



Citizen-Centered Digital Governance: Institutional Determinants of Public Service Quality in Rural Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines the institutional determinants of public service quality within the implementation of citizen-centered digital governance in rural Indonesia. The study is motivated by the growing demand for public services that are efficient, transparent, responsive, and accessible through digital technologies, while rural local governments continue to experience institutional and organizational challenges in implementing digital transformation. A qualitative research approach was employed to explore how institutional capacity, administrative competence, digital technology utilization, transparency, and citizen participation shape public service quality. The research was conducted in Pammana District, Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, involving twelve purposively selected informants representing government officials, frontline service providers, village representatives, and community members. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and document analysis, and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that institutional capacity serves as the foundation for successful digital governance implementation, while digital technology functions as an enabling mechanism for improving service efficiency and accessibility. Transparency enhances accountability by providing clearer information regarding public services, whereas citizen participation strengthens service responsiveness through continuous feedback and collaborative interactions. The study further reveals that organizational culture and human resource competence are essential in sustaining digital transformation beyond technological adoption. The novelty of this research lies in the development of an integrated conceptual framework demonstrating how institutional capacity, digital governance, transparency, citizen participation, and organizational adaptability collectively shape citizen-centered public service quality in rural governance contexts. The study recommends strengthening institutional capacity, expanding digital literacy initiatives, fostering adaptive organizational cultures, and promoting participatory governance to support sustainable digital transformation in rural public administration.

Keywords: Citizen-Centered Digital Governance; Institutional Capacity; Public Service Quality; Citizen Participation; Rural Governance.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the way governments interact with citizens and deliver public services. Across the globe, governments increasingly adopt digital governance initiatives to improve service accessibility, transparency, efficiency, and accountability. Digital governance is no longer understood merely as the digitization of administrative procedures; rather, it represents a comprehensive transformation of public sector governance that places citizens at the center of public service delivery and decision-making processes (Janssen & Estevez, 2013). In developing countries, including Indonesia, digital governance has become a strategic instrument for achieving inclusive and sustainable public service delivery while addressing persistent administrative inefficiencies. Nevertheless, despite significant investments in digital infrastructure and e-government initiatives, improvements in public service quality remain uneven, particularly in rural areas where institutional limitations continue to constrain governance performance.

Indonesia has made considerable progress in promoting digital transformation through the implementation of the Electronic-Based Government System (SPBE) and other national digital governance initiatives. However, implementation outcomes vary substantially across regions. Rural local governments continue to experience disparities in institutional capacity, technological infrastructure, administrative competence, and citizen accessibility, resulting in unequal digital service readiness (United Nations, 2024). While urban governments increasingly integrate digital platforms into public administration, many rural administrations still rely on conventional bureaucratic procedures that limit service responsiveness, transparency, and citizen engagement. These conditions are particularly important because rural communities represent a substantial proportion of Indonesia's population and frequently encounter greater barriers in accessing quality public services.

Public service quality has long been recognized as a central indicator of government effectiveness and public sector legitimacy (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003). Citizens increasingly expect governments to provide services that are reliable, efficient, transparent, and responsive to their needs. However, evidence suggests that technological adoption alone does not automatically improve service quality. Digital transformation requires institutions that possess sufficient organizational capacity, competent human resources, adaptive leadership, and effective governance mechanisms capable of integrating technology into everyday administrative practices (Painter & Pierre, 2005; Andrews et al., 2017). Consequently, understanding the institutional foundations that enable digital governance to improve public service quality has become an increasingly important issue within contemporary public administration research.

Previous studies have demonstrated that digital governance contributes to administrative efficiency, improved transparency, and stronger citizen engagement. Digital technologies facilitate coordination among public organizations, simplify administrative procedures, and expand access to government information (Gil-Garcia et al., 2018; Meijer & Bolívar, 2016). Furthermore, citizen-centered governance perspectives emphasize that public value is increasingly co-created through interactions between governments and citizens rather than produced solely by public organizations (Osborne et al., 2016; Nabatchi et al., 2017). Likewise, transparency has been shown to enhance accountability and strengthen citizens' trust when institutional responsiveness accompanies information disclosure (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014; Cucciniello et al., 2017). Collectively, these studies indicate that successful digital governance depends not only on technology but also on institutional and participatory governance arrangements.

