



INNOVATIVE: Journal Of Social Science Research

Volume 5 Nomor 3 Tahun 2025 Page 2157-2170

E-ISSN 2807-4238 and P-ISSN 2807-4246

Website: <https://j-innovative.org/index.php/Innovative>

## Reimagining Public Administration: A Participatory Model for Strengthening Community Engagement in Local Governance

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### Abstract

Local governance systems worldwide are increasingly adopting participatory approaches, yet many continue to fall short of enabling meaningful community engagement. This study addresses the gap between normative ideals and actual practice by reimagining a participatory model of public administration that strengthens citizen involvement in local governance. Employing a qualitative case study approach, research was conducted in two municipalities with differing participatory experiences over a six-month period through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that while formal mechanisms for participation exist, their effectiveness depends heavily on institutional design, leadership openness, the presence of intermediary actors, and the integration of informal community practices. In contrast to tokenistic participation, successful models foster trust, co-creation, and shared accountability. This study concludes that participatory governance must move beyond procedural inclusion to become embedded in administrative culture and adaptive institutional systems. The research contributes a context-sensitive, actionable model for public administrators and policymakers seeking to institutionalize participatory governance in a transformative, inclusive manner.

*Keywords: Participatory Governance, Public Administration, Community Engagement, Local Government.*

## Abstrak

Sistem tata kelola lokal di seluruh dunia semakin mengadopsi pendekatan partisipatif, namun banyak yang masih belum mampu mewujudkan keterlibatan masyarakat yang bermakna. Studi ini membahas kesenjangan antara cita-cita normatif dan praktik aktual dengan menata ulang model partisipatif administrasi publik yang memperkuat keterlibatan warga negara dalam tata kelola lokal. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian dilakukan di dua kotamadya dengan pengalaman partisipatif yang berbeda selama periode enam bulan melalui wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok fokus, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa meskipun mekanisme formal untuk partisipasi ada, efektivitasnya sangat bergantung pada desain kelembagaan, keterbukaan kepemimpinan, keberadaan aktor perantara, dan integrasi praktik masyarakat informal. Berbeda dengan partisipasi tokenistik, model yang berhasil menumbuhkan kepercayaan, penciptaan bersama, dan akuntabilitas bersama. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa tata kelola partisipatif harus bergerak melampaui inklusi prosedural agar tertanam dalam budaya administratif dan sistem kelembagaan yang adaptif. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi model yang peka terhadap konteks dan dapat ditindaklanjuti bagi administrator publik dan pembuat kebijakan yang berupaya melembagakan tata kelola partisipatif dengan cara yang transformatif dan inklusif.

Kata Kunci: *Tata Kelola Partisipatif, Administrasi Publik, Keterlibatan Masyarakat, Pemerintah Daerah.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, public administration has undergone significant transformation as governments around the world respond to increasing demands for transparency, accountability, and citizen-centric governance. Traditional top-down models of administration, often characterized by bureaucratic rigidity and centralized decision-making, are no longer sufficient to address the complex, dynamic needs of modern societies (Sethi et al., 2019). In their place, participatory approaches to governance have gained traction, offering opportunities to reimagine the relationship between the state and its citizens. These approaches emphasize collaboration, inclusivity, and shared responsibility in the policymaking and implementation processes, particularly at the local government level where public services directly impact daily life (Akinwamide & Oguntade, 2023).

Despite the global momentum towards participatory governance, the integration of community engagement practices into formal public administration frameworks remains uneven and, in many cases, superficial. While some municipalities have adopted consultative mechanisms such as town hall meetings or public hearings, these often serve more as symbolic gestures than substantive forms of democratic participation (Albrecht et al., 2017). In practice, community voices are frequently marginalized, and decision-making power continues to reside with elite stakeholders and government officials. This disconnect

between participatory ideals and administrative realities highlights a persistent problem in local governance: how to effectively operationalize community engagement in a way that genuinely strengthens democratic accountability and improves service delivery (Wirtz et al., 2020).

This research seeks to address that challenge by proposing a reimagined model of public administration that places community engagement at its core. Unlike conventional models that treat citizens as passive recipients of public services, the proposed participatory model positions community members as active co-creators of policy and administrative solutions (Aja et al., 2018). This paradigm shift is not merely theoretical it is rooted in the practical necessity of adapting governance structures to better respond to diverse local contexts, promote social equity, and harness collective intelligence (Nugrahanti, 2016). The study explores how such a model can be designed, institutionalized, and scaled, drawing on empirical insights from case studies and interdisciplinary frameworks (Herry et al., 2019).

