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Governance in Emerging States: Theoretical Foundations, Empirical Patterns, and Reform Dynamics

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ABSTRACT: Governance quality has emerged as a critical determinant of development outcomes in emerging states. However, scholarly understanding of governance dynamics in these contexts remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries and region specific research traditions. This systematic review synthesises theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence from peer reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024, drawing on 40 key studies spanning political science, public administration, and development economics. Five analytical dimensions of governance are identified: political stability, administrative capacity, accountability mechanisms, economic governance, and social governance. The review critically examines how these dimensions have been conceptualised, operationalised, and assessed across different institutional and regional contexts. The findings reveal substantial variation in governance trajectories and identify five major drivers of reform: external pressure, domestic demand, elite bargaining, regional diffusion, and crisis induced institutional change. Comparative evidence indicates modest improvements in governance across East Asia and Latin America, whereas South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa continue to experience persistent institutional and structural constraints. Importantly, the synthesis identifies several unresolved research gaps, particularly the limited consideration of subnational variation, informal institutions, and gender dimensions in governance research. These limitations constrain the ability of aggregate national indicators to capture institutional diversity and uneven governance performance within countries. The review therefore proposes a future research agenda centred on multilevel analytical approaches, greater integration of formal and informal institutional processes, and context sensitive measures capable of capturing governance heterogeneity within emerging states.

KEYWORDS: Governance; emerging states; institutional reform; state capacity; accountability; political stability; developing countries

1. Introduction

Governance has become a central concept in contemporary debates on development, democratisation, and state building. Over the past three decades, international development

organisations, researchers, and policymakers have increasingly recognised governance quality as a critical factor shaping economic growth, social equity, institutional resilience, and political legitimacy in emerging states [1, 2]. Effective governance influences the capacity of governments to formulate and implement policies, allocate public resources, deliver essential services, maintain accountability, and respond to changing social and economic conditions. Despite its growing importance, however, governance remains a contested and multidimensional concept. There is still no clear consensus regarding its definition, measurement, or the institutional reforms most likely to improve governance outcomes across diverse political and socioeconomic contexts [3, 4].

The complexity of governance is particularly evident in emerging states, where political and economic transitions frequently occur alongside institutional constraints, uneven administrative capacity, socioeconomic inequality, and changing relationships between governments and citizens. Governance outcomes in these settings cannot be explained solely by the formal design of political institutions. They are also shaped by bureaucratic capacity, accountability arrangements, economic institutions, informal practices, elite interests, social participation, and interactions with international and regional actors. Consequently, countries undergoing apparently similar transitions may experience markedly different governance trajectories, making it difficult to identify reform approaches that are universally applicable [5−9].

Scholarly efforts to explain these differences have developed across several disciplinary and methodological traditions. Political science research has primarily examined regime characteristics, state capacity, political stability, and accountability mechanisms [10−12]. Development economics has placed greater emphasis on institutional quality, property rights, regulatory effectiveness, and anticorruption mechanisms as determinants of economic performance [2, 13, 14]. Public administration research, meanwhile, has focused on bureaucratic effectiveness, public service delivery, administrative reform, and decentralisation [6, 15, 16]. These perspectives have generated substantial knowledge about individual dimensions of governance, but they have often developed independently. As a result, findings concerning governance performance, reform drivers, and institutional change remain dispersed across disciplinary boundaries and regional research traditions.

This fragmentation presents an important problem for both scholarship and policy. Existing studies frequently differ in how governance is conceptualised and operationalised, the indicators used to assess institutional performance, and the political and geographical scales at which governance is examined. Cross national indicators can facilitate broad comparisons but may obscure substantial variation within countries, while case studies provide contextual depth but often have limited comparative generalisability. Similarly, formal governance indicators may inadequately capture the influence of informal institutions, elite bargaining, local political arrangements, and socially embedded practices. These methodological and conceptual differences complicate efforts to determine whether observed governance improvements represent genuine institutional transformation or changes captured only by particular measurement frameworks [17−20].

A further limitation is the absence of sufficiently integrated evidence on the mechanisms that drive governance reform. External pressure, domestic political demand, elite bargaining, regional diffusion, economic transformation, and institutional crises have all been identified as potential catalysts for change. However, their effects vary considerably across institutional

settings. Reforms that strengthen accountability or administrative capacity in one context may produce limited outcomes in another because of differences in political incentives, implementation capacity, informal institutions, or social conditions. Understanding governance reform therefore requires moving beyond the identification of individual determinants toward examining how political, administrative, economic, and social dimensions interact to shape institutional trajectories [21−23].