Despite these important contributions, several important research gaps remain. First, existing studies predominantly focus on urban governments, technologically advanced regions, or developed countries, while rural governance in developing countries remains comparatively underexplored. Second, previous research generally emphasizes technological adoption as the primary driver of digital transformation but gives relatively limited attention to the institutional mechanisms through which digital governance improves public service quality. Third, institutional capacity, transparency, citizen participation, and administrative competence are commonly examined as separate explanatory variables, leaving limited understanding of how these factors interact as an integrated citizen-centered governance system. Consequently, empirical evidence explaining the institutional dynamics underlying successful digital governance in rural Indonesia remains limited.

To address these gaps, this study adopts an integrated institutional perspective that views digital governance as a multidimensional governance process rather than merely a technological innovation. Institutional capacity, administrative competence, digital technology utilization, transparency, citizen participation, organizational culture, and organizational adaptability are conceptualized as interconnected elements that collectively shape public service quality. Such an approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of why similar digital initiatives may produce different governance outcomes across local government institutions operating under different institutional conditions.



The novelty of this study lies in the development of an integrated conceptual framework that links institutional capacity, administrative competence, digital technology utilization, transparency, citizen participation, and organizational adaptability within a citizen-centered digital governance perspective. Unlike previous studies that primarily explain digital governance from technological or administrative viewpoints, this research demonstrates how these institutional dimensions interact to shape public service quality in rural local governments. By focusing on rural Indonesia, the study also extends current digital governance literature to governance contexts that remain relatively underrepresented in international public administration research.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how institutional capacity, administrative competence, digital technology utilization, transparency, citizen participation, and organizational adaptability collectively influence public service quality within the framework of citizen-centered digital governance in rural Indonesia. By addressing the identified research gaps, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the institutional determinants of digital governance while offering practical recommendations for strengthening sustainable public service transformation in rural local governments. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on digital governance and citizen-centered public administration and provide evidence-based policy recommendations for improving the quality of public services in developing-country rural settings.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of how institutional factors shape public service quality within the implementation of citizen-centered digital governance in rural Indonesia. A qualitative case study was considered the most appropriate design because the research sought to explore governance processes, institutional practices, organizational dynamics, and stakeholders' experiences that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurements. Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to understand complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts and is particularly appropriate for examining institutional transformation in public administration (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted in Pammana District, Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The study site was selected purposively because it represents a rural administrative area currently undergoing digital transformation in public service delivery while continuing to experience institutional and organizational challenges. Although digital governance initiatives have been introduced through national government policies, local implementation remains influenced by variations in institutional capacity, technological readiness, administrative competence, and community participation. These characteristics make Pammana District an appropriate empirical setting for investigating citizen-centered digital governance in rural Indonesia (Patton, 2015).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and experience with digital public service implementation. Twelve key informants participated in the study, consisting of the District Head (Camat), the District Secretary, heads of administrative divisions, planning officers, information management personnel, frontline public service officers, village government representatives, and community members who had recently accessed public services. The inclusion criteria required participants to possess substantial knowledge of administrative processes, digital governance implementation, or direct experience as public service users. Purposive sampling is appropriate for selecting information-rich cases capable of providing in-depth insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The combination of institutional actors and service users enabled the researcher to obtain multiple perspectives regarding governance practices and public service quality.

Data were collected between April and May 2026 using three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source because they allowed participants to explain their experiences and perceptions while ensuring consistency across interview topics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each interview lasted approximately 45–75 minutes and was conducted face-to-face using an interview guide covering institutional capacity, administrative competence, digital technology utilization, transparency, citizen participation, organizational culture, and public service quality. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Direct observations were



conducted within district public service offices to document administrative processes, interactions between public officials and citizens, and the practical use of digital technologies during service delivery. Documentary evidence, including strategic plans, service standards, government regulations, organizational reports, and digital governance policy documents, was also examined to provide institutional context and support data triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials were analyzed through a systematic coding process. Initially, open coding was undertaken to identify meaningful concepts emerging from the data. Subsequently, axial coding was employed to organize related codes into broader analytical categories, including institutional capacity, digital governance implementation, transparency, citizen participation, organizational culture, and public service quality. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate these categories into overarching themes explaining the institutional determinants of citizen-centered digital governance. Throughout the analysis, the constant comparative method was employed to refine codes and ensure consistency across multiple data sources (Miles et al., 2014).

Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved. Saturation was considered to have occurred when additional interviews no longer generated substantially new concepts, categories, or interpretations relevant to the research objectives. The final interviews primarily confirmed patterns that had already emerged from previous participants, indicating that sufficient depth and variation of information had been obtained to comprehensively explain the institutional determinants of public service quality (Guest et al., 2020).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study adopted the quality criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through source triangulation, involving government officials, frontline employees, village representatives, and citizens, and method triangulation, integrating interviews, observations, and document analysis. Preliminary findings were also subjected to member checking, whereby selected participants reviewed the researchers' interpretations to verify their consistency with participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was strengthened by maintaining detailed documentation of data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical processes, thereby creating an audit trail. Confirmability was supported through continuous comparison across multiple sources of evidence and researcher reflexivity to minimize subjective bias. Rich descriptions of the research context were provided to facilitate transferability to similar rural governance settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process in accordance with internationally accepted principles for qualitative social research (American Psychological Association, 2020). Prior to data collection, all participants received a clear explanation regarding the purpose of the study, research procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews commenced. Participants' identities were anonymized by replacing personal names with institutional positions or pseudonyms in the presentation of findings. Interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Analysis of the qualitative data generated five major themes describing the institutional determinants of citizen-centered digital governance in rural Indonesia. The themes were developed through a systematic coding process and were consistently supported by evidence from interviews, observations, and document analysis. As shown in Table 1, the findings are organized around institutional capacity, digital technology utilization, transparency, citizen participation, and organizational culture and human resource competence. Each theme is presented in the following sections using representative quotations from participants to illustrate the empirical evidence.



Table 1. Summary of Major Themes

Major Theme	Key Findings	Representative Evidence
Institutional Capacity	Leadership commitment, organizational coordination, and administrative capability were identified as the primary institutional conditions supporting digital governance implementation.	“The most important thing is not the technology itself, but whether employees are willing and able to use it consistently.” (District Head)
Digital Technology Utilization	Digital technologies improved administrative efficiency and communication, although infrastructure limitations and digital literacy remained major constraints.	“Information can now be shared through digital communication channels, making the process much faster.” (Administrative Officer)
Transparency	Digital information systems increased service transparency by providing clearer procedures, requirements, and processing times.	“We know what documents to prepare before coming to the office.” (Citizen Informant)
Citizen Participation	Citizens increasingly contributed feedback through digital communication platforms, supporting more responsive public services.	“Many service improvements actually come from feedback provided by citizens.” (Planning Officer)
Organizational Culture and Human Resource Competence	Organizational adaptability and continuous learning were essential for sustaining digital transformation beyond technology adoption.	“The biggest challenge is changing old habits and encouraging employees to work differently.” (Frontline Service Officer)

Institutional Capacity as the Foundation of Citizen-Centered Digital Governance

The findings indicate that institutional capacity constitutes the fundamental condition for implementing citizen-centered digital governance in rural local government. Participants consistently emphasized that successful digital transformation depends primarily on organizational readiness rather than merely the availability of digital technologies. Leadership commitment, administrative coordination, and employee capability emerged as the three institutional factors most frequently mentioned during interviews.

The District Head explained:

“The most important thing is not the technology itself, but whether employees are willing and able to use it consistently. Leadership must continuously encourage staff to improve their services and adapt to new systems.”

Several administrative officers similarly described leadership support as an important factor in motivating employees to adopt digital systems and improve service responsiveness.

The findings also revealed differences in institutional readiness among administrative units. Some offices had integrated digital procedures into routine administrative work, whereas others continued to rely heavily on conventional manual systems because of limited organizational support and technical capability. These variations indicate that institutional readiness remains uneven across public service units.

Overall, institutional capacity emerged as the organizational foundation that enables citizen-centered digital governance to function effectively within rural public administration.

Digital Technology Utilization and Public Service Delivery

Participants generally perceived digital technology as improving the efficiency and accessibility of public services. Government officials reported that electronic document management systems and digital communication platforms reduced processing time and simplified administrative coordination. Citizens likewise acknowledged that obtaining information regarding service procedures had become easier through online communication channels.

