

Leadership, Governance, and Local Development in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of leadership in shaping governance processes, public service delivery, and local development outcomes within decentralized systems in Southeast Asia using a qualitative systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA framework. It synthesizes empirical studies published from 2010 to 2025 focusing on local government institutions in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, and other ASEAN member's state. Literature searches were conducted through Google Scholar and ProQuest using keywords related to leadership, decentralization, governance, and public service delivery. From 1,000 initially identified records, 895 were excluded during initial screening and 53 were removed after full-text assessment, resulting in 52 studies included in the final synthesis. Findings reveal that leadership plays a central role in translating decentralization reforms into effective governance and development outcomes by strengthening accountability, decision-making, stakeholder engagement, institutional coordination, and service responsiveness. However, leadership effectiveness is highly context-dependent and is shaped by institutional design, political dynamics, administrative capacity, fiscal resources, and patronage or elite influence. The review further shows that even capable leaders may experience limited outcomes when governance systems are weak or politically constrained. The study concludes that improving decentralized governance requires a dual focus on leadership capacity-building and institutional reform, emphasizing ethical governance, participatory leadership, merit-based systems, and accountability mechanisms to support sustainable and inclusive development across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: local leadership; service capacity; decentralization; ASEAN member states

INTRODUCTION

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping government performance, particularly in governance effectiveness, public service delivery, and local development. In decentralized political systems, where decision-making powers are transferred to local authorities, leadership becomes even more significant because local officials are directly responsible for implementing policies and addressing the specific needs of their communities. The effectiveness of decentralization largely depends on the capacity of local leaders to exercise authority, make sound decisions, and maintain accountability within their jurisdictions. Previous studies emphasize that leadership capacity and institutional accountability strongly influence the performance of local governments under devolved governance systems (Diokno-Sicat & Maddawin, 2019; Robinson, 2007; Liwanag & Wyss, 2019).

Several Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste, have implemented decentralization reforms aimed at strengthening local autonomy, improving governance responsiveness, and enhancing public service delivery. Through these reforms, local government units were given greater authority over development planning, resource allocation, and the implementation of essential services. Comparative studies suggest that while decentralization has expanded the responsibilities of local governments, its success is influenced by institutional arrangements, fiscal resources, administrative autonomy, and the quality of local leadership (**Boex & Simatupang, 2015; Atienza, 2019; Kulachai, 2020**).

Despite the adoption of similar decentralization reforms, governance outcomes across Southeast Asia remain uneven. Some local governments have demonstrated innovation, efficiency, and strong governance practices, while others continue to face challenges related to weak institutional capacity, inefficiency, and limited accountability. These differences indicate that decentralization alone does not automatically result in effective governance. Rather, leadership quality significantly shapes how decentralization policies are implemented and translated into development outcomes. **Capuno (2015)**, for example, found that leadership characteristics such as education, experience, and political incentives influence innovation and reform initiatives within Philippine local governments. Likewise, studies conducted in Indonesia and the Philippines reveal that transformational leadership, institutional capacity, and reduced transaction costs contribute to stronger public sector innovation and governance performance (**Amri, 2020**).

Although literature on decentralization and governance has expanded considerably, existing studies remain fragmented. Much of the research focuses on individual countries or specific sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, social welfare, and digital governance. While these studies provide important context-specific insights, they offer limited understanding of how leadership functions across broader governance environments within the Southeast Asian region. Existing literature on Philippine devolution, Indonesian local governance, Cambodian health systems, and Timor-Leste digital administration often examines governance outcomes separately rather than through an integrated regional perspective (**Atienza & Go, 2022; Soputhy et al., 2023; Soares et al., 2024**).

Furthermore, many studies emphasize quantitative indicators such as budget utilization, service coverage, and development indices in assessing local government performance. Although these indicators are important, they do not fully capture the complexity of leadership practices within decentralized governance systems. Limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of local leaders and stakeholders, particularly regarding how leadership decisions are negotiated and shaped by political, institutional, and cultural dynamics. Existing studies suggest that factors such as patronage politics, elite influence, political interference, and institutional constraints significantly affect leadership practices and governance outcomes in ways that cannot be fully explained through numerical measures alone (**Shair-Rosenfield, 2016; Verbrugge, 2015; Susilo, 2021**).

Given these limitations, there is a need to complement quantitative approaches with qualitative perspectives that examine leadership as a relational and context-dependent process. A qualitative understanding of leadership allows for deeper analysis of how local officials interact with communities, manage institutional challenges, and respond to development concerns within decentralized systems. This perspective also helps explain why similar governance frameworks may produce varying outcomes across different local contexts. Studies on participatory governance, civil society engagement, collaborative disaster governance, and community-based health systems demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is strongly shaped by relationships among local government officials, communities, civil society organizations, and other institutional actors (**Work, 2002; Orbista, 2012; Suryaman, 2021; Beggs et al., 2023**).

Despite the expanding body of literature on decentralization and local governance in Southeast Asia, significant gaps remain in understanding how leadership operates within decentralized systems across varying political and institutional contexts. Existing studies frequently focus on specific dimensions such as fiscal decentralization, public service delivery, local autonomy, or governance performance in isolation, resulting in fragmented analyses that fail to capture the broader and interconnected role of leadership in

shaping governance and development outcomes. Moreover, much of the current scholarship emphasizes institutional structures and quantitative performance indicators, while giving limited attention to the qualitative, relational, and context-specific dimensions of leadership practice. Consequently, there remains insufficient comparative and integrative research examining how local leaders navigate political dynamics, institutional constraints, administrative challenges, and community expectations within decentralized governance systems across Southeast Asia.

