward a deeper understanding of the qualitative characteristics of political participation.

In many countries worldwide, the introduction of gender quotas is regarded as an effective instrument for ensuring political diversity and enhancing the representation of women in governing bodies. This institutional measure aims to eliminate structural barriers that hinder the equal participation of women in the political process. However, an analysis of existing studies indicates that an increase in the number of women in politics does not necessarily lead to a shift in the dominant status of men as the group wielding power and influence (Hughes, 2011). This phenomenon is explained by the fact that formal increases in representation are not always accompanied by transformations in social and cultural norms that sustain patriarchal hierarchies.

Although gender quotas expand women's access to political positions, they often fail to bring about fundamental changes in the distribution of power. At the same time, empirical evidence suggests that groups with higher proportions of women tend to demonstrate greater effectiveness in their work (Woolley et al., 2010), which may be attributed to their propensity for collaboration, inclusivity, and collective decision-making. Thus, the potential of women in politics extends beyond quantitative representation and directly influences the quality and outcomes of collective action.

In Kazakhstan, the introduction of a 30% quota for women, youth, and persons with disabilities on party lists in 2020 should be viewed as an institutional response to global challenges related to representative participation and gender equality. This formally

established mechanism was intended to promote the structural inclusion of underrepresented social groups in the political decision-making process.

However, an analysis of the 2023 election results reveals a significant gap between the normative framework and actual outcomes (see Table 2). While women comprised 40% of candidates nominated to the Mazhilis, which generally corresponds to the established quota (Central Election Commission, 2023), only 18% of women were elected to the lower house of parliament. There is nearly a twofold decrease in the share of women transitioning from nomination to election (from 40% to 18%). A similar trend is observed at the regional level. Women constituted 20.8% of candidates nominated to regional maslikhats and maslikhats of cities of republican significance, yet only 15.5% were elected (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). The proportion of women among elected akims is only 8.9%, indicating an extremely low level of their representation in the executive vertical at the local level.

Table 2. Election Results for the Mazhilis of Parliament, Regional Maslikhats, Maslikhats of Cities of Republican Significance, and Rural Akims in 2023 by Gender

Level	Nomination		Election	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Mazhilis	201 (60%)	80 (40%)	80 (82%)	18 (18%)
Regional maslikhats, maslikhats of cities of republican significance	79.2%	20.8%	334 (85.5%)	52 (15.5%)
Rural akims	-	-	597 (91.1%)	58 (8.9%)

The analysis of electoral outcomes reveals that the introduction of quota mechanisms has not ensured a substantive increase in women's political representation. Despite formal compliance with candidate nomination quotas, the significant decline in the proportion of women at the election stage indicates the limited effectiveness of this measure in its current form. This imbalance suggests that, given the existing level of women's political activity and engagement, the stated goals of democratic reforms concerning inclusivity and equal representation risk remaining unfulfilled. The key reasons for this discrepancy likely lie in persistent institutional barriers such as party selection mechanisms, electoral preferences, and deeply entrenched gender stereotypes within society.

Under these conditions, the necessity of transitioning from formal quota compliance to a more comprehensive and sustainable approach becomes evident. Such an approach should encompass not only regulatory measures but also the development of support infrastructure, the preparation of women for political participation, and programs aimed at changing societal perceptions of women's roles in the political sphere.

In this context, the experience of other post-Soviet countries (e.g., Georgia and Ukraine) suggests that the success of reforms also depends on the capacity of institutions to adapt to the value heterogeneity of society. In Kazakhstan, this implies the development of feedback mechanisms between citizens and local authorities – such as direct elections of akims – and

the integration of digital platforms to enhance transparency and civic engagement.

The low level of representation of various social groups in the most recent electoral cycles in Kazakhstan reflects not only the limited effectiveness of institutional reforms but also the presence of deep-seated cultural barriers within social cohorts themselves. One of the most pronounced manifestations of this phenomenon is gender stigmatization, which continues to significantly affect women's participation in political life.

