



Editorial

Editorial for the Special Edition—Contemporary Local Governance, Wellbeing, and Sustainability: Integrating Digital Innovations and Societal Trust for Future Resilience

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1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of local governance, the intersection of digital technology, citizen engagement, and sustainability presents unique opportunities and challenges. This special edition of the MDPI *Social Sciences* journal explores how contemporary local governance can leverage these factors to enhance public wellbeing and sustainability. The eleven papers included in this edition provide a comprehensive view of best practices, technological advancements, and sociopolitical dynamics that shape the governance landscape across different regions and contexts, forming a tapestry of eleven interconnected studies that delve into the critical role of local governance in shaping the wellbeing and sustainability of our communities. As the world grapples with complex challenges, local authorities stand at the forefront, navigating a web of opportunities and hurdles in their pursuit of a brighter future. These diverse studies collectively offer a nuanced understanding of the contemporary landscape of local governance and pave the way for further exploration and innovation.

2. The Papers

The papers included in this special edition are listed below:

1. Contested Borderlands: Experimental Governance and Statecraft in the Laos Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone;
2. Best Practices for Municipalities to Promote Online Citizen Participation and Engagement on Facebook: A Narrative Review of the Literature;
3. Digital Access to Judicial Services in the Brazilian Amazon: Barriers and Potential;
4. The Challenges of Artificial Intelligence in Public Administration in the Framework of Smart Cities: Reflections and Legal Issues;
5. Trust, Corruption, and Tax Compliance in Fragile States: On a Quest for Transforming Africa into Future Global Powerhouse;
6. A Quantitative Study on the Factors Influencing Implementation of Cybersecurity Laws and Regulations in Pakistan;
7. The Tick Issue as a Reflection of Society–Nature Relations: Localized Perspectives, Health Issues and Personal Responsibility—A Multi-Actor Sociological Survey in a Rural Region (The Argonne Region, France);
8. Local Governments Facing Turbulence: Robust Governance and Institutional Capacities;
9. The Inner Functioning of Local Governance Networks in Centralized Countries: A ‘Brave New World’?;
10. Public Trust in the Time of Pandemic: An Analysis of Social Networks in the Discourse of Large-Scale Social Restrictions in Indonesia;
11. Advancing Sustainable Bio-Waste Management through Law and Policy: How Co-Creation Can Help Pursue Fair Environmental Public Policies in the European Context.



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3. Governance in Transition: Experimental Zones and Digital Engagement

“Contested Borderlands: Experimental Governance and Statecraft in the Laos Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone” examines the experimental nature of governance within special economic zones (SEZs). This paper explores how state and non-state actors navigate sovereignty, legality, and economic imperatives in this contested region, revealing the tensions inherent in balancing local wellbeing and global economic agendas.

4. Digital Engagement and Participation

“Best Practices for Municipalities to Promote Online Citizen Participation and Engagement on Facebook: A Narrative Review of the Literature” underscores the significance of digital platforms in fostering community involvement. This paper reviews the successful strategies that municipalities can employ to enhance citizen engagement through social media, particularly Facebook. Digital engagement not only facilitates more inclusive decision-making processes but also fosters transparency and accountability in governance. These elements are crucial for building public trust, a recurring theme across several papers in this edition.

5. Access to Judicial Services in Remote Areas

Complementing the discussion on digital engagement, “Digital Access to Judicial Services in the Brazilian Amazon: Barriers and Potential” highlights the critical role of digital infrastructure in providing essential services to remote and underserved communities. This paper identifies significant barriers, such as limited internet access and technological literacy, which impede the effective delivery of judicial services. It emphasizes the potential of digital platforms to bridge these gaps, ensuring equitable access to justice. This connects with broader discussions on digital inclusion and the necessity of robust infrastructure, as highlighted in studies on artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

6. Artificial Intelligence in Smart Cities

“The Challenges of Artificial Intelligence in Public Administration in the Framework of Smart Cities: Reflections and Legal Issues” explores the integration of artificial intelligence into urban governance, emphasizing both its potential benefits and inherent risks. Artificial intelligence can significantly enhance the efficiency of service delivery, but it also raises critical legal and ethical concerns. These include issues of privacy, data security, and the potential for biased decision-making. This paper argues for the establishment of comprehensive legal frameworks to govern artificial intelligence use, ensuring that its deployment promotes fairness and accountability. This theme resonates with discussions on cybersecurity and public trust, illustrating the interconnected nature of these governance challenges.