This gap underscores the urgent need for a systematic and comparative qualitative synthesis that examines leadership beyond administrative functions and performance metrics. Accordingly, the present study aims to analyze leadership practices within decentralized local government systems in selected Southeast Asian countries, namely the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste. Specifically, the study seeks to explore how local leadership shapes public service delivery, influences local development outcomes, and responds to political, institutional, administrative, and resource-related conditions within decentralized settings. By integrating evidence across diverse national and governance contexts, this study intends to contribute a more comprehensive, contextually grounded, and regionally informed understanding of leadership in decentralized governance, while also addressing the fragmented nature of existing literature in Southeast Asia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative systematic literature review approach to comprehensively synthesize existing scholarly work on leadership and governance within local government institutions across Southeast Asia. The use of this method allowed for an in-depth examination of patterns, themes, and interpretations drawn from a wide range of qualitative studies, providing a richer understanding of how leadership functions within decentralized governance systems. Rather than focusing solely on numerical measurements, this approach emphasized meaning, context, and the lived realities of governance actors.

The review specifically focused on local government institutions in selected Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste, as well as other ASEAN member states where relevant studies were available. These institutions included various levels of local governance such as provinces, municipalities, cities, and barangays. This broad scope allowed the study to capture variations in leadership practices and governance structures across different administrative and cultural settings within the region.

By examining multiple levels of local government, the study was able to identify how leadership operates differently depending on institutional size, resource availability, political environment, and administrative capacity. This comparative perspective provided valuable insights into how decentralization reforms are interpreted and implemented at the grassroots level, where governance outcomes are most directly experienced by citizens.

Literature searches were systematically conducted using reputable academic databases, primarily Google Scholar and ProQuest. These platforms were selected due to their wide coverage of peer-reviewed journals, theses, dissertations, and policy papers relevant to governance and public administration. The search process involved the use of carefully selected keywords related to leadership, decentralization, local governance, and Southeast Asian political systems to ensure that relevant and high-quality studies were identified.

To maintain academic rigor and relevance, clear inclusion criteria were applied. Only qualitative studies published between 2010 and 2025 were considered, ensuring that the review captured contemporary perspectives on leadership and governance in the context of ongoing decentralization reforms. Studies were required to focus on empirical findings derived from interviews, case studies, ethnographic research, or document analysis, which allowed for a deeper exploration of leadership experiences and governance dynamics.

At the same time, exclusion criteria were established to maintain focus and consistency within the review. Non-empirical studies, purely quantitative research, and articles that did not directly address leadership

within local government institutions were excluded. This helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in qualitative evidence, which is essential for understanding complex social and institutional processes that cannot be fully explained through numerical data alone.

The systematic approach used in this study ensured transparency, consistency, and replicability in the selection and analysis of literature. By carefully screening and evaluating sources based on defined criteria, the study was able to minimize bias and focus on the most relevant and credible evidence available. This methodological rigor strengthens the validity of the findings and supports a more reliable synthesis of leadership and governance practices across Southeast Asia.

Overall, this methodological framework provided a strong foundation for analyzing how leadership is conceptualized and practiced within decentralized governance systems. It enabled the study to move beyond surface-level descriptions and instead develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors that shape leadership effectiveness and governance outcomes across diverse local government contexts in the region.

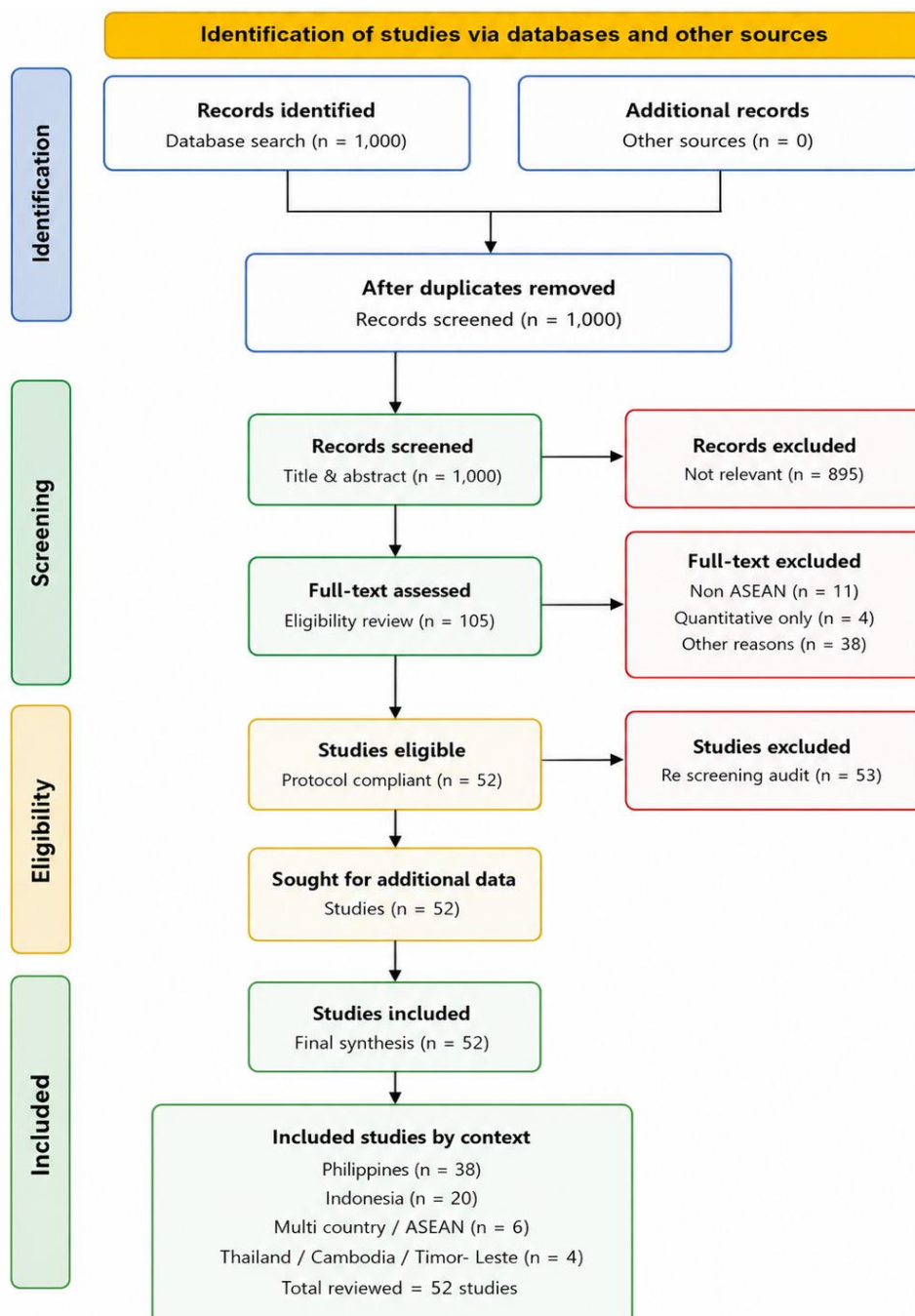


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the literature extraction using PRISMA protocol.

