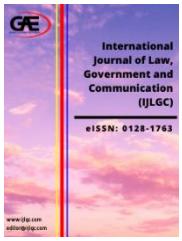
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STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE INTEGRITY THROUGH E-PARTICIPATION: THE ROLE OF TRANSPARENCY AND RESPONSIVENESS IN MALAYSIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Abstract:

There is an increasing emphasis on public participation in today's governance system as citizens are demanding a larger role in government processes and decision-making. The development of information and communication technologies (ICT) has brought about the phenomenon of e-participation as an effective tool to enable citizens to interact with government. Nevertheless, digital participation is under threat from a lack of transparency, responsiveness, and public trust. Most research so far has explored e-participation from a technology acceptance, citizen participation, and service performance point of view, neglecting the aspect of enhancing the integrity of governance. The aim of this study is to investigate the role of e-participation in governance integrity through transparency and responsiveness in the context of the local government of Malaysia, particularly Alor Setar City Council (MBAS). A qualitative case study approach was used with

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thematic analysis of the interviews held with 24 informants, consisting of 10 local government officers and 14 members of the public, as well as relevant literature and policy documents. The results show that e-participation can improve the integrity of governance through greater transparency and responsiveness in citizen-government interaction. However, it can only be effective if there is institutional ability and commitment to act on the basis of public input and to take steps to respond effectively. The study emphasises that e-participation is not only a medium of communication, but also a form of governance, and its role in the integrity of governance depends on institutional capacity. It makes a valuable contribution to the digital governance literature, and serves as a reminder of the need to combine e-participation with other institutional options that enable transparent and responsive local government.

Keywords:

E-Participation, Governance Integrity, Institutional Capacity, Local Government, Responsiveness, Transparency

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Introduction

The involvement of the public as part of democratic governance and effective public administration has always been acknowledged. The growing demand for more accountability, transparency, and citizen engagement has redefined the way in which governments and citizens relate to each other, especially at the local level where they have direct contact with government decisions and these decisions have a direct impact on the lives of local communities (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). Nowadays, citizens are not the only recipients of public services; they are also important stakeholders whose views, experience and expectations are taken into consideration for policymaking, improving public services and decision-making processes (Wang, 2001).

With the advent of information and communication technologies (ICT), horizons have been extended even further with regard to citizens' participation. Digital technologies have given governments the opportunity to communicate with the public in many ways online, to share, co-create, discuss, and collect feedback besides face-to-face interactions. This has helped to explain why e-participation, defined as the participation of citizens in governance through technologies, has grown (Macintosh, 2004). The significance of e-participation is growing as a factor to consider in e-governance, as it can be used to enhance communication, widen participation, and deepen citizen-government relations (Sæbø, Rose, & Flak, 2008; Wirtz, Daiser, & Binkowska, 2018).

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Digital governance promotion in Malaysia has been increasing in the last decade. Several schemes have been launched to promote citizen involvement, such as online complaint management systems, social media and mobile apps, and digital feedback channels. E-participation at the local government level has emerged as a vital tool for citizens to report local issues, offer suggestions, lodge complaints, and engage directly with the local government (MAMPU, 2023). These are all efforts towards the government's vision of better service delivery and citizen-inclusive governance.

The shift towards e-participation also fits in with an overall governance reform movement aimed at increasing trust in and transparency of government institutions and accountability of government officials. Transparency allows citizens to gain access to information and understand the decision-making processes; responsiveness is the readiness and capacity of public institutions to respond to citizens' concerns in an efficient and timely way (OECD, 2020). These principles can be considered key aspects of governance integrity when they are combined. In this context, integrity is not necessarily the opposite of corruption, but also entails good moral character, transparency, accountability, fairness, and a goodwill desire to represent the public interest (Huberts, 2018).

While there have been massive investments in using digital technologies and citizen engagement platforms, issues concerning governance integrity persist in local government administration. This is largely because of the lack of response to public complaints, failure to provide feedback on matters raised, the public's feeling that public opinion may not have affected policy action, and tardiness in response time. These concerns are especially relevant as local governments are the nearest to the citizens and often the front line between citizens and government institutions.

Recent governance problems have shown that integrity is not necessarily linked to 'corruption' or 'misconduct'. Instead, they also manifest themselves in weak transparency practices, low communication effectiveness, lack of responsiveness, and lack of sufficient space for citizens to genuinely participate (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020). A lack of access to information and failure to respond in a timely manner to citizens or to consider citizen feedback in decision-making processes can lead to a loss of faith in government institutions. Thus, governance integrity can be viewed as an overall institutional quality of being open, accountable, responsive, and trusted in public administration.

