

The Leadership of Regional Heads in Strengthening Public Accountability through Smart City Governance

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the smart city paradigm over the last twenty years has prompted municipal authorities to leverage digital technologies as a mechanism for enhancing operational efficiency, transparency, and the overall quality of public service delivery. Nevertheless, empirical research indicates that the execution of smart city initiatives does not inherently augment public accountability unless it is underpinned by robust leadership and effective governance structures. This research endeavor seeks to scrutinize the pivotal role of regional leaders in fortifying public accountability through the lens of smart city governance. Employing a qualitative methodological framework alongside a case study design, this investigation aims to elucidate the intricate processes, practices, and significations of leadership within the realm of regional digital governance. Data acquisition was achieved via semi-structured, in-depth interviews with local government officials, digital system administrators, and community representatives, complemented by an analytical review of policy documents and selective observations pertaining to the implementation of digital governmental systems. The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis through a systematic approach involving open coding, categorization, and the formulation of analytical themes pertinent to leadership, smart city governance, and public accountability. The findings reveal that the leadership exercised by regional chiefs constitutes a fundamental determinant in propelling the transformation towards digital-centric governance. Regional leaders who possess a pronounced digital vision and unwavering commitment are proficient in steering the amalgamation of information systems, enhancing inter-organizational coordination among regional entities, and fostering shifts in bureaucratic operational modalities towards a more professional and performance-oriented framework. Furthermore, the deployment of digital platforms augments information transparency and civic engagement, thereby reinforcing the frameworks of public accountability and social oversight. The study substantiates the premise that smart cities ought to be conceptualized as an integrated governance structure, rather than mere technological advancements, in the pursuit of cultivating transparent, adaptive, and accountable local governance.

Keywords: Regional Leadership; Smart City; Digital Governance; Public Accountability; Local Government

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the smart city concept has developed globally as a strategic approach to address the complexities of modern urban governance. Various countries have adopted digital technologies to enhance administrative efficiency, improve the quality of public services, and increase government transparency. However, the development of smart cities does not always correlate with improved public accountability. Several international studies indicate that government digitalization often stops at a technical level, without accompanying fundamental changes in governance practices and public leadership (Meijer & Bolívar, 2020). In Indonesia, the commitment of local governments to smart cities is evident through national programs such as the Movement Towards 100 Smart Cities initiated by the Ministry of Communication and Information. As of 2023, more than 190 districts/cities have adopted smart city master plans focusing on public services, transparency, and community participation. More explicitly regarding the research location, the characteristics of the local government being studied, and the rationale for case selection. Some local leaders, such as in Surabaya, Bandung, and Jakarta, are utilizing digital systems to open access to budget information, online

complaint services, and real-time monitoring of bureaucratic performance, which empirically contributes to enhancing public accountability. Local governments are competing to develop public service applications, integrated data centers, and online complaint systems. Nevertheless, policy evaluation reports show that many smart city initiatives have not been fully utilized as instruments of public accountability. Technology is often used merely to fulfil program indicators, rather than as a means to strengthen transparency and accountability to the community (Ministry of Communication and Information, 2023).

Field issues reveal a gap between the normative goals of smart cities and the reality of their implementation. Empirical findings from various regional policy reports show that digital platforms are often not integrated with decision-making mechanisms, while public participation tends to be symbolic. Previous interviews with local government officials indicate that the low commitment of regional leaders is one of the factors hindering the optimization of digital governance (Nam & Pardo, 2021). In the framework of public administration, regional leaders hold a strategic position as the highest political and administrative authority at the local level. The leadership of regional heads not only determines policy direction but also shapes organizational culture, bureaucratic relationships, and public service orientation. Therefore, the success of smart cities as an accountability instrument cannot be separated from how regional heads interpret, manage, and direct the digital transformation of governance (Torfing et al., 2020).