The selective nature of the evidence base is important when interpreting the findings of the review. Rather than indicating a weakness in the literature, the concentration of included studies reflects the application of defined eligibility criteria that prioritized empirical qualitative research directly addressing leadership, governance, and decentralization within local government settings. The resulting evidence base therefore provides a focused representation of the literature most closely aligned with the objectives of the review.

However, the geographical distribution of the evidence also reveals an important limitation. Research is concentrated more heavily in the Philippines and Indonesia, while Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste are represented by substantially fewer studies. This imbalance suggests that the regional evidence base should not be interpreted as an equally representative account of all Southeast Asian decentralization experiences. Consequently, comparative conclusions should be understood in light of differences in the availability and concentration of country-specific scholarship.

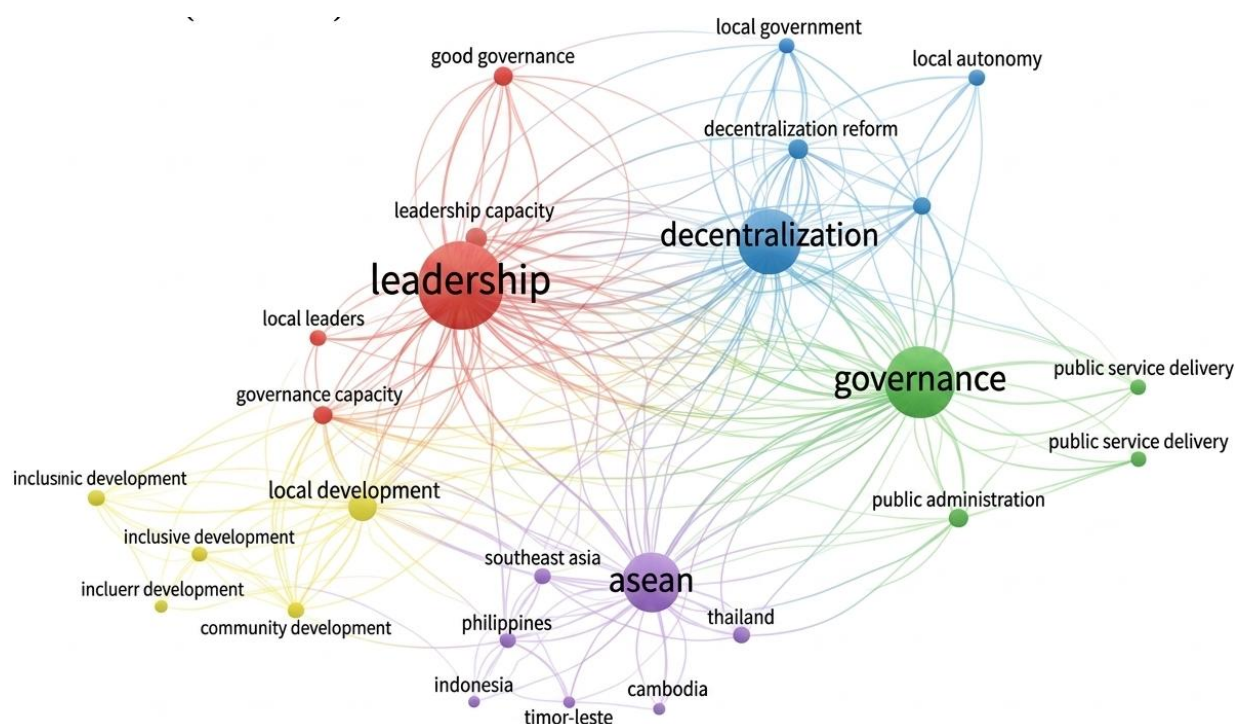


Figure 2. Bibliometric Mapping of Leadership, Governance, and Decentralization Studies in Southeast Asia

To complement the qualitative systematic literature review, bibliometric mapping was conducted using VOS viewer to visualize the conceptual relationships and thematic structure of the literature on leadership, governance, decentralization, and local development in Southeast Asia. The bibliometric analysis was used primarily as a descriptive and exploratory tool to identify recurring concepts and relationships within the reviewed literature rather than as a substitute for the qualitative thematic synthesis.

Keywords were extracted from the bibliographic records of the included studies and examined for their frequency of occurrence and co-occurrence. Related terms and variations in terminology were standardized where appropriate to minimize duplication and improve the interpretability of the network visualization. The analysis focused on keyword co-occurrence, in which keywords were treated as connected when they appeared together within the same study. The resulting network was visualized through VOS viewer, with node size representing the relative frequency of occurrence and the strength of connections reflecting the degree of association among keywords.

The keyword threshold and clustering configuration were based on the settings applied during the VOS viewer analysis. Keywords that did not meet the minimum occurrence requirement were excluded from the visualization to reduce noise and emphasize the most relevant thematic relationships. The resulting clusters were interpreted according to the substantive meaning of the keywords contained within each cluster. The

identified clusters were subsequently compared with the qualitative themes generated from the systematic review to determine areas of convergence between the bibliometric structure and the substantive findings.

Because the VOS viewer analysis was intended to support rather than replace qualitative interpretation, the resulting clusters were not treated as independent empirical categories. Instead, they were used to provide an additional representation of the intellectual structure of the reviewed literature and to identify dominant and emerging areas of research concerning leadership, decentralization, governance, public service delivery, and local development in Southeast Asia.

