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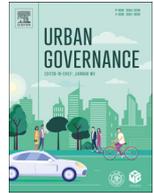
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Evaluating the capacity of local authorities in implementing participatory urban planning: The case of Khobar City, Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the capacity of local authorities in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, to implement participatory urban planning within a centralized governance system and the context of Vision 2030 reforms. It introduces a conceptual framework structured around four key dimensions: transparency, public participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach—including 20 semi-structured interviews with officials and survey data from 453 residents—the research identifies institutional and systemic barriers, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, overlapping mandates, and the symbolic use of participatory mechanisms in urban planning. While e-platforms like *Istilaa* and *Balady* offer digital avenues for participation, their impact remains constrained by digital inequality and limited integration with decision-making. The findings also reveal that public input often informs minor project adjustments rather than shaping strategic planning, highlighting the consultative rather than collaborative nature of participatory urban planning in Khobar. This paper contributes to participatory governance theory by adapting Arnstein's Ladder to assess participation levels in centralized, non-democratic contexts. It demonstrates that while reforms under Vision 2030 have encouraged decentralization and public participation, significant gaps persist in institutional transparency, responsiveness, and the effective use of participatory tools. To enhance participatory outcomes, the study proposes targeted reforms, including institutionalizing participatory frameworks, improving inter-agency coordination, and investing in digital and human capacity. The findings offer broader implications for implementing participatory planning in transitional governance systems and underscore the importance of tailored approaches to urban governance reform.

1. Introduction

Recent debates in urban governance and participatory planning emphasize a global shift toward citizen-centric governance, prioritizing inclusivity, equity, and accountability (Healey, 2006; Fainstein, 2013). These discussions are particularly relevant in centralized governance systems, where structural and institutional barriers—such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and coordination difficulties—often constrain meaningful public participation (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Rowe & Frewer, 2000). Scholars have underscored the importance of decentralization in fostering participatory urban planning, as it enables local governments to better respond to public needs and build trust through greater transparency and responsiveness (Andrews & Entwistle, 2010; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). Recent research also highlights how participatory governance practices have accelerated in recent years, especially in European planning systems that promote integrated, adaptive, and participatory approaches (Nadin et al., 2020). These trends offer a use-

ful point of contrast for examining participatory reforms in more centralized or semi-authoritarian systems.

Vision 2030, launched in 2016, marked a major shift in Saudi Arabia's national policy, aiming to reduce oil dependency, diversify the economy, and introduce governance reforms. One of its key ambitions is to decentralize decision-making and promote public participation in urban planning. Digital tools such as *Balady* and *Istilaa* were introduced to support this goal (The National Transformation Program, 2016; Vision 2030, (2018)). However, despite these reforms, several barriers persist. These include the enduring centralization of authority, limited institutional frameworks for participation, and unequal access to digital platforms (Boureggh et al., 2023; Aldegheshem, 2023).

Concerns have also emerged regarding the displacement of local communities in the context of large-scale mega-projects, where relocation has often taken place without meaningful public input. Although affected residents have usually received compensation exceeding market value—together with new housing and benefits such as scholarships

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(Chatham House 2017; Thompson, 2017, 2021; Shihabi, 2020)—these processes have nonetheless raised questions of equity. Such developments highlight the importance of addressing existing barriers in order to achieve Vision 2030's stated goals of inclusive governance and participatory urban planning.

This paper evaluates the capacity of local authorities in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, to implement participatory urban planning within a historically centralized governance system. As one of the earliest top-down planned cities in the country, Khobar was established in the 1940s and developed with the influence and support of U.S. oil companies, particularly the California-Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC), which employed a hierarchical, top-down planning approach (Al-Hathloul & Edadan, 1993; Aramco, 2023). This historical context offers important insights into the structural challenges of transitioning to more participatory forms of urban governance. While grounded in the Saudi context, this case offers insights that could be relevant also for other centralized and/or non-democratic systems—particularly those undergoing reform processes aimed at institutionalizing public participation.

Building on these debates, this study situates its findings within broader theoretical frameworks of participatory urban planning, decentralization, and digital governance (Arnstein, 1969; Bovaird & Löffler, 2003). It examines the practical and empirically grounded implications of Vision 2030 for participatory planning, exploring how global principles are adapted—or constrained—within Saudi Arabia's centralized governance model. Specifically, the study assesses the capacity of local authorities to leverage Vision 2030 initiatives to enhance public participation while navigating persistent hierarchical decision-making structures. By providing empirical evidence on the localization of national reforms, this research contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on the adaptation of participatory frameworks in non-democratic and centralized settings. The Khobar case also serves as a lens through which to understand the tensions between reform agendas and on-the-ground implementation—a dynamic present in many transitioning governance systems beyond Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, this paper contributes to governance debates in the Global South by offering an empirical analysis of participatory urban planning within a transitioning rentier state. As Saudi Arabia undergoes post-oil-dependent governance reforms under Vision 2030, the study provides timely insights into how centralized systems seek to incorporate participatory principles amidst emerging decentralization efforts. By examining the institutional dynamics in Khobar, the paper extends MENA-region governance literature and highlights the tensions between national reform agendas and localized implementation within centralized contexts.

Assessing the capacity of local authorities to implement participatory urban planning is essential for understanding their role in shaping urban development (Boyne, 2002). Such assessments typically draw on evaluation frameworks focused on decentralized governance, transparency, participation, responsiveness, strategic planning, and technological adaptation (Işoraitè, 2005; Boyne, 2002). However, scholars have noted that applying these frameworks across diverse contexts can be problematic. Structural constraints—such as limited institutional capacity, political dynamics, and resource disparities—complicate straightforward evaluations of local performance (Andrews et al., 2005; Bovaird & Löffler, 2003). For these frameworks to be meaningful, they must be contextualized to account for the socio-political, cultural, and institutional realities of the regions in which they are applied (Fainstein, 2013; Healey, 2006).

In this regard, the paper explores how governance structures shape participatory practices in urban planning in Khobar, identifying both barriers and opportunities for more inclusive participation. While participatory mechanisms such as public hearings, digital consultations, and workshops exist, the study finds that these often remain consultative rather than transformative. Achieving meaningful participation remains a challenge, particularly in reaching marginalized populations and ensuring equitable development outcomes. Although current prac-

tices align with Vision 2030's objectives, they fall short of realizing the justice-oriented outcomes envisioned in Fainstein's Just City framework.

This paper is structured as follows: the literature review contextualizes participatory urban planning and local governance in both global and Saudi-specific contexts; the methodology outlines the mixed-methods approach employed, including interviews, surveys, and document analysis; the findings and discussion analyze the capacity of local authorities, highlighting specific challenges and opportunities in participatory urban planning. The conclusion presents actionable recommendations to institutionalize inclusive governance and align planning practices more closely with community needs.

2. Literature review

This paper explores four key dimensions of participatory urban planning—transparency, public participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption—as they relate to the performance of local authorities. These dimensions were selected because they are critical for assessing how local governments share information, engage people, respond to public input, and leverage digital tools, particularly within centralized systems like that of Saudi Arabia.

2.1. Transparency

Transparency is a foundational element of participatory urban planning. It enables accountability, builds public trust, and ensures that planning processes are open and understandable to stakeholders. This section assesses how governance structures in Saudi Arabia influence transparency and affect public participation. Transparency is essential for building trust and accountability in urban planning processes (Bovaird & Löffler, 2003; Hood, 1991). Transparency involves making public information accessible, helping stakeholders understand planning objectives and processes, and establishing oversight mechanisms such as audits and public reporting (Innes & Booher, 2004; Fung, 2006). Effective governance requires clear decision-making structures, well-defined roles and responsibilities, and accountability measures to prevent inefficiencies and strengthen public confidence in urban planning (Albrechts, 2004).

Moreover, governance transparency is interconnected with public participation. Transparency creates an informed citizenry, which is crucial for meaningful participation in planning decisions (Rowe & Frewer, 2000). However, the lack of accessible information or overly bureaucratic governance structures can hinder participatory efforts and perpetuate a disconnect between authorities and communities (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). To address these challenges, studies on participatory governance and institutional capacity highlight the importance of designing governance frameworks that institutionalize participatory mechanisms and maintain transparency through consistent communication, public forums, and feedback channels. For instance, Bryson (2011) focuses on strategic governance and institutional reforms to enhance public participation, while Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) examine public administration models that integrate participatory practices into local decision-making. Empirical research, including the findings of this study, further underscores how digital platforms like *Istithlaa* and *Balady* provide opportunities for transparent participation, though their effectiveness remains limited by bureaucratic inefficiencies and the digital divide. Such measures not only improve public trust but also contribute to the development of equitable and inclusive urban planning outcomes.

