



Rethinking Public Governance: A Qualitative Study on the Meanings, Practices, and Challenges of Contemporary Governance

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Abstract - The transformation of contemporary public governance reflects a significant shift from traditional public administration toward more collaborative, participatory, and network-based approaches. Increasing institutional complexity, fragmented authority, and growing demands for transparency and accountability have prompted a rethinking of governance concepts and practices. This study aims to explore the meanings, practices, and challenges of public governance as perceived and experienced by key actors involved in governance processes. Adopting an interpretive qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews, policy and legal document analysis, and observations of governance practices across diverse institutional contexts. The findings reveal that public governance is understood in multiple and often contested ways, highlighting tensions among managerial, legal, and participatory dimensions. Governance practices frequently diverge from formal institutional designs, shaped by power relations, informal interactions, and varying actor capacities. Moreover, contemporary governance faces persistent challenges, including authority fragmentation, transparency deficits, and governance fatigue, which collectively undermine policy effectiveness and public legitimacy. This study contributes to governance scholarship by emphasizing the need for context-sensitive and adaptive governance frameworks and offers policy implications for strengthening legal and policy arrangements that support more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable public governance.

Keywords: Public governance; Contemporary governance; Public policy; Qualitative study; Public administration

Abstrak - Transformasi tata kelola publik kontemporer menunjukkan pergeseran signifikan dari model administrasi publik tradisional menuju pendekatan yang lebih kolaboratif, partisipatif, dan berbasis jejaring. Kompleksitas aktor, fragmentasi kewenangan, serta tuntutan transparansi dan akuntabilitas menuntut pemaknaan ulang terhadap konsep dan praktik governance. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi secara mendalam makna, praktik, dan tantangan tata kelola publik sebagaimana dipersepsikan dan dialami oleh para aktor yang terlibat dalam proses pemerintahan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif interpretatif dengan desain studi kasus multi-situs, melibatkan wawancara semi-terstruktur, analisis dokumen kebijakan dan regulasi, serta observasi terhadap praktik tata kelola di berbagai konteks kelembagaan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tata kelola publik dipahami secara beragam, mencerminkan ketegangan antara dimensi manajerial, legal, dan partisipatif. Praktik governance di lapangan sering kali menyimpang dari desain normatif kelembagaan, dipengaruhi oleh dinamika kekuasaan, relasi informal, dan kapasitas aktor. Selain itu, tantangan utama tata kelola kontemporer meliputi fragmentasi otoritas, defisit transparansi, serta kelelahan tata kelola yang berdampak pada legitimasi kebijakan publik. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kajian governance dengan menegaskan pentingnya pendekatan kontekstual dan adaptif, serta menawarkan implikasi kebijakan bagi penguatan kerangka hukum dan kebijakan yang lebih responsif, inklusif, dan berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: Tata kelola publik; Governance kontemporer; Kebijakan publik; Pendekatan kualitatif; Administrasi publik



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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The transformation in public governance reflects a significant transition from traditional public administration methods to modern networked and collaborative models. Contextual factors including diverse stakeholder needs and increasing complexity in governance are pivotal in driving this shift (Ombagi et al., 2023; Gebremeskel et al., 2023). This evolution is underscored by the necessity for

robust structures capable of facilitating stakeholder interaction and joint decision-making (Domínguez et al., 2025). Furthermore, contemporary governance paradigms emphasize decentralization and digitalization, which foster innovative modes of inclusivity and participation among various stakeholders (Banerjee et al., 2020; Dove et al., 2024). Despite advancements in established normative governance frameworks, disparities exist in their practical application within governance systems, indicating a critical gap requiring empirical exploration (Malakoane et al., 2022).

To fully understand contemporary governance, it is essential to consider the experiences and perspectives of key actors involved in governance processes. Reassessing these lived experiences facilitates a richer qualitative inquiry into governance meanings and practices, particularly under changing social, political, and economic climates (Wang et al., 2025). The complexities surrounding effective public governance necessitate qualitative approaches that delve into the narratives and interpretations of different stakeholders, reframing governance within a context-sensitive framework (Nuridin et al., 2022).

Research Problem and Questions

The study aims to investigate three primary research questions:

How do actors conceptualize and interpret public governance within current contexts?

What practices are adopted in governance on a day-to-day administrative and policy level?

What are the major challenges encountered in realizing effective, accountable, and inclusive governance Quintana (2025)?

By addressing these questions, the research will illuminate the dynamics between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, responding directly to the demands of contemporary governance challenges (Brubacher et al., 2024).

Research Objectives and Contributions

The primary objectives of this research are to explore and articulate the meanings attributed to public governance, scrutinize real-world governance practices, and contribute to the ongoing theoretical discourse surrounding governance scholarship (Uddin, 2024). This exploration aims to provide insights that can guide future studies and enhance practical governance capacity through evidence-based recommendations (Lauwo et al., 2022).