Overall, the VOS viewer visualization indicates that leadership, decentralization, and governance constitute closely interconnected themes within the reviewed literature. The clustering of keywords further suggests that leadership is frequently examined alongside institutional capacity, accountability, public service delivery, local autonomy, and development concerns. The geographical terms appearing in the network also reflect the uneven distribution of scholarship across the reviewed Southeast Asian cases, particularly the stronger representation of the Philippines and Indonesia. However, the visualization should be interpreted as a representation of keyword relationships within the reviewed literature rather than as a direct measure of governance performance across countries. The bibliometric findings therefore complement the qualitative synthesis by illustrating the dominant conceptual connections and thematic emphases present in the evidence base.

RESULTS

The results of this systematic literature review provide strong and consistent evidence that leadership occupies a central and indispensable role in shaping governance processes, public service delivery, and broader development outcomes within decentralized systems across Southeast Asia. By synthesizing qualitative studies from multiple countries and governance contexts, the review moves beyond surface-level descriptions of performance indicators and instead offers a deeper, more interpretive understanding of how leadership is actually practiced, experienced, and negotiated within local government institutions. In doing so, it highlights that leadership is not merely a formal position of authority, but a dynamic and evolving process shaped by human relationships, institutional arrangements, and contextual realities (Maddawin, 2018).

A key insight from the synthesis is that leadership in local government is fundamentally relational in nature. It is exercised through continuous interaction between leaders, subordinates, political actors, and community stakeholders. Unlike purely quantitative approaches that measure outcomes in terms of efficiency or service coverage, the qualitative evidence shows that leadership effectiveness is closely tied to trust-building, communication, negotiation, and the ability to manage competing interests within local governance systems. This relational dimension explains why leadership outcomes vary significantly even among local governments operating under similar decentralization frameworks.

At the same time, the findings clearly demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is highly context-dependent rather than universal or standardized. The review reveals that institutional structures, political environments, administrative capacity, and resource availability all play decisive roles in shaping how leadership is exercised in practice. In well-resourced and institutionally stable local governments, leaders are more able to implement policies effectively, coordinate administrative functions, and respond to community needs in a timely manner. Strong political backing and clear bureaucratic systems further strengthen leadership authority and operational efficiency.

Conversely, in contexts where governance systems are weak or fragmented, leadership effectiveness is significantly constrained. The review highlights that political dynasties, patronage-based systems, and entrenched elite control can undermine merit-based leadership and distort decision-making processes. In such environments, leadership is often limited by external political interference, reducing its ability to act independently or prioritize public welfare. Similarly, bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited technical capacity,

and inadequate financial resources further weaken the ability of leaders to translate policies into effective public service delivery (Maddawin, 2018; Robinson, 2007).

These structural and political constraints illustrate that leadership cannot be fully understood in isolation from the governance environment in which it operates. Instead, leadership outcomes are the product of continuous interaction between individual capabilities and systemic conditions. This means that even highly competent leaders may struggle to achieve meaningful governance improvements if institutional and political environments are not supportive. As such, improving governance outcomes requires simultaneous attention to both leadership development and institutional reform.

Based on these findings, the study strongly suggests the need for targeted and context-sensitive leadership development programs. Such programs should go beyond technical training and include capacity-building initiatives focused on ethical governance, participatory leadership, conflict management, and adaptive decision-making. Equally important is the strengthening of institutional support systems that enable leaders to function effectively, including transparent administrative procedures, merit-based staffing, and stable policy frameworks (Tenorio & Sanjorjo, 2021). In addition, the integration of leadership development into broader decentralization strategies is essential. Decentralization reforms that focus only on transferring authority without strengthening leadership capacity and institutional readiness risk producing uneven or ineffective governance outcomes. A more holistic approach is needed—one that aligns leadership enhancement with fiscal decentralization, institutional strengthening, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that

Stage	n	%	Notes
Identified	1000	100%	Database search
Screened	1000	100%	Title/abstract screening
Excluded	895	89.5%	Irrelevant topics
Full-text assessed	105	10.5%	Eligibility check
Excluded full-text	53	5.3%	Not ASEAN / not LGU / etc.
Included	52	5.2%	Final SLR sample

Table 1. Selection statistics of the comparative systematic literature review local governments can genuinely respond to community needs and development priorities (Boex & Simatupang).

The implications of these findings are also reflected in the systematic review process, particularly through the PRISMA-based screening and selection of studies. The flow of records demonstrates a rigorous and highly selective process designed to ensure that only the most relevant and methodologically appropriate studies were included in the final synthesis. Initially, a total of 1,000 records were identified through database searches and preliminary screening. At this stage, 895 records were excluded due to duplication, irrelevance to local governance, lack of focus on Southeast Asia, or failure to meet inclusion criteria.

Following this initial screening phase, only 105 records remained for full-text review. However, a more detailed protocol-based evaluation further refined the dataset, resulting in the exclusion of an additional 53

studies. These were removed due to reasons such as being outside the ASEAN regional focus, being purely quantitative in nature, lacking empirical grounding, or not directly addressing leadership within local government institutions. This secondary screening ensured that only studies with strong alignment to the research objectives were retained.

Ultimately, the final qualitative synthesis included 52 studies, representing only 5.2% of the original dataset. This indicates that 948 records, or 94.8% of the initial pool, were excluded through a rigorous and systematic filtering process. This high level of exclusion is not a limitation but rather a strength of the study, as it demonstrates strict adherence to inclusion criteria and ensures that the final analysis is based on highly relevant, high-quality, and contextually appropriate literature.

Overall, this structured and transparent selection process reinforces the credibility of the findings and ensures that the conclusions drawn are grounded in robust qualitative evidence. The final dataset represents a carefully refined body of knowledge that accurately reflects leadership dynamics in Southeast Asian local government systems, allowing for a more precise and meaningful interpretation of governance realities in decentralized contexts.