From a social and cultural perspective, public accountability is not solely understood as a formal reporting mechanism, but as a relational process between the government and society. Public trust, policy legitimacy, and social acceptance of digital innovations are significantly influenced by responsive and ethical leadership. In a society with social diversity and varying levels of digital literacy, the role of local leaders becomes crucial in bridging technology with local needs and values (Gil-Garcia et al., 2020). Previous studies on smart cities and public accountability mostly employed quantitative approaches and focused on measuring system performance, digitalization indices, or user satisfaction levels. These approaches provide an overview but have not explained the processes, meanings, and experiences of key actors in the practice of digital governance. As a result, the dimensions of leadership are often treated as an additional variable rather than as a complex social phenomenon (Janssen et al., 2022). Literature on local leadership also shows similar limitations. Many studies emphasize leadership styles or individual characteristics of local leaders, but few have explored how that leadership is practiced within the context of smart city governance. In fact, digital transformation demands processes of adaptation, negotiation, and organizational learning that can only be deeply understood through qualitative approaches (Ansell & Gash, 2021).

The research gap becomes increasingly apparent when public accountability is positioned as a result of the interaction between leadership, technology, and governance. Previous studies tend to separate these three aspects, thus failing to provide a comprehensive understanding of how regional leaders build, interpret, and implement accountability within the smart city ecosystem. The lack of qualitative studies has resulted in the voices and experiences of local actors being underrepresented in the literature (Pereira et al., 2021). A qualitative approach is relevant to uncover these dynamics as it allows researchers to understand social realities from the perspective of the actors directly involved. Through in-depth interviews, observations, and policy document analysis, qualitative research can explore how regional leaders define accountability, how smart city policies are translated into practice, and how the community responds to these efforts.

This approach aligns with the interpretative tradition in public administration (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020). In addition to its theoretical contributions, this study has strong practical relevance. Local governments are under pressure to demonstrate accountable digital performance amid increasing demands for public transparency. Without a deep understanding of the role of regional leaders, smart city policies risk becoming technocratic projects that are disconnected from community needs. Therefore, this research aims to provide critical reflections for policymakers and local government practitioners. Unlike most smart city studies that focus on technology aspects, digital infrastructure, or performance measurement systems, this research places regional leadership as a central actor in shaping smart city-based public accountability. Smart city literature tends to treat leadership as a contextual variable or supporting factor, without delving deeply into how leadership is practiced, interpreted, and translated in daily digital governance. This study fills that gap by adopting an interpretative qualitative

approach that allows for the analysis of processes, meanings, and dynamics of leadership in local digital governance.

Based on the description, this research focuses on the leadership of local heads in strengthening public accountability through smart city governance. The main focus is directed towards the processes, experiences, and meanings of leadership in the practice of digital governance. By positioning local heads as central actors, this research aims to reveal how leadership shapes the direction, quality, and sustainability of digital-based public accountability. The goal of this research is to gain a deep understanding of the role of local heads in building public accountability through smart city governance. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of public administration studies by integrating perspectives on leadership, digital governance, and public accountability within a qualitative approach. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a reference for local governments in designing smart city policies that are not only technologically innovative but also accountable and oriented towards public interests.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply analyze the role of regional leadership and smart city governance in strengthening public accountability. This approach was chosen because the issues of accountability and digital transformation in regional government are complex phenomena influenced by institutional context, leadership, and interactions among actors. Case studies allow researchers to explore processes, dynamics, and meanings of policies holistically within the real context of regional governance. Yin (2018) emphasizes that case studies are relevant when research focuses on understanding policy mechanisms and governance practices within specific institutional environments, rather than on statistical generalization.

The selection of informants was done through purposive sampling, with the main criteria being direct involvement in the planning, implementation, or utilization of smart city systems. The informants consist of regional government officials, digital government system managers, and community representatives who actively use public digital services. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which is when additional interviews no longer yield new substantive information. The research was conducted on regional governments that have formally adopted smart city policies and have actively functioning digital infrastructure. This strategy aligns with Creswell and Poth (2018), who emphasize the importance of selecting cases and participants rich in information in qualitative public policy research.