One administrative officer explained:

“Previously, citizens had to visit the office several times just to confirm requirements. Now, information can be shared through digital communication channels, making the process much faster.”

Despite these improvements, both public officials and community members identified several challenges. Limited internet connectivity, inadequate digital infrastructure, and varying levels of digital literacy continued to restrict the effectiveness of digital services. Older citizens, in particular, often preferred conventional face-to-face interactions because they experienced difficulties using digital platforms.

These findings suggest that digital technologies currently complement rather than replace traditional public service delivery mechanisms in rural government.

Transparency in Public Service Delivery

Transparency emerged as another important theme throughout the interviews. Participants agreed that digital communication channels had improved public access to information regarding administrative procedures, required documents, service schedules, and processing times.

A community member stated:

“The service process is easier now because information about requirements is available before we come to the office. We know what documents to prepare and what procedures to follow.”

Government officials also reported that providing information through digital platforms reduced misunderstandings during service delivery and encouraged greater accountability.

However, transparency practices differed across administrative units. While several offices regularly updated service information through digital media, others continued to rely primarily on conventional communication methods. Consequently, citizens experienced different levels of transparency depending on the type of public service they accessed.

Citizen Participation in Digital Governance

Interview findings indicate that citizen participation has become increasingly important in supporting digital governance implementation. Rather than acting solely as recipients of public services, citizens increasingly provided suggestions, complaints, and feedback regarding service quality through digital communication platforms.

A planning officer explained:

“We receive suggestions and complaints through messaging applications and social media. Many service improvements actually come from feedback provided by citizens.”

Participants described social media applications and digital messaging platforms as the most frequently used communication channels between citizens and local government. These platforms enabled faster communication and facilitated more responsive interactions between public officials and service users.

Nevertheless, participation was not equally distributed among community members. Younger citizens generally engaged more actively in digital communication, whereas older residents remained more dependent on conventional face-to-face interactions.

Organizational Culture and Human Resource Competence

Another important finding concerns the role of organizational culture and employee competence in supporting digital transformation. Participants consistently emphasized that technology alone was insufficient without employees who were willing to adapt to new administrative practices.

A frontline public service officer stated:

“The biggest challenge is not learning the technology itself. The challenge is changing old habits and encouraging employees to work differently.”

Interview participants also highlighted the importance of continuous training and organizational support. Employees who had participated in digital literacy training expressed greater confidence in operating digital systems and responding to citizens' needs.

The findings therefore suggest that organizational adaptability and continuous learning constitute essential conditions for sustaining digital governance within rural public administration.

Discussion

Institutional Capacity as the Foundation of Citizen-Centered Digital Governance

The findings underscore that institutional capacity should be understood as the fundamental enabling condition for successful citizen-centered digital governance rather than merely as an organizational resource. This suggests that the effectiveness of digital governance is determined less by the availability of technology than by the ability of public institutions to mobilize administrative resources, coordinate organizational processes, and foster adaptive leadership. In rural governance contexts, where institutional constraints are often more pronounced than technological limitations, organizational readiness becomes the primary determinant of whether digital initiatives can generate meaningful improvements in public service quality.

This interpretation reinforces the concept of policy capacity, which emphasizes that effective public sector innovation depends on the interaction of analytical, operational, and political capacities rather than on technological investment alone (Wu et al., 2015). Similarly, Painter and Pierre (2005) argue that institutional capacity reflects an organization's ability to respond effectively to environmental change through coordinated governance arrangements and administrative competence. The present study extends these perspectives by demonstrating that institutional capacity operates as the organizational foundation through which citizen-centered digital governance can be translated into improved public service delivery within rural local governments.

The findings also support recent scholarship suggesting that digital transformation represents an organizational rather than purely technological process. Vial (2019) argues that digital transformation requires fundamental organizational adaptation involving structures, leadership, organizational culture, and employee capabilities. Likewise, Criado and Gil-Garcia (2019) contend that public sector digital transformation succeeds only when technological innovation is embedded within institutional reform and governance modernization. The evidence from this study indicates that rural governments require sustained institutional strengthening before technological innovations can be fully integrated into routine administrative practices.

