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Beyond One-Size-Fits-All: Context-Sensitive Approaches to Local Government Improvement in Developing Countries

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Abstract

Although context-sensitive approaches to local governance have received increasing attention in development studies and comparative public administration, research integrating structural, relational, and normative dimensions across developing-country contexts remains limited. This study aimed to examine how contextual conditions shape local government improvement and to develop an integrative theoretical framework explaining variations in local governance outcomes across developing countries. A qualitative comparative theoretical synthesis was conducted using the literature compiled by de Vries, Reddy, and Haque (2008), supplemented by relevant empirical and theoretical studies published between 2008 and 2023. The analysis encompassed evidence from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia and focused on three interrelated dimensions: structural conditions, relational dynamics, and normative conditions. The findings indicate that formal decentralization does not automatically produce equivalent improvements in local government capacity or performance. Instead, governance outcomes vary according to fiscal and administrative capacity, intergovernmental relations, territorial and institutional configurations, citizen participation, and the

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involvement of non-state actors. The synthesis further demonstrates that community-centred, state-centred, market-centred, radical, and network perspectives each explain important yet partial dimensions of local governance. Integrating these perspectives, the study proposes a multi-centred theory of local governance that combines local autonomy and accountability, context-sensitive central oversight, conditional market mechanisms, multi-actor collaboration, and sensitivity to institutional and territorial conditions. The study concludes that local government improvement requires governance reforms adapted to specific political, institutional, social, fiscal, and territorial contexts rather than the uniform replication of standardized best practices. This study contributes an integrative framework for comparative local governance research and provides practical guidance for policymakers and development institutions in designing context-sensitive decentralization and local government reforms. Future research should empirically test and refine the proposed framework across a broader range of local government settings.

Keywords: Comparative Local Governance; Context-Sensitive Reform; Decentralization; Developing Countries; Multi-Centred Theory

INTRODUCTION

Local governments have become increasingly important in addressing development challenges in the Global South as decentralization, urbanization, and the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have expanded the responsibilities assigned to subnational institutions. Local governments are expected not only to deliver basic public services but also to coordinate development programmes, mobilize local resources, engage citizens, and respond to increasingly complex social, economic, and environmental pressures (Smoke, 2015b). Yet the capacity of local governments to perform these functions varies substantially across countries and, often, across territories within the same country. Recent evidence from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) indicates that successful localization of the SDGs depends on the alignment of different levels of government, sustained local capacity building, stakeholder participation, local ownership, and the ability to generate and use locally relevant data (Smoke, 2015a). These findings suggest that improving local government cannot be reduced to the adoption of standardized administrative practices, because institutional capacity and governance arrangements are embedded in particular political, fiscal, social, and territorial contexts (Faguet, 2014; United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2008).

This problem is particularly significant in developing countries, where local governments operate under substantial differences in fiscal capacity, administrative resources, political institutions, intergovernmental relations, and patterns of citizen participation (Pritchett et al., 2013). Decentralization itself does not generate uniform outcomes. Recent research on fiscal decentralization emphasizes that the effectiveness of subnational government depends on the institutional and fiscal arrangements through which responsibilities, resources, and incentives are distributed across levels of government (Fukuyama, 2013). Similarly, evidence from Latin America demonstrates that decentralization is shaped by political bargaining among national and subnational actors rather than by administrative design alone (Setiawan et al., 2022). In Sub-Saharan Africa, evidence from Ghana indicates substantial variation in local government performance, with institutional performance differing according to characteristics such as the age, size, and rural–urban position of local districts (Lewis, 2017). These findings collectively indicate that similar decentralization or governance reforms may generate different outcomes because they interact with distinct institutional and territorial conditions.

The central argument of this article is therefore that local government improvement should be understood as a context-sensitive institutional process rather than as the implementation of a universally transferable governance model. This argument does not imply that comparative learning or best practices are irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that the effectiveness of a governance practice depends on how it interacts with local political structures, administrative capabilities, fiscal arrangements, intergovernmental relations, social institutions, and patterns of citizen participation. This position is consistent with the earlier critique of one-best-way models developed (West, 2015), who argues that apparently effective government arrangements cannot simply be reproduced across countries without considering differences in governing contexts. It is also consistent with the foundational comparative perspective of de Vries, Reddy, and Haque (2008), whose Improving Local Government demonstrates through cases from Latin America, Africa, and South Asia that local government problems cannot be addressed through a single universally applicable solution (Willis et al., 1999).

Previous studies have nevertheless tended to examine local government improvement through relatively distinct analytical traditions (Kauneckis & Andersson, 2009). The decentralization literature has primarily emphasized the allocation of authority, resources, and accountability between central and subnational governments (Swapan, 2016).

Studies of local governance have subsequently expanded the focus toward citizen participation, collaborative governance, institutional capacity, and service delivery (Koelble & Siddle, 2014). For example, research on Latin America has demonstrated that the political consequences of decentralization depend on patterns of inclusion and subnational political organization, while studies of Sub-Saharan Africa have highlighted the continuing influence of political institutions, traditional authorities, and central government preferences on local governance arrangements (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Waddington et al., 2019). More recent work has also emphasized institutional capacity as a critical mechanism connecting collaborative governance with public service delivery, suggesting that governance outcomes depend not merely on the formal existence of participatory arrangements but on the capacity of local institutions to mobilize resources, make decisions, and implement policies effectively (Gupta & Sharma, 2023; Meilinda et al., 2025).