According to sociological survey data, 61.8% of women report an unwillingness to participate in politics, indicating a moderate level of both interest and potential engagement. Despite the presence of formal opportunities, the path to active political involvement remains obstructed by a range of structural and socio-cultural factors. The most frequently cited barriers among respondents were:

Widespread gender stereotypes – 34.6%
Lack of support from family and society – 29%
Insufficient political skills and practical experience – 17.2%
Financial constraints – 13.6%
Unwillingness to bear political responsibility – 10%
Low self-confidence – 8.1%

This analysis suggests that women's political engagement is hindered not only by institutional frameworks but also by persistent cultural norms, reproduced within both societal and familial settings. Gender socialization, which shapes perceptions of "traditional" roles for women, continues to limit their political self-expression, despite the state's formal efforts to expand participation.

Conclusion

1. Institutional transformations in Kazakhstan represent a crucial stage in the country's transitional development, aimed at building a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable model of governance. These changes are expected to lay the groundwork for a deeper transformation of political practices, including the expansion of citizen participation in decision-making processes. However, the reforms remain incomplete and require further advancement.
2. Despite the intensification of electoral legislation reforms, there remains a substantial gap between formal procedural norms and the actual level of democratic participation. This is evidenced by empirical data indicating weak political socialization across various social groups. The absence of sustained motivation for civic engagement suggests that institutional reforms alone, without support from socio-cultural factors, are insufficient for fostering a robust democratic culture.
3. In this context, enhancing the transparency of electoral procedures and developing targeted measures for political mobilization – such as supporting women and institutionalizing feedback mechanisms with the population – become critically

important. Only a comprehensive approach that combines institutional reform with the activation of civic participation can facilitate the transition to a substantive model of democracy.

4. Particular attention should be given to political socialization as a systemic process, encompassing educational initiatives, the media environment, and civic engagement practices. Without strengthening these components, reform efforts risk remaining superficial and incapable of transforming the cultural foundations that underpin democratic values.

Future Research

This study is limited in its ability to present a more stratified picture of civic and political participation. Specifically, the analysis does not address age, geographic, or socio-economic differentiation in electoral engagement, which could offer a more comprehensive understanding of participation dynamics amid political transformations. Moreover, in light of the ongoing digital transformation of political communication and institutional interaction, a promising direction for future research is the use of predictive scenarios, including those grounded in digital analytics. Of particular interest is the study of the potential of online platforms as factors capable of reshaping both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of electoral participation – from voter registration to digital campaigning and mobile electoral mobilization.

Overall, further research on political transformations in Kazakhstan should focus on the long-term effects of reforms and the development of mechanisms for sustainable civic engagement. Special attention should be paid to the local level of governance, where the key limitations of existing political institutions are most clearly manifested. To overcome electoral apathy, increase trust in government, and strengthen democratic practices, not only institutional will but also broad socio-cultural support is needed – requiring a comprehensive and systemic approach.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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MOTERŲ PILIETINIS ĮSITRAUKIMAS KAZACHSTANO RINKIMŲ PROCESUOSE

Santrauka. *Šiame tyrime analizuojamas rinkimų sistemos reformų poveikis pilietinio įsitraukimo lygiui Kazachstane politinių transformacijų, prasidėjusių po 2019 m. valdžios perėjimo, kontekste. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas lyčių stratifikacijai rinkimų sistemoje ir jos įtakai politiniam atstovavimui. Kazachstano atvejis nagrinėjamas platesniame posovietinių pereinamojo laikotarpio visuomenių kontekste, kur rinkimų reformos atlieka pagrindinį vaidmenį institucionalizuojant demokratines normas. Taikoma metodologija yra universalaus pobūdžio ir gali būti pritaikyta panašių procesų tyrimams šalyse, kuriose yra panašios politinės sąlygos.*

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NETWORK MANAGEMENT IN PUBLIC POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS AND PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

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Abstract. *This article explores the role of network management in enhancing the effectiveness of public policy implementation in multi-actor and complex project contexts. Using a theoretical-conceptual approach and secondary literature, the study synthesizes institutional, relational, and meta-governance perspectives, illustrated with empirical evidence from tobacco*

prevention policy in Switzerland. The findings indicate that active network management—through facilitation, mediation, and consensus building—strengthens implementation performance, particularly in conflict-prone policy environments. Contextual factors, including institutional status, network integration, managerial workload, and a policy design phase, as well as temporal dimensions, such as long-term engagement and adaptive learning, influence the success of these strategies. Practically, the article emphasizes strengthening managerial capacities, inter-actor coordination, and continuous evaluation to improve the effectiveness of public policy implementation.