While the adoption of e-participation initiatives is growing, most of the studies focus on technology adoption, user acceptance, citizen engagement, and service effectiveness (Zheng & Schachter, 2017; Lim, Abdul Malek, Hussain & Tahir, 2020). Although these studies offer interesting insights on how digital participation platforms are used, less attention has been paid to understanding how e-participation can improve the integrity of governance. Specifically, knowledge is still limited on how e-participation can contribute to transparency and responsiveness and how this, in turn, can help consolidate integrity in local government institutions.

This gap becomes highly relevant in the Malaysian context as integrity, accountability, good governance and citizen-centred public administration are the thrust of the Malaysia Madani agenda. As more local governments invest in digital participation projects, it is important not only to consider the adoption of technology, but whether these systems help fulfil larger governance goals. Gaining insights into how e-participation enhances governance integrity is

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consequently key to ensuring that digital transformation is not only about improving the quality of administration but also about boosting public trust and democratic governance.

Under these circumstances, this study seeks to explore the potential of e-participation to improve the integrity of governance by increasing transparency and responsiveness in Malaysian local government. The study draws on qualitative evidence from the Alor Setar City Council (MBAS) in terms of how public feedback is handled by the officials and how the public sees the acknowledgement, follow-up, and visibility of the actions that they observe being taken based on their feedback.

Problem Statement

As governments continue to digitise their engagement with citizens, new opportunities for citizen participation, communication and collaboration in public affairs are emerging. As citizens increasingly demand more inclusive and citizen-centred governance, governments around the world are capitalising on e-participation to broaden public participation in governance processes, thus improving governance outcomes. Citizens can communicate with government institutions more conveniently and efficiently than ever before through digital communication systems like online complaint systems, social media and mobile apps, and electronic consultation mechanisms (Macintosh, 2004; Sæbø et al., 2008). These have created high expectations of the potential of e-participation for enhancing democratic governance, enhancing public service delivery and improving the citizen-government relationship.

In Malaysia, digital transformation has become an integral part of public sector reform. To enable citizens to participate, access government services, and make government more responsive, there has been a gradual increase in different e-participation initiatives taken by local governments. This is in line with the country's vision of digital governance and citizen-centric governance (MAMPU, 2023; United Nations, 2024). Nevertheless, despite enormous investments in digital participation platforms, doubts about transparency, responsiveness, accountability, and public trust remain. Often, citizens report that they are not receiving adequate responses to their complaints, that there is little follow-up communication, that there are low levels of information sharing, and that there is a lack of clarity about how their input affects decision-making processes. Such concerns indicate that the struggle is not simply for the opportunity to participate but also for the participation to have a governance impact.

The literature also indicates that having a platform does not necessarily mean that citizens are engaged and governance outcomes will be successful, especially with e-participation. Despite the increased communication through digital means, there are still gaps and issues in the interaction between citizens and governments, including a lack of integration of citizens' voices into decision-making and insufficient responsiveness. As a concept of interactive governance, public value is not just about public access to digital resources but is about ongoing co-production processes between citizens and public institutions (Choi & Song, 2020; Wang & Ran, 2025). As a result, citizens may feel participation is symbolic, rather than substantive, resulting in frustration, disaffection, and loss of trust in public institutions. The United Nations (2024) added that e-participation initiatives struggle to achieve desired results when citizens are unable to see government responsiveness and accountability in citizen feedback management.

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Such challenges are of particular importance due to their close association with governance integrity. Now, integrity is often mentioned in contexts of preventing corruption, ethical behaviour and lawfulness. However, today, integrity is also considered a more general quality of institutions and is seen as an attribute of transparency, accountability, responsiveness, fairness and public trust (Huberts, 2018; OECD, 2023). In this context, the integrity of governance is manifested in the possibility of open dialogue with the public, in acting promptly on their demands, in showing responsibility for decision-making processes and in implementing them.