Table 2. General Study Characteristics of the Included Studies on Leadership, Governance, and Local Development in Southeast Asia

Author/s (Year)	Country/Context	Governance Approach / Theme
Diokno-Sicat & Maddawin (2018)	Philippines	Decentralization and local governance
Tenorio & Sanjorjo	Philippines	LGU leadership capacity and devolution
Valdez	Philippines	Barangay governance and leadership
Boex & Simatupang	Philippines / ASEAN	Comparative local governance systems
Robinson (2007)	Philippines	Decentralization and public service delivery
Capuno	Philippines	Leadership and innovation under decentralization
Juco, Maddawin, & Manasan	ASEAN / Philippines	Functional assignments under decentralization
Atienza	Philippines	Local autonomy and devolution
Work	Philippines	Participatory governance and partnerships
Moreno & Sulasula	Philippines	Local governance management
Liwanag & Wyss	Philippines	Health governance and decision space
Shair-Rosenfield	Philippines	Political decentralization and governance
Atienza & Go	Philippines	Local governance and autonomy
Danggalan et al.	Philippines	Managerial capability and service quality
Hendrarso et al.	Philippines	Adaptive decentralization governance
Liwanag & Wyss	Philippines	Decentralized health decision-making

Orbista	Philippines	NGO participation in governance
Vibora & Mandigma	Philippines / ASEAN	Digital governance and online tax systems
Evio & Bonito	Philippines	eHealth governance implementation
Roengtam et al.	Philippines / ASEAN	Social media governance
Pepito et al.	Philippines	Health workforce governance
Tejero et al.	Philippines	Rural health workforce management
Camorongan	Philippines	Smart city governance
Van Niekerk et al.	ASEAN	Social innovation in health governance
Afable	Philippines / ASEAN	Facebook and public engagement
Liwanag & Wyss	Philippines	Accountability and decentralization
Florece et al.	ASEAN	Disaster governance and resilience
Cuenca (2019)	Philippines	Fiscal decentralization and health delivery
Kulachai	Thailand	Local autonomy and democratic governance
Perwita Sari et al.	Indonesia	PPP governance and institutional capacity
Amri	Philippines / Indonesia	Public innovation and transformational leadership
Jack-Kadioglu	Philippines	Coastal governance and accountability
Susilo	Indonesia	Political patronage and decentralization
Purwanto	Indonesia	Governance coordination and WEF security
Suryaman	Indonesia	Collaborative disaster governance
Harkness	Indonesia	Coastal livelihood governance
Thaler	Indonesia	Forest governance and development
Ham	Indonesia	Participatory planning and resilience
Pratama	Indonesia	Marine governance and sustainable funding
Palagi	Philippines	Disaster relocation governance
Dwidjo Susilo et al.	Indonesia	Universal health governance
Beggs et al.	Philippines	Climate-resilient local health systems
Soputhy et al.	Cambodia	Decentralized health governance

Asmorowati et al.	Indonesia	Social protection governance
Meutia et al.	Indonesia	Healthcare reform and meta-governance
Widiono et al.	Indonesia	Poverty reduction governance
Dian Perwita Sari et al.	Indonesia	Infrastructure PPP governance
Syed Annuar et al.	Indonesia / Malaysia	Smart city governance
A'yuningsih & Rodiyah	Indonesia	Digital public service delivery
Rahayu, Nurmandi, & Younus	Indonesia	E-government implementation
Mutiara, Yuniarti, & Pratama	Indonesia	Smart governance and transparency
Soares et al.	Timor-Leste	Smart village governance and digital administration

DISCUSSION

The PRISMA-guided systematic literature review (SLR) provides strong and consistent evidence that leadership functions as a foundational governance mechanism within decentralized political systems across Southeast Asia. Across all included studies, leadership emerges not as a peripheral administrative feature but as a central determinant of how local governments perform in practice. It shapes key governance dimensions such as administrative efficiency, accountability structures, policy implementation, and the overall quality of public service delivery. In this sense, leadership serves as the operational link between decentralization reforms and their actual outcomes on the ground. This aligns with decentralization scholarship emphasizing that local governance effectiveness is highly dependent on leadership quality, discretion, and decision-making capacity (Maddawin, 2018).

A key synthesis from the reviewed literature is the strongly contextual and relational nature of leadership. Leadership effectiveness is not fixed or universally transferable across settings; rather, it is shaped by political relationships, institutional arrangements, and socio-economic conditions. Outcomes depend heavily on how leaders engage with political actors, bureaucratic systems, and community stakeholders. This supports a political economy perspective, where leadership is embedded within incentive structures, power relations, and institutional constraints. Even highly capable leaders may experience limited governance outcomes in environments characterized by political instability, elite dominance, or administrative politicization (Enorio & Sanjorjo, n.d.).

In addition to relational dynamics, institutional structure plays a decisive role in shaping leadership performance. The review shows that local government effectiveness is significantly influenced by the clarity, strength, and coherence of institutions in which leadership operates. Systems with clear role definitions, fiscal decentralization, and administrative autonomy tend to support stronger leadership outcomes. Conversely, fragmented or overlapping institutional arrangements often result in inefficiency, delays, and governance confusion. This reinforces the argument that decentralization outcomes are not automatic but are heavily conditioned by institutional design (Maddawin, 2018).

Closely related to institutional design is the role of political environment and governance autonomy. The evidence shows that political stability and reduced interference enhance leadership effectiveness by allowing continuity in policy implementation and administrative decision-making. When leaders operate with genuine autonomy, they are more capable of executing long-term development strategies and strengthening institutional systems. However, in many Southeast Asian contexts, patronage politics, elite capture, and

political interference continue to undermine governance processes, weaken accountability, and distort decision-making priorities.

Another major finding concerns resource limitations and administrative capacity constraints at the local level. Many local government units face persistent shortages in financial resources, technical expertise, and bureaucratic efficiency. These limitations directly restrict leadership performance, as even competent leaders are unable to fully implement policies without adequate institutional support. Insufficient funding reduces program effectiveness, while weak administrative systems delay service delivery. This aligns with public administration literature identifying capacity deficits as a major barrier to successful decentralization implementation (Sicat & Maddawin, 2018).