7. Trust, Corruption, and Compliance

“Trust, Corruption, and Tax Compliance in Fragile States: On a Quest for Transforming Africa into Future Global Powerhouse” examines how corruption undermines public trust and hampers tax compliance, presenting a significant barrier to economic development in fragile states. This paper suggests that building transparent and accountable institutions is crucial for fostering trust and encouraging compliance. This connects to the broader theme of trust discussed in the context of digital engagement, artificial intelligence deployment, and governance during crises. Building public trust is foundational to effective governance and sustainable development.

8. Cybersecurity and Legal Implementation

“A Quantitative Study on the Factors Influencing Implementation of Cybersecurity Laws and Regulations in Pakistan” identifies critical factors that affect the implementation of cybersecurity laws, such as political will, institutional capacity, and public awareness. Effective cybersecurity is essential for protecting digital infrastructure and ensuring the

integrity of online services. This paper's findings are closely related to discussions on digital judicial services and artificial intelligence, highlighting the need for robust legal and regulatory frameworks to safeguard public trust and security in the digital age.

9. Society–Nature Relations

“The Tick Issue as a Reflection of Society–Nature Relations: Localized Perspectives, Health Issues and Personal Responsibility—A Multi-Actor Sociological Survey in a Rural Region (The Argonne Region, France)” explores the complex relationship between society and the environment, using the tick issue as a case study. This paper underscores the importance of local perspectives and personal responsibility in addressing environmental health issues. It highlights how localized, participatory approaches can lead to more effective and sustainable environmental management. This theme connects with the broader discussions on sustainability and public engagement, emphasizing the need for inclusive and community-based governance practices.

10. Resilience and Institutional Capacities

“Local Governments Facing Turbulence: Robust Governance and Institutional Capacities” focuses on the resilience of local governments in times of crisis. This paper argues that adaptive governance structures and robust institutional capacities are vital for maintaining stability and continuity in public services. This study's findings are particularly relevant to the challenges of implementing artificial intelligence, ensuring cybersecurity, and building public trust, illustrating the importance of resilient governance frameworks in navigating contemporary challenges.

11. Governance Networks in Centralized Countries

“The Inner Functioning of Local Governance Networks in Centralized Countries: A ‘Brave New World’?” examines the dynamics of governance networks within centralized states. This paper reveals how local governance can balance autonomy and centralization, which is crucial for understanding the broader governance frameworks discussed in other papers, such as those on artificial intelligence, digital judicial services, and cybersecurity. Effective governance networks are essential for coordinating complex policy areas and ensuring coherent and integrated service delivery.

12. Public Trust During Pandemics

“Public Trust in the Time of Pandemic: An Analysis of Social Networks in the Discourse of Large-Scale Social Restrictions in Indonesia” analyses how public trust is maintained during crises, particularly through social media discourse. This paper highlights the importance of transparent communication and trust-building in ensuring public compliance with large-scale social restrictions. The themes of trust and transparent communication are echoed across other studies, underscoring their critical role in effective crisis management and governance.

13. Sustainable Bio-Waste Management

“Advancing Sustainable Bio-Waste Management through Law and Policy: How Co-Creation Can Help Pursue Fair Environmental Public Policies in the European Context” advocates for collaborative approaches to policymaking in bio-waste management. This paper connects to the broader theme of sustainability and the need for inclusive and participatory governance frameworks. Co-creation, involving multiple stakeholders in the policymaking process, ensures that environmental policies are fair, effective, and widely accepted. This approach resonates with discussions on societal engagement and local perspectives in environmental management.