Issues of integrity in local government often manifest themselves in far less dramatic ways, such as through administrative and procedural practices. When there is no response to citizens' complaints, when a response to citizens' input is given but no action is taken, when there is a lack of explanation for decisions, and when there are no meaningful opportunities for citizens to influence decisions, they may doubt the integrity of public institutions. These experiences heighten the sense of opacity, unresponsiveness, and apathy of institutions, which over time leads to a loss of public trust and confidence in government. Transparency and responsiveness are among the most crucial factors contributing to citizens' trust in and legitimate perceptions of government, especially in digital governance settings (Mergel, Edelmann & Haug, 2019; OECD, 2023).

This increased dependence on e-participation platforms consequently presents an important question about their contribution towards enhancing the integrity of governance. Digital technologies are often touted as a means of enhancing transparency and accountability, but technological solutions do not ensure transparency and accountability. It has been demonstrated by Gaventa and Barrett (2010) that these citizen engagement effects are conditioned upon the political setting and public institutions' receptiveness. This indicates that formal mechanisms of participation are not enough if there is not a commitment to listen to citizens and take their advice. The success of e-participation is therefore crucially dependent on the way in which institutions process and handle citizens' input and how they share information and decisions with citizens and react to their concerns. Lack of transparency and responsiveness can make e-participation a performative exercise that solicits inputs without providing opportunities for participation or influence. In such situations, the use of digital participation can actually be counter-productive in eroding public trust.

There have been numerous studies on e-participation, but research so far has focused mainly on the adoption of e-participation technologies, citizen participation, users' satisfaction and the effectiveness of the services (Lim, Abdul Malek, Hussain & Tahir, 2020; Zheng & Schachter, 2017). There has been relatively limited research to appreciate the value of e-participation in governance integrity, especially in the local government in Malaysia. In addition, these concepts of transparency, responsiveness and integrity are often analysed as individual elements instead of as colliding dimensions in the digital participation process. As a result, there is limited understanding of the response from local authorities to digital inputs, and whether local authorities foster transparency, accountability and perceived governance integrity through their feedback practices (Man & Abdul Manaf, 2024). Therefore, little is known about how e-participation can enhance the integrity of governance in local governance contexts.

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This gap is gaining more and more significance in the Malaysian context, especially in the agenda of Malaysia MADANI, which greatly values integrity, accountability, transparency, and citizen-centred governance. Moving beyond the discussion of the adoption of technology, one needs to consider if digital participation platforms support the broader objective of good governance, and how they are part of local authorities' investment in supporting that objective. It is also vital to understand how e-participation helps bolster governance integrity by enhancing transparency and responsiveness, in order to ensure that digital transformation not only delivers more efficient administration, but also public trust, democratic engagement and sustainable local governance.

Hence, this study aims to address this gap by examining the roles of e-participation in improving governance integrity through transparency and responsiveness, in order to gain insight into the practice of digital governance in Malaysian local government.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative case study approach to explore the effect of e-participation on fortifying the integrity of local government in Malaysia by increasing the transparency and responsiveness of local government. The empirical data consisted of previously collected interviews with 24 participants: 10 local government officers and 14 members of the public, who were selected through purposive sampling. The interview data were analysed thematically to highlight certain patterns, lessons learned and findings about how e-participation projects are implemented and how they contribute to transparency, responsiveness and governance integrity. Conceptual and policy context for interpreting the interviews was provided by examining relevant scholarly literature, government reports and policy documents. The combination of empirical facts and documentary sources grants a comprehensive understanding regarding the way in which e-participation can help create more transparent, responsive and citizen-centred local governance. The analysis focused on the experiences of the participants and practices in this single local authority. It therefore did not measure impacts or account for all Malaysian local governments.

E-Participation in Local Government

Digitalisation of public sector administration has been progressively introduced, and the interactions between governments and citizens have undergone changes. In this context of changing governance, e-participation has become a key tool for citizens' participation via digital platforms and communication technologies. E-participation can be defined as the use of ICTs to facilitate and improve the ability of citizens to participate in government activities, policy debates, and public decision-making (Macintosh, 2004; Medaglia, 2012). E-participation is a growing integral part of governance systems today, as governments are taking active action to improve interactions with citizens, the provision of public services, and the opportunities for citizens to participate in governance processes through digital technologies.

The rise of e-participation is closely connected with developing trends of digital governance and collaborative public administration. Traditional forms of participation can be geographically limited and time-limited, but digital technologies allow for more geographically distributed, ongoing, and participatory ways to connect governments and citizens (Linders, 2012). Online platforms for consultation and feedback via social media, e-complaint portals,

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and mobile apps let citizens voice concerns, provide feedback, and contribute to governance processes more easily than through traditional participation methods.