The review further establishes a strong governance–development linkage, showing that leadership quality has a direct influence on socio-economic outcomes. Effective leadership is associated with improved public service delivery, better resource allocation, stronger local development programs, and enhanced poverty reduction outcomes. It also contributes to increased institutional trust, as citizens perceive local governments to be more responsive and accountable. In this way, leadership acts as a mediating mechanism between institutional structures and development performance (SLR Included Studies, 2025).

Another important synthesis is that leadership effectiveness is not static but can be developed over time. The literature consistently highlights the importance of structured capacity-building interventions such as training programs, institutional reforms, mentoring systems, and governance strengthening initiatives. These interventions are particularly important in decentralized systems where leaders are expected to manage complex administrative and political responsibilities. Without continuous development, leadership capacity risks lagging behind increasing governance demands (Enorio & Sanjorjo, n.d.).

The findings also emphasize that leadership development must be integrated into broader decentralization reforms rather than treated as an isolated intervention. Leadership strengthening is most effective when embedded within institutional reforms such as fiscal decentralization, administrative restructuring, and accountability mechanisms. This integrated approach ensures sustainability and continuity in governance improvement. It also enhances coherence across policy systems, preventing fragmentation of capacity-building efforts.

From a PRISMA perspective, the review process itself reflects a highly selective evidence base. A total of 1,000 records were initially identified and screened. Of these, 895 records were excluded during title and abstract screening due to irrelevance. The remaining 105 studies were assessed for eligibility, after which 53 studies were excluded for reasons such as duplication, non-ASEAN context, lack of focus on local government, purely quantitative or conceptual orientation, or misalignment with inclusion criteria. This resulted in a final dataset of 52 studies included in the qualitative synthesis.

Overall, the final sample represents only 5.2% of the original records, while 94.8% were excluded through systematic screening. This demonstrates the rigor and precision of the PRISMA-guided selection process, ensuring that only highly relevant and context-specific studies were included. The narrowing process strengthens the credibility of the synthesis by focusing exclusively on studies directly aligned with decentralized governance and leadership dynamics in Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, the findings of this PRISMA-guided review present a comprehensive understanding of leadership in decentralized governance systems. They demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is shaped by a complex interaction of institutional design, political environment, and resource capacity. At the same time, leadership plays a critical role in translating decentralization reforms into tangible governance and development outcomes. Strengthening both leadership capacity and institutional systems is therefore essential for achieving sustainable improvements in local governance performance.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Several directions emerge from the limitations and geographical imbalance identified in this review. First,

future research should undertake cross-country field studies involving local government units in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste. Such studies would provide direct empirical evidence on how local leaders interpret and implement decentralization reforms under different institutional and political conditions. Greater attention should also be given to Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste, where the present evidence base remains comparatively limited.

Second, future studies should employ mixed-method research designs that combine qualitative evidence from interviews, focus groups, case studies, and document analysis with quantitative measures of governance performance, administrative capacity, public service delivery, and local development. Such integration would allow researchers to examine not only how leadership is experienced and practiced but also whether particular leadership practices are associated with measurable governance outcomes.

Third, longitudinal research is needed to examine how leadership capacity and decentralization outcomes develop over time. Studies extending across multiple administrative or electoral periods could determine whether leadership reforms, institutional strengthening, and decentralization arrangements produce sustained improvements in accountability, service delivery, and local development or whether observed improvements are temporary and dependent on individual leaders.

Finally, future comparative research should pay greater attention to the interaction between leadership and institutional conditions. Rather than examining leadership capacity as an isolated variable, researchers should investigate how fiscal arrangements, administrative autonomy, political competition, accountability mechanisms, and institutional capacity enable or constrain local leadership across different Southeast Asian governance systems.

Explanation of the Chart

The chart illustrates the changing trends in decentralized governance studies in ASEAN across three periods: 2010–2015, 2016–2020, and 2021–2025. It highlights the evolution of governance priorities and the perceived effectiveness of decentralization reforms over time.

The blue line, labeled Foundation & Institutional Reforms, shows a steady increase from approximately 58% in 2010–2015 to about 82% in 2021–2025. This upward trend indicates that governance reforms in ASEAN countries gradually became more effective over time. The increase suggests stronger institutional capacity, improved local autonomy, and better implementation of decentralization policies, particularly in countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia.

The red line, representing Participatory Governance, shows a declining trend from around 33% to 14% across the three periods. This decline does not necessarily indicate reduced participation but rather suggests that participatory governance became increasingly integrated into broader governance systems and was no longer treated as a separate or emerging governance concern. Earlier studies heavily emphasized citizen participation and accountability reforms, while later studies shifted attention toward governance resilience and digital transformation.

Meanwhile, the green line, labeled Governance Resilience & Digital Transformation, remains comparatively lower but reflects the emergence of new governance priorities in recent years. The focus on resilience and digital governance became more visible during 2021–2025, particularly in response to post-pandemic governance challenges, disaster management, e-governance systems, and digital public service delivery in ASEAN local governments.

Overall, the chart demonstrates a transition in ASEAN governance research over the past 15 years—from foundational decentralization reforms toward more adaptive, resilient, and technology-oriented governance systems. The increasing effectiveness of governance reforms across the periods suggests that ASEAN local governments have gradually strengthened their administrative capacity, participatory mechanisms, and institutional responsiveness.