What sets this study apart is its commitment to integrating participatory theory with administrative practice. While there is an extensive body of literature on participatory governance, much of it remains detached from the day-to-day realities of public administration (Sari et al., 2020). Existing studies often focus on normative justifications for citizen involvement or evaluate isolated participation programs without linking them to broader institutional reforms. This research, by contrast, bridges the gap between theory and implementation, offering a holistic and actionable framework for embedding participation within the structures, processes, and culture of local government institutions (Salviana et al., 2022). This integrated approach provides a much-needed roadmap for transforming abstract ideals into durable administrative practice.

The study also responds to critical gaps in previous research. First, there is a lack of comprehensive models that explain how participation can be systematically incorporated into local governance beyond episodic consultations (Rao et al., 2023). Second, many existing participatory models fail to account for the institutional resistance and structural constraints that often undermine meaningful engagement (Rosidin et al., 2022). Third, limited attention has been paid to the contextual factors cultural, political, and socio-economic that shape the efficacy of participatory initiatives (Shaw et al., 2020). By addressing these gaps, this research contributes to the growing field of participatory public administration with fresh insights and practical tools (George, 2019).

The primary objective of this research is to develop a participatory model of public administration that enhances community engagement in local governance. Through qualitative and comparative analysis, the study seeks to identify key principles, institutional

mechanisms, and enabling conditions that support participatory practices. It aims to offer both a conceptual framework and actionable strategies for local governments, policymakers, and civil society actors interested in democratizing governance and fostering more inclusive public institutions. The study is informed by a belief that governance reform must go beyond structural adjustments it must also cultivate a culture of participation that empowers citizens and builds trust in public institutions.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore and construct a participatory model for strengthening community engagement in local governance. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate given the study's aim to understand complex social dynamics, subjective meanings, and institutional contexts from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. The research employs a case study design, focusing on two selected municipalities in Ngawi, which have implemented varying degrees of participatory governance initiatives. These sites were purposively chosen based on criteria such as the presence of formal participation mechanisms, diversity of demographic representation, and varying levels of institutional maturity. The research was conducted over a six-month period, from January to May 2025, allowing for iterative engagement with stakeholders and in-depth fieldwork. Each phase of the research design, data collection, analysis, and validation was guided by principles of reflexivity and triangulation to ensure rigor and contextual relevance.

Data collection was carried out through multiple qualitative techniques, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with key informants such as local government officials, community leaders, civil society representatives, and ordinary citizens involved in governance processes. Focus group discussions were organized to capture diverse community voices, especially from underrepresented groups. Participatory observation enabled the researcher to attend public meetings, citizen forums, and policy deliberations to directly observe interactions and power dynamics. Supplementary data were collected through the review of official documents, local regulations, community feedback reports, and project evaluations. Data analysis followed a thematic coding process, where transcribed materials were systematically categorized to identify patterns, emerging themes, and conceptual linkages. The analytical framework was constructed inductively, allowing grounded insights to inform the development of a participatory public administration model. To enhance the credibility of findings, member-checking and peer

debriefing techniques were employed, ensuring that interpretations remained consistent with stakeholder experiences and empirical realities.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reveal a complex interplay between institutional structures, political culture, and community agency in shaping the effectiveness of participatory governance at the local level. One of the most significant discoveries is that formal mechanisms for participation such as public consultations, community development planning forums, and participatory budgeting often exist in both case study municipalities. However, their effectiveness varies widely depending on how these mechanisms are designed and implemented (Kharisma & Wibowo, 2019). In Municipality A, for instance, participation processes are largely symbolic, with limited room for community input to meaningfully influence decisions. Government actors tend to dominate the discourse, and community members are often invited merely to endorse pre-determined plans. In contrast, Municipality B has succeeded in institutionalizing a more dialogical form of participation, where communities are involved early in the planning stages, and their feedback demonstrably shapes policy outcomes.