2.2. Public participation

In this section, we examine the role of public participation in urban planning. This is relevant for assessing the inclusiveness and effectiveness of participation mechanisms. This section evaluates the depth and impact of participatory processes. Public participation involves engaging the public in urban decision-making, policy development, and planning. While widely recognized in urban governance, its extent varies de-

pending on institutional frameworks and implementation strategies. To assess participation effectively, key criteria from the literature must be considered. Inclusiveness plays a crucial role in participation by ensuring diverse demographic and social groups are represented, particularly marginalized populations (Rowe & Frewer, 2000). However, systemic barriers—such as bureaucratic constraints, lack of awareness, and logistical challenges—often limit meaningful participation (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). These barriers highlight the need for inclusiveness, not only to achieve equitable participation but also as a measure of local authorities' capacity to foster effective urban governance and public-oriented decision-making.

The availability and effectiveness of participation mechanisms, such as public meetings, surveys, and digital platforms, are also crucial for evaluating participation levels. While digital tools have the potential to expand access, they may inadvertently exclude individuals who lack technological access or digital literacy, highlighting the ongoing challenges of the digital divide (Reddick, Chatfield & Jaramillo, 2015). Moreover, the mere existence of participatory mechanisms does not guarantee meaningful participation—effective implementation and follow-up are essential to ensure that public input is genuinely considered rather than symbolic or superficial efforts.

To better conceptualize the levels of participation, Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation provides a useful framework. Despite being around for many decades, the model is still exceedingly useful to categorize public participation into eight steps, ranging from nonparticipation (manipulation, therapy) to degrees of symbolic effort (informing, consultation, placation) and ultimately to degrees of public power (partnership, delegated power, and public control). In the context of Saudi Arabia's participatory urban planning, many participatory mechanisms—such as workshops and digital consultations—align with the consultation level, where input is gathered but does not significantly influence final decisions. Without institutionalized frameworks that enable meaningful participation, public participation efforts risk being symbolic, which can erode public trust and diminish long-term participation incentives (Arnstein, 1969).

To enhance participatory urban participation, it is crucial to move beyond consultation toward higher levels of participation, ensuring that public input shapes decision-making rather than serving as a symbolic exercise. This shift requires clear mechanisms for incorporating public feedback, transparent decision-making processes, and institutional commitments to integrating participatory insights into urban policies. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering more equitable, inclusive, and responsive public participation in urban governance and planning.

2.3. Responsiveness

In this section, we analyze responsiveness as a measure of local authorities' ability to address public needs. This is relevant for understanding how participation builds trust. This section examines how well authorities adapt to public input. Responsiveness is a key factor in evaluating local authorities' performance in participatory urban planning. It refers to their ability to address public concerns and adapt to community needs in a timely and effective manner. As Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) argue, responsiveness is central to fostering trust and legitimacy in governance, requiring proactive measures to address issues and enhance services. However, the degree to which responsiveness is achieved often depends on the effectiveness of local participatory mechanisms that enable local authorities to collect, analyze, and act on public feedback.

Local participatory mechanisms, such as workshops, consultations, and e-participation platforms, play a critical role in achieving responsiveness by creating structured channels for public input and feedback. Nevertheless, the degree to which such systems genuinely facilitate meaningful adaptation to public needs often depends on political will, bureaucratic efficiency, and the extent to which feedback is

integrated into decision-making processes (Bovens, Goodin & Schillemans, 2014; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). When local participatory channels are underutilized or symbolic, responsiveness is weakened, and public trust in governance diminishes. For instance, Menon and Hartz-Karp (2019) highlight how inadequate public participation in policy development and decision-making in India underscores the necessity for institutional innovations to enhance both participatory practices and governance responsiveness.

Additionally, structural and systemic challenges, including institutional inaction, unequal access to participatory channels, and resource constraints, may limit the effectiveness of participatory processes in improving responsiveness. This highlights the need for continuous evaluation and reform to ensure that participatory mechanisms are not only inclusive but also effectively integrated into decision-making frameworks, enabling local authorities to be more adaptive and aligned with public needs (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

2.4. Innovation and technology adoption

This section examines the role of digital technology in participatory urban planning, with a focus on how digital tools enhance public participation, transparency, and responsiveness. The growing integration of e-participation platforms has significantly transformed the planning landscape by making governance processes more accessible and inclusive. Globally, digital tools such as online consultations, surveys, and collaborative platforms have enabled local authorities to engage wider and more diverse populations, particularly those previously underrepresented due to physical, social, or logistical barriers (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

While these tools offer great potential, their success hinges on overcoming persistent barriers—digital inequality, data privacy concerns, and the technical capacities of both public institutions and public (Kleinmans, Falco & Babelon, 2021; Du et al., 2023). For digital governance to be meaningful, institutional reforms must support it. Studies show that when digital participation is paired with follow-up mechanisms, transparent feedback loops, and clear accountability structures, it can significantly strengthen public trust and cultivate a sense of civic ownership (Falco & Kleinmans, 2018).

In the Saudi context, the increasing reliance on digital tools also reflects changing patterns of public participation. Demographic factors—particularly age and access to technology—shape how individuals interact with urban planning processes. Bouregh et al. (2023) found that 64% to 73% of Saudi respondents across various age groups expressed willingness to participate through digital platforms. Similarly, digital access has been shown to correlate positively with a sense of public and participation in planning (Mutambik, Almuqrin, Alharbi, & Abusharhah, 2023). These patterns align with Saudi Arabia's rapid improvement in global rankings—rising from 66th to 7th in the UN E-Participation Index between 2020 and 2024 (UN-DESA, 2024)—signaling growing institutional investment in online participatory mechanisms.

Ultimately, the adoption of digital technologies in participatory urban planning presents a key opportunity for local authorities to enhance inclusion and responsiveness. However, realizing this potential requires targeted strategies to improve digital access, develop institutional capacity, and ensure that public input leads to tangible planning outcomes—particularly in centralized governance systems like Saudi Arabia's, where digital participation may serve as a structured substitute for more open deliberation.

3. Conceptual framework

This conceptual framework for this study is built upon the four key dimensions identified through the literature review: transparency, public participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption. These elements are widely acknowledged in participatory governance theory

(Arnstein, 1969; Bovaird & Löffler, 2003; Fung, 2006; Nabatchi & Amster, 2014) as foundational for enabling public participation and institutional accountability. The selection of these dimensions was driven by their repeated appearance in existing studies and their relevance in assessing how local authorities implement participatory urban planning.

Rather than replicating a single pre-existing framework, this model is a synthesis of established theoretical components, adapted specifically to the governance realities of centralized, non-democratic contexts such as Saudi Arabia. In such settings, public participation typically unfolds within tightly managed institutional structures, where direct influence on policymaking is limited. This framework, therefore, places emphasis on mechanisms that enable controlled yet meaningful participation—focusing not on power redistribution, but on building institutional capacities for information sharing, inclusive consultation, feedback responsiveness, and the integration of digital technologies.

Each dimension in this framework plays a distinct yet interdependent role. Transparency is positioned as the foundational layer, ensuring that information about planning processes, decisions, and policies is accessible to the public. Without transparency, participation lacks substance and legitimacy. Building on this, public participation captures the extent to which public is invited and able to contribute their perspectives, whether through consultations, surveys, or public forums. However, participation is only meaningful when met with institutional responsiveness—the degree to which authorities consider and act upon public input. A lack of responsiveness risks reducing participation to symbolic gestures. Finally, technology adoption enables and enhances all three prior dimensions. Digital platforms such as *Istitlea* and *Balady* (MoF, 2024; MoMRA, 2024) serve as key tools for information dissemination, participation, and real-time feedback collection, especially important in contexts where physical or bureaucratic barriers limit direct participation.

Importantly, these four dimensions are not isolated. They form a dynamic and mutually reinforcing system. Transparency supports informed and inclusive participation; participation generates public input that demands responsiveness; responsiveness strengthens trust and future participation; and technology cuts across the system, making these interactions more scalable, efficient, and accessible. This interconnectivity makes the framework particularly useful for evaluating how local authorities manage participation in top-down systems where participation is encouraged, but the boundaries of influence are institutionally defined.

The theoretical contribution of this framework lies in its context-sensitive adaptation of global participatory principles to settings where governance is centralized and civic power limited. Whereas most participatory models presume a democratic structure with shared authority, this framework offers a pragmatic tool for assessing how participatory urban planning functions within the structural limits of non-democratic systems. By doing so, it bridges a critical gap between normative theory and the realities of local governance reform in places like Khobar City.

Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual framework developed in this study, highlighting the four interrelated dimensions used to evaluate the capacity of local authorities in implementing participatory urban planning within centralized governance systems.

4. Methodology

This paper is designed methodologically to answer the research question: What is the capacity of local authorities in the Saudi city of Khobar to implement local participatory urban planning? It explores how governance structures, local participatory mechanisms, and systemic factors interact to shape the practices and capacity of local authorities in fostering participation in urban development. Specifically, the study examines the implementation of local participatory urban planning as a dependent variable and the capacity of local authorities as an independent variable. A multi-method approach is adopted to explore the re-

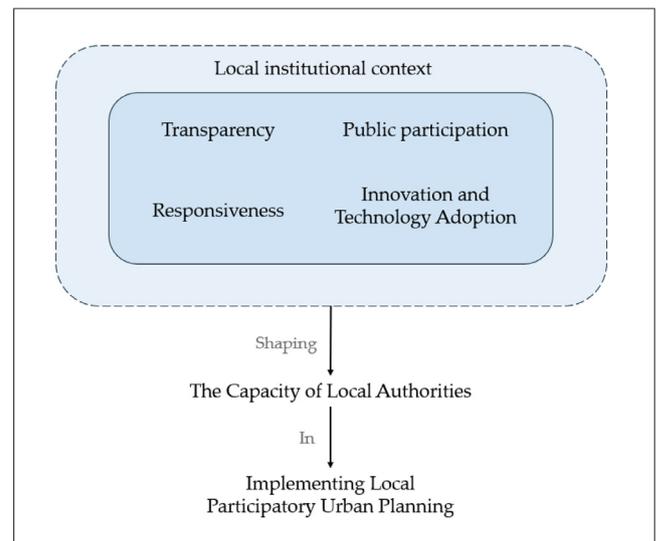


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for evaluating the capacity of local authority in implementing participatory urban planning.

sponsiveness of local participatory urban planning in interacting with governance structures in Saudi Arabia.

4.1. Methods

The methods begin with a comprehensive literature review to explore scholarly debates, theoretical models, and practical applications of participatory urban planning in Saudi Arabia. It examines how governance structures and participatory mechanisms interact with systemic factors, providing a foundation for understanding local authorities' performance. Beyond summarizing sources, the review critically synthesizes concepts, identifying knowledge gaps and offering insights into participatory urban planning dynamics. Following Xiao and Watson (2019) and Shaffril et al. (2021), it contextualizes the study and frames key dimensions—governance, public participation, responsiveness, and digital platforms—establishing the theoretical basis for research questions, data collection, and analysis.

To complement the theoretical insights from the literature review, the methods include a detailed analysis of urban planning policies, reports, and documents. This analysis focuses on identifying the legal frameworks, urban development plans, and policy documents that underpin urban governance in Saudi Arabia. The selection of documents follows Altheide's (2000) systematic prescription for unveiling patterns and meanings embedded in policy and planning texts, enabling a deeper understanding of how theoretical principles translate into practice. This step aligns with the research objective by providing the practical context necessary to evaluate local authorities' capacity in participatory urban planning. The integration of policy analysis with scholarly literature ensures that the study bridges the gap between theoretical frameworks and real-world governance practices, enabling the formulation of targeted recommendations for improving participatory urban planning in Saudi Arabia.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 local officials and decision-makers from key institutions involved in urban planning and governance in Khobar. These included Khobar Municipality, the Eastern Region Development Authority (Sharqia Development Authority), and the Eastern Region Governorate (Eastern Province Emirate). The selection of participants was designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how local authorities implement participatory urban planning and navigate governance challenges. Table 1 presents details of the interviewees, including their positions, institutions, and the dates and locations of the interviews.

Table 1
List of interviewees by professional title, institution, and interview date.

No.	Position	Institution	Place, date
1.	Supervisor	Khobar Municipality	Khobar, September 8, 2024
2.	Manager	Khobar Municipality	Khobar August 30, 2024,
3.	Officer	Khobar Municipality	Khobar, August 6, 2024
4.	Specialists	Khobar Municipality	Khobar, August 1, 2024
5.	Manager	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, September 24, 2024
6.	Officer	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, August 23, 2024
7.	Manger	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, September 12, 2024
8.	Officer	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, September 23, 2024
9.	Officer	Khobar Governate	Khobar, August 17, 2024
10.	Director	Khobar Municipality	Khobar, August 1, 2024
11.	Officer	Khobar Municipality	Khobar, August 4, 2024
12.	Experts	Development Authorities Support Center	Riyadh, July 26, 2024
13.	Officer	Khobar Municipality	Khobar, July 26, 2024
14.	Specialists	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, September 24, 2024
15.	Specialists	Khobar Municipality	Khobar, September 11, 2024
16.	Specialists	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, September 19, 2024
17.	Manger	Ministry of Planning	Riyadh, August 8, 2024
18.	Coordinator	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, August 10, 2024
19.	Officer	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, August 22, 2024
20.	Specialists	Sharqiah Development Authority	Khobar, August 13, 2024

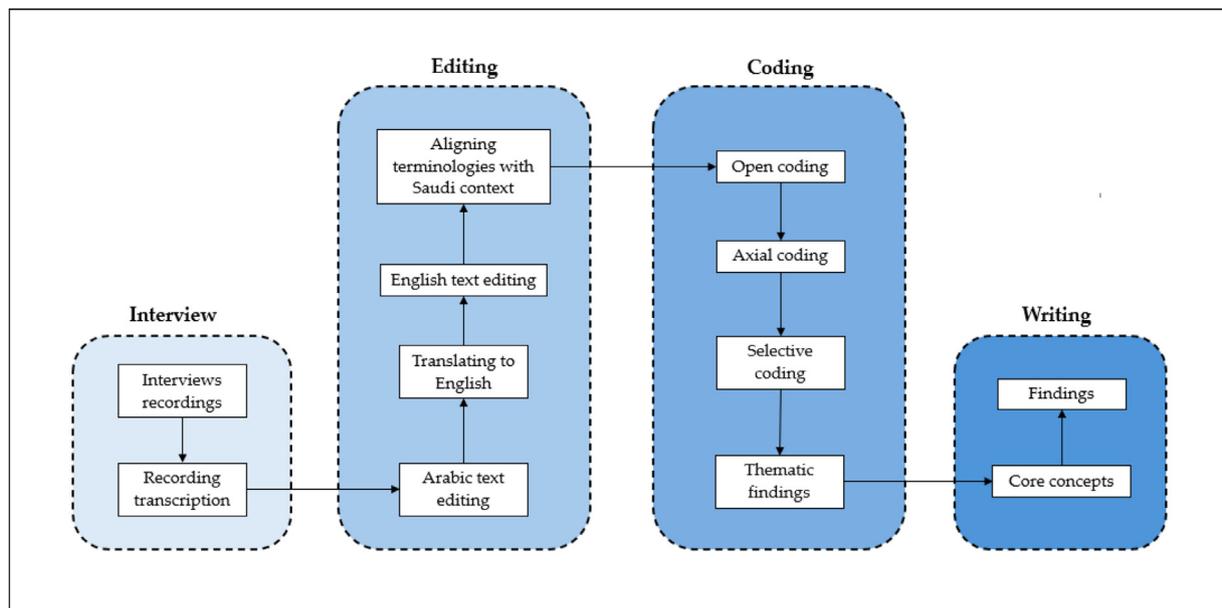


Fig. 2. Qualitative data analysis process for interviews with urban planners.

The interviews aimed to gather qualitative insights into the capacity of local authorities to foster participatory urban planning. This method was chosen to explore the practical implications of governance reforms, institutional changes, and participatory mechanisms, as perceived by key stakeholders. Following the framework of Kallio et al. (2016), the interviews covered several key themes, including the impact of recent policies, the methods used to integrate public input into planning processes, the challenges faced in implementing participatory practices, and the institutional capacity for fostering inclusivity and transparency. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling respondents to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives on participation methods, barriers, and opportunities for reform. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewed stakeholders, detailing their professional roles, affiliated institutions, and the dates and locations of each interview.

The thematic focus of the interviews was guided by the literature review, ensuring alignment with the study’s conceptual framework. As shown in Fig. 2, the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were first edited in Arabic before being translated into English to ensure accurate contextualization of terminologies relevant to

Saudi Arabia’s context. The analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti9 (Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software, CAQDAS), following the approach outlined by Friese (2014). The data analysis process involved open coding to identify emerging themes, axial coding to establish relationships between these themes, and selective coding to synthesize the findings into core thematic insights.