In local government contexts, e-participation plays a special role as local government is the closest level of government to citizens. Local governments directly bear responsibility for providing vital public services and solving problems within the community that impact the day-to-day lives of citizens. Effective engagement with citizens is therefore essential in ensuring that policy and services are responsive to citizens' needs and expectations in the localities. E-participation initiatives, according to investigations done by Porwol, Ojo and Breslin (2016), allow the possibility of more effective engagement of citizens with local governments by providing opportunities for ongoing interactions with citizens, the exchange of knowledge and community collaboration. These platforms allow governments to receive community feedback and enhance the communication process while building relationships with stakeholders in governance activities.

In addition to supporting communication, e-participation has come to be strongly linked to other governance goals. As scholars have pointed out, there is great potential in digital participation initiatives to increase inclusiveness, improve public service delivery, strengthen democratic legitimacy, and increase collaborative governance practices (Wirtz et al., 2018; Janssen & Estevez, 2013). Digital engagement can help governments gain insights from citizens in real time while also enabling more citizens' participation in governance processes. Given these possible advantages, there have been doubts about the effectiveness of e-participation. Even though digital participation platforms are available, their use does not always facilitate genuine citizen engagement or better governance outcomes, according to existing studies. Instead, governance improvements are more likely to happen when digital participation makes it possible to have continuous conversations and co-production between citizens and public institutions (Medaglia, 2012; Wang & Ran, 2025).

Even though digital participation tools have proliferated, issues around a low level of citizens' influence, lack of feedback systems, and poor institutional responsiveness remain. As a result, there has been a progressive shift from the questions of technological adoption to the governance outcomes that are produced through digital participation initiatives. This change highlights the need to analyse the role of e-participation in promoting governance values, in addition to governance integrity.

Governance Integrity

Transparent and honest governance is considered to be one of the major cornerstones of good governance and effective public administration. The focus on integrity has historically been on averting corruption, misconduct and abuse of power amongst public institutions. In recent years, however, the definition of integrity has been extended to other aspects of public administration, such as transparency, accountability, ethical behaviour, responsiveness and trust of the public (Huberts, 2014; OECD, 2023).

Huberts (2018) defines governance integrity as the quality of governance systems and institutional practices that underpin ethical governance and the protection of the 'public interest'. Integrity consequently does not simply mean individual acts, but also the structures and processes that shape an organisation's conduct, and how public entities engage with citizens. In this respect, integrity means that public organisations are capable of functioning

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openly, explaining and communicating honestly, and appropriately acting on the concerns raised by the public.

Moreover, recent governance literature indicates that integrity should be seen as a 'relational' phenomenon, evolving in the relationship between government and citizens (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020). Perceptions of integrity are shaped not just by formal accountability mechanisms, but by citizens' day-to-day interactions with public institutions. The availability of information, responsiveness to complaints, fair decisions, and real opportunities for meaningful engagement have a profound impact on people's perceptions of institutions' integrity.

In local government settings, governance integrity takes on special importance because of direct and frequent interactions between a local government and its citizens. Responsiveness to the needs of the community and openness in providing services and consulting with stakeholders are among the key aspects of local governments that are assessed. Thus, perceptions of governance integrity are closely tied to citizens' trust in local government institutions.

With the increased use of digital governance initiatives, governance integrity has grown in its importance. Increasingly, governments are using digital tools to interact with citizens, and expectations for transparency, accountability, and responsiveness have been heightened. Citizens have come to expect that governments will offer digital means for their participation and that they will be transparent and responsive to their concerns in making decisions. These expectations place governance integrity as a crucial result of digital participation efforts.

Transparency: A Dimension of Governance Integrity

Transparency is regarded as one of the most crucial aspects of governance integrity. It relates to transparency of information about government action, decisions, and processes (Hood, 2006; Piotrowski, 2007). Transparency helps citizens monitor the work of public institutions, helps to measure government performance, and is a means to impose accountability on those who make decisions.

Transparency is more than an information-sharing issue. Contemporary governance studies show that transparency contributes to legitimacy, accountability, and public trust by lowering the information asymmetries between governments and citizens (Meijer, 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen, Porumbescu, Hong & Im, 2013). Transparency helps citizens to understand how governments make decisions, how to assess the consequences of policies, and how to engage more effectively in governance.