Keywords: *network management, governance, collaborative, public policy.*

Raktažodžiai: *tinklų valdymas, vadyba, bendradarbiavimas, viešoji politika.*

1. Introduction

The dynamics of modern governance have reshaped the formulation and implementation of public policy, as the complexity of contemporary issues can no longer be addressed solely through bureaucratic mechanisms. Over the past two decades, public administration has undergone a transformation alongside an increasingly multisectoral society, in which political and administrative authority has become fragmented, and both governmental and non-governmental actors are no longer able to resolve complex social problems independently. The rigidity and centralization of hierarchical models have been increasingly questioned, prompting a shift toward more adaptive and inclusive network-based collaborative governance (Wang and Ran 2023; Hadorn 2022).

The network approach emphasizes the involvement of diverse stakeholders in the formulation and decision-making processes of public policy. Addressing complex problems requires multi-actor participation, making this approach particularly relevant as a social structure composed of actors interconnected through information exchange, resource distribution, legal relationships, and various forms of interaction (Craps and Brugnach 2015; Carlsson and Sandström 2008). Sørensen and Torfing (2005) assert that the network approach emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional government models that were overly state-oriented. In many developing country contexts, government dominance in the policy process has been shown to limit cross-actor collaboration. Similarly, Torfing (2005) argues that traditional and overly state-centric models of governance tend to limit interaction and collaboration between actors in policy networks. Thus, governance is no longer solely a matter for the government but rather the result of interaction between various actors in policy networks.

In contemporary public administration studies, the network approach has undergone significant development (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). Awareness of the limitations of conventional top-down models in policy implementation has prompted scholars to develop

alternative frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of implementation processes more comprehensively (Sabatier 2008). The network approach is viewed as an adaptive response to increasingly complex and fragmented policy environments (Agranoff and McGuire 2001), with its processes continuously evolving in line with changing environmental conditions and the dynamics of the actors involved (Ulibarri et al. 2020). This theoretical perspective is further supported by empirical evidence; comprehensive studies indicate that network governance has become an essential form of multi-organizational coordination in the provision of public services (Provan and Kenis 2008). Although collaborative approaches are not new to public administration, their intensity and scope have increased dramatically in recent decades, demanding the collective attention of both scholars and practitioners (Kapucu and Hu 2020). Moreover, the global trend toward collaborative governance reinforces the relevance of the network approach in contemporary public policy research and practice (Ansell and Torfing 2021).

Previous studies have focused on network structures or macro-level governance, while the influence of managerial mechanisms and operational contexts on policy implementation performance has rarely been discussed. Previous literature has also often overlooked the role of managerial strategies in network outcomes (Ysa et al. 2014). In this regard, Klijn et al. (2010) assert that without active network management, governance structures alone are insufficient to guarantee the achievement of expected results.

For example, Provan and Kenis (2008) focus on the form and coordination of networks, while Agranoff and McGuire (2001) emphasize adaptation to complexity; both pay less attention to the interaction of contextual factors and managerial activities at the specific implementation level. Therefore, there is a need to integrate perspectives that previous studies tend to separate, namely institutional, relational, and meta-governance approaches, into a comprehensive analytical framework to explain network effectiveness. This opens up space for research that highlights how managerial activities, interaction dynamics, and contextual factors influence implementation outcomes. Thus, this paper links context, network management, and implementation performance at the micro or project level, where Hadorn's (2022) contribution becomes relevant. Concrete case studies, such as policy implementation in developing countries or the Swiss case analyzed by Hadorn (2022), demonstrate varying degrees of network management effectiveness and emphasize the importance of analysis that links theory with actual practice.

Based on these theoretical and empirical advances, this article seeks to deepen the understanding of the network approach by highlighting the analytical dimensions of network management in the policy implementation process. Rather than viewing governance networks solely as structures, this study emphasizes the managerial and contextual mechanisms that enable networks to function effectively and generate policy outcomes. By synthesizing institutional, relational, and meta-governance perspectives, the discussion aims to explain how managerial activities, contextual factors, and interaction dynamics collectively shape implementation performance. This conceptual orientation forms the foundation for the subsequent analytical framework, which integrates theoretical arguments with

empirical illustrations to explore the relationship between network management, context, and policy effectiveness.