Data collection techniques include semi-structured in-depth interviews, document analysis, and limited observation of the use of digital government systems. Interviews were used to explore the perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of key actors regarding digital leadership and public accountability. Document analysis includes regional regulations, performance reports, planning documents, and digital public service platforms to understand the formal framework and implementation practices. Limited observations were conducted to gain contextual understanding of the use of performance dashboards and service applications. The use of multi-source data aims to strengthen triangulation and enhance the reliability of findings (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis through the stages of open coding, categorization, and the development of analytical themes related to leadership, smart city governance, and public accountability. The analysis process is iterative, starting from data collection to the interpretation stage, allowing for reflective adjustments in the focus of the analysis. This approach enables researchers to identify patterns of meaning and relationships between policy concepts systematically. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis is effective in revealing the structure of meaning in qualitative research oriented towards policy and public governance.

The validity of the data is maintained through the application of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria. Credibility is strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods, while dependability is ensured by transparently documenting the research process. Confirmability is achieved through data audit trails and researchers' reflexivity during the analysis process. Transferability is provided through

adequate context description of the research so that readers can assess the relevance of the findings in other contexts. Ethical aspects of the research are applied by obtaining participant consent (informed consent), maintaining informant anonymity, and ensuring data confidentiality, in accordance with the principles of social research ethics and public policy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Israel & Hay, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Leadership of Regional Heads as Drivers of Governance Transformation

The research findings indicate that the leadership of regional heads plays a decisive role in the success of strengthening public accountability through smart city governance. Based on in-depth interviews with local government officials and digital system managers, it was found that regional heads with a strong digital vision tend to promote structural and cultural changes within the bureaucracy. Leadership is manifested not only in formal policies but also in the courage to make strategic decisions and consistency in overseeing the implementation of digital innovations. One informant stated, "The direction of smart city policies heavily depends on the direct commitment of the regional head, as without leadership encouragement, digital programs often run half-heartedly."

From the perspective of strategic public leadership, regional leaders not only function as policymakers but also as organizational change agents and institutional value creators. According to Tummers and Knies (2021), effective public leadership is characterized by the ability of leaders to build a shared vision and coordinate organizational resources to achieve collective goals. This research reinforces that view by demonstrating that the digital vision of regional heads plays a crucial role in driving structural and cultural changes in the bureaucracy, ensuring that digital innovations are not merely symbolic but are internalized in government work practices. Furthermore, this discussion shows that the consistency and courage of regional heads in overseeing the implementation of smart cities have direct implications for strengthening public accountability.

Within the framework of transformational leadership theory, Wright and Pandey (2020) emphasize that leaders who can set an example and demonstrate sustained commitment tend to produce more adaptive and accountable public organizations. The findings of this research contribute empirically by showing that proactive leadership among regional heads creates normative pressure for the bureaucracy to operate more transparently and accountably, especially when digital systems are used as performance monitoring tools. Therefore, leadership not only serves as a supporting factor for smart cities but also as a fundamental foundation in building accountable local government governance.

2. Smart City Governance as a Coordination and Transparency Mechanism

The results of observations and document analysis indicate the development of smart city governance as an instrument for cross-organizational coordination among regional apparatus organizations. Local governments utilize command centers, integrated information systems, and public service applications to unify data and expedite decision-making. From field observations, this system enables real-time monitoring of program performance and reduces information fragmentation among work units. A bureaucratic informant emphasized that "through performance dashboards, leaders can directly see program progress and request clarification if delays occur." These findings suggest that smart cities function as a governance framework, not merely as technology projects. Additionally, the research findings indicate that smart city governance serves as a coordination mechanism across regional apparatus organizations in line with smart governance theory, which positions technology as an integrative tool in public sector management. According to Nam and Pardo (2021), smart governance emphasizes the government's ability to unify data, actors, and decision-making processes into one coherent system.