Transparency matters especially in local government, where numerous public activities and policy decisions will have an impact on local citizens. There is growing demand from citizens for local governments to be open and transparent about public spending, performance in delivering services, development projects, and policymaking. Transparency is therefore not just about information being available, but also about information being understood, and being timely and relevant to citizens' needs.

The development of e-participation can give new opportunities for improving transparency and using digital technologies. Information is shared on governmental activities through the use of government websites, social media platforms, online dashboards, or digital consultation tools,

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increasing the visibility of governmental activities (Cucciniello, Porumbescu & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017). These technologies help citizens to access information more efficiently and facilitate public administration's increased openness.

However, transparency in the context of e-participation is not limited to information. Meaningful transparency involves government communication of how citizen feedback has been taken into account, the outcomes of decisions, and the impact of citizen participation on governance processes (Porwol, Ojo & Breslin, 2016). When the information is available openly, and the participation processes are transparent, citizens are more likely to perceive the integrity of the institutions. As a result, transparency emerges as one of the key ways in which e-participation can augment the integrity of governance.

Responsiveness: A Dimension of Governance Integrity

Responsiveness is another key aspect of the integrity of governance and is often seen as one of the core attributes of citizen-centred governance. Responsiveness, defined as both the recognition of citizens' needs, expectations and concerns and the capacity to deal with them effectively, is a feature of public institutions (Vigoda, 2002; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). It embodies an institution's dedication to public service and its ability to interact with stakeholders in a constructive manner.

The notion of responsiveness has become more popular in the public administration field owing to the rising demands for more flexibility, accessibility, and being people-oriented for governments. Responsive institutions actively recognise public issues or concerns, offer a prompt response, and make an effort to show citizens that their opinions are appreciated in decision-making (Yang & Pandey, 2011). This helps to improve public satisfaction and increases the legitimacy of government. Responsiveness is especially significant in local government environments as there is likely to be a range of more frequent interactions between citizens and local government over service delivery concerns, complaints and community matters. Citizens' perceptions of the performance and trustworthiness of the government are heavily shaped by timely responses and effective communication. However, a slow response and lack of follow-up can make people lose trust in public institutions and may deter them from participating in the future.

Digital technologies offer opportunities to support responsive governance through the increased opportunity for immediate communication between governments and citizens. Governments can also capture feedback, track people's worries, and communicate with citizens in an efficient way via an e-participation platform, compared to traditional participation platforms (Mergel, 2013). However, a lot of digital participation projects are still struggling with converting citizens' inputs into government decisions. Despite the existence of digital tools for citizen engagement, as well as the ability of public institutions to respond to, incorporate, and act upon citizen input, the literature indicates that the value of citizen participation is dependent on the capability to facilitate co-production and interaction processes, which are ongoing (Wang & Ran, 2025).

Responsiveness from a governance integrity standpoint is institutional accountability and a sense of service to the public interest. Governments that recognise citizen concerns and respond to them in time show respect for citizens' input and reinforce the sense of fairness, trust and

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integrity. Responsiveness thus is one of the critical channels through which e-participation can have an impact on governance integrity.

Linking E-Participation and Governance Integrity

The literature indicates that there is no automatic or guaranteed link between e-participation and governance integrity. E-participation promotes the technological platform for citizens to participate in governance, but it is the way governments moderate and react to citizen interventions that is determinant of the nature of the governance outcomes. Digital platforms cannot ensure governance integrity unless they are supported by institutional practices that foster open, accountable, and responsive governance.

Transparency and responsiveness end up as two of the mechanisms by which e-participation can help to improve the integrity of governance. E-participation helps to increase transparency through better access to information, more communication, and more visibility of governmental processes for citizens. E-participation, in parallel, allows for better responsiveness by providing ways for the government to receive, acknowledge, and address citizen concerns more efficiently. These dimensions are interrelated and jointly help to improve accountability, public trust and perceptions of institutional legitimacy (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017; OECD, 2023).

In this regard, this study posits that e-participation can support governance integrity by enabling transparency and responsiveness within the local government context. This research aims to gain insights into the potential of digital participation interventions to foster more transparent, responsive, and trusted governance, drawing on an understanding of this relationship in the local government context of Malaysia. This paper suggests that, on the basis of the foregoing discussion, the relationship between e-participation and governance integrity is mediated by transparency and responsiveness. The conceptual framework proposed is shown in Figure 1.