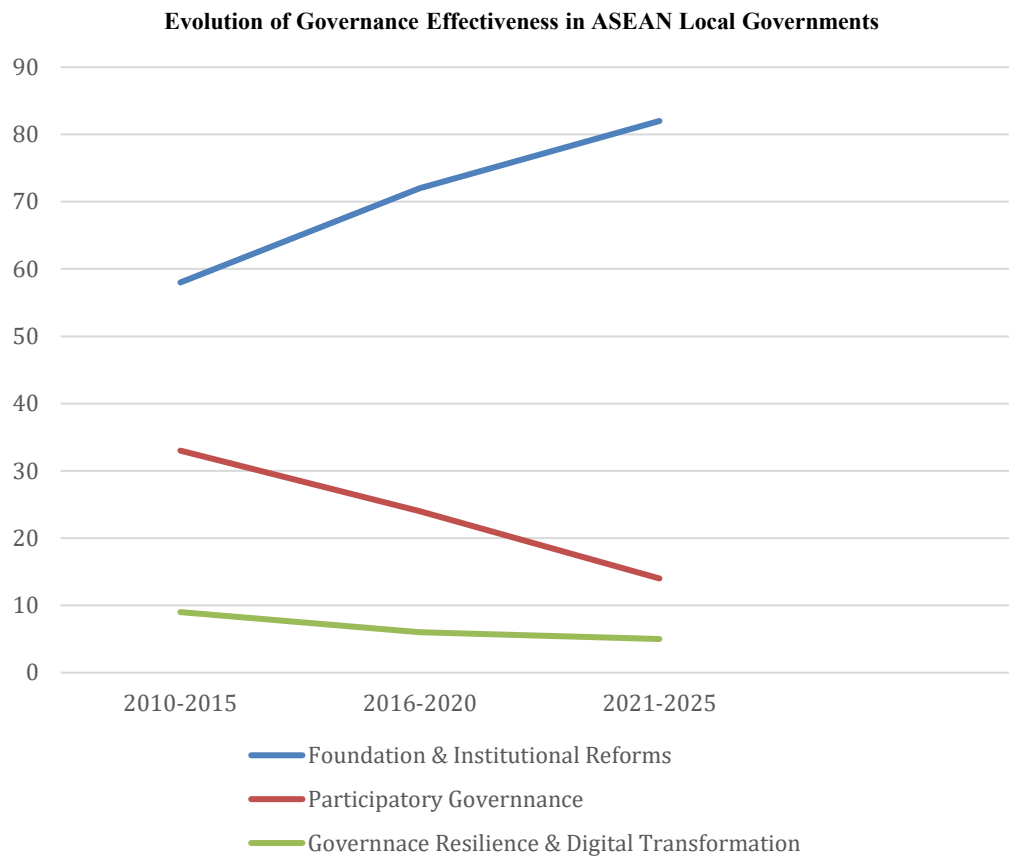


Figure 3. Discussion of PRISMA Findings on ASEAN Governance Studies

PIE GRAPH DISCUSSION

The geographical distribution of the 52 included studies demonstrates an uneven concentration of research across the Southeast Asian cases covered by the review. The Philippines constitutes the most frequently represented national context, followed by Indonesia, while Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste are represented by substantially fewer studies. Multi-country studies also contribute to the evidence base by examining governance and decentralization across more than one national context.

The country classification used in this review was not necessarily mutually exclusive. Where a study examined two or more countries or explicitly addressed a broader ASEAN context, the study was coded under each relevant country or regional category. Consequently, the reported country frequencies represent country-study occurrences rather than mutually exclusive shares of the 52 studies. For this reason, the percentages should not be interpreted as components of a single 100-percent distribution and may exceed 100 percent when combined.

The concentration of studies in the Philippines and Indonesia is analytically significant. Both countries have extensive experience with decentralization and local autonomy, generating substantial scholarship on local governance, administrative capacity, public service delivery, participation, and political leadership. The comparatively limited representation of Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste, however, indicates that the available evidence does not provide an equally balanced empirical basis across all five focal countries.

This imbalance should therefore be considered when interpreting the comparative findings of the review. The prominence of Philippine and Indonesian studies may reflect the greater availability of scholarship and documented decentralization experiences rather than necessarily indicating that the governance dynamics identified in these countries are uniformly applicable across Southeast Asia. The underrepresentation of Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste consequently represents an important research gap and reinforces the need for additional comparative empirical studies across the region.

ASEAN GOVERNANCE

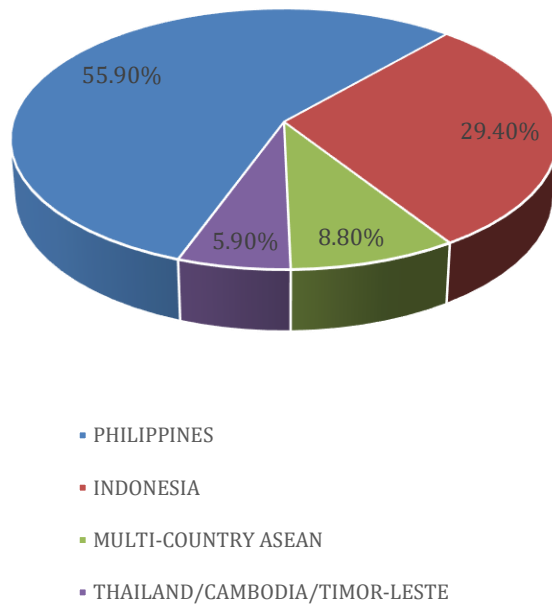


Figure 4. Pie Graph Distribution of ASEAN Governance Studies by Country and Context

Comparative Insights Across the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste

A comparative reading of the reviewed literature reveals that leadership operates differently across Southeast Asian decentralization contexts because institutional arrangements, administrative capacities, and political environments vary substantially across countries. The evidence is particularly concentrated in the Philippines and Indonesia, while Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste remain comparatively underrepresented. Nevertheless, the available studies from these cases provide important insights into how different institutional environments condition the role of local leadership.

In the Philippines, the literature places considerable emphasis on decentralization, local autonomy, leadership capacity, accountability, public service delivery, and the relationship between local political leadership and institutional performance. The Philippine experience demonstrates that decentralization creates substantial opportunities for local leaders to exercise discretion and initiate governance reforms, but leadership effectiveness remains influenced by political dynamics, institutional capacity, resource availability, and accountability arrangements. Leadership therefore functions not simply as an individual competency but as an important mechanism through which formally decentralized authority is translated into local governance outcomes.