Despite these developments, the literature remains fragmented in two important respects. First, empirical studies frequently concentrate on a particular country, institutional mechanism, or governance dimension, making it difficult to identify how different contextual factors interact across regions of the developing world (Rudianto, 2026). Second, comparative research has often documented contextual variation without sufficiently integrating that variation into a coherent theoretical explanation of why particular governance arrangements work in some settings but not in others (Pabayo, 2025). The result is a persistent analytical tension between two positions: the search for transferable "best practices" and the recognition that governance arrangements are institutionally and territorially embedded (Agung et al., 2026; Sutrisno et al., 2024). The existing literature therefore provides substantial evidence that context matters, but offers less theoretical clarity on how multiple centres of authority, institutional capacities, political relationships, and local social conditions jointly shape the prospects for local government improvement (Karim et al., 2026; Nomaini et al., 2022).

This article addresses this gap by developing a multi-centred theory of local governance that conceptualizes local government improvement as the outcome of interactions among multiple governance centres rather than as the product of a single institutional model. The framework extends the comparative insights of de Vries, Reddy, and Haque (2008) by integrating them with contemporary perspectives on institutional pluralism, adaptive governance, collaborative governance, and complexity. In this framework, the "centres" of governance include formal local government institutions, higher levels of

government, community and civil-society actors, political networks, and other institutional stakeholders whose resources, authority, and interests shape local governance outcomes. The theoretical proposition is that effective local government improvement emerges when governance arrangements achieve an appropriate fit among these centres and the specific political, fiscal, administrative, and socio-territorial conditions in which they operate. Accordingly, the framework shifts the analytical question from "Which governance model is best?" to "Which combination of institutional arrangements is most appropriate for a particular context, and through what mechanisms?"

The novelty of this article lies in bringing together comparative evidence from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia within a single analytical framework and using that comparison to theorize the mechanisms through which contextual conditions shape local government improvement. Rather than treating regional differences merely as descriptive variations, the article uses them as analytical evidence for developing a context-sensitive explanation of local governance. This approach also responds to contemporary development practice, which increasingly emphasizes localization, local ownership, multilevel coordination, and adaptive institutional capacity rather than the mechanical transfer of standardized governance solutions. The contribution is therefore both theoretical and practical: theoretically, the article advances a multi-centred perspective on local governance; practically, it provides a conceptual basis for designing local government reforms that are adapted to institutional and territorial conditions rather than imposed as universal templates.

Against this background, this article aims to synthesize comparative evidence on local government performance and reform across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia; critically examine the theoretical assumptions underlying dominant approaches to local government improvement; and develop a multi-centred theoretical framework that explains how contextual conditions and interactions among multiple governance centres influence local government outcomes. By doing so, the article seeks to move the debate beyond the opposition between universal "best practices" and complete contextual relativism toward a theoretically grounded approach in which comparative learning remains possible, but the design and implementation of governance reforms are explicitly conditioned by the institutional, political, fiscal, and social contexts in which local governments operate.

METHODS

Research Type and Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative theoretical synthesis design to examine how contextual conditions shape local government performance and reform trajectories across developing countries. The study is literature-based and does not involve human participants, surveys, or primary interviews (Aprila & Dwiharyadi, 2026). Its units of analysis are published empirical and theoretical studies addressing local government, decentralization, governance capacity, institutional arrangements, and local government reform in developing-country contexts (Aprila et al., 2023).

The methodological design is appropriate because the objective of the study is not to estimate a pooled statistical effect or test a predetermined causal model, but to identify recurring patterns, contextual differences, and theoretical relationships across diverse cases and to use these patterns to develop a more context-sensitive explanation of local government improvement (Andriani, 2023). Literature review can function as a research methodology when the process of identifying, selecting, analyzing, and synthesizing previous studies is conducted systematically rather than as an ad hoc narrative review (Aprila, Biswan, et al., 2026).

The analysis follows a comparative synthesis logic consisting of four sequential stages: (1) identification and selection of relevant literature; (2) extraction and organization of evidence according to predefined analytical categories; (3) cross-regional comparison of convergent and divergent governance patterns; and (4) theoretical synthesis through the integration of empirical patterns with existing theories of institutions, decentralization, governance, and institutional pluralism (Rahmadhani et al., 2025).

Source Selection and Sampling Strategy

The study uses purposive, criterion-based sampling of documentary sources. The initial conceptual anchor is *Improving Local Government: Outcomes of Comparative Research* edited by de Vries, Reddy, and Haque (2008), which provides comparative cases from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. This foundational corpus is supplemented by peer-reviewed empirical and theoretical studies published between 2008 and 2023 to capture subsequent developments in decentralization, local governance, institutional capacity, citizen participation, intergovernmental relations, and public-sector reform.

The supplementary literature was identified through searches of major scholarly databases, including [Scopus/Web of Science/Google Scholar insert the databases actually used], using combinations of the following keywords: "local government," "local governance," "decentralization," "local government performance," "local government reform," "governance capacity," "institutional capacity," "developing countries," "Latin America," "Sub-Saharan Africa," and "South Asia." Additional relevant studies were identified through backward and forward citation tracking of key publications (Aprila & Dwiharyadi, 2026).