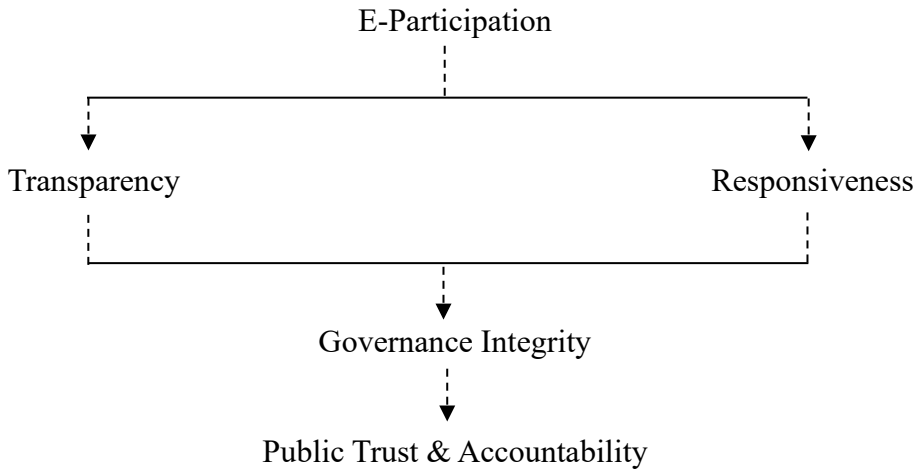


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by the author based on Huberts (2014), Mungiu-Pippidi (2020), OECD (2023) & Wirtz et al. (2018).

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The framework shows that e-participation is an empowering tool for local governments to be more transparent and responsive. These governance dimensions in turn help to build governance integrity, thereby increasing public trust and accountability.

Findings and Discussion: Transparency As A Foundation Of Governance Integrity

The results showed that transparency was a major problem with implementing the e-participation projects in MBAS. While different digital platforms had been set up to enable citizens to voice their opinions, informants always pointed to the lack of transparency when it came to how their input was used and kept in the decision-making process. Numerous participants reflected that they could submit complaints or suggestions and concerns digitally, but that they did not always have the information regarding the status of the submission or regarding the decision's effects. As a result, citizens were not always sure that their ideas, votes, or concerns were taken into account, acted on, or used as a basis for local governance.

> *"We submit our complaints regarding neighbourhood infrastructure through the online system. But after submitting, it feels like a black hole. We don't get updates on whether the report has been reviewed, rejected, or scheduled for repair. We just have to wait and see if something changes on the ground."* Public Informant 02-004

This concern was also noted by local government actors, who pointed out that the administrative steps that are needed to respond to a concern often have several stages, which are not necessarily transparent to the public.

> *"Sometimes citizens expect immediate visibility on every action taken by the council. However, our internal process involves technical assessments, budget approvals, and contractor scheduling. If we do not communicate these stages transparently back through the system, citizens perceive our silence as a lack of openness."* - Local Officer Informant 01-002

These views combined suggest a gap between internal administrative processes and external information visibility. The problem is not so much whether the administrative action is taking place or not, but rather a limited ability of the institution to let citizens know what action was taken and what the progress and outcomes of that action were. In this dimension, transparency is linked to institutional structures of managing and communicating public input.

Governance-wise, the findings indicate that there is a disconnect between participation and transparency. Digital participation tools do not necessarily imply transparency of governance. Instead, transparency is an ongoing process of communication about how citizens' views affect the policymaking process, service enhancements, and administration. A lack of citizens' ability to see how participation translates to government response can cause participation to feel symbolic.

While previous studies argue that transparency refers to the disclosure of information, it also involves transparency of the decision-making process and the transparency of participation results (Meijer, 2013; Cucciniello, Porumbescu & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017). Likewise, Grimmelikhuijsen, Porumbescu, Hong and Im (2013) highlight the importance of transparency in terms of strengthening perceptions of openness and accountability of government through clear communication of actions to the public, decisions made, and the reasoning behind them.

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Lack of such communication can lead to the impression of opacity by public institutions and reduce citizens' trust in public institutions.

The results indicate that transparency serves as one of the critical aspects of governance integrity, as it allows citizens to assess the government's actions and to hold public institutions accountable. Governance integrity is enhanced when governments are open, not only in providing access to an e-participation mechanism, but also in making processes of participation visible and comprehensible. Thus, it is important to judge the extent of effectiveness of e-participation not only by how many platforms are developed but also by how many contribute to greater transparency in governance.