To assess the extent of public participation facilitated by local authorities, the study employed a modified version of Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation as an analytical framework. This approach provided a structured means of evaluating how participatory mechanisms function across different governance levels, focusing on three key aspects: the degree of public participation, the extent to which public input influences decision-making, and the institutionalization of participatory practices within governance structures. By examining these dimensions, the study sought to understand how effectively Khobar Municipality, the Regional Development Authority, and the Governorate engage the public in urban planning and policymaking.

Each governance entity was assessed based on these criteria and assigned a participation score ranging from 1 to 8, reflecting different

levels of public involvement. At the lowest end of the scale, scores of 1 or 2 indicated non-participation, where public participation was either symbolic or entirely absent. Slightly higher on the scale, scores between 3 and 4 reflected limited participation, where authorities engaged the public through consultations or feedback mechanisms but without granting them significant influence over decision-making. The mid-range scores of 5 and 6 represented consultation and partnership, where public input was actively sought and, to some extent, incorporated into urban planning processes. The highest levels, 7 and 8, signified delegated power and full public control, where the public played a direct and influential role in governance, contributing substantially to policy formulation and decision-making.

To quantitatively assess public perceptions of local authorities' performance in participatory urban planning, we conducted a mixed-mode survey of 453 Khobar residents (144 in person, 309 online), structured around themes from our literature review and policy analysis. Following Regmi, Waithaka, Paudyal, Simkhada, and van Teijlingen (2016), this approach balanced cost-effectiveness and breadth, while recruitment combined convenience sampling—engaging participants at parks, malls, festivals, and via Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp to include under-represented urban residents (Emerson, 2021)—with stratified sampling across age brackets and geographic districts to ensure demographic representativeness (Singh & Mangat, 2013). Integrating these quantitative findings with our qualitative interviews and document analysis provides a comprehensive evaluation of participatory mechanisms, governance practices, and digital platforms, informing actionable recommendations for enhancing urban governance.

The structure of both the survey and interview guides was directly informed by the conceptual framework. Specific questions were designed to capture respondents' views on each of the four key dimensions—transparency, public participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption. This alignment ensured that the data collection process systematically addressed the analytical categories used throughout the study, allowing for consistent interpretation across the empirical findings.

4.2. Case study and background

Saudi Arabia's rapid development, strategic location, and Khobar's role within the Eastern Province make it a valuable case for analysing how local authorities manage participatory urban planning. This literature review explores the institutional framework, key stakeholders, and participation mechanisms shaping urban planning in Khobar, offering practical insights into the broader conceptual framework. Khobar, a city in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, is located along the Arabian Gulf as shown Fig. 3, approximately 17 km south of Dammam. Emerging as an urban center in 1940s following the discovery of oil, the city's growth has been driven by the expansion of commercial activities in the petroleum sector (Fig. 4) (Aramco, 2021). Today, Khobar features a modern commercial infrastructure, including shopping malls, offices, and residential areas, complemented by attractions such as the Al Khobar Corniche and Half Moon Beach. The King Fahd Causeway, linking Saudi Arabia to Bahrain, underscores Khobar's strategic role as a hub for regional commerce and tourism (Asharqia Chamber, 2024).

Fig. 5 showcases various urban landscapes and infrastructure within Al Khobar, a city in Saudi Arabia known for its modern architecture, waterfront developments, and vibrant commercial districts. It highlights the city's urban planning, featuring residential suburb neighbourhoods, high-rise buildings, and public spaces that reflect its economic growth and development.

Urban development projects in Khobar reflect a national trend of leveraging public-private partnerships (PPPs) to revitalize urban spaces. The Al Khobar Waterfront redevelopment project serves as a prime example, integrating mixed-use commercial developments, entertainment venues, and luxury accommodations to enhance the city's attractiveness to residents and tourists (National Center for Privatization, 2020).

However, these initiatives raise critical questions about inclusivity and adherence to participatory planning principles. Concerns persist over the extent of community involvement in decision-making, with fears that prioritizing commercial objectives may overshadow social and environmental considerations, marginalize certain groups, and erode public trust in urban governance (Aldegheshem, 2023).

While the many developments promise immediate economic benefits, it is crucial to evaluate whether these gains translate into broader societal improvements. Urban planning research highlights the significance of meaningful public participation in ensuring development projects address diverse community needs and foster inclusive growth (Bouregh et al., 2023). As such, Khobar provides a valuable case for exploring the intersection of economic objectives, participatory governance, and sustainable urban development in Saudi Arabia. Local authorities in Khobar, including the Eastern Region Governorate, the Eastern Region Development Authority, Khobar Municipality, and the Khobar Municipal Council (suspended for re-evaluation in 2023), play distinct but interconnected roles in shaping urban governance. These entities collectively influence the participatory urban planning process by engaging with residents and stakeholders to promote inclusive and sustainable urban development. The subsequent sections analyze their specific contributions to urban governance, focusing on their efforts to enhance community involvement and address the city's development challenges.

5. Findings

5.1. Interview insights

These insights are informed by the conceptual framework outlined in the literature review, which identifies key dimensions of transparency, public participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption as essential for evaluating the local authorities' capacity in implementing participatory urban planning. For example, governance complexity directly relates to discussions of overlapping institutional roles and the need for clear accountability frameworks. Similarly, participation challenges and practices draw on Arnstein's (1969) and Irvin and Stansbury's (2004) critiques of barriers to effective participation. This alignment ensures that the analysis contributes to the study's broader objective of contextualizing participatory urban planning within Saudi Arabia's evolving governance framework.

5.2. Urban participation challenges in Saudi Arabia

The findings reveal a growing emphasis on participatory urban planning in Saudi Arabia, driven by the strategic objectives of Vision 2030. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is hindered by limitations in communication mechanisms and the lack of institutionalized participatory frameworks. Interviews highlighted that public input often influences minor project adjustments rather than strategic urban policies, underscoring a need for more robust participation tools (Interviewees 1, 3, 13, 17, 20).

- "Unfortunately, participation remains limited to specific projects, and public input often addresses immediate needs rather than strategic priorities." (Interviewee 3)
- "There is no real public participation in this context, even though the system allows it." (Interviewee 1)

This indicates a lack of institutionalized frameworks for meaningful participation, resulting in fragmented and ad hoc participatory practices.

5.3. Governance complexity and institutional roles

Governance in Saudi urban planning involves multiple layers, including governates, municipalities, and Regional Development Authorities.



Fig. 3. Map of the eastern region. adapted from Maps Saudi Arabia, (2024).



Fig. 4. Commercial street in Khobar 1940s (Aramco, 2021).

Post-2016 structural changes, particularly the decentralization of governance under Vision 2030, have reshaped the roles of these entities. While, on the one hand, governates focus on strategic oversight, municipalities handle day-to-day planning and development, often interacting directly with the public. The Regional Development Authorities, on the other hand, play a consultative role, emphasizing strategic planning and regional development. However, overlapping mandates and coordination challenges remain significant barriers to effective governance (Interviewees 1, 7, 6, 9).

- "Governance is complex with overlapping roles between governates, municipalities, and development authorities." (Interviewee 6)
- "Coordination between entities is often limited, and responsibilities are divided but unclear." (Interviewee 9)

The findings underscore the need for clear accountability frameworks and enhanced inter-agency collaboration to address governance inefficiencies.

5.4. Impact of vision 2030 on participatory planning

Vision 2030 has been a transformative influence, encouraging participatory planning and decentralization. This shift has enabled municipalities and development authorities to adopt more inclusive planning approaches than before 2016, integrating public input into decision-making. Nevertheless, these efforts are in their infancy, with participatory practices often symbolic rather than substantive. Vision 2030's emphasis on digital transformation has also introduced tools like the "Istitlaa" platform to gather public feedback on urban policies, though their effectiveness in fostering genuine participation varies across projects (Interviewees 3, 5, 8, 6).