14. Deepening the Interconnection of the Themes of the Articles

i. Building Trust: The Foundation for Effective Citizen Engagement and Sustainable Development

The cornerstone of any effective local governance system is trust between citizens and their representatives. Papers 2, 5, and 10 illuminate the crucial role of citizen engagement in building trust, a prerequisite for sustainable development. Paper 2 examines how municipalities can leverage online platforms like Facebook to foster citizen participation. By examining best practices, it highlights the potential of technology to bridge the gap between citizens and decision-making processes. However, the success of such initiatives hinges on responsible data management practices and ensuring inclusivity, so that all voices, regardless of digital literacy, are heard. Similarly, Paper 10, through an analysis of social networks in Indonesia during a pandemic, demonstrates how digital tools can be harnessed to maintain public trust in times of crisis. By fostering open communication channels and transparent decision-making processes, local authorities can build trust and encourage citizen buy-in in critical public health measures. This trust, however, extends beyond the realm of digital engagement. Paper 5 ventures beyond national borders to explore the crucial link between trust, corruption, and tax compliance in fragile states across Africa. Building a culture of trust in governance emerges as a central pillar for Africa, or any developing nation, to achieve sustainable development and global prominence. Without public trust, essential government services will remain underfunded, hindering progress in critical areas like education, healthcare, and infrastructure development.

ii. The Double-Edged Sword of Technology: Opportunity, Ethical Considerations, and Building Robust Governance Frameworks

Technology presents a double-edged sword to local governance. Paper 3 explores the potential of digital access to bridge the justice gap in the Brazilian Amazon. This study exemplifies how technology can democratize access to essential services, fostering a more just society. Imagine a scenario where remote communities in the Amazon can access legal consultations or file court documents online, reducing travel burdens and increasing access to justice. However, such advancements require robust digital infrastructure and investment in digital literacy programs to ensure equitable access. Paper 4 cautions that the implementation of artificial intelligence in public administration, particularly within smart city initiatives, raises ethical and legal concerns. As local authorities navigate the frontier of technological innovation, responsible implementation is paramount. Balancing the potential benefits of artificial intelligence, such as improved traffic management or optimized waste collection, with the need for responsible data management, robust ethical frameworks, and transparent algorithms is crucial. Furthermore, Papers 6 and 8 highlight the need for strong governance frameworks at the local level to effectively harness the power of technology and navigate the complex challenges of the digital age. Paper 6 analyses the factors influencing the implementation of cybersecurity laws in Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of institutional capacity. Robust legal frameworks and well-trained personnel are essential for safeguarding critical infrastructure and citizen data in the face of cyberattacks. Similarly, Paper 8 examines the capabilities that local governments need to weather turbulent times, such as pandemics or economic crises. This highlights the need for robust governance structures at the local level to foster resilience and effective response mechanisms, which may involve leveraging technology for contact tracing during a pandemic or deploying AI-powered tools for disaster preparedness.

iii. Empowering Communities: Collaboration, Co-Creation, and Addressing Localized Challenges

Effective local governance hinges not only on citizen trust but also on empowered communities. Paper 7, which explores the multifaceted issue of ticks in rural France, underscores the importance of localized perspectives and multi-actor collaboration in tackling societal challenges. Citizen engagement strengthens governance while fostering a

sense of ownership and empowering communities to co-create solutions. This study on ticks exemplifies how a seemingly localized issue can have broader implications for public health and the environment. By involving local communities, researchers, and public health officials in a multi-actor collaboration, a more effective and sustainable solution can be developed to address the tick problem. This principle of co-creation extends to Paper 11, which focuses on sustainable bio-waste management in Europe. This study emphasizes the potential of co-creation, where citizens and policymakers collaborate to develop fairer and more effective environmental policies. Imagine citizens participating in workshops to brainstorm solutions for reducing food waste or developing innovative composting programs. Such collaborative approaches can lead to more effective and socially accepted environmental policies.

iv. Understanding Network Dynamics and Addressing Centralization: Navigating a Complex Landscape