Responsiveness and Citizens' Perceptions Of Institutional Integrity

Another key aspect of governance integrity that has an impact on the effectiveness of e-participation initiatives is responsiveness. Informants often complained of slow response times from the platform, lack of acknowledgements, and follow-up on complaints and feedback submitted online. Some of the participants commented that it was a "one-way system" with information being given to them, but not resulting in meaningful communication with local authorities.

> *"The application is easy to access, but the response time is very slow. You report a broken streetlamp or clogged drain, and it takes weeks. Sometimes without any acknowledgement at all. It makes you feel like your effort in participating is completely ignored."* – Public Informant 02-009

From the institutional point of view, however, the delay of responses is linked to the officers' willingness to respond and operational constraints. The interviews with local government staff highlighted several reasons why citizen feedback is challenging, including the lack of formal standard operating procedures for citizen feedback, limited ownership of citizen feedback and engagement work, and the lack of institutional focus on two-way engagement. These results indicate that the provision of technological infrastructure is not enough to achieve meaningful involvement of citizens if organisational processes and administrative practices are not conducive to responsive engagement.

> *"The challenge on our side is that the volume of digital complaints is massive, but our operating procedures and manpower for frontline response are limited. Without an efficient tracking mechanism, complaints get delayed, and this directly damages public trust in our responsiveness."* – Local Officer Informant 01-007

Based on these findings, responsiveness should not only be interpreted as a measure of how quickly the government responds to the citizens. It also relies on the institutional capacity to recognise, coordinate, document, respond to, and follow up on public input. Hence, it is important to build responsiveness not only by communicating effectively with the people, but also by making sure that there is enough capacity within the organisation to handle participation in an organised manner. In light of this, it is consistently stated throughout the literature that responsiveness is a key dimension of citizen-centred governance. Vigoda (2002) and Yang and Pandey (2011) argue that responsiveness is an institution's ability to respond to citizen concerns in a timely and relevant way. Responsiveness is often seen as a manifestation of a government's interest in and respect for people's opinions, and its willingness to serve people's needs.

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Therefore, responsiveness is an important factor in views on legitimacy, accountability and trustworthiness.

Responsiveness is more than administrative efficiency, as it pertains to the issue of governance integrity. It symbolises the commitment of institutions to public accountability and ethical governance. Governments that recognise citizens' concerns, give updates, and communicate decisions show respect for citizens' participation and enhance perceptions of integrity. On the other hand, if there are significant delays or if there is a lack of feedback and weak communication mechanisms, it can lead to feelings that citizens' contributions are demeaned or neglected. This perception can eventually deter future involvement and trust in local government in general.

This finding contributes to the argument that responsiveness is a key mechanism by which e-participation can help governance integrity. Implementing digital participation initiatives thus requires not only technical competencies, but also a capacity of the institutions themselves to meaningfully engage with citizen participation.

E-Participation: Institutional Capacity in Strengthening Governance Integrity

The findings altogether point to the role of e-participation in governance integrity as depending on the institutional practice of citizens' participation. Although MBAS has made investments in multiple digital participation technologies, the results show that technological availability is not enough to boost governance integrity. Instead, integrity results depend upon the inclusion of digital participation with clear and transparent communication, active and adaptive engagement processes, and institutional commitment to civic-centred governance.

One common theme across the interviews was participants' sense that there were opportunities for them to participate but not necessarily that they could have an impact or results in governance. This is typical of the e-participation literature, which has noted that efforts in e-participation have often stalled at the information and consultation stage, and have not been able to achieve more meaningful levels of participation. Active and ongoing interactions and co-production processes are needed to facilitate the integration of citizens' voices into governance decision-making and outcomes (Wang & Ran, 2025; Medaglia, 2012). It is therefore important that the relevance of e-participation is not judged exclusively in terms of participation figures or technological sophistication, but by how well it enables relationships between governments and citizens to be improved.

Most significantly, the results show that the output of meaningful governance outcomes with the help of e-participation is highly dependent on institutional capacities. Many of the transparency and responsiveness challenges identified were interconnected with internal administrative arrangements like a lack of a proper system of standard operating procedures, inadequate human resources, ineffective feedback monitoring, and a variable degree of management commitment associated with varied job responsibilities. These results indicate that institutional capacity cannot be considered independently of transparency and responsiveness, since it constitutes the backbone of the institution that will enable these two dimensions to be operationalised.