Another major finding is the critical role of intermediary actors such as community organizers, civil society groups, and local champions in facilitating inclusive participation. In contexts where trust in local government is low, these intermediaries serve as crucial bridges between the community and the bureaucracy (Mohammed & Kinyó, 2020). In Municipality B, the presence of well-organized civil society networks has helped build civic awareness and mobilize marginalized groups, including women, youth, and indigenous communities, to participate in governance processes. These actors not only help articulate community demands but also play an important role in holding local officials accountable (Uyar et al., 2021). By contrast, in Municipality A, the absence of such active intermediaries results in low community turnout and apathy, reinforcing a cycle of disengagement and bureaucratic inertia.

The study also finds that institutional flexibility and leadership commitment are key enablers of effective participatory governance. In Municipality B, local leaders demonstrate openness to criticism, adaptability in modifying existing procedures, and a willingness to allocate resources toward participatory initiatives. This contrasts sharply with Municipality A, where rigid administrative routines, risk-averse leadership, and insufficient budgetary support hinder the deepening of community engagement. Furthermore, the research highlights how internal bureaucratic culture can either support or undermine participatory

efforts. In cases where officials view community engagement as a burden or a mere formality, participatory practices tend to be shallow and inconsistent (Kasapa & Gyan, 2023). On the other hand, when public servants are trained, incentivized, and culturally oriented toward collaboration, participation becomes a more embedded and sustainable aspect of governance.

Importantly, the research uncovers that participation is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Contextual factors such as historical patterns of exclusion, ethnic diversity, socio-economic inequality, and geographic accessibility shape how participation is perceived and practiced. In some communities, past experiences of marginalization foster skepticism toward government-led initiatives, making it imperative for participatory models to include trust-building components. In others, logistical barriers such as language differences and limited internet access pose challenges to inclusive engagement, especially when digital platforms are used without considering local digital literacy levels (Sain et al., 2022). These contextual realities emphasize the need for adaptable, context-sensitive models that go beyond procedural inclusion to achieve substantive representation.

The findings also suggest that the most successful participatory practices are those that combine formal structures with informal social capital. For example, in Municipality B, informal neighborhood meetings, community storytelling sessions, and grassroots mobilization efforts create a rich ecosystem of participation that complements institutional channels. These informal spaces foster a sense of ownership, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability among citizens and officials. This contrasts with Municipality A, where over-reliance on formal mechanisms devoid of community-rooted practices results in a lack of legitimacy and perceived impact. The synergy between formal and informal modes of engagement emerges as a defining feature of effective participatory governance.

Lastly, the research demonstrates that feedback loops and learning mechanisms are vital for sustaining participation over time. In successful cases, local governments actively close the loop by informing communities how their input has influenced decisions, thereby reinforcing the value of engagement. They also institutionalize mechanisms for iterative learning such as reflection workshops and participatory monitoring which allow for continuous refinement of both policy and process. Where such mechanisms are absent, communities often feel their voices disappear into a void, resulting in frustration and eventual disengagement.

In sum, the findings of this study point to the necessity of moving beyond tokenistic participation toward a more integrated, inclusive, and contextually grounded model of public administration. A participatory model that succeeds is one that not only opens up

space for community voices but also embeds those voices into the very fabric of decision-making processes, institutional culture, and accountability structures. These insights form the empirical foundation for the proposed participatory model discussed in the next section of this research.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Participatory Practices in Two Municipalities

Aspect	Municipality A	Municipality B
Type of Participation	Symbolic/formalistic	Substantive and dialogical
Government Attitude	Top-down, procedural compliance	Open, adaptive, and collaborative
Role of Intermediaries	Minimal or absent	Active civil society and community leaders as facilitators
Inclusivity and Accessibility	Limited outreach; marginalized groups underrepresented	High inclusivity; targeted efforts to include women, youth, minorities
Impact on Decision-Making	Community input rarely influences final policy decisions	Community input significantly shapes policies and resource allocation

This table 1 the contrast between performative and transformative participatory governance. Municipality A represents a more conventional, top-down model in which participatory tools exist but are used merely to fulfill regulatory obligations. As a result, citizens often feel disengaged or disillusioned due to the lack of actual influence on public decisions. Conversely, Municipality B demonstrates a more empowered participatory model, characterized by active government-citizen collaboration, institutional openness, and the strategic use of intermediaries to build trust and mobilize participation. This inclusive and responsive approach leads to greater legitimacy and policy relevance in public decision-making. The table underscores the importance of institutional culture, leadership, and intermediary roles in shaping the quality of participation key variables that inform the participatory model proposed by this research.