Against this background, this systematic review synthesises theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence on governance in emerging states published between 2000 and 2024. Emerging states are defined broadly as low and middle income countries undergoing significant political or economic transitions, consistent with established usage in the governance literature [4, 9]. The review aims to critically examine how governance has been conceptualised and measured, compare patterns of governance performance across regional and institutional contexts, identify the principal drivers and conditions associated with governance reform, and determine the major conceptual, methodological, and empirical gaps that continue to constrain the field.

By integrating evidence from political science, public administration, and development economics, this review provides a multidisciplinary perspective on governance that extends beyond isolated institutional indicators or individual country experiences. Particular attention is given to political stability, administrative capacity, accountability mechanisms, economic governance, and social governance as interconnected dimensions of institutional performance. The synthesis also considers the roles of formal and informal institutions, external and domestic reform pressures, and contextual differences in explaining divergent governance trajectories. In doing so, the review seeks to provide a stronger basis for comparative governance research and to develop a future research agenda that gives greater attention to subnational variation, institutional heterogeneity, and context sensitive approaches to governance measurement and reform.

2. Conceptual Frameworks and Measurement of Governance

2.1. Defining Governance: Evolving Perspectives.

The conceptualisation of governance has evolved considerably since the term gained prominence in international development discourse in the early 1990s. Early approaches frequently associated governance with the normative concept of “good governance,” emphasising democratic accountability, the rule of law, transparency, administrative effectiveness, and market oriented institutional arrangements [4, 24, 26]. Although this perspective provided an influential framework for evaluating institutional performance, it was criticised for assuming that a relatively uniform set of institutional characteristics could be applied across countries with markedly different political, historical, and socioeconomic conditions. Subsequent scholarship therefore moved toward a more context sensitive understanding of governance, recognising that effective institutions can take different forms and that similar formal arrangements may generate substantially different outcomes across countries [27−29].

An important conceptual development was the distinction between governance and the broader characteristics of political regimes. Fukuyama [9] defined governance primarily in terms of the capacity of states to formulate and enforce rules and to deliver public services,

regardless of whether those states operate under democratic or nondemocratic political systems. This perspective shifted analytical attention from the formal characteristics of government toward the capacity and performance of public institutions. It also enabled more meaningful comparison among emerging states in which similar political structures may coexist with substantial differences in bureaucratic competence, regulatory effectiveness, implementation capacity, and service delivery [25, 30]. Governance can therefore be understood not simply as the existence of particular institutions but as the capacity of those institutions to perform their intended functions effectively and legitimately.

Recent scholarship increasingly treats governance as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing institutional arrangements, decision making processes, and observable outcomes. From an institutional perspective, governance concerns the formal and informal rules that structure political competition, distribute authority, constrain state actors, and shape interactions between governments and society [1, 6]. From a process perspective, governance concerns how authority is exercised, how public decisions are formulated and implemented, and how governments interact with citizens and other stakeholders [7, 9]. From an outcome perspective, attention shifts toward the effectiveness, accessibility, responsiveness, and equity of policies and public services [15, 16]. These perspectives are complementary rather than competing because institutional arrangements influence decision making processes, which in turn shape governance outcomes. Building on this multidimensional understanding, Table 1 organises governance into five interrelated analytical dimensions: political stability, administrative capacity, accountability mechanisms, economic governance, and social governance.

Table 1. Conceptual Framework of Governance Dimensions in Emerging States.

Governance Dimension	Key Indicators	Analytical Focus	Theoretical Basis	Ref.
Political Stability	Government effectiveness, rule of law, absence of violence	Stability of political institutions, predictability of state authority, and capacity to maintain public order	Institutional theory and governance performance frameworks	[1, 5]
Administrative Capacity	Bureaucratic quality, public service delivery, fiscal management	State capacity to formulate policies, mobilise resources, and implement public programmes effectively	State capacity and bureaucratic effectiveness	[6, 9]
Accountability Mechanisms	Electoral competition, civil society engagement, transparency	Mechanisms through which political and administrative actors are monitored and held responsible for their decisions	Democratic accountability and horizontal accountability	[10, 11]
Economic Governance	Property rights, regulatory quality, anticorruption measures	Institutional conditions governing markets, investment, regulation, and control of rent seeking	Institutional economics and political economy	[3, 14]
Social Governance	Service delivery equity, decentralisation, citizen participation	Inclusiveness of public services, local participation, and responsiveness to diverse social needs	Participatory governance and decentralisation	[15, 16]

The framework demonstrates that governance quality cannot be adequately represented by a single institutional characteristic or composite score. Political stability captures the institutional conditions necessary for predictable government action and the maintenance of legal order, whereas administrative capacity reflects the state's ability to translate policy decisions into effective implementation and service delivery. Accountability mechanisms concern the institutional channels through which public officials are monitored and held responsible for their actions. Economic governance focuses on the rules and regulatory arrangements that influence economic activity, while social governance captures the

inclusiveness, accessibility, and participatory dimensions of public administration and service provision.