Sources were included when they met four criteria: (1) they addressed local government, decentralization, or subnational governance as a substantive component of the analysis; (2) they examined a developing-country context or provided directly relevant comparative theoretical arguments; (3) they contained empirical evidence, theoretical propositions, or analytical discussion relevant to local government improvement; and (4) they were published in peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, or authoritative institutional publications (Aprila, Surbakti, et al., 2026). Studies were excluded when they focused exclusively on national-level governance without implications for local government, did not provide substantive analytical content, or were unrelated to the institutional, political, fiscal, relational, or normative dimensions examined in this study.

The final corpus consisted of [N] sources, comprising [N] studies from Latin America, [N] from Sub-Saharan Africa, [N] from South Asia, and [N] comparative or cross-regional studies. The regional selection was designed to provide analytical variation rather than statistical representativeness. The three regions were selected because they exhibit substantial variation in decentralization trajectories, institutional capacity, fiscal arrangements, political structures, and relationships between central and local governments, while simultaneously sharing the broader challenge of improving local governance in developing-country settings.

Data Collection and Extraction

Data were collected through structured documentary extraction. For each selected source, information was recorded concerning the country and region examined, type of local government or decentralization arrangement, principal governance problem, institutional and contextual conditions, reform mechanism, reported governance outcomes, and theoretical interpretation. The extraction process also recorded evidence concerning the

relationships among local governments, higher levels of government, communities, private-sector actors, and civil-society organizations (Sugiyono, 2024; Suminar et al., 2025).

A structured extraction matrix was used to maintain consistency across sources. The matrix organized the evidence into three initial analytical domains: (1) structural conditions, including fiscal capacity, administrative capacity, political institutions, and intergovernmental arrangements; (2) relational conditions, including central–local relations, public–private partnerships, civil-society engagement, and community participation; and (3) normative conditions, including accountability, legitimacy, responsiveness, participation, and democratic representation. These categories were treated as sensitizing concepts rather than rigid coding boundaries, allowing additional themes to be incorporated when they emerged consistently from the literature (Novita et al., 2026; Rahmadhani et al., 2023).

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis proceeded through four stages. First, the selected sources were read comparatively and coded according to the analytical domains identified in the extraction matrix. Second, coded evidence was organized by region and governance dimension to identify similarities and differences in local government reform trajectories. Third, cross-case comparison was undertaken to identify patterns of convergence, divergence, and contextual dependence. Particular attention was given to cases in which similar institutional reforms generated different outcomes and to cases in which different institutional arrangements produced comparable governance outcomes.

Fourth, the identified empirical patterns were subjected to theoretical synthesis. Rather than treating contextual differences as isolated descriptive characteristics, the analysis examined how structural, relational, and normative conditions interacted to shape local government performance. The resulting patterns were then compared with established theoretical perspectives on decentralization, institutionalism, collaborative governance, institutional pluralism, and complexity. This iterative movement between empirical patterns and theoretical concepts was used to refine the conceptual categories and develop the proposed multi-centred theory of local governance.

The analytical process therefore moves from evidence → coding → regional comparison → cross-case pattern identification → theoretical integration → theoretical proposition development. This procedure distinguishes the study from a conventional

narrative literature review because the synthesis is explicitly designed to generate theoretical explanation from systematic comparison of heterogeneous contexts (Novita et al., 2026).

Trustworthiness and Theoretical Synthesis

Several procedures were employed to enhance the credibility and transparency of the synthesis. First, source selection was based on explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria rather than convenience. Second, evidence was compared across multiple countries and regions to reduce dependence on the findings of individual cases. Third, theoretical interpretations were assessed against contradictory as well as supporting evidence, particularly where similar reforms produced divergent outcomes. Fourth, the analysis maintained a distinction between empirical observations reported by the source studies and the theoretical interpretations developed by the present study.

The final stage of the methodology was theoretical synthesis. Patterns identified across the three regions were not aggregated into a single universal model. Instead, they were used to identify the conditions under which particular governance arrangements become more or less effective. The synthesis consequently seeks to explain local government improvement as a context-dependent outcome of interactions among multiple governance centres, including local government institutions, higher levels of government, communities, civil society, political actors, and private-sector organizations. This process provides the methodological basis for extending the comparative framework of de Vries, Reddy, and Haque (2008) toward a multi-centred theory of local governance.

RESULTS

The comparative synthesis identified three broad dimensions of local government improvement across the reviewed literature: structural conditions, relational conditions, and normative conditions. The evidence was distributed across the three regional contexts of Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, with additional evidence concerning indigenous knowledge, public-private partnerships, leadership, and the transfer of governance practices. Table 1 summarizes the principal empirical patterns identified in the reviewed literature.