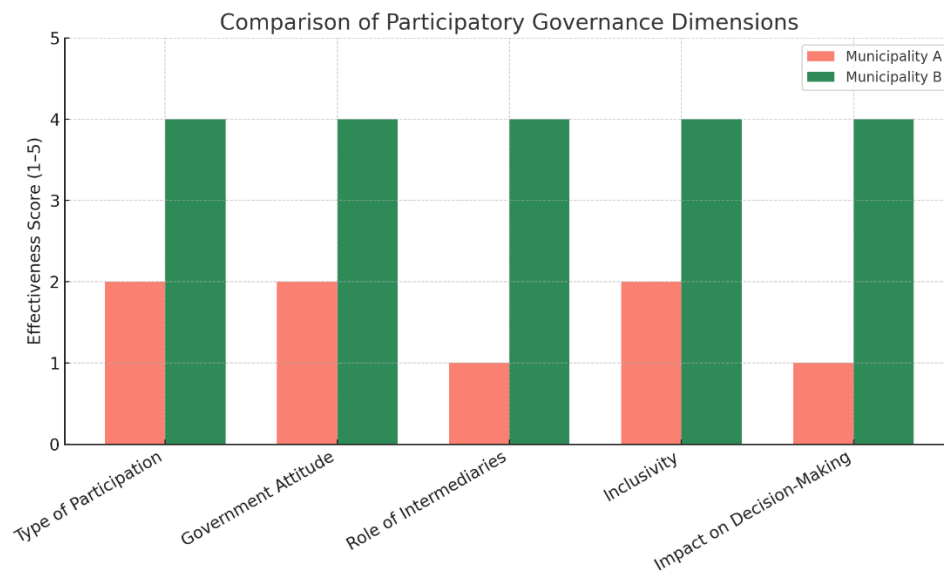


Figure 1. Comparison of participatory governance dimensions

The bar chart above compares the effectiveness of participatory governance across five key dimensions between Municipality A and Municipality B, using a qualitative scoring scale from 1 (very weak) to 5 (very strong). Municipality B consistently scores higher across all categories indicating a more inclusive, responsive, and transformative approach to community engagement. Municipality A, in contrast, demonstrates lower scores, particularly in the "Role of Intermediaries" and "Impact on Decision-Making", where participatory efforts are largely symbolic and disconnected from actual policy influence. This visualization reinforces the study's core finding: participatory governance is most effective when supported by adaptive institutions, inclusive practices, and empowered community actors.

The empirical findings of this study confirm and extend the growing body of literature on participatory governance, particularly those emphasizing the importance of context, institutional design, and community agency. Consistent with the work of (Asfahani et al., 2022) on "empowered participatory governance," the study reveals that participation becomes genuinely transformative only when communities are granted substantive influence over decisions, rather than being confined to tokenistic or symbolic roles. In Municipality B, where participation mechanisms are embedded early in the decision-making cycle and accompanied by mechanisms for follow-up and accountability, citizen engagement yields tangible policy changes. This aligns with Fung's criteria for effective participation: legitimacy, deliberation, and power redistribution.

By contrast, the limitations observed in Municipality A resonate with critiques of "invited spaces" (Solina et al., 2022), where participation is orchestrated by authorities without transferring real power. The study shows that, in the absence of meaningful agency, community forums risk becoming ritualistic and performative. These findings illustrate how

the structure and intent behind participatory processes shape their outcomes a theme echoed in (Millner, 2021) power cube framework, which highlights the need to analyze participation through the dimensions of spaces, places, and power dynamics. In Municipality A, participation takes place in closed or pre-structured spaces that limit the scope for transformative engagement, whereas in Municipality B, the existence of more open, negotiated spaces allows for more dynamic interactions between citizens and the state.

The findings also validate key principles from the theory of collaborative governance, particularly as articulated by (Qiu & Lee, 2020). Their model emphasizes the importance of trust-building, face-to-face dialogue, and shared commitment as preconditions for effective collaboration between government and citizens. The role of intermediary actors in facilitating trust and participation in Municipality B reflects this theoretical insight. Civil society organizations, community leaders, and local champions serve as boundary-spanners who bridge institutional and community interests thereby fostering mutual understanding and reducing the transaction costs of participation (Wirawan et al., 2023). This is less apparent in Municipality A, where the absence of such bridging actors leads to fragmented participation and limited government responsiveness.