2. Method

This study adopts a theoretical-conceptual approach to examine and synthesize scholarly perspectives on network management in public policy implementation. This approach is employed to deepen conceptual understanding of governance dynamics characterized by multi-actor involvement and complex contextual conditions (Jaakkola 2020). The data are drawn from secondary scholarly literature, including reputable international journal articles, foundational academic books, and prior empirical studies relevant to network governance and network management. The literature was selected purposively based on its relevance and theoretical contribution. Empirical studies, such as Hadorn's (2022), are used as analytical illustrations rather than as primary empirical evidence. The analysis is conducted through conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis, integrating institutional, relational, and meta-governance perspectives to explain the relationships between contextual conditions, managerial mechanisms, and policy implementation performance (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Agranoff 2007; Torfing et al. 2012). This study strengthens the theoretical foundation of network management research and provides an analytical framework for future empirical inquiry (Bacharach 1989).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Rethinking Network Management: Institutional, Relational, and Meta-Governance Perspectives

If we trace the meaning of network management individually, in the context of policy studies, the word "management" is more interpreted as activity management (Klijn 1996). Meanwhile, "network" is interpreted as interaction or collaboration between actors in a policy. So, "network management" can be construed as an activity that manages interactions between actors in a policy.

Theoretically, network management can be viewed from complementary institutional and relational perspectives. The institutional perspective (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) emphasizes the role of formal structures and rules in shaping actor interactions, while the relational perspective (Agranoff 2007; Mandell 2001) highlights interpersonal relationships, social dynamics, as well as trust-building, conflict mediation, and facilitation of communication among stakeholders. The third perspective (Torfing et al. 2012) combines institutional and relational elements within a meta-governance framework, viewing network management as a strategic intervention that shapes actor interactions without reducing

their autonomy and flexibility. This approach emphasizes complexity, uncertainty, and the importance of adaptability and learning in network governance.

Contemporary theoretical perspectives on network management increasingly recognize the importance of context in shaping network dynamics. Bryson et al. (2015) emphasize that the effectiveness of network management strategies is highly dependent on contextual factors, including the characteristics of the problem at hand, the institutional landscape, and political conditions. In parallel, Emerson et al. (2012) developed a collaborative governance framework that places network management in broader socio-ecological systems, recognizing that network dynamics are shaped by and contribute to the wider policy ecosystem.

The empirical investigation conducted by Hadorn (2022) contributes to this theoretical discourse by identifying two fundamental questions in the study of network management: first, how different constellations of contextual factors influence the level of network management activity (active versus non-active), and second, how network-level characteristics, including network management, interact with project-level characteristics to influence implementation performance.

3.2 Understanding the Context of Active Network Management

As Hadorn (2022) observes, the dynamics of network management are not uniform but highly dependent on context. Four key conditions—institutional status, network integration, managerial workload, and a policy design phase—collectively shape how active or passive network management emerges in practice. The legal status of the management institution is a significant determinant of the autonomy and legitimacy of network managers. Research by Bressers and O'Toole (2005) shows that organizations with stronger legal status tend to have greater access to resources and institutional legitimacy, facilitating the implementation of more proactive network management strategies.

The level of integration in a network represents the structural position of the network manager and his or her access to the flow of information and resources in the network. Burt (2004) developed the concept of "structural holes," which explains how actors who connect previously unconnected groups have strategic advantages regarding information access and control. An empirical study by Berardo and Scholz (2010) shows that network managers with a high degree of centrality, as measured by the number and quality of their connections with other network actors, tend to be more effective in coordinating network activities and mediating inter-organizational conflicts.

The caseload that network managers handle influences their time allocation and attention to network management functions. These findings are consistent with research conducted by Milward and Provan (2003), which shows that an imbalance between managerial responsibilities and available administrative resources often hampers the effectiveness of network management. The policy design phase represents the temporal context of policy implementation and influences the scope of discretion available to network managers. In

parallel, a study by Howlett et al. (2009) shows that different phases in the policy cycle, from formulation to evaluation, require different management approaches, with significant implications for network management strategies.

Hadorn's (2022) analysis expands our understanding of the interactions between these contextual factors. The study identifies how specific constellations of legal status, integration, caseload, and policy design phases interact through configurational comparative analysis to produce active or non-active network management patterns. These findings are consistent with the "equifinality" approach advocated by Ragin (2008), which suggests that the same outcome (in this case, active network management) can be produced through different combinations of causal factors.