From a practical perspective, these findings imply that local governments should prioritize institutional development alongside digital infrastructure investment. Capacity-building programs should focus not only on improving technological facilities but also on strengthening leadership commitment, interdepartmental coordination, organizational learning, and administrative competence. Such institutional investments are likely to produce more sustainable improvements in public service quality than technology-centered reforms implemented without organizational readiness.

Digital Technology as an Enabler Rather Than the Primary Driver of Public Service Quality

The findings suggest that digital technology functions primarily as an enabling mechanism rather than the principal driver of public service improvement. While digital tools contribute to administrative efficiency, information accessibility, and faster communication, their effectiveness remains contingent upon institutional conditions and users' capacity to utilize technological resources effectively. This interpretation challenges deterministic perspectives that assume technological adoption automatically produces governance improvements.

This conclusion is consistent with the socio-technical perspective of digital governance, which views technology and organizational institutions as mutually reinforcing components of public sector transformation (Cordella & Tempini, 2015). Rather than replacing existing governance systems, digital technologies reshape administrative processes through continuous interaction with organizational structures, human capabilities, and institutional norms. Consequently, technology should be regarded as an instrument supporting governance reform rather than as the reform itself.

The findings further complement Dunleavy et al.'s (2006) concept of Digital-Era Governance, which argues that successful digital government depends on organizational integration, user-centered service design, and administrative simplification rather than merely digitizing existing bureaucratic procedures. In rural Indonesia, these conditions remain uneven because differences in digital literacy, internet accessibility, and institutional readiness continue to influence the effectiveness of digital service implementation.

These observations also align with the OECD Digital Government Framework, which emphasizes that digital government maturity depends on governance capability, data management, interoperability, and institutional collaboration rather than technological availability alone (OECD, 2020). Therefore, improving digital governance requires simultaneous investments in infrastructure, organizational systems, and human resource development.

For local governments, these findings indicate that digital transformation strategies should move beyond infrastructure procurement toward integrated digital governance planning. Investments in internet infrastructure should be accompanied by continuous digital literacy programs, technical



assistance for public employees, and user-oriented service redesign to ensure that technological innovations produce measurable improvements in service quality.

Transparency as a Catalyst for Accountability and Public Trust

The findings suggest that transparency should not be viewed merely as the disclosure of administrative information but as an institutional mechanism that strengthens accountability and improves the quality of interactions between governments and citizens. Within the context of citizen-centered digital governance, transparency reduces information asymmetry, increases procedural certainty, and enables citizens to access public services more efficiently. Consequently, transparency contributes not only to better administrative performance but also to the development of public trust in government institutions.

This interpretation is consistent with Open Government Theory, which argues that transparency constitutes one of the principal foundations of accountable and democratic governance (Meijer et al., 2012). Similarly, Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014) emphasize that transparency enhances citizens' perceptions of governmental trustworthiness when information is timely, relevant, and easily accessible. However, the present findings indicate that transparency alone does not automatically improve public service quality. Its effectiveness depends on the institutional capacity of government organizations to provide accurate information, respond promptly to public inquiries, and continuously update digital communication channels.

The findings also support the broader principles of open government promoted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017), which emphasize transparency, participation, and accountability as mutually reinforcing components of good governance. In rural government settings, transparency therefore extends beyond publishing information through digital platforms; it requires institutional commitment to ensuring that citizens can understand, access, and utilize that information effectively.

From a practical perspective, local governments should institutionalize transparency through standardized digital information systems that provide comprehensive service procedures, processing times, administrative requirements, and complaint mechanisms. Regular updates of online information, combined with responsive communication channels, can reduce unnecessary administrative burdens while strengthening citizens' confidence in public institutions. Such measures are particularly important in rural areas where limited access to government offices often increases citizens' dependence on digital information.

Citizen Participation and the Co-Creation of Public Value

The findings demonstrate that citizen participation represents a fundamental characteristic of citizen-centered digital governance rather than a complementary component of public administration. Digital communication platforms create opportunities for citizens to engage directly with government institutions by providing feedback, reporting service problems, and contributing suggestions for service improvement. This indicates a shift from traditional government-centered administration toward collaborative governance in which citizens actively participate in shaping public service outcomes.