> *"Digital platforms cannot run successfully on technical department efforts alone. Top management must mandate standard operating procedures for responsiveness, allocate*

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> *adequate resources, and treat public feedback as a key Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for the department heads."* - Local Officer Informant 01-001

Support from top management is especially crucial for boosting this institutional capacity. This leadership commitment can institutionalise e-participation by implementing clear processes, ensuring there are enough resources, delegating responsibility for feedback, and monitoring the reactions of various departments to citizen input. As pointed out by the informants, when public responses are seen as an organisational priority, it is easier for officers to experience the notions of responsiveness and openness as part of their institutional roles and responsibilities instead of just as a technical function of a digital platform.

> *"When the leadership emphasises integrity and openness in dealing with public complaints, the lower-level officers will act more seriously. If top management does not monitor how we respond to digital feedback, the system becomes merely a formality rather than a tool for true accountability."* - Local Officer Informant 01-005

The results prove that institutional capacity is not merely a supporting condition for e-participation, but the capacity to make e-participation effective in making meaningful administrative responses. The ability of the institution to link citizens' input with a transparent and responsive administrative response is driven by the presence of clear SOPs, adequate human resources, internal coordination, feedback-tracking mechanisms, and commitment of the top management.

Transparency and responsiveness function as complementary dimensions of e-participation which can help support governance integrity. Transparency helps citizens see what the government does and how it makes decisions; responsiveness is the government's desire and ability to recognise and respond to public issues. Combined, these dimensions are pivotal to accountability, legitimacy and public trust. However, if an institution's capacity to foster transparent and responsive processes is limited, digital participation may turn into a participatory principle in name only, which can gather citizens' inputs without providing any outcomes for governance.

This argument resonates with current governance literature, indicating that citizens today judge the integrity of government more on a day-to-day basis based on how they interact with public institutions than solely on formal accountability mechanisms (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2020; OECD, 2023). Citizens in the digital governance context are not only expecting governments to afford them opportunities for participation, but are also demanding that they be open, responsive and accountable during the engagement process.

As such, e-participation has to be considered not only as a means by which citizens can be engaged through technologies, but as a governance mechanism whose effectiveness in relation to integrity is dependent on institutional capacity. The results indicate that transparency and responsiveness are potential avenues for e-participation to contribute to the strengthening of governance integrity, whereas institutional capacity is the organisational precondition for these processes to work. More specifically, this study contributes to the local government context by showing how the use of e-participation can be connected to institutional efforts, such as establishing clear procedures, feedback-tracking systems, internal coordination, adequate human resources, and top-management commitment for improving transparency and responsiveness in the management of citizen feedback.

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Conclusion

The use of e-participation in local governance processes offers a lot of opportunities to promote governance integrity through increasing transparency, responsiveness, and inclusion for citizens. However, mere digital participation platforms are not enough to accomplish these results. The role of e-participation in governance is still limited without the adoption of proper institutional commitment, strategic planning, and effective feedback mechanisms. Digital technologies can open new avenues for interaction, but building trust, accountability and genuine engagement with citizens is an ongoing process that demands that organisations put in the work.

The progress of governance integrity is not only reliant on technological innovation, but also on more open, responsive and citizen-centred approaches to governance on the part of public institutions. Transparency should go beyond the supply of information to clear and open communication about where and how citizens' contributions are taken into account and how they influence decision-making. Likewise, responsiveness demands that governments go beyond passive collection of citizens' information to active engagement, valuing and recognising citizens' concerns.

In order to realise these aspirations, e-participation has to be part of and integrated into the wider governance structure and not a stand-alone technological project. This involves institutional capacity building, leadership buy-in, public communication digitisation and accountability arrangements to boost public trust. Although institutional commitment is crucial, the success of e-participation depends on citizens' willingness and capability to engage in governance processes. Equally important is the development of an inclusive participatory environment which empowers citizens to participate meaningfully and to contribute to governance processes. This type of atmosphere promotes proactive citizenship and makes sure that citizen involvement is not merely consultative, but embedded in governance.

Digital participation and governance outcomes produced by local governments' digital participation initiatives need to be given a higher priority in the continuous journey of local government toward digital transformation. Going forward, e-participation is not only about increasing access to technology but about enhancing transparency and responsiveness by ensuring ongoing institutional investment. Such institutional commitment is essential to ensure that citizens' voices are heard in transparent and responsive administrative actions. This integration can enable e-participation to play a more meaningful role in enhancing governance integrity and facilitating more inclusive, trustful, and citizen-centred local governance.

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