- "Vision 2030 has accelerated reforms and decentralization, creating opportunities for participatory urban planning." (Interviewee 5)
- "Platforms like 'Istitlaa' are promising, but their impact depends on how effectively they are utilized." (Interviewee 3)

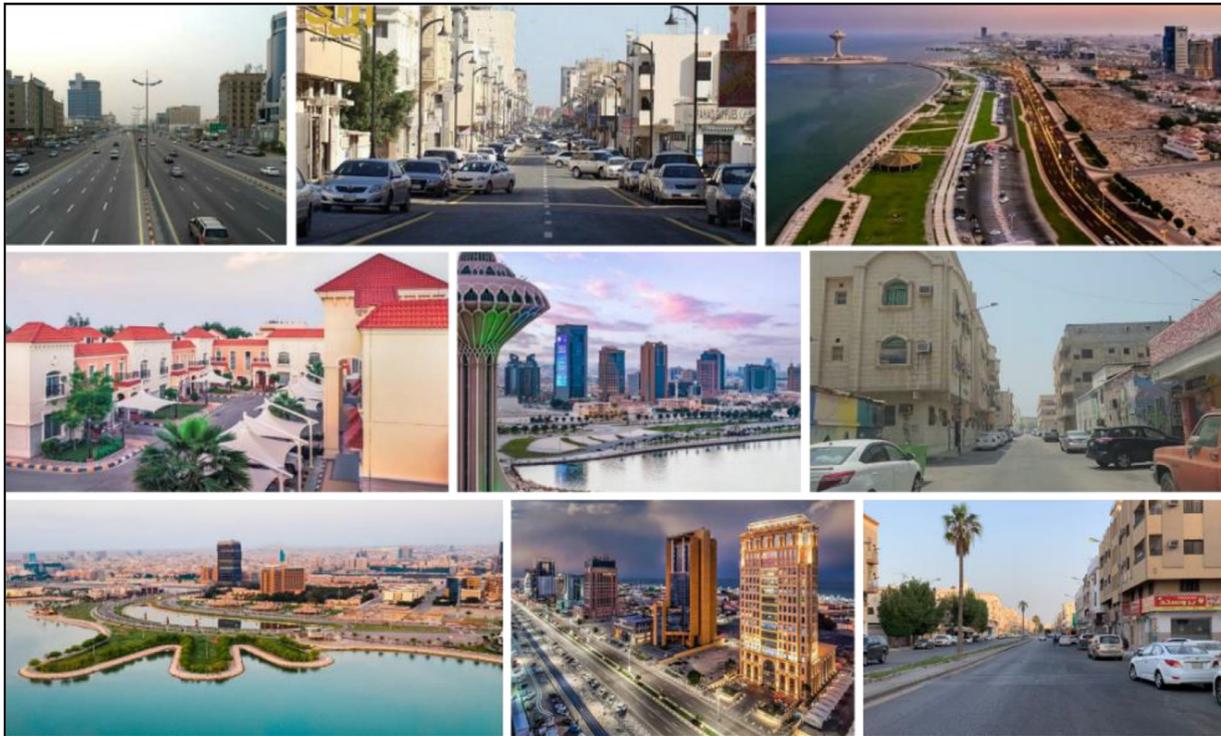


Fig. 5. Sense of place in Khobar City, illustrating its modern urban development. (Alfuzaiia, 2020, 2023).

While these reforms represent a positive shift, inconsistent implementation and limited institutional capacity remain barriers to achieving meaningful participation.

5.5. Public participation practices

Practices such as workshops, surveys, and digital platforms like Isti'laa and Balady are key tools for public participation, engaging stakeholders and facilitating broader input. However, participation remains at a consultation level on Arnstein's ladder, reflecting the policy goal under Vision 2030 to enhance transparency and inclusivity rather than full collaboration or public control. While feedback mechanisms exist, they lack systems to significantly influence final decisions. Future reforms could aim to advance participation toward more collaborative levels, aligning better with Vision 2030's inclusive governance objectives (Interviewees 2, 11, 12).

- "Workshops provide valuable insights, but they are not institutionalized and are often one-off events." (Interviewee 12)
- "Surveys on platforms like Twitter lack reliability, as they don't verify participant identities." (Interviewee 2)

These findings highlight the need for institutionalizing participatory practices and enhancing the reliability and inclusivity of public participation mechanisms.

5.6. Regional focus on the eastern province

The Eastern Province, home to cities like Khobar, offers a unique context for participatory urban planning due to its strategic significance and economic diversity. Key stakeholders in urban planning include the Eastern Region Governorate, Khobar Municipality, and the Sharqia Development Authority, which work collaboratively on various initiatives. However, their efforts are often constrained by centralized decision-making processes and limited frameworks for public participation. For example, recent large-scale projects in Khobar like highways, waterfront, and

housing project were primarily designed and implemented by centralized authorities with minimal consultation or input from local communities, reflecting a top-down planning approach. Additionally, the presence and influence of large corporations such as Aramco and SABIC add complexity to the planning process. These corporations, with significant control over land ownership and resource allocation, tend to follow a top-down approach rooted in the industrial cities model, further limiting opportunities for inclusive and participatory planning (Interviewees 7, 16, 18).

- "Large corporations like Aramco significantly influence planning, often limiting opportunities for public participation." (Interviewee 18)
- "Efforts are constrained by centralized decision-making, which limits the autonomy of local entities." (Interviewee 7)

The findings emphasize the importance of balancing corporate interests with community needs to achieve equitable urban development.

5.7. Tools and mechanisms for feedback

Digital tools, including social media platforms and online surveys, are increasingly used to gather public input. However, the lack of unified methodologies for data collection and feedback processing creates inconsistencies. Feedback loops, which allow for adjustments based on community responses, are underdeveloped, limiting their impact on project outcomes. The Urban Observatory, a regional resource center, collects and analyzes data on urban trends such as population growth, infrastructure use, and quality of life indicators. It aims to inform decision-making and improve urban governance by providing insights into public satisfaction and participation. Despite its potential, the Observatory remains underutilized for measuring and incorporating public input into participatory urban planning processes (Interviewees 4, 5, 10, 19).

- "Feedback mechanisms are fragmented, and there is no unified system for managing public input." (Interviewee 4)
- "Tools like the Urban Observatory have potential but remain underutilized." (Interviewee 19)

The findings suggest that improving data integration and creating robust feedback loops are critical for enhancing participatory outcomes

5.8. Training and capacity building

The interviews highlighted significant gaps in training for local officials and decision makers in municipalities and the regional development authority in participatory practices. Many participants emphasized the need for specialized training programs to enhance the capacity of municipalities and regional development authorities. Higher education institutions and professional associations could play a crucial role in addressing these deficiencies, fostering a culture of effective public participation (Interviewees 4, 7, 14, 15)

- "There is an urgent need for training officials on participatory methods to improve participation outcomes." (Interviewee 15)
- "Higher education institutions can play a pivotal role in bridging the training gap." (Interviewee 4)

Building institutional capacity through training is essential for fostering effective community participation.

5.9. Future directions and institutionalization

Participants expressed optimism about the future of participatory urban planning in Saudi Arabia. Ongoing reforms under Vision 2030 are expected to institutionalize participatory practices, ensuring consistency and accountability. Developing clear governance frameworks, enhancing digital tools, and providing training programs are critical steps toward achieving these goals. There is also a growing recognition of the need to balance public input with technical expertise to ensure sustainable and effective urban development. (Interviewees 17, 20)

- "Reforms under Vision 2030 are creating opportunities to institutionalize participatory planning." (Interviewee 20)
- "Balancing public input with technical expertise is essential for sustainable urban development." (Interviewee 17)

These findings underscore the need for systemic reforms, such as integrating participatory mandates into legal frameworks, adopting advanced digital tools for participation, and fostering collaboration between technical experts and the public to ensure consistency, accountability, and inclusivity in participatory urban planning.

5.10. Local authority capacity on Arnstein's ladder

This paper evaluates the participatory capacity of local authorities in Khobar using Arnstein's Ladder of public Participation, which ranks participation from nonparticipation to full public control. In interviews, 20 decision-makers assessed three governance tiers from point of capacity to 'climb' the participation ladder: the Regional Development Authority, the Municipality, and the Governorate.

The Municipality scored the highest average (3.8), reflecting consultative to partnership levels supported by workshops, digital platforms, and feedback sessions. The Regional Development Authority followed with an average of 3.65, focusing primarily on strategic planning. While this limits direct public input, it incorporates broader stakeholder consultation. The Governorate scored the lowest (2.7), where participation is largely tokenistic, offering minimal opportunities for meaningful participation.

These findings highlight disparities in participatory practices across local authorities, as illustrated in Fig. 6. The Municipality leads with the most active public participation, supported by workshops, digital platforms, and feedback sessions, while the Regional Development Authority adopts a more indirect approach, focusing on strategic planning with limited direct public input. In contrast, the Governorate score underscores significant challenges in achieving meaningful public participation, reflecting symbolic practices. This analysis emphasizes the uneven

capacities for public participation in Khobar, underscoring the need for targeted capacity-building initiatives to elevate participation levels and address these variations across local authorities.

As summarized in Table 2, the findings substantiate the relevance of the conceptual framework and demonstrate how the four dimensions—transparency, participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption—manifest in the local urban planning context of Khobar.