The internal dynamics of local governance networks are further explored in Papers 8 and 9. Paper 8 examines the capabilities that local governments need to weather turbulent times, such as pandemics or economic crises. This highlights the need for robust governance structures at the local level to foster resilience and effective response mechanisms. Paper 9 delves into the inner workings of local governance networks in centralized countries. By prompting reflections on these networks' effectiveness in facilitating responsive and inclusive governance, this study underscores the importance of finding a balance between central oversight and local autonomy. Building on the findings of Paper 6 on cybersecurity, Paper 9 finds that effective local governance networks require not only strong legal frameworks but also robust communication channels between different actors. Imagine a scenario where local authorities collaborate with national cybersecurity agencies to share best practices and develop coordinated responses to cyber threats. Such collaboration strengthens the overall network and enhances its ability to protect critical infrastructure and citizen data. However, the effectiveness of local governance networks can also be hampered by excessive centralization, as explored in Paper 9. While some level of central oversight is necessary to ensure compliance with national regulations and facilitate resource allocation, overly centralized structures can stifle local innovation and responsiveness. Finding the right balance is crucial for empowering local authorities to address the specific needs and challenges of their communities.

v. Adaptive Governance and Collaborative Networks

The papers collectively advocate for adaptive governance frameworks that can respond to local contexts, harness technological advancements, and build trust through transparency and engagement. The studies on SEZs in Laos (Paper 1), digital governance in Brazil (Paper 3), and AI in smart cities (Paper 4) all highlight the need for governance models that are not only innovative but also sensitive to the socio-political and cultural landscapes they operate within. Furthermore, the discussions on network governance (Paper 9), resilience in local governments (Paper 8), and public trust (Paper 10) suggest that collaboration across various governance levels and sectors is essential for addressing complex challenges like pandemics, economic instability, and environmental degradation. These papers underscore the importance of building robust governance networks that can support local administrations in navigating crises and promoting sustainable development.

vi. The Path Forward: Fostering Innovation and Collaborative Governance for a Sustainable Future

These eleven articles illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of contemporary local governance. The studies underscore the critical need for local authorities to undertake the following:

- (a) Prioritize citizen trust and engagement by leveraging technology responsibly, fostering open communication channels, and ensuring inclusive participation, both online and offline;

- (b) Embrace responsible technological innovation while addressing ethical considerations, ensuring data security, and investing in digital literacy programs;
- (c) Strengthen governance frameworks at the local level to build capacity, resilience, and effective legal frameworks, particularly in the digital realm;
- (d) Empower communities through collaboration and co-creation to develop effective solutions that address localized challenges and promote environmental sustainability;
- (e) Navigate the complexities of local governance networks by fostering communication and collaboration between different actors, while advocating for a balance between central oversight and local autonomy.

By fostering a culture of innovation and collaborative governance, local authorities can effectively address contemporary challenges and pave the way for a more just, sustainable, and prosperous future for all. We invite the reader to engage with these studies and contribute to the ongoing dialogue on how local governance can best serve its citizens and build a brighter future.

15. A Call for Continued Exploration and Building a Stronger Network

This special edition serves as a springboard for further exploration. We encourage research into innovative approaches that empower local governments to fulfil their vital role. Here are some key areas for future investigation:

- (a) **Citizen Science Initiatives:** Citizen science initiatives, where volunteers collect and analyse data, can be leveraged to address local environmental challenges or improve public service delivery.
- (b) **Big Data and Local Decision-Making:** Local authorities can ethically utilize big data to gain valuable insights and inform evidence-based policy decisions.
- (c) **Cross-Sectoral Collaboration:** Local governments can foster effective collaboration between different sectors, such as public health, education, and the private sector, to address pressing societal challenges.

16. Conclusions

By collectively addressing the issues examined in this special edition, we can strengthen the web of local governance and ensure that it serves as a powerful force for positive change in our communities. A more robust and innovative local governance system is essential for building a future where wellbeing and sustainability are not just aspirations but achievable realities for all.

The interconnected themes of digital innovation, trust, and sustainability weave through these eleven papers, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding contemporary local governance. By integrating best practices in digital engagement, addressing the legal and ethical challenges of artificial intelligence, building trust through transparency, and promoting sustainable practices, local governments can enhance public wellbeing and resilience. These studies collectively highlight the importance of adaptive, inclusive, and participatory governance frameworks in addressing the multifaceted challenges of our time. This special edition offers valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers dedicated to advancing effective and inclusive local governance in an increasingly complex world.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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