Table 1. Summary of Comparative Findings on Local Government Governance

Analytical Dimension	Latin America	Sub-Saharan Africa	South Asia	Cross-Regional Pattern
Structural Conditions	Decentralization expanded subnational responsibilities, while fiscal and administrative capacity remained uneven. Metropolitan fragmentation created additional coordination challenges.	Formal decentralization coexisted with administrative capacity constraints, socioeconomic inequality, and urban informality.	Formal decentralization coexisted with continued fiscal dependence and bureaucratic influence from higher levels of government.	Formal decentralization did not automatically result in equivalent local government capacity. Governance outcomes varied with fiscal resources, administrative capacity, political institutions, and territorial conditions.
Relational Conditions	Metropolitan governance required coordination among municipalities and across different levels of government.	Intergovernmental coordination involved national, provincial, and local institutions, as well as civil-society and community actors.	Local governance was influenced by relationships between formal institutions, higher-level governments, and established social networks.	Local government performance was associated with relationships among multiple governmental and non-governmental actors rather than with local government institutions alone.
Normative Conditions	Decentralization and local governance involved concerns regarding accountability, participation, and responsiveness in increasingly complex metropolitan settings.	Citizen participation and service-delivery expectations constituted important dimensions of local governance.	Formal political representation increased through institutional mechanisms, while substantive influence remained affected by existing social hierarchies.	Local government improvement involved not only administrative performance but also participation, representation, accountability, legitimacy, and responsiveness.
Overall Pattern	Governance challenges were strongly associated with metropolitan fragmentation and uneven institutional capacity.	Governance challenges reflected the interaction between formal decentralization, institutional capacity, inequality, and informality.	Governance challenges reflected the interaction between formal decentralization, fiscal dependence, bureaucratic influence, and social structures.	Similar decentralization and governance reforms produced different configurations of outcomes across contexts, indicating substantial contextual variation in local government improvement.

The comparative synthesis identified substantial differences in the structural, relational, and normative conditions shaping local government governance across the three regions. As presented in Table 1 (Comparative Findings on Local Government Governance Across Regions), Latin American cases were particularly characterized by metropolitan fragmentation and uneven institutional capacity, Sub-Saharan African cases reflected the interaction between decentralization, administrative capacity, inequality, and informality, while South Asian cases highlighted continued fiscal and bureaucratic dependence on higher levels of government. Despite these regional differences, the findings also reveal several recurring patterns, particularly the importance of fiscal and administrative capacity, intergovernmental and multi-actor relationships, and normative dimensions such as participation, accountability, representation, legitimacy, and responsiveness.

Structural Conditions of Local Government Performance

The first set of findings concerns the structural conditions under which local governments operate. The comparative evidence identifies three recurring structural elements: the distribution of authority through decentralization, the availability of fiscal and administrative capacity, and the territorial configuration within which local governments perform their functions. Although these elements appear across the three regional contexts, their specific configurations differ substantially.

Figure 1 summarizes the principal structural conditions identified across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. The figure shows that Latin American cases are characterized by decentralization accompanied by uneven institutional capacity and metropolitan fragmentation; Sub-Saharan African cases combine formal decentralization with inequality, urban informality, and administrative capacity constraints; while South Asian cases show formal decentralization alongside fiscal dependence and continued bureaucratic influence from higher levels of government.

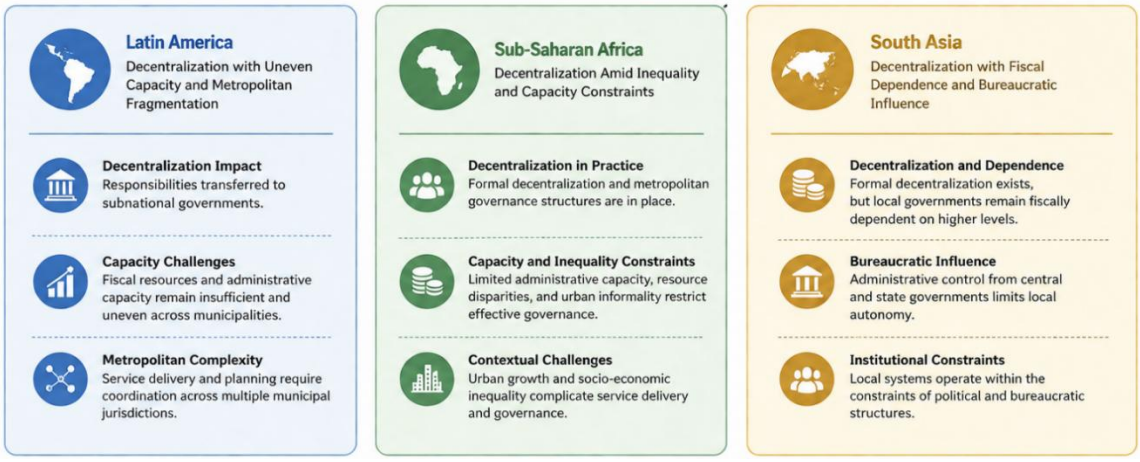


Figure 1. Structural Conditions Affecting Local Government Performance Across Regions

In Latin America, the reviewed literature identifies a substantial expansion of formal responsibilities at the subnational level following decentralization reforms. However, the transfer of responsibilities was not consistently accompanied by equivalent fiscal resources or administrative capacity. This pattern is particularly evident in metropolitan areas, where transport, water, housing, and environmental management frequently extend beyond individual municipal boundaries. The cases of São Paulo, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires illustrate the presence of multiple municipal jurisdictions operating within interconnected metropolitan systems.