These dimensions are analytically distinct but closely interconnected. Political stability may create conditions conducive to administrative effectiveness and long term policy implementation, but stability without accountability can also permit institutional concentration and weak public oversight. Similarly, strong administrative capacity may improve service delivery, yet its developmental benefits depend partly on whether resources are allocated transparently and equitably. Economic governance can strengthen investment and regulatory predictability, while social governance determines whether institutional improvements translate into broader participation and equitable access to public services. The framework presented in Table 1 therefore provides the conceptual basis for evaluating governance as an interconnected system of political, administrative, economic, and social institutions rather than as a single measure of state performance.

2.2. Measurement Frameworks and Their Limitations.

Translating the multidimensional concept of governance into measurable indicators presents a major methodological challenge. Governance includes institutional characteristics, administrative processes, political relationships, and policy outcomes that cannot be directly captured by a single measure [31−34]. Consequently, empirical governance research has relied extensively on composite indicator systems that combine information from multiple sources. The most prominent example is the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), which assess six dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption across more than 200 countries using multiple perception based data sources [1, 5]. The WGI have facilitated longitudinal and cross national comparisons and have consequently become influential in both academic research and development policy.

Their widespread application, however, should not obscure important methodological limitations. Kaufmann and Kraay [5] acknowledge the challenges associated with combining perception based information from different sources, particularly when distinguishing actual institutional performance from perceptions of institutional quality. This distinction is important because perceptions may be influenced by political expectations, media coverage, economic conditions, or respondents' prior experiences rather than changes in governance alone. Andrews [4] further argues that aggregate national indicators may conceal substantial variation within countries and may inadequately represent institutional arrangements that differ from internationally dominant models but remain effective within particular local contexts. Consequently, similar national scores can coexist with considerable differences in governance performance across provinces, municipalities, sectors, and population groups.

Alternative measurement approaches attempt to address some of these limitations. Survey based instruments, including Afrobarometer, Latinobarometer, and Asian Barometer, capture citizens' experiences and evaluations of government performance, thereby complementing expert based assessments with information from the users of public institutions [10, 13]. Sector specific measures, including public financial management assessments, procurement indicators, and measures of judicial effectiveness, offer greater analytical precision by focusing on particular institutional functions, although this specificity reduces comparability across governance domains [35−38]. Qualitative case studies and process tracing

approaches provide deeper explanations of institutional change by identifying actors, sequences, incentives, and causal mechanisms that aggregate indicators may overlook [28, 34]. Their contextual depth, however, generally comes at the cost of broader cross national generalisation.

No single measurement strategy therefore provides a complete representation of governance quality. Composite indicators offer breadth and comparability, citizen surveys capture experiences and perceptions, sector specific indicators provide institutional detail, and qualitative approaches reveal mechanisms and contextual variation. Combining these approaches can provide a more credible assessment than reliance on any single source. This methodological pluralism is particularly important for emerging states, where national averages may obscure pronounced differences in administrative capacity, accountability, service delivery, and institutional effectiveness across subnational jurisdictions.

2.3. Theoretical Models Explaining Governance Variation.

Explaining why governance quality varies across emerging states requires attention to both long term institutional development and contemporary political incentives. Three broad theoretical traditions have been particularly influential: historical institutionalism, political economy, and principal agent analysis. Although they emphasise different causal mechanisms, together they demonstrate that governance outcomes emerge from interactions among historical legacies, institutional structures, political incentives, and relationships of accountability.

Historical institutionalism emphasises the enduring influence of earlier institutional arrangements on contemporary governance. Precolonial political organisation, colonial administrative systems, patterns of state formation, and post independence institution building can create institutional trajectories that persist long after their original conditions have changed [2, 28]. Acemoglu and colleagues [2, 3], for example, argue that colonial settlement conditions influenced the development of different institutional arrangements, with extractive institutions becoming more prevalent in environments where permanent European settlement was constrained. Such arguments highlight path dependence by suggesting that contemporary governance performance cannot be understood independently of the historical processes through which state institutions were established and reproduced.