5.2. Survey results

5.2.1. Descriptive analysis

The analysis of responses to a question assessing the effectiveness of local authorities in incorporating residents' opinions into urban development reveals a consistent trend of dissatisfaction across all age groups, although the degree of dissatisfaction varies. Among younger respondents, particularly those aged 18–24, a significant portion (40.9 %) rated local authorities as "Not Effective at All," followed by 27.3 % who selected "Slightly Effective." Only 18.2 % found them "Moderately Effective," while 11.4 % chose "Effective," and just 2.3 % rated them as "Very Effective." This suggests that younger participants generally view public participation efforts as inadequate. A similar pattern emerges among those aged 25–34, with 45.8 % selecting "Not Effective at All" and 25.4 % "Slightly Effective." Although this group shows a slight increase in the higher effectiveness ratings compared to the youngest group, overall satisfaction remains low.

Dissatisfaction peaks in the 35–44 age group, where 52.4 % rated authorities as "Not Effective at All" and 24.5 % as "Slightly Effective"—the highest percentage of complete dissatisfaction across all age groups. Only a small minority rated authorities as "Effective" or "Very Effective." This may reflect accumulated frustration or higher expectations for accountability. Interestingly, the 45–65 age group shows a slightly more favorable outlook. Although 33.9 % still selected "Not Effective at All," this is the lowest rate of dissatisfaction among all age groups. Additionally, 21.1 % rated authorities as "Moderately Effective" and 11.0 % as "Effective," suggesting a more optimistic view of participatory governance in this cohort. The 65+ age group, while smaller in sample size, reflects sentiments similar to the younger cohorts. Half (50.0 %) rated authorities as "Not Effective at All," with the remainder distributed between "Slightly Effective" and "Moderately Effective." Notably, none of the respondents in this group selected "Very Effective," indicating skepticism toward local responsiveness.

In summary, perceptions of local authorities' ability to incorporate public opinion remain overwhelmingly negative across all age groups. Very few respondents viewed them as "Very Effective." The slightly more positive outlook among the 45–65 age group may point to differences in experience or expectations. These results highlight a clear need to enhance participatory strategies that better align with residents' expectations and improve the credibility of local governance. This pattern is visually represented in two complementary diagrams: a bar chart and a heatmap, both shown in Fig. 7, which illustrate the distribution and intensity of perceived effectiveness levels across age groups.

5.2.2. Chi-square test

5.2.2.1. Transparency and perceived capacity. This test examines the relationship between transparency in urban planning and the perceived capacity of local authorities in implementing participatory urban planning. Transparency is a foundational factor influencing governance dimensions such as public participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption (Bovaird & Löffler, 2003; Fung, 2006). It fosters trust, ensures accountability, and enables informed decision-making (Innes & Booher, 2004; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014).

- Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no association between the transparency of urban planning processes and the perceived local authorities' capacity in implementing participatory urban planning.

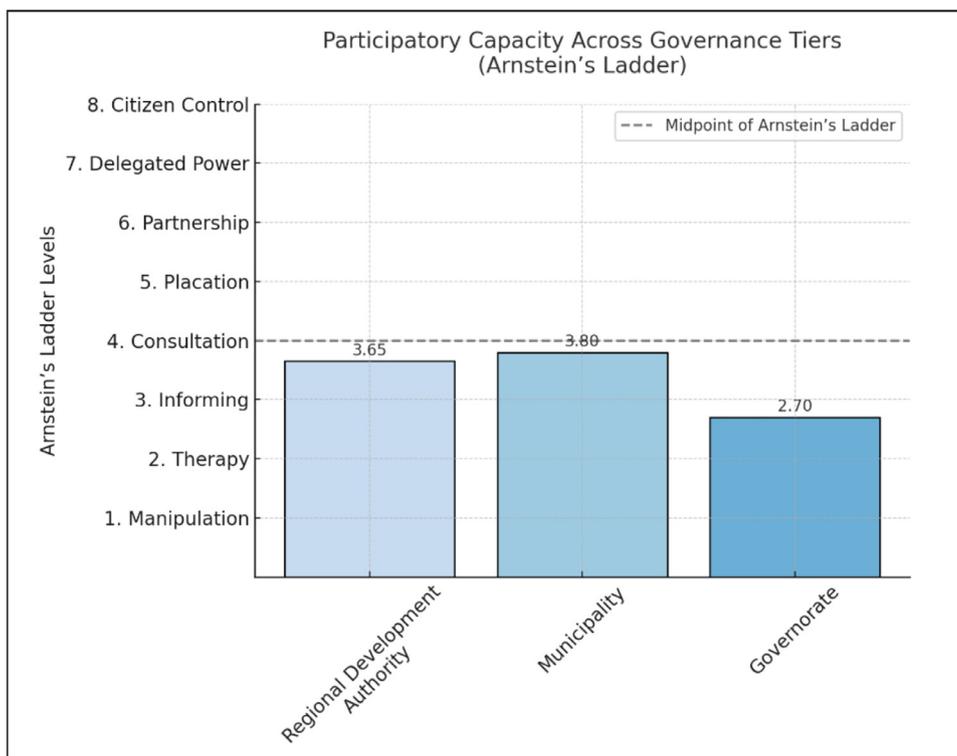


Fig. 6. Participatory capacity across local authorities in Khobar (adapted from Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, 1969; findings based on interviews).

Table 2

Interview findings aligned with the four dimensions of the conceptual framework for participatory urban planning in Saudi Arabia.

	Framework dimension	Key Themes from findings	Support quotes	Implications of evaluation
1	Transparency	Overlapping institutional roles; unclear accountability; governance complexity (5.3, 5.6) Centralized decision-making limits local autonomy (5.6)	"Coordination between entities is often limited..." (Interviewee 9) "Efforts are constrained by centralized decision-making..." (Interviewee 7)	Need for institutional clarity and transparent governance structures Decentralize authority to empower local decision-making
2	Public Participation	Workshops and consultations common but often ad hoc; low impact on strategic decisions (5.2, 5.5) Participation seen more as consultation than collaboration (5.2, 5.5)	"Participation remains limited to specific projects..." (Interviewee 3) "Surveys on platforms like Twitter lack reliability..." (Interviewee 2)	Institutionalize participatory mechanisms beyond symbolic consultation Advance toward collaborative models of engagement
3	Responsiveness	Limited feedback loops; symbolic responses to input; need for institutional frameworks (5.2, 5.7) Lack of capacity and training for officials (5.8, 5.9)	"Feedback mechanisms are fragmented..." (Interviewee 4) "There is an urgent need for training officials..." (Interviewee 15)	Develop reliable feedback systems to build trust and responsiveness Invest in training to enhance institutional responsiveness
4	Technology Adoption	Digital tools like Istitlaa and Balady used but poorly integrated; digital divide issues (5.4, 5.7) Underutilization of data from observatories and surveys (5.7)	"Platforms like Istitlaa are promising..." (Interviewee 3) "Urban Observatory has potential but remains underutilized." (Interviewee 19)	Improve digital inclusion and link digital tools with planning outcomes Leverage existing data tools for informed participatory planning

- Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): There is an association between the transparency of urban planning processes and the perceived local authorities' capacity in implementing participatory urban planning.

This hypothesis is designed to test whether the transparency in urban planning processes impacts public perception of local authorities' capacity. The observed frequencies are gathered from the survey responses,

showing the distribution of responses based on the transparency of urban planning and the perceived local authorities' capacity in implementing participatory urban planning as shown in Table 3.

The expected frequencies are calculated based on the observed data totals, assuming there is no association between the transparency and capacity categories (i.e., based on the null hypothesis). These expected frequencies are calculated in Table 4.