The Indonesian literature similarly demonstrates the importance of leadership and institutional capacity within a highly decentralized governance environment. Studies in the reviewed evidence base address public sector innovation, participatory governance, disaster governance, digital public services, social protection, infrastructure partnerships, and local administrative reform. Compared with the Philippine evidence, the Indonesian literature places particularly visible emphasis on innovation, collaborative governance, administrative coordination, and the management of decentralization-related institutional arrangements. This suggests that leadership effectiveness in Indonesia is closely associated with the capacity of local institutions to coordinate actors and adapt governance practices to changing policy and development demands.

The evidence from Thailand presents a comparatively different emphasis. The available study focuses on local autonomy and democratic governance, indicating the continuing importance of the relationship

between decentralization and the institutional conditions under which local governments exercise authority. However, the smaller number of studies limits the extent to which broader conclusions can be drawn from the Thai case. Rather than treating Thailand as evidence equivalent in weight to the Philippines or Indonesia, its findings should be interpreted as an underrepresented component of the regional evidence base.

Similarly, the Cambodian evidence emphasizes decentralized governance within specific institutional and service-delivery contexts, particularly local health governance. This indicates that leadership effectiveness in Cambodia must be understood in relation to administrative structures and the practical capacity of local institutions to implement decentralized responsibilities. The limited number of included studies, however, suggests that further empirical investigation is necessary to determine whether these patterns extend beyond the sectors represented in the current literature.

Timor-Leste represents an emerging and institutionally developing decentralization context. The included evidence addresses smart village governance and digital administration, pointing to the growing importance of technology, administrative modernization, and local institutional development. Compared with the more established decentralization experiences of the Philippines and Indonesia, Timor-Leste illustrates the importance of examining leadership within governance systems where institutional capacities and decentralization arrangements continue to evolve.

Taken together, the comparison demonstrates that leadership should not be conceptualized as a universal variable operating independently of institutional context. In the Philippines and Indonesia, relatively extensive decentralization experiences provide broader opportunities for local leadership, innovation, and administrative discretion. In Thailand, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste, the more limited evidence points to the continuing importance of institutional development, central–local relations, administrative capacity, and emerging governance structures. The comparative evidence therefore supports a context-dependent understanding of leadership in which the effectiveness of local leaders depends not only on individual competencies but also on the institutional and political environments within which those competencies are exercised.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that leadership is a central and determining force in shaping governance processes, public service delivery, and local development outcomes across Southeast Asia. Within decentralized systems, where authority is distributed to local governments, leadership becomes the mechanism through which policies are interpreted, implemented, and translated into tangible public value. The synthesis of qualitative evidence underscores that leadership is not merely administrative but deeply influential in steering institutional direction and development priorities.

The findings consistently show that effective leadership enhances decision-making processes by promoting clarity, responsiveness, and strategic alignment with community needs. Leaders who demonstrate vision, integrity, and adaptability are more likely to foster trust and cooperation within local institutions. In turn, this strengthens the ability of local governments to deliver services efficiently and equitably, particularly in complex and resource-constrained environments.

Moreover, leadership plays a vital role in strengthening accountability mechanisms within decentralized governance structures. When leaders actively engage with stakeholders and uphold transparent practices, they help build stronger institutional legitimacy. This accountability is essential in ensuring that public resources are used appropriately and that development programs reflect the actual needs of the population.

However, the study also highlights that leadership effectiveness does not operate in isolation. It is significantly shaped by contextual factors such as political dynamics, institutional frameworks, and administrative capacity. In many cases, even capable leaders face limitations when governance systems are weak or when political interference constrains decision-making autonomy. This demonstrates that leadership must be understood within the broader governance environment.

The evidence further suggests that disparities in governance outcomes across Southeast Asia are partly explained by differences in how leadership is supported or constrained by institutional systems. Countries and localities with stronger administrative structures and clearer governance rules tend to experience more consistent and effective leadership performance. Conversely, fragmented institutions often hinder leadership effectiveness regardless of individual capability.

These findings also reinforce the importance of capacity building as a long-term strategy for improving decentralized governance. Developing leadership skills alone is insufficient if not accompanied by reforms that strengthen institutions, streamline processes, and enhance resource allocation systems. A more integrated approach is required—one that aligns leadership development with structural governance improvements.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that governments should prioritize initiatives that enhance both individual leadership competencies and institutional conditions. This includes investing in training programs, improving merit-based recruitment systems, and reinforcing accountability frameworks. Such measures can help ensure that leaders are not only well-prepared but also adequately supported in their roles.

Ultimately, the study concludes that strengthening leadership capacity within enabling governance environments is essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive local development across Southeast Asia. The findings also demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is inseparable from institutional capacity, political conditions, administrative autonomy, and resource availability. Given the uneven geographical distribution of the existing evidence, future research should expand comparative field studies to underrepresented countries, employ mixed-method approaches that integrate qualitative and quantitative governance evidence, and undertake longitudinal analyses of leadership and decentralization outcomes across ASEAN local governments. Such research would strengthen understanding of how leadership and institutional conditions interact over time and would provide a stronger empirical basis for improving decentralized governance across diverse Southeast Asian contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

I declare that there are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be perceived as influencing the research, analysis, or interpretation of the findings presented in this study.

Author's Contribution

Jade Kirby B. Epis: Conceptualization of the study, literature search, data screening, qualitative synthesis, interpretation of findings, and preparation of the manuscript writing of the original draft, review, and editing.

Dr. Asterio G. Olandria: Supervision of the research process, provision of academic guidance, methodological validation, and critical review and editing of the manuscript.

John Archie Matute: Assistance in literature organization, data verification, synthesis support, and collaborative review and editing of the final manuscript.

Ethical Statement

This systematic literature review synthesized existing scholarly work and publicly available literature. It did not involve the recruitment of human participants, animal subjects, or the use of identifiable private data; therefore, ethical approval was not required for the conduct of this study.

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