In South Asia, the evidence shows a similar distinction between formal decentralization and the actual capacity of local institutions. India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan established different institutional arrangements for local government through constitutional, legislative, and decentralization reforms. However, the reviewed evidence indicates continued financial dependence on higher levels of government and substantial administrative influence from higher-level bureaucracies. In India, for example, Panchayati Raj institutions received formal responsibilities while remaining dependent on state governments for financial resources and administrative support.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the reviewed evidence demonstrates that formal decentralization and institutional formalization also coexist with substantial structural constraints. The South African case provides evidence of a constitutional framework that distributes governmental functions across national, provincial, and local spheres and establishes metropolitan municipalities with significant responsibilities and revenue arrangements. At the same time, metropolitan local governments operate within conditions

characterized by socioeconomic inequality, spatial segregation, urban informality, and constrained administrative capacity

The cross-regional comparison therefore identifies a common empirical pattern: the formal decentralization of authority does not correspond automatically to equivalent local government capacity. Across the three regions, the reviewed cases differ in the specific constraints they face, but fiscal resources, administrative capacity, institutional arrangements, and territorial characteristics repeatedly appear as relevant structural conditions. Latin American cases emphasize metropolitan fragmentation, South Asian cases emphasize fiscal and bureaucratic dependence, and Sub-Saharan African cases emphasize the interaction between formal institutional arrangements and socioeconomic and administrative constraints.

Relational Conditions and Intergovernmental Coordination

The second set of findings concerns the relationships through which local governments exercise authority and deliver public services. The literature identified intergovernmental relations, community engagement, public-private partnerships, leadership, and local knowledge as recurring relational dimensions.

The reviewed evidence on intergovernmental relations identified both vertical and horizontal coordination as important components of local governance arrangements. In South Africa, integrated development planning was reported as an instrument for coordinating planning across national, provincial, and local levels. The evidence further identified political trust, bureaucratic capacity, and coordination mechanisms as relevant features of intergovernmental relationships.

The literature on community leadership identified three leadership domains: political leadership, managerial leadership, and civic leadership. These domains correspond respectively to elected authority, professional administrative capacity, and the mobilization of civil-society actors. The reviewed participation literature further reported that sustained citizen involvement in local decision-making was associated with governance quality, equity, and accountability when institutional support, information, and organizational capacity were available.

A separate body of evidence concerned indigenous and local knowledge. Studies included in the synthesis reported the use of locally embedded knowledge in areas such as agricultural management, environmental governance, informal financial arrangements, and

community-based conflict resolution. The literature therefore identified local knowledge as a recurring component of governance arrangements in several developing-country contexts.

The reviewed evidence on public-private partnerships also identified specific enabling conditions. The Turkish municipal case examined by Göymen (2008) identified three conditions associated with effective partnerships: public-sector capacity and accountability, private-sector competence and responsibility, and active civil-society participation. The absence of one or more of these conditions was associated in the reviewed literature with less favorable partnership outcomes.

Normative Conditions: Participation, Representation, Accountability, and Legitimacy

The third analytical dimension concerns the normative characteristics of local governance. The comparative evidence identified participation, representation, accountability, legitimacy, and responsiveness as recurring elements in the literature.

In South Asia, the reviewed evidence from India showed that institutional mechanisms for political representation, including reserved seats for women and Scheduled Castes, increased formal representation within local government institutions. At the same time, the reviewed study reported that substantive policy influence remained associated with existing social networks and dominant caste structures.

The Southern African literature similarly reported the importance of citizen participation and service-delivery expectations. The reviewed South African evidence documented service-delivery protests, particularly in low-income townships, alongside the formal institutional arrangements established through the post-apartheid constitutional framework.

The literature on New Public Management identified another normative dimension. Local government reforms incorporating results-based management, performance measurement, contracting out, and customer-oriented service delivery were reported across Southern Africa. The reviewed literature also identified a distinction between viewing citizens as service users and viewing them as democratic participants in local governance.

Across the reviewed literature, therefore, local government performance was reported not only in terms of administrative and service-delivery capacity but also through dimensions relating to participation, representation, accountability, and relationships between citizens and public institutions.

Cross-Regional Pattern of Contextual Variation

The comparative synthesis identified substantial variation in the specific configuration of governance constraints across the three regions. Latin American cases were characterized particularly by metropolitan fragmentation and the coordination of functions across municipal boundaries. South Asian cases emphasized the coexistence of formal decentralization with continuing bureaucratic and fiscal dependence on higher levels of government. The Sub-Saharan African evidence emphasized the interaction between formal decentralization structures and conditions including inequality, urban informality, administrative capacity, and intergovernmental coordination.

At the same time, several recurring elements appeared across the regional evidence. These included differences in local administrative capacity, fiscal dependence, relationships between levels of government, participation of non-state actors, and the role of locally embedded social and institutional arrangements. The evidence therefore demonstrated both regional differentiation and cross-regional recurrence in the factors associated with local government performance.

Table 2. Cross-Regional Patterns of Local Government Governance

Governance Dimension	Latin America	Sub-Saharan Africa	South Asia	Cross-Regional Finding
Fiscal and Administrative Capacity	Local governments assumed expanded responsibilities, but fiscal and administrative capacity remained uneven across municipalities.	Local governments operated with substantial differences in administrative capacity and socioeconomic resources.	Local governments remained financially dependent on higher levels of government, with continuing bureaucratic influence.	Decentralization was not consistently accompanied by equivalent fiscal and administrative capacity.
Intergovernmental Relations	Metropolitan governance required coordination among municipalities and between local and higher levels of government.	Governance involved coordination among national, provincial, and local institutions.	Local institutions remained strongly connected to state or central government administrative structures.	The effectiveness of local governance was associated with the configuration of relationships across levels of government.
Territorial and Institutional Context	Metropolitan fragmentation created overlapping jurisdictions and	Inequality, spatial segregation, and urban informality affected local	Local governance was embedded within diverse institutional and social structures.	Territorial and institutional conditions shaped the way local governments