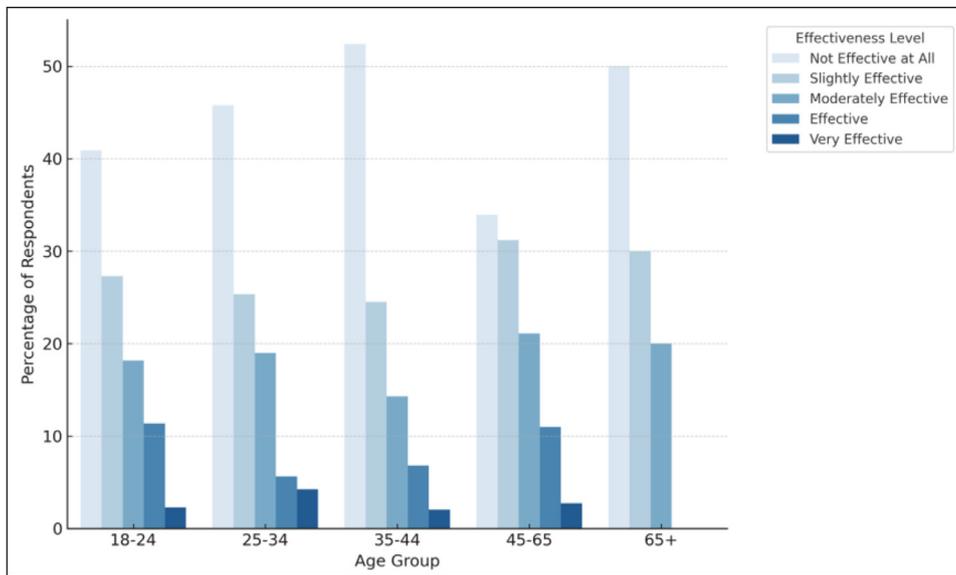


Fig. 7. Perceived effectiveness of local authorities across age groups, shown using both bar chart and heatmap. Source: Author's survey data (2024).

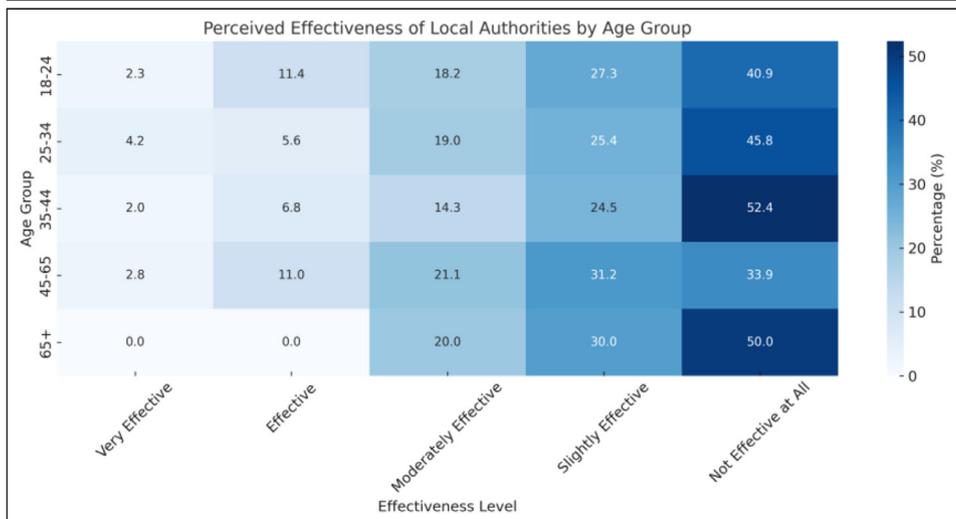


Table 3
Contingency Table of Urban Planning Transparency and Local Authorities' Capacity.

Transparency in Urban Planning	Effective	Moderately Effective	Not Effective at All	Slightly Effective	Very Effective
Transparent	11	24	7	10	2
Somewhat Transparent	11	11	5	11	5
Slightly Transparent	9	34	50	83	2
Very Transparent	1	1	0	0	3
Not Transparent at all	3	11	140	17	1

Table 4
Expected Frequencies for Urban Planning Transparency and Local Authorities' Capacity.

Transparency in Urban Planning	Effective	Moderately Effective	Not Effective at All	Slightly Effective	Very Effective
Transparent	4.18	9.68	24.13	14.46	1.55
Somewhat Transparent	3.33	7.71	19.22	11.51	1.24
Slightly Transparent	13.78	31.90	79.55	47.65	5.12
Very Transparent	0.39	0.90	2.23	1.34	0.14
Not Transparent at all	13.32	30.82	76.87	46.04	4.95

Table 5
Relationship Between Age Groups and Perceptions of Local Authorities’ Capacity in Implementing Participatory Urban Planning.

Age Group	Effective	Moderately Effective	Not Effective at All	Slightly Effective	Very Effective	Total
18–24	5	9	18	12	2	45
25–34	8	27	65	36	6	142
35–44	10	21	77	36	3	147
45–65	12	23	37	34	3	109
65+	0	2	5	3	0	10
Total	35	81	202	121	14	453

Table 6
Expected Frequencies for the Relationship Between Age Groups and Perceptions of Local Authorities’ Capacity in Participatory Urban Planning.

Age Group	Effective	Moderately Effective	Not Effective at All	Slightly Effective	Very Effective
18–24	3.41	7.88	19.66	11.78	1.27
25–34	11.00	25.45	63.46	38.01	4.08
35–44	11.38	26.34	65.69	39.35	4.23
45–65	8.44	19.53	48.71	29.18	3.13
65+	0.77	1.79	4.47	2.68	0.29

The chi-square statistic is calculated for each cell using the formula:

$$\chi^2 \sum \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$$

With the chi-square statistic (283.30) and degrees of freedom (16), the p-value is calculated. In this case, the p-value is extremely small (approximately 7.24×10^{-51}) indicating a highly significant result. Since the p-value is <0.05 , we reject the null hypothesis, suggesting a significant association between the perceived transparency in urban planning and the perceived local authorities’ capacity in implementing participatory urban planning. This supports the idea that transparency plays a key role in shaping perceptions of local authorities’ capacity in implementing local participatory urban planning.

5.2.2.2. Age and perceived capacity. This examines the relationship between age group and the perceived local authorities’ capacity in implementing participatory urban planning.

- Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no association between age group and the perceived local authorities’ capacity in implementing participatory urban planning.
- Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): There is an association between age group and the perceived local authorities’ capacity in implementing participatory urban planning.

Table 5 shows the relationship between age groups and the and the perceived local authorities’ capacity in implementing participatory urban planning

Table 6 shows the expected frequencies for the contingency table:

The chi-square statistic of 27.33, with 36 degrees of freedom, yielded a high p-value of 0.850. Since the p-value is significantly greater than the common significance threshold (e.g., 0.05), we fail to reject the null hypothesis. This indicates that there is no statistically significant association between age groups and their ratings of local authorities’ capacity in implementing participatory urban planning. In practical terms, this result suggests that perceptions of the perceived local authorities’ capacity in implementing participatory urban planning do not differ meaningfully across age groups within the surveyed population.

5.2.2.3. Participation and perceived capacity. This hypothesis examines the relationship between the actual public participation and the perceived capacity of local authorities in participatory urban planning in

Table 7
Contingency table of the actual public participation and perceived local authority capacity.

Public Participation	Effective	Not Effective	Total
Participated	22	48	70
Never Participated	81	295	376
Total	103	343	446

Table 8
Expected frequencies for the actual public participation and perceived local authority capacity.

Public Participation	Effective (Expected)	Not Effective (Expected)
Participated	84.88	243.11
Never Participated	18.11	51.88

Khobar, Saudi Arabia. It assesses whether individuals who have participated in urban planning activities perceive local authorities as more capable of incorporating public input compared to those who have never participated.

- Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no association between the actual public participation and the perceived capacity of local authorities in participatory urban planning.
- Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): The actual public participation positively associated with the perceived capacity of local authorities in participatory urban planning.

The responses were organized into a 2×2 contingency table (Table 7), illustrating the relationship between public participation levels and perceptions of local authorities’ capacity.

The expected values, assuming no association between participation levels and perceived local authority capacity, are calculated as follows in Table 8:

The chi-square statistic is 3.68 with 1° of freedom, and the p-value (0.0549) is slightly above the 0.05 significance threshold, making the result not statistically significant but close to significance. This suggests a borderline association between the actual public participation and perceived local authority capacity. While participation alone does not strongly influence perceptions of local authorities, the trend indicates

Table 9
Comparative assessment of local authority capacity for participatory urban planning in Khobar, based on stakeholder insights and empirical data.

Authority	Capacity in Local Participatory Urban Planning	Challenges	Opportunities
Eastern Province Governorate	Limited public involvement; operates under a centralized framework.	Centralized decision-making restricts responsiveness and participation.	Potential for decentralization and improved transparency.
Eastern Region Development Authority	Moderate participation via strategic planning and private sector engagement.	Limited public input; prioritization of strategic planning over local community plans.	Better integration of community priorities through structured participation.
Khobar Municipality	Active in zoning reviews, urban design, and digital platforms.	Bureaucratic inefficiencies delay responsiveness; digital participation is consultative, not impactful.	Digital tools and consultations can enhance participation with better accountability.
Khobar Municipal Council	Represents the public but lacks authority and resources.	Weak decision-making power; underutilized participatory channels; low public satisfaction.	Governance reforms, more funding, and stronger institutional roles can improve effectiveness.

it may play a role in shaping public trust. This aligns with [Bovaird and Löffler \(2003\)](#) and [Nabatchi and Amsler \(2014\)](#), who argue that participatory mechanisms enhance trust and legitimacy when they are transparent, inclusive, and impactful. The weaker association here suggests that participation in Khobar remains consultative rather than substantive, limiting its effect on governance trust.