3.3 Rethinking the Link Between Network Management and Implementation Performance

The link between network management and policy implementation performance deserves renewed attention, particularly in light of recent empirical findings such as those presented by Hadorn (2022). Rather than treating this relationship as linear, it is more accurate to view it as dynamic and multi-level. Network management operates simultaneously at the system and project levels, where managerial actions, contextual conditions, and interaction patterns collectively shape implementation outcomes. This perspective resonates with the analytical framework developed by Provan and Milward (1995), which conceptualizes network effectiveness across multiple layers, from individual organizational performance to broader network-level outcomes.

At the network level, Hadorn (2022) identifies network management as a significant determinant of collective problem-solving capacity. These findings align with previous research by Klijn et al. (2010), which shows that proactive network management strategies contribute positively to the quality of the collaborative decision-making process and the suitability of the resulting solutions. More specifically, the study demonstrated that network managers who actively employ facilitation, mediation, and brokerage strategies tend to facilitate higher levels of collaboration and coordination among network actors.

At the project level, Hadorn (2022) identified several factors that influence implementation performance, including task complexity, resource availability, and level of political support. These findings are consistent with the implementation analysis framework developed by Matland (1995), which proposes that the interaction between the level of policy ambiguity and the intensity of political conflict influences implementation dynamics. Projects with low ambiguity and strong political support tend to show more linear and predictable implementation patterns, while projects with high ambiguity and intense conflict require a more adaptive and learning-based implementation approach.

Hadorn's (2022) Bayesian analysis revealed complex interactions between network-level and project-level characteristics in shaping implementation outcomes. Specifically, the study shows that active network management has a more substantial positive effect on

project performance in complex tasks and contentious policy environments. These findings are in line with the contingency perspective proposed by Turrini et al. (2010), which suggests that the effectiveness of a particular network management strategy depends on the contextual and substantive characteristics of policy implementation.

Hadorn's study also identified the moderating effect of network structural characteristics on the relationship between network management and implementation performance. Specifically, active network management shows more substantial positive effects in networks with lower levels of structural integration, indicating a compensatory role of network management in less optimal structural contexts. These findings reinforce the perspective that Herranz (2008) proposed, which suggests that different management strategies may be required for networks with different structural characteristics.

The temporal dimension has also proven to be important in policy implementation. The relationship between network management and implementation performance evolves over time, with the positive effects of active network management becoming more evident in mature implementation phases. These findings align with Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) on the importance of continuity and learning, as well as Majone and Wildavsky's (1978) concept of "implementation as evolution," which views implementation as a dynamic process that develops through interaction with the policy environment.

3.4 Illustrative Insights from the Swiss Smoking Prevention Policy

The case of tobacco prevention policy in Switzerland provides an illustrative example of how contextual factors and managerial mechanisms interact within governance networks, influencing implementation performance. This section draws on Hadorn's (2022) study as an analytical reference to demonstrate how active network management can enhance coordination, stakeholder engagement, and implementation effectiveness in complex policy environments. Switzerland offers a particularly informative context due to its federal structure, where cantons possess significant autonomy in implementing health policies. At the cantonal level, tobacco prevention programs are carried out through networks involving both governmental and non-governmental actors, creating a valuable "policy laboratory" to observe how institutional status, network integration, and managerial workload shape network management practices.

In his comparative analysis, Hadorn (2022) examined 13 cantonal implementation networks involving both structural and behavioral interventions. The findings revealed considerable variation in network management approaches across cantons. Some networks exhibited active management—characterized by intensive coordination, facilitation, and consensus building—while others followed more passive or non-active patterns, with limited managerial intervention. These variations were associated with differences in the institutional authority of managing organizations (governmental versus non-governmental), the level of integration within the tobacco policy network, the volume of cases handled, and the maturity of the prevention program.

Hadorn's configurational analysis identified several pathways leading to active network management. A combination of strong institutional status (typically governmental organizations), high levels of network integration, moderate caseloads, and mature implementation phases tended to result in more proactive management strategies. Conversely, in cases where institutional authority was weaker, strong integration and adaptive managerial engagement could compensate for structural limitations—a finding consistent with Ragin's (2008) principle of *equifinality*, whereby similar outcomes can emerge from different combinations of causal factors.