Governance Dimension	Latin America	Sub-Saharan Africa	South Asia	Cross-Regional Finding
	cross-boundary service-delivery challenges.	government operations.		exercised formally assigned responsibilities.
Citizen Participation and Representation	Local governance involved increasing expectations concerning participation, accountability, and responsiveness.	Citizen participation and service-delivery demands were prominent features of local governance.	Formal political representation expanded, while substantive influence remained affected by existing social structures.	Participation and representation were present across regions but operated through different institutional and social configurations.
Non-State Actors and Local Knowledge	Civil-society and other local actors participated in decentralized governance arrangements.	Community leadership, civil society, and indigenous or local knowledge appeared as relevant governance resources.	Established social networks and community structures influenced local governance processes.	Local governance involved multiple actors beyond formal government institutions, although their roles varied across contexts.
Overall Governance Pattern	Decentralization was associated with metropolitan fragmentation and uneven institutional capacity.	Decentralization interacted with inequality, informality, and administrative constraints.	Decentralization coexisted with fiscal dependence, bureaucratic influence, and social hierarchies.	Similar decentralization processes produced different governance configurations across contexts, demonstrating substantial contextual variation in local government improvement.

The cross-regional comparison presented in Table 2 demonstrates that local government governance was shaped by different combinations of structural, relational, and normative conditions across the three regions. Latin American cases were primarily characterized by metropolitan fragmentation and uneven institutional capacity, Sub-Saharan African cases by the interaction of decentralization with inequality, informality, and administrative constraints, and South Asian cases by fiscal dependence, bureaucratic influence, and socially embedded governance arrangements. Despite these differences, the synthesis identifies several recurring conditions across regions, particularly fiscal and administrative capacity, intergovernmental relations, territorial and institutional characteristics, citizen participation, and the involvement of non-state actors. These findings

indicate that the reviewed cases shared several governance challenges while differing in the configuration and relative importance of the conditions associated with local government performance.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of the Comparative Findings

The comparative findings demonstrate that the central challenge of local government improvement in developing countries is not simply the absence of decentralization or formal institutional arrangements, but the unequal capacity of local governments to operate within the structural, relational, and normative conditions surrounding them (Agung et al., 2026). As shown in the Results section, decentralization expanded the formal responsibilities of local governments across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, but the corresponding fiscal, administrative, and institutional capacities varied substantially (Faguet, 2014). This pattern suggests that the formal transfer of authority represents only one component of effective local governance. The actual performance of local governments depends on whether transferred responsibilities are supported by adequate resources, administrative capabilities, institutional coordination, and locally appropriate governance arrangements (Fukuyama, 2013).

The regional differences identified in the synthesis further demonstrate that the same broad reform trajectory can interact with different contextual constraints. In Latin America, decentralization was closely associated with metropolitan fragmentation and the difficulty of coordinating functions that extend beyond municipal boundaries (Gupta & Sharma, 2023). In South Asia, formal decentralization coexisted with fiscal dependence and continuing bureaucratic influence from higher levels of government. In Sub-Saharan Africa, formal decentralization operated alongside socioeconomic inequality, spatial segregation, urban informality, and administrative constraints (Karim et al., 2026). These differences are important because they demonstrate that the problem of local government improvement cannot be reduced to a single institutional deficit. Rather, the relevant constraint depends on the configuration of institutions, resources, territorial structures, and social relationships within each setting (Kauneckis & Andersson, 2009). The findings therefore directly support the research objective of examining local government improvement through a comparative and context-sensitive perspective.

The findings concerning relational conditions further indicate that local government performance is not produced exclusively within the boundaries of formal local government institutions (Koelble & Siddle, 2014). Intergovernmental relations, community participation, civil-society engagement, private-sector involvement, and locally embedded knowledge all appeared in the reviewed literature as relevant components of governance arrangements (Lewis, 2017). The evidence on South Africa, for example, emphasizes the importance of political trust, bureaucratic capacity, and coordination mechanisms within intergovernmental relations, while the literature on community leadership identifies political, managerial, and civic leadership as complementary sources of local governance capacity (Nomaini et al., 2022). This finding suggests that local government improvement is partly a relational process in which institutional performance depends on the quality of interactions among actors operating at different levels and possessing different forms of authority and resources.

The normative findings provide a further qualification. Participation, representation, accountability, and legitimacy cannot be treated simply as supplementary outcomes of administrative modernization (Pabayo, 2025). The South Asian evidence shows that formal representation can increase without necessarily eliminating the influence of existing social hierarchies, while the literature on New Public Management demonstrates a tension between treating citizens as service consumers and recognizing them as democratic participants (Pritchett et al., 2013). Thus, local government improvement involves a broader question concerning who participates in governance, whose interests are represented, and how public authority is held accountable.

Findings in Relation to Existing Theories and Previous Literature

The findings support the proposition that no single theoretical tradition adequately captures the full complexity of local governance in developing-country contexts. Community-centred theories provide an important explanation of the democratic legitimacy of local self-government because they emphasize participation, civic identity, and communal engagement (Rahmadhani et al., 2025; Rudianto, 2026; Suminar et al., 2025). However, the South Asian evidence demonstrates that communities themselves are not necessarily internally homogeneous or egalitarian (Setiawan et al., 2022). Existing caste, gender, class, ethnic, and religious structures can influence who has effective access to local decision-

making. The community-centred perspective therefore explains the importance of local participation but requires additional attention to internal power asymmetries (Smoke, 2015b).