In this context, the use of command centers and integrated information systems is not just a technical innovation, but an institutional strategy to reduce bureaucratic fragmentation. This study's results reinforce the view that data-driven coordination enables local leaders to obtain a comprehensive performance picture, thereby allowing for quicker and evidence-based decision-making. From a transparency perspective, this research confirms the perspective of Klievink and Janssen (2020) that integrated digital systems can enhance the visibility of

government work processes and minimize asymmetric information among organizational units. Performance dashboards and public service applications act as instruments of internal transparency, where each regional apparatus organization can be monitored in real-time. Meijer's (2022) opinion is also relevant, emphasizing that digital transparency affects not only government-citizen relationships but also strengthens horizontal accountability within the bureaucracy. Thus, smart cities serve as an internal control mechanism that promotes openness and discipline in public service performance.

Furthermore, this discussion shows that smart city governance reflects a shift in the paradigm of public administration from a procedural approach to a collaborative and performance-based approach. Within the framework of digital-era governance, Luna-Reyes and Gil-Garcia (2021) explain that the integration of information systems enables the creation of sustained coordination among governmental actors. The findings of this research provide empirical contributions by demonstrating that transparency and coordination do not emerge automatically from technology, but are produced through governance designs strategically controlled by local leaders. Therefore, smart cities can be understood as a framework of modern governance that connects technology, leadership, and accountability within a single ecosystem of local government.

3. Digital Governance and Changes in Bureaucratic Work Patterns

The research results also reveal a shift in governance practices towards a digital governance model. The digitization of public services and performance management drives changes in the way personnel work, particularly in decision-making and reporting. Based on policy documentation and local performance reports, digital systems are used as the basis for program evaluation and internal control. Government officials acknowledge that the use of digital systems increases demands for professionalism and timeliness in their work. One informant stated that "every activity is recorded in the system, so performance can no longer be concealed." This indicates the internalization of accountability principles within the bureaucracy.

In the perspective of digital transformation theory in the public sector, Vial (2021) emphasizes that digitalization not only changes work tools but also reconfigures organizational processes and the roles of public officials. The findings of this study support that view by showing that digital systems are used as the main reference in program evaluation and internal control, making bureaucratic decisions increasingly dependent on systematically documented data and performance records. Furthermore, this discussion emphasizes that digital governance contributes to the internalization of accountability principles in regional bureaucracy. Within the framework of performance-based accountability theory, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2022) explain that digital performance management systems create structural pressure for officials to work more professionally and punctually since every activity can be tracked. The findings of this research broaden that argument by showing that the internal transparency generated by digital systems limits the space for unaccountable work practices while also encouraging a cultural shift within organizations towards performance orientation. Thus, digital governance acts as an institutional mechanism that strengthens bureaucratic accountability through data-driven oversight.

4. Strengthening Public Accountability through Digital Technology

The next finding shows that the implementation of smart cities significantly contributes to strengthening public accountability. Interviews with community representatives and local activists revealed that information openness through digital platforms expands public access to data on services and the performance of local governments. The public can monitor service processes, file complaints, and obtain feedback more quickly. A community informant stated, "now the public can directly report problems through the application, and the government cannot ignore them." This condition demonstrates that digital technology strengthens social control mechanisms in local governance.

In the perspective of open government theory, digital technology is understood as an instrument that enables transparency, participation, and collaboration between the government and citizens. According to Zuiderwijk and Janssen (2020), publicly available data based on digital platforms encourages the creation of more symmetrical relationships between the government and society, as information is no longer monopolized by bureaucracy. The results of this study reinforce this view by showing that public access to service data and government performance enhances the public's capacity to monitor and evaluate government actions directly.

Furthermore, this discussion emphasizes that digital technology strengthens social control mechanisms as part of public accountability.