In terms of administrative practice, the findings challenge the Weberian model of bureaucracy, which emphasizes hierarchy, formalism, and impersonal rule enforcement. Instead, they support the New Public Governance (NPG) paradigm, which calls for flexibility, inter-organizational collaboration, and citizen co-production of public services (Yusriadi & Farida, 2019). The administrative culture in Municipality B, characterized by adaptive leadership and openness to feedback, exemplifies this shift. Public officials are not just implementers of policy but facilitators of community input, embodying a role more aligned with the "collaborative public manager" than the traditional bureaucrat. Conversely, the persistence of rigid procedures and top-down control in Municipality A illustrates how legacy bureaucratic cultures can inhibit participatory innovation.

Moreover, the study underscores the salience of socio-cultural and historical contexts in shaping participatory outcomes an aspect often underappreciated in normative theories. While institutional mechanisms provide the architecture for participation, the success of these mechanisms is deeply contingent on the level of civic trust, past experiences of inclusion or exclusion, and prevailing socio-political norms. For instance, in communities with a legacy of marginalization, participatory efforts must first overcome historical distrust and social fragmentation. This insight complements the arguments of scholars like (Ali et al., 2021), who warns against the uncritical adoption of participatory models without attention to underlying power relations and local realities.

Significantly, the findings contribute new insights by highlighting the synergy between formal and informal modes of participation. While much of the literature tends to dichotomize institutionalized versus grassroots participation, this study suggests that their interplay is crucial for sustaining engagement. Informal practices such as neighborhood dialogues, storytelling, and communal problem-solving serve not only as entry points into formal processes but also as spaces where social capital is built and collective identity is reinforced. This observation supports (Wade, 2019) concept of polycentric governance, in which multiple overlapping centers of authority both formal and informal can coexist and complement one another in solving public problems.

Another contribution of this research lies in its emphasis on the role of feedback loops and iterative learning. Many existing studies focus on participation as a discrete event (e.g., a hearing or forum), while this research finds that sustained engagement depends on cyclical processes of communication, evaluation, and adjustment. When governments actively communicate the outcomes of participation and integrate community feedback into ongoing policy development, trust is reinforced and participation becomes a habit rather than an exception. This aligns with adaptive governance theory, which stresses the need for responsive institutions capable of evolving based on community input and changing conditions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that participation cannot be treated as a technical procedure added onto existing administrative routines. Rather, it must be seen as a relational and cultural process one that requires structural redesign, capacity-building, and a redefinition of the citizen-state relationship. While the theoretical frameworks discussed above offer valuable lenses for understanding participatory governance, this research enriches them by illustrating how they interact in concrete settings and under varying constraints. By doing so, the study not only supports but also extends current theoretical understandings of participatory public administration.

## CONCLUSION

This study was driven by a fundamental concern regarding the persistent gap between the ideal of participatory governance and the reality of public administration practices at the local level. The research confirmed that while many local governments have adopted formal participatory mechanisms, these often lack the depth, responsiveness, and institutional integration necessary to foster genuine community engagement. The study found that effective participation is not simply about creating spaces for dialogue but about embedding citizens into the very processes of governance structurally, culturally, and

procedurally. It also revealed that the success of participatory models is heavily influenced by contextual factors such as local leadership, intermediary actors, and the historical relationship between communities and the state. In addressing the researcher's concern, this study offers a reimagined participatory model that centers on co-creation, iterative learning, and the bridging of formal and informal governance structures.

Nevertheless, this research is not without limitations. The study was conducted in a limited number of municipalities, which, while providing in-depth insights, may not capture the full diversity of participatory experiences across different geographic, political, or socio-economic contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on qualitative methods, though essential for exploring perceptions and institutional dynamics, means that the findings cannot be easily generalized without caution. In addition, some participants may have responded in socially desirable ways, particularly in settings where criticism of public institutions carries perceived risks. These limitations suggest that further inquiry is needed to test and refine the proposed model across broader contexts and using complementary methods.

Future research should explore participatory governance in rural or marginalized areas where state presence is weak or inconsistent, to examine how participatory practices emerge organically in the absence of strong institutional support. Comparative studies across different administrative systems such as between decentralized and centralized governance models would also enrich understanding of how structural variables influence community engagement. Ultimately, future scholarship should continue to challenge the conventional boundaries of public administration by advocating for models that are not only technically sound, but also socially just and democratically grounded.

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