State-centred theories provide a different and complementary explanation by emphasizing administrative coordination, national policy, and the functional role of local governments within the wider state apparatus (Smoke, 2015a). This perspective is particularly relevant to the evidence of continuing bureaucratic and fiscal dependence in South Asia and the importance of intergovernmental coordination identified in the African cases (Swapan, 2016). However, the findings also indicate that excessive central control can weaken the autonomy and responsiveness that constitute important rationales for decentralization. The state-centred perspective consequently captures the importance of coordination and capacity but does not sufficiently explain the democratic and locally embedded dimensions of governance.

Market-centred approaches similarly capture an important dimension of local government, particularly where service provision, contracting, and public-private partnerships are concerned (Waddington et al., 2019). However, the reviewed evidence challenges the assumption that market mechanisms can operate as broadly applicable substitutes for public capacity in developing-country settings (West, 2015). The PPP evidence indicates that effective partnerships require a capable and accountable public sector, a competent private sector, and active civil society (Willis et al., 1999). This finding suggests that market mechanisms are conditional instruments whose effectiveness depends on institutional and social preconditions rather than universally transferable solutions.

The radical and neo-Marxist tradition contributes a structural explanation by directing attention to the economic and political constraints surrounding local governments. This perspective is useful for understanding how local fiscal capacity and local economic structures can restrict the choices available to municipal authorities. Nevertheless, its structural emphasis can understate the capacity of local political and administrative actors to construct alternative governance arrangements and to mobilize community and institutional resources. The evidence reviewed in this study indicates that local actors are not merely passive recipients of structural constraints; their relationships, leadership capacities, and institutional choices also influence governance outcomes.

Governance and network theories provide a particularly relevant explanation for the relational findings because they recognize that contemporary local governance involves

multiple actors, including government agencies, civil-society organizations, private providers, and communities. However, the evidence also confirms an important limitation of network approaches: relationships among actors cannot automatically be assumed to be cooperative, balanced, or democratic. Questions of authority, accountability, resources, and unequal bargaining power remain important. The findings concerning intergovernmental relations, indigenous knowledge, community participation, and PPPs therefore indicate that a multi-actor perspective must be accompanied by an explicit analysis of institutional capacity and power relationships.

Taken together, these findings support the central theoretical diagnosis of this study: each major theoretical tradition captures an important dimension of local governance while simultaneously leaving other dimensions insufficiently explained. Community-centred theories emphasize legitimacy and participation; state-centred theories emphasize administrative coordination; market-centred theories emphasize choice and efficiency; radical approaches emphasize structural constraints; and network theories emphasize interdependence among multiple actors. The comparative evidence therefore provides a basis for moving beyond theoretical competition toward an integrative framework.

Theoretical Contribution: Toward a Multi-Centred Theory of Local Governance

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the elaboration of a multi-centred theory of local governance that integrates the analytical strengths of these traditions while explicitly incorporating contextual specificity. The concept builds on the comparative framework associated with de Vries, Reddy, and Haque (2008), but extends it by incorporating insights from complexity theory, institutional pluralism, and the capabilities approach.

The first principle of the proposed framework concerns the relationship between local autonomy and accountability. The findings indicate that local self-government is important for responsiveness and democratic participation, but local autonomy cannot be treated as an unrestricted institutional good. Local governments must remain accountable both to their constituent communities and to broader legal and democratic frameworks. This principle addresses the limitation of purely community-centred approaches by recognizing that local communities may contain internal inequalities and that local autonomy must operate within broader accountability arrangements.

The second principle concerns the context-sensitive balance between local discretion and central oversight. The regional comparison demonstrates that neither complete centralization nor unrestricted local autonomy provides a universally appropriate solution. The appropriate distribution of authority depends on the functional area involved, the administrative capacity available at the local level, and the political and social characteristics of the territory. This principle directly follows from the different configurations observed across Latin America, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The third principle concerns the conditional role of market mechanisms. The findings do not suggest that private-sector participation or market-oriented instruments should be rejected. Rather, the evidence indicates that their effectiveness depends on public-sector capacity, accountability, private-sector competence, and social oversight. This interpretation transforms market mechanisms from universal prescriptions into context-dependent governance instruments.

The fourth principle is institutional pluralism and multi-actor governance. Local government should not be conceptualized as an isolated administrative organization. Effective governance involves elected representatives, professional administrators, communities, civil-society organizations, private actors, and higher levels of government. The quality of governance therefore depends not only on the capacity of individual institutions but also on the relationships among them. This principle is consistent with the relational patterns identified in the Results and extends the network perspective by incorporating questions of accountability, power, and institutional capacity.

The fifth and most distinctive principle is contextual specificity. The findings indicate that similar institutional reforms can generate different governance configurations when introduced into different fiscal, political, administrative, social, and territorial environments. Accordingly, the framework rejects both uncritical policy replication and complete contextual relativism. General governance principles remain useful, but their implementation requires systematic adaptation to local conditions. This proposition is consistent with the literature's critique of best-practice transfer and institutional isomorphism, which emphasizes that practices regarded as successful in one institutional environment may not produce equivalent outcomes elsewhere.