This interpretation aligns closely with Public Service Logic, which conceptualizes public value as the outcome of continuous interactions among governments, citizens, and other stakeholders rather than the product of government action alone (Osborne, 2021). Similarly, Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia (2017) argue that citizen participation enhances service effectiveness by integrating users' knowledge and experiences into governance processes. The findings of the present study reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that digital communication technologies facilitate more continuous and responsive interactions between local governments and citizens, even within resource-constrained rural settings.

The study also contributes to collaborative governance literature by illustrating that participation is influenced not only by institutional openness but also by citizens' digital capabilities. Ansell and Gash (2008) argue that successful collaboration depends upon mutual trust, shared understanding, and sustained communication among stakeholders. In the present study, variations in digital literacy among different demographic groups suggest that participation opportunities remain uneven despite the availability of digital communication platforms. Consequently, technological accessibility alone cannot guarantee inclusive citizen participation.

For local governments, these findings imply that citizen participation strategies should extend beyond establishing digital complaint systems. Governments should actively encourage public engagement through community consultations, digital literacy programs, participatory service evaluation, and continuous feedback mechanisms. Such initiatives can strengthen collaborative relationships between citizens and public institutions while improving the responsiveness of digital public services.



Organizational Culture and Human Resource Competence as Drivers of Sustainable Digital Transformation

Perhaps the most important implication of this study is that sustainable digital governance depends fundamentally on organizational culture and human resource competence. Technology can facilitate administrative innovation, but its long-term effectiveness relies upon employees' willingness to adapt, learn, and embrace organizational change. Digital transformation therefore represents a process of institutional learning rather than simply technological modernization.

This interpretation supports organizational learning theory, which argues that public organizations achieve sustainable innovation through continuous knowledge acquisition, adaptation, and reflective learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Likewise, Senge (2006) emphasizes that learning organizations cultivate shared vision, continuous improvement, and adaptive leadership as prerequisites for organizational transformation. The findings suggest that these characteristics are equally relevant within digital governance, where technological change continually reshapes administrative processes and service delivery.

Recent public administration scholarship similarly highlights the importance of adaptive capacity in digital transformation. Mergel, Ganapati, and Whitford (2021) argue that digital government maturity depends largely upon organizational flexibility, leadership commitment, and workforce readiness rather than technological sophistication. The present study extends this argument by demonstrating that organizational adaptability is particularly important in rural governments where institutional resources are relatively limited.

These findings also reinforce the strategic importance of continuous professional development within local government institutions. Rather than treating digital literacy training as a one-time intervention, governments should establish long-term capacity development programs focusing on digital competencies, innovation management, collaborative leadership, and citizen-oriented service delivery. Such investments will improve organizational resilience and enable local governments to respond more effectively to future technological and societal changes.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital governance by advancing an integrated institutional perspective on citizen-centered public service delivery in rural contexts. While previous studies have predominantly emphasized digital technology as the principal driver of public sector transformation (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Mergel et al., 2019), the present findings demonstrate that technology functions primarily as an enabling mechanism whose effectiveness depends on broader institutional conditions. Institutional capacity, transparency, citizen participation, organizational culture, and human resource competence collectively shape the ability of local governments to translate digital initiatives into improved public service quality.

The study also extends the application of Public Service Logic (PSL) within digital governance research. Public Service Logic argues that public value is co-created through continuous interactions among governments, citizens, and other stakeholders rather than being produced exclusively by public organizations (Osborne, 2021). The present findings support this perspective by demonstrating that citizen-centered digital governance emerges through collaborative institutional arrangements where technology facilitates, but does not replace, interactions between governments and citizens. Consequently, digital transformation should be understood as an institutional and relational process rather than simply a technological innovation.

Furthermore, the study contributes to institutional theory by illustrating that organizational readiness remains a prerequisite for successful governance innovation. Consistent with Scott (2014), institutional change requires the alignment of organizational structures, governance processes, leadership, and cultural norms. The findings therefore suggest that digital governance maturity is determined not only by technological capability but also by the institutional capacity of public organizations to adapt to changing governance environments.