6. Discussion

The lessons from Khobar’s participatory urban planning efforts offer valuable insights into how centralized governance systems can incorporate participatory principles within politically constrained environments. The findings substantiate the study’s conceptual framework by demonstrating how each of the four dimensions—transparency, public participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption—manifests in Khobar’s urban governance context. For example, transparency emerged as the strongest predictor of public trust, with overlapping institutional roles and limited coordination commonly cited as barriers (Interviewees 6, 9). Public participation remained largely consultative, relying on workshops and digital platforms that lacked strategic influence (Interviewees 3, 12).

Responsiveness was weakened by fragmented feedback systems and a lack of institutional follow-through (Interviewees 4, 15). While technology adoption is a promising enabler of participatory governance, our findings highlight a critical distinction between access and influence. Platforms such as *Balady* and *Istiltlaa*—frequently mentioned by participants (Interviewees 3, 19)—have improved public access to planning processes, particularly among digitally literate users. However, this access rarely translates into meaningful influence on planning outcomes, as participation remains largely consultative and seldom impacts strategic decisions. Without mechanisms for integrating feedback into decision-making, digital tools risk becoming procedural rather than transformative ([Falco & Kleinhans, 2018](#); [Kleinhans et al., 2021](#)). These findings reaffirm that technology adoption alone is insufficient unless coupled with institutional responsiveness, underscoring the interdependence of the four dimensions in shaping governance performance ([Arnstein, 1969](#); [Bovaird & Löffler, 2003](#); [Fung, 2006](#)).

The centralized nature of Saudi Arabia’s governance system fundamentally shapes how each dimension of the conceptual framework operates in practice. Transparency is constrained by top-down information flows and limited inter-agency disclosure, making it difficult for public to access timely, actionable planning data. Public participation

is permitted within formalized or symbolic bounds, often restricted to consultative processes that do not challenge decision-making authority. Responsiveness is further weakened by bureaucratic fragmentation, where overlapping institutional mandates create ambiguity and delay in acting upon public input. Lastly, technology adoption—while promoted through national initiatives like *Balady* and *Istiltlaa*—often serves more as a managerial tool than a participatory enabler, due to its limited integration with deliberative mechanisms and feedback loops. These constraints underscore the importance of tailoring participatory frameworks to institutional realities, particularly in non-democratic and centralized governance environments.

The statistical association between perceived transparency and public confidence in local authorities (Chi-square test, [Section 5.2.2.1](#)) reinforces its foundational role. Transparency enables participation and cultivates legitimacy—key elements of effective governance (Innes & Booher, 2004; [Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014](#)). In contrast, the weaker associations for participation and age ([Sections 5.2.2.2 and 5.2.2.3](#)) indicate that participatory efforts in Khobar are still perceived as symbolic, echoing concerns raised in the literature on tokenistic participation in non-democratic settings ([Irvin & Stansbury, 2004](#); [Arnstein, 1969](#)).

Institutional dynamics further illustrate this pattern. The Municipality, for example, scored highest on Arnstein’s ladder ([Section 5.10](#)), yet only reached a consultative level, hindered by limited decision-making power and bureaucratic inefficiencies. The Regional Development Authority engaged more at the strategic level, while the Governorate remained the most centralized and least participatory. This reflects broader governance trends where meaningful public involvement is restricted without institutional support and structural reform ([Healey, 2006](#); [Fainstein, 2013](#)). The Khobar case contributes to global literature on participatory governance in non-democratic and transitional contexts. It supports critiques that centralized system reforms often emphasize managerial efficiency over genuine public participation ([Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004](#); [Andrews et al., 2005](#)). The experience under Vision 2030 shows that digital platforms alone are insufficient; without follow-up mechanisms and governance mandates, participatory tools do not translate into inclusive outcomes ([Falco & Kleinhans, 2018](#); [Kleinhans et al., 2021](#)).

To move beyond symbolic participation, governance systems must institutionalize feedback loops, align digital tools with broader participation strategies, and uphold transparency as a base value. The Khobar case illustrates how participatory frameworks can be pragmatically adapted to centralized and non-democratic systems, where public power

is structurally limited. The conceptual framework developed in this paper contributes theoretically by reinterpreting Arnstein's Ladder—not as a linear path to full public control—but as a diagnostic tool for evaluating participation within bounded institutional structures. This reconceptualization broadens the applicability of participatory governance models beyond democratic settings, offering a more nuanced understanding of how partial and symbolic forms of participation function in transitional or centralized governance contexts. These insights not only deepen our understanding of participatory urban planning under constraint but also highlight avenues for future research on adaptive governance reforms in comparable governance settings. Table 9 below further illustrates these variations by comparing the capacities, challenges, and opportunities of the key local governance actors involved in participatory urban planning in Khobar.

7. Conclusion

This study evaluated the capacity of local authorities in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, to implement participatory urban planning within a centralized governance model, using a conceptual framework grounded in four key dimensions: transparency, participation, responsiveness, and technology adoption. The findings show that although Vision 2030 has encouraged steps toward decentralization and digital participation, these efforts are still limited by systemic constraints—such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, overlapping institutional mandates, and tokenistic participation practices. By integrating Arnstein's Ladder into a context-sensitive framework, the study offered a nuanced assessment of participation levels across different governance tiers. This approach responds to calls in the literature for frameworks that reflect the political and institutional complexities of non-democratic contexts (Fainstein, 2013; Bovaird & Löffler, 2003). It highlights that effective participation depends not only on available platforms and procedures but also on institutional accountability and responsiveness.

Empirical findings from Khobar clearly illustrate how each dimension of the framework is manifested in practice. Transparency emerged as the strongest predictor of public trust, as overlapping institutional roles and limited coordination were consistently cited as barriers to credibility (Interviewees 6, 9). In contrast, public participation—while increasingly emphasized through community workshops and digital platforms—remains largely consultative, with limited influence on strategic decisions (Interviewees 3, 12). Responsiveness is further weakened by the absence of structured feedback mechanisms, and digital tools like *Istitlaa* and the Urban Observatory remain underutilized or disconnected from decision-making processes (Interviewees 3, 19). Although platforms such as Balady have increased access to participation, this access does not necessarily translate into influence. Bridging the gap between digital access and meaningful decision-making power requires not only technological investment but also institutional reforms that ensure public input informs strategic urban planning outcomes.

To realize the participatory ambitions of Vision 2030, our findings indicate the need for a set of reforms, namely: (1) institutionalizing participatory frameworks to move beyond ad hoc consultations, (2) strengthening inter-agency coordination to address fragmented governance structures, (3) improving digital access and literacy to close the participation gap, and (4) mandating accountability in how public input is integrated into urban planning decisions. These recommendations align with international principles of good governance while being tailored to Saudi Arabia's unique administrative and political context.

This study contributes to urban governance theory by offering a context-sensitive adaptation of participatory urban planning frameworks for centralized, non-democratic environments. Specifically, it refines Arnstein's Ladder and broader participatory governance models to assess how controlled, consultative, and symbolic participation still play meaningful roles within top-down governance structures. Rather than framing limited participation as failure, the study offers a diagnostic lens to evaluate what is possible within institutional constraints—thereby ex-

tending the theoretical utility of participatory models to Global South and authoritarian contexts.

Beyond the Saudi context, the conceptual framework and findings may be transferable to other semi-authoritarian or top-down governance systems undergoing reform. In such contexts, where digital platforms are introduced to manage public participation in controlled ways, similar tensions between symbolic inclusion and institutional responsiveness are likely to emerge. The framework thus offers a diagnostic tool for evaluating participation in settings where civic space is limited but reform narratives are active.

Future research should expand on these insights through comparative studies, metrics of citizen behavior, and longitudinal assessments of Vision 2030's participatory reforms. The Khobar case shows that even within constrained environments, incremental and context-sensitive reforms can foster more inclusive, responsive, and transparent urban governance.

During the preparation of this work, the author used OpenAI's for proofreading only. After using this tool, the author carefully reviewed, edited, and validated the content to ensure accuracy, clarity, and alignment with the research objectives. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity and scholarly content of the publication.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Fouad Alasiri: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Marcin Dąbrowski:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision. **Claudiu Forgaci:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Roberto Rocco:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

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