The multi-centred framework can therefore be understood as a diagnostic rather than prescriptive theory. Its purpose is not to specify a single institutional arrangement that all

local governments should adopt, but to identify the combination of conditions under which particular governance arrangements are likely to function effectively. This interpretation is consistent with the theoretical extension developed in this study, in which complexity theory conceptualizes governance outcomes as emergent from interactions among multiple actors, institutional pluralism explains collective governance across multiple scales, and the capabilities approach provides a normative basis for evaluating whether governance arrangements expand substantive opportunities for community members.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings have several implications for the design of local government reform in developing countries. First, reform programmes should move from uniform institutional transplantation toward contextual diagnosis. Before transferring a governance model, policymakers should assess local fiscal capacity, administrative capability, intergovernmental relations, territorial characteristics, social structures, and existing community institutions. This approach does not reject international learning but changes the mechanism through which learning occurs: successful practices should be treated as adaptable reference points rather than as standardized institutional templates.

Second, decentralization policies should be accompanied by appropriate investments in local administrative and fiscal capacity. The findings demonstrate that transferring formal responsibilities without corresponding resources and implementation capacity can create a gap between legal authority and actual performance. Fiscal transfers, professional administrative capacity, planning systems, and coordination mechanisms therefore need to be considered as part of decentralization design rather than as secondary implementation issues.

Third, local government reform should strengthen intergovernmental and multi-actor coordination. The evidence on South Africa, community leadership, and PPPs indicates that governance outcomes depend on interactions among multiple institutional and social actors. Policy design should therefore create mechanisms through which local governments, higher levels of government, communities, civil society, and private actors can coordinate responsibilities while maintaining clear accountability arrangements.

Fourth, development interventions should recognize local knowledge and institutional diversity as potential governance resources. The literature reviewed in this study shows that externally designed interventions can overlook locally embedded knowledge and

capacities. However, incorporating local knowledge should not mean assuming that all traditional arrangements are inherently equitable or effective. Instead, local knowledge should be incorporated through processes that allow it to interact critically with formal institutions, professional expertise, and democratic accountability.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its contribution. First, the research employs a comparative theoretical synthesis rather than primary empirical data. The findings therefore depend on the quality, scope, and conceptual orientations of the studies included in the literature corpus. The analysis cannot establish causal effects in the same manner as longitudinal or quantitative comparative research.

Second, the regional comparison covers Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, but the evidence within each region is not geographically comprehensive. The reviewed literature contains particularly prominent cases such as São Paulo, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, India, and South Africa, and these cases should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all local governments within their respective regions.

Third, the synthesis brings together studies employing different concepts, methodologies, and levels of analysis. This heterogeneity provides analytical diversity but also limits direct comparability between cases. The proposed multi-centred theory should therefore be understood as a theoretical framework generated from comparative patterns rather than as a fully validated causal model.

Future research should address these limitations through empirical testing of the proposed framework across a larger and more systematically comparable set of local governments. Quantitative studies could examine whether fiscal capacity, administrative capacity, intergovernmental coordination, and multi-actor participation are associated with local government performance under different institutional conditions. Qualitative comparative studies could further investigate how the five principles of the multi-centred framework operate in specific local contexts. Longitudinal research would also be valuable for examining how governance arrangements evolve over time and whether context-sensitive adaptations generate more sustainable outcomes than standardized reform models. Such research would provide an empirical basis for refining, testing, and potentially operationalizing the multi-centred theory proposed in this study.

CONCLUSION

The comparative synthesis demonstrates that local government improvement in developing countries cannot be explained by formal decentralization or the adoption of standardized governance reforms alone. The findings across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia reveal substantial variation in the structural, relational, and normative conditions shaping local governance. Latin American cases highlight metropolitan fragmentation and uneven institutional capacity, Sub-Saharan African cases emphasize the interaction between decentralization, inequality, informality, and administrative constraints, while South Asian cases demonstrate the persistence of fiscal dependence, bureaucratic influence, and socially embedded governance structures. Across these contexts, fiscal and administrative capacity, intergovernmental relations, citizen participation, and the involvement of multiple actors consistently emerge as important conditions shaping local government performance.

The principal contribution of this study is the elaboration and extension of a multi-centred theory of local governance as a diagnostic and analytical framework for understanding context-sensitive local government improvement. Rather than proposing a universally applicable institutional model, the framework integrates the analytical strengths of community-centred, state-centred, market-centred, radical, and network perspectives while addressing their respective limitations. It emphasizes accountable local self-government, a context-sensitive balance between local autonomy and central oversight, the conditional use of market mechanisms, pluralist multi-actor governance, and the primacy of contextual specificity. The framework further incorporates insights from complexity theory, institutional pluralism, and the capabilities approach to explain why similar reform strategies may produce different outcomes across institutional, social, political, and historical settings.

Future research should empirically test and refine the proposed multi-centred framework across a broader range of local government contexts. Comparative studies could examine how fiscal capacity, administrative capability, intergovernmental relations, citizen participation, and multi-actor governance interact under different institutional conditions. Longitudinal research would also be valuable for examining how context-sensitive reforms evolve over time and whether adaptation produces more sustainable governance outcomes than standardized policy replication. Future studies may further operationalize the five principles of the multi-centred theory and assess their applicability through mixed-methods,

comparative case studies, or quantitative cross-country research, thereby strengthening the empirical foundation and explanatory scope of the framework.

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