In the framework of social accountability theory, Joshi and Fox (2021) emphasize that community oversight becomes effective when responsive and easily accessible complaint channels are available. The findings of this research provide empirical contributions by demonstrating that complaint applications and other digital channels not only accelerate government feedback but also create normative pressure for local governments to respond to citizens' demands more responsibly. Thus, digital technology serves not only as a service tool but also as an institutional medium that strengthens public accountability through community participation and oversight.

5. Implications for Regional Public Administration Practices

Overall, the research findings indicate that the integration of regional leadership, smart city governance, and digital government has driven the transformation of regional public administration. Public administration is no longer solely procedure-oriented but is moving towards a data-driven approach, transparency, and performance accountability. Based on the analysis of planning and evaluation documents, digital systems are utilized to enhance service efficiency and strengthen the accountability of regional leaders to the public. This indicates a paradigm shift in public administration towards a model that is more adaptive and responsive to societal demands. This transformation aligns with Osborne's (2010) view that modern public administration must depart from traditional bureaucratic approaches and shift towards a results-oriented model, collaboration, and public value. Furthermore, the research findings suggest that the digitization of public administration also strengthens the accountability mechanisms of regional leaders to the community. The use of performance information systems and electronic service delivery allows for more transparent and publicly accessible reporting processes, thereby encouraging increased social control over government activities. This situation reflects a paradigm shift in public administration towards governance that is adaptive and responsive to the dynamic needs of society. This perspective is consistent with the views of Bovens, Schillemans, and Goodin (2014), which state that public accountability in the digital era serves not only as an administrative obligation but also as a democratic mechanism to ensure legitimacy and public trust in the government. Thus, the integration of digital technology in regional public administration can be understood as an essential foundation for renewing governance that is more open and accountable.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the leadership of regional heads is a key factor in strengthening public accountability through smart city governance. The findings indicate that the success of smart city implementation is not solely determined by the availability of digital technology, but rather by the extent to which regional heads possess vision, commitment, and consistency in directing the transformation of governance. Proactive leadership can drive structural and cultural changes within the bureaucracy, ensuring that digital technology does not remain merely an administrative project but is internalized in the everyday working practices of government.

Furthermore, this study finds that smart city governance functions as a mechanism for coordination and transparency across regional device organizations. The integration of information systems, performance dashboards, and public service platforms enables data-driven decision-making and reduces bureaucratic fragmentation. In this context, the smart city serves as a framework for modern governance that strengthens internal bureaucratic accountability while enhancing information openness to the public. Additionally, the transformation towards digital governance has proven to encourage a change in the working patterns of bureaucracy to be more professional, measurable, and accountable. The digitization of performance management and public services creates a traceable work record, thereby narrowing the space for unaccountable practices. At the same time, information openness and digital participation channels strengthen societal control over the performance of local governments.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of public administration studies by integrating the perspectives of regional leadership, smart city governance, and public accountability within a single qualitative analysis framework. These findings enrich the literature that has tended to separate these three aspects, while

also affirming that public accountability is a result of the dynamic interaction among actors, technology, and governance. Practically, the research outcomes provide an understanding that strengthening digital-based public accountability requires visionary leadership, an integrated governance design, and a commitment to openness and public participation. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Strengthening the leadership of regional heads

Local governments need to enhance the digital leadership capacity of regional heads through strategic training and cross-regional learning so that smart cities are utilized as instruments for strengthening public accountability, rather than merely as technological innovations.

2. Integration of smart city governance

The development of smart cities should be directed toward the integration of information systems across regional organizational units, as well as their consistent use in planning, decision-making, and evaluating government performance.

3. Strengthening public participation and social control

Local governments need to ensure that data openness platforms, digital complaint services, and public participation channels are responsive and have a real impact on improving services and policies.

4. Direction for future research

Future research is suggested to broaden the study context across regions or use a longitudinal approach to understand the dynamics of leadership, digital governance, and public accountability in the long term.

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