Finally, this study provides empirical evidence from rural Indonesia, a governance context that remains relatively underrepresented in international public administration scholarship. By focusing on rural local government, the study broadens existing digital governance literature, which has largely concentrated on metropolitan governments and technologically advanced administrative systems. The findings therefore offer valuable insights into how institutional conditions shape digital transformation in developing-country rural settings.

Practical Implications for Local Government

The findings provide several practical implications for local governments seeking to strengthen citizen-centered digital governance.



First, local governments should prioritize institutional capacity development alongside investments in digital infrastructure. Expanding internet connectivity and introducing new digital applications will produce limited improvements unless accompanied by organizational strengthening, administrative coordination, and leadership commitment. Capacity-building initiatives should therefore include institutional development strategies that improve governance processes, decision-making mechanisms, and interdepartmental collaboration.

Second, continuous investment in human resource development should become a strategic priority. Regular training programs focusing on digital literacy, innovation management, public communication, and citizen-oriented service delivery will enhance employees' ability to adapt to technological change. Building an organizational culture that encourages learning and innovation is equally important for sustaining long-term digital transformation.

Third, local governments should strengthen transparency by establishing integrated digital information systems that provide clear, accurate, and regularly updated information regarding public services. Standardized digital service portals containing administrative procedures, service requirements, processing times, and complaint mechanisms can improve accessibility while reducing uncertainty experienced by service users.

Fourth, digital governance policies should promote broader citizen participation beyond the provision of online complaint platforms. Governments should institutionalize participatory governance through digital consultation forums, periodic citizen satisfaction surveys, collaborative service evaluations, and community engagement programs. Such initiatives can strengthen public trust while ensuring that public services remain responsive to evolving community needs.

Finally, policymakers should recognize that digital governance represents a long-term institutional transformation rather than a technology procurement project. Sustainable digital transformation requires integrated policy approaches combining institutional reform, organizational learning, technological innovation, and citizen engagement. This holistic perspective is particularly relevant for rural governments facing resource constraints and administrative capacity limitations.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that citizen-centered digital governance in rural local government should be understood as an institutional transformation rather than solely as a process of technological modernization. The effectiveness of digital governance depends on the ability of public institutions to integrate organizational capacity, adaptive governance, transparent administrative practices, citizen engagement, and human resource development into a coherent governance system. Within this perspective, digital technologies function as enabling instruments whose contribution to public service quality is determined by the institutional environment in which they are implemented.

The study contributes to the public administration literature by proposing an integrated institutional perspective that explains citizen-centered digital governance through the interaction of institutional capacity, digital technology utilization, transparency, citizen participation, organizational culture, and administrative competence. This perspective extends Public Service Logic by demonstrating that public value in digital governance is generated through institutional collaboration and continuous interaction between governments and citizens rather than through technological innovation alone.

The findings also broaden existing digital governance scholarship by providing empirical evidence from rural Indonesia, where institutional conditions differ substantially from those commonly examined in studies conducted in urban or technologically advanced settings. Consequently, the study offers a more contextually grounded understanding of digital governance implementation within developing-country rural governments and provides a conceptual foundation for future research examining institutional determinants of public service transformation.

Recommendation

Based on the theoretical and practical implications of this study, several recommendations are proposed.

First, local governments should adopt a comprehensive approach to digital governance by integrating technological innovation with institutional strengthening. Digital transformation initiatives should therefore be accompanied by organizational reforms that enhance leadership capacity, administrative coordination, and institutional adaptability.

Second, continuous investment in human resource development should become a strategic priority. Capacity-building programs should extend beyond technical training to include digital leadership, collaborative governance, innovation management, and citizen-oriented public service delivery. Such



investments will strengthen the institutional capability required to sustain digital transformation over the long term.

Third, governments should promote more inclusive citizen-centered governance by expanding opportunities for public participation through accessible digital platforms, community consultation mechanisms, and continuous feedback systems. Improving digital literacy among citizens, particularly in rural communities, is equally important to ensure that digital governance remains inclusive and equitable.

Finally, future research is encouraged to examine citizen-centered digital governance across different administrative levels and regional contexts using comparative and longitudinal research designs. Such studies would provide a deeper understanding of how institutional capacity, governance arrangements, and technological innovation evolve over time and influence sustainable improvements in public service quality.

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