In terms of implementation performance, networks exhibiting active management generally achieved higher levels of success in meeting smoking prevention objectives. This effect was especially evident in complex interventions, such as enforcing smoke-free regulations in public spaces or restricting tobacco marketing. In these settings, coordination, mediation, and consensus building played a crucial role in overcoming resistance and mobilizing support from diverse stakeholders.

A growing body of research supports this insight. Network management has been shown to be closely linked to the outcomes of governance networks, with active strategies—such as connecting actors and facilitating collaboration—enhancing mutual trust and performance (Klijn et al. 2010). Similarly, Andrews and Beynon (2017) found that "technical networking" or intensive interaction among partners correlates with higher stakeholder support, while Edlmann and Grobbelaar (2021) emphasize that facilitation and coordination foster open communication, conflict management, and alignment of stakeholder expectations. The involvement and creativity of multiple actors is therefore not merely a procedural formality, but a defining feature of contemporary governance.

Hadorn's (2022) analysis also underscores the interaction between network management and project characteristics. Active network management was found to have a stronger positive impact in complex projects with higher potential for conflict. These findings align with Klijn et al. (2010), who demonstrated that the number and quality of management strategies implemented significantly influence network outcomes, and with Ysa et al. (2014), who showed that trust building and facilitative strategies enhance managerial influence on network dynamics. Finally, the Swiss case highlights the temporal dimension of policy implementation. Long-term prevention programs tended to exhibit greater effectiveness, reflecting the importance of sustained engagement, learning, and adaptation over time. This observation resonates with the evolutionary view of policy implementation, which emphasizes incremental adjustment through trial and error and institutional learning (Bullock et al. 2021).

4. Conclusion

This study emphasizes that network management is not merely a structural or procedural function but a dynamic and strategic activity embedded in multi-actor governance

contexts. The discussion shows that active network management—through strategies such as actor linkage, facilitation, mediation, and consensus building—plays a crucial role in enhancing collaborative performance, particularly in complex and conflict-prone policy environments. Contextual conditions, including institutional status, network integration, managerial workload, and the stage of policy design, determine the extent to which these strategies can be effectively applied.

Furthermore, the temporal dimension emphasizes that long-term engagement, adaptive learning, and sustained coordination are crucial for achieving meaningful policy outcomes, with implementation evolving through iterative cycles of experimentation and institutional learning, underscoring the adaptive nature of governance.

From a practical perspective, these reflections reaffirm the strategic importance of network management in mobilizing stakeholder commitment, coordinating collective action, and fostering collaborative problem-solving. Strengthening managerial capacities—both individually, through professional development, and institutionally, through supportive governance frameworks—is essential for improving implementation effectiveness in complex network settings. Although this article does not present new empirical findings, its conceptual synthesis provides a robust analytical foundation for further inquiry. Future research could extend this framework across diverse policy domains, institutional arrangements, and temporal scales, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how networks of actors can be effectively governed to address contemporary public challenges.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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TINKLŲ VALDYMAS ĮGVENDINANT VIEŠĄJĄ POLITIKĄ: KONCEPCINĖS REFLEKSIJOS IR PRAKTINĖS ĮŽVALGOS

Santrauka. *Čia nagrinėjamas tinklo valdymo vaidmuo didinant viešosios politikos įgyvendinimo efektyvumą daugiašaliuose ir sudėtinguose projektuose. Remiantis teoriniu-konceptualiu požiūriu ir antrine literatūra, tyrime susintetinamos institucinės, santykinės ir metavaldymo perspektyvos, iliustruojamos empiriniais įrodymais iš tabako prevencijos politikos Šveicarijoje. Išvados rodo, kad aktyvus tinklo valdymas – pasitelkiant moderavimą, tarpininkavimą ir sutarimo kūrimą – stiprina įgyvendinimo rezultatus, ypač konfliktams linkusioje politikos aplinkoje. Kontekstiniai veiksniai, įskaitant institucinį statusą, tinklo integraciją, vadovų darbo krūvį ir politikos kūrimo etapą, taip pat laiko aspektai, tokie kaip ilgalaikis įsitraukimas ir adaptyvus mokymasis, turi įtakos šių strategijų sėkmei. Straipsnyje pabrėžiamas vadovų gebėjimų stiprinimas, veikėjų tarpusavio koordinavimas ir nuolatinis vertinimas, siekiant pagerinti viešosios politikos įgyvendinimo efektyvumą.*

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