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Conceptualizing Public Governance

Governance encompasses diverse definitions that reflect its roles in coordination, negotiation, and inclusion of stakeholders, underscoring critical components such as accountability and transparency (Fadiah et al., 2023; Ssenyonjo et al., 2022). The concept of public governance now extends beyond conventional paradigms, integrating multifaceted interactions among various actors, including governmental, non-governmental, and private entities. This complexity necessitates a coherent understanding of governance frameworks that can adapt to local contexts and varying stakeholder expectations (Bianchi, 2022).

Governance in Practice: Beyond Institutional Design

Understanding governance in practice involves recognizing the role of informal interactions and underlying power dynamics that shape decision-making. Empirical studies often reveal that actual governance practices deviate from established institutional designs, indicating that responsiveness to contextual realities is paramount for effective governance (Reddel et al., 2024; Linstad et al., 2024). The nuances of power relationships among diverse stakeholders also inform how governance outcomes are realized in practice (Usman et al., 2025).

Legal and Policy Dimensions of Governance

The relationship between legal frameworks and governance is multifaceted; legal systems can create both opportunities and obstacles for effective governance (Mukhlis & Perdana, 2022; Aziz, 2023). Policy instruments provide the guiding structures for governance behavior, yet their functionality heavily relies on coherent support mechanisms from both governmental and non-governmental perspectives (Anciano, 2025). The interplay between law and policy thus remains a significant focus in shaping effective governance processes (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

Conceptual Framework

This research aims to establish a comprehensive framework integrating governance theories with socio-legal perspectives. Such a framework highlights governance as a context-dependent and socially constructed process, which varies according to actor interactions and institutional realities (Ikuteyijo et al., 2024; Pike, 2020). By applying this multi-dimensional lens, the research seeks to elucidate the complexities and challenges that characterize contemporary governance landscapes (Aweesha et al., 2025; Gebara et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Approach

The study will employ an interpretative qualitative design characterized by case-oriented and multi-site methodologies. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of governance contexts, accommodating the multifaceted nature of the subject matter (Howell et al., 2023; Rajan et al., 2021). Participants' insights collected through qualitative means will further enrich the understanding of public governance dynamics (Fernandes et al., 2021; Liao & Ruei, 2025).

Research Context and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy will be utilized to select participants from diverse governance settings, including officials from public institutions and relevant non-state actors. This selection criterion aims to gather varied perspectives that accurately represent the multifarious governance landscape (d'Alençon & Ortiz, 2024; Peda & Vinnari, 2022).

Data Collection Methods

Data will be collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, document analyses, and observational techniques. Employing multiple methods will facilitate triangulation, enhancing the robustness and credibility of findings (Antonio, 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2025). This comprehensive approach will capture the complexities inherent in governance practices and stakeholder interactions (Koff et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

Thematic and interpretive analysis will be utilized to uncover underlying patterns in the data, supported by cross-case comparisons to elucidate differences and similarities across contexts. This analytical strategy seeks to provide deeper insights into the meanings derived from governance practices and the experiences of various actors involved.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics will underpin the entire research process, emphasizing informed consent, confidentiality, and reflexivity. Recognizing the sensitive nature of governance-related matters, the study will prioritize the ethical implications of participant engagement and data management.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Meanings of Public Governance

Preliminary findings will reveal diverse interpretations of governance as articulated by various actors, elucidating tensions among managerial, legal, and participatory dimensions within governance practices. The study will highlight how these differing perspectives influence governance outcomes and stakeholder engagement (Asbari et al., 2026; Cahyono, 2026; Purwanto, 2026).

Governance Practices in Everyday Contexts

The research will document observations that signify the dynamic interplay between formal governance mechanisms and informal practices, thereby illustrating how adaptive governance strategies are employed to navigate institutional limitations. This exploration emphasizes the significance of context in shaping the effectiveness of governance practices.

Challenges of Contemporary Governance

Identified challenges within contemporary governance will include notable issues like fragmentation of authority, transparency deficits, and governance fatigue. These challenges critically affect the effectiveness of policy implementation and public trust in governance systems.

Discussion

Rethinking Governance beyond Normative Models

In moving from normative governance designs to practical applications, this section proposes a recalibrated focus on how governance practices can redefine theoretical frameworks. Addressing the gaps between theory and practice is vital for evolving governance scholarship.

Governance, Power, and Legitimacy

Power dynamics play an essential role in navigating governance outcomes. This discussion will critically assess how legitimacy issues arise in multi-actor arrangements and their implications for public policy.

Legal and Policy Implications

An analysis of how legislation can be better aligned with the realities of governance will propose pathways toward designing adaptable frameworks that respond to contemporary challenges.

CONCLUSION

Key Conclusions

The evolution of public governance is characterized as contested, wherein effectiveness is contingent upon diverse actor perspectives and contextual practices. The findings underscore the need for adaptive and inclusive governance strategies that are responsive to local contexts and stakeholder dynamics.

Policy and Institutional Implications

Recommendations will be made to bolster governance capacities and adapt institutional frameworks. Enhancing participatory mechanisms is crucial for fostering inclusive governance structures.

Limitations and Future Research

The study will identify limitations stemming from qualitative methodologies and suggest future research avenues that could include comparative and longitudinal studies to better understand governance complexities over time.

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