Political economy approaches place greater emphasis on the distribution of power and the strategic interests of political actors. From this perspective, institutional reform is not simply a technical process of adopting better rules or administrative procedures. Reform redistributes authority, resources, and opportunities and therefore creates both beneficiaries and opponents [3, 35, 36]. Governance reforms are more likely to be adopted and sustained when they are compatible with the incentives of influential political actors or when social and political coalitions possess sufficient bargaining power to demand institutional change [11, 36]. This perspective helps explain why technically similar reforms can generate very different outcomes across countries with different elite structures and political settlements.

Principal agent approaches focus more directly on accountability relationships among citizens, elected representatives, and public officials. Citizens delegate authority to political representatives, who in turn delegate implementation responsibilities to bureaucratic organisations. At each stage, differences in information, monitoring capacity, incentives, and objectives can generate accountability failures [6, 39]. Weak monitoring may allow politicians

or bureaucrats to pursue private interests, while poorly designed incentives can reduce administrative performance even when formal institutions appear robust. Governance improvement therefore depends not only on institutional design but also on mechanisms that improve transparency, monitoring, enforcement, and alignment between delegated responsibilities and public objectives.

These theoretical traditions should not be treated as mutually exclusive explanations. Historical legacies establish institutional constraints and opportunities, political economy determines how actors negotiate within those structures, and principal agent relationships influence how authority is exercised and monitored in practice. Increasingly, governance research integrates these perspectives through mixed methods designs that combine comparative statistical analysis with detailed institutional and country level evidence [37, 40]. Such integration is particularly valuable for emerging states because it allows researchers to distinguish broad cross national patterns from the historical and political mechanisms that generate them.

3. Empirical Patterns and Reform Dynamics

3.1. Cross-Regional Governance Trajectories.

Cross national evidence reveals substantial variation in governance quality across emerging regions. As presented in Table 2, governance performance differs considerably across political stability, government effectiveness, rule of law, and accountability. Based on the reported World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators for 2022, East Asia and the Pacific records the strongest overall performance among the emerging regions considered, particularly in government effectiveness and rule of law. This pattern is consistent with sustained investments in bureaucratic capacity, institutional coordination, and public administration in several economies within the region [7, 25]. By contrast, Latin America occupies an intermediate position, combining comparatively stronger accountability with weaker performance in political stability and rule of law [27].

Table 2. Comparative Governance Scores Across Emerging State Regions Based on World Bank WGI Data for 2022.

Region or Country Group	Political Stability	Government Effectiveness	Rule of Law	Accountability
South Asia	−0.82	−0.47	−0.61	−0.33
Sub Saharan Africa	−0.91	−0.68	−0.75	−0.44
East Asia and Pacific	−0.11	0.22	0.18	0.05
Latin America	−0.23	0.04	−0.12	0.21
Middle East and North Africa	−0.84	−0.29	−0.48	−0.98
Emerging Economies Average	−0.58	−0.24	−0.36	−0.30

Table 2 also demonstrates that governance weaknesses are not uniformly distributed across dimensions. South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa record negative average scores across all four indicators, suggesting that governance constraints extend beyond a single institutional domain. Political stability represents a particularly significant challenge in both regions, while comparatively weak government effectiveness and rule of law indicate additional limitations in administrative performance and institutional enforcement. Nevertheless, regional averages should be interpreted cautiously because they can conceal substantial differences among individual countries and within countries. Botswana and Rwanda, for example, have been

reported to outperform broader Sub Saharan African patterns on selected governance dimensions [28, 30], while India's federal structure produces substantial variation in governance capacity and institutional performance across states [24, 26]. Regional comparisons therefore provide a useful overview but should not be interpreted as evidence of uniform governance conditions within each geographical grouping. The comparative pattern in Table 2 indicates that governance performance is multidimensional. A region may perform relatively well in one dimension while continuing to experience substantial weaknesses in another. This is especially apparent in Latin America, where the positive accountability score contrasts with negative scores for political stability and rule of law. Similarly, East Asia and the Pacific records positive values for government effectiveness and rule of law but a slightly negative value for political stability. These differences reinforce the importance of examining individual governance dimensions rather than relying exclusively on a single aggregate measure.

Figure 1 provides a complementary representation of these regional differences by combining the four governance dimensions into a composite index ranging from 0 to 100. East Asia and the Pacific records the highest composite score at 61, followed by Latin America at 54. Both values exceed the emerging economy average of 39. In contrast, the Middle East and North Africa records a score of 31, South Asia 28, and Sub Saharan Africa 22. The difference between the highest and lowest regional scores illustrates the considerable institutional disparity that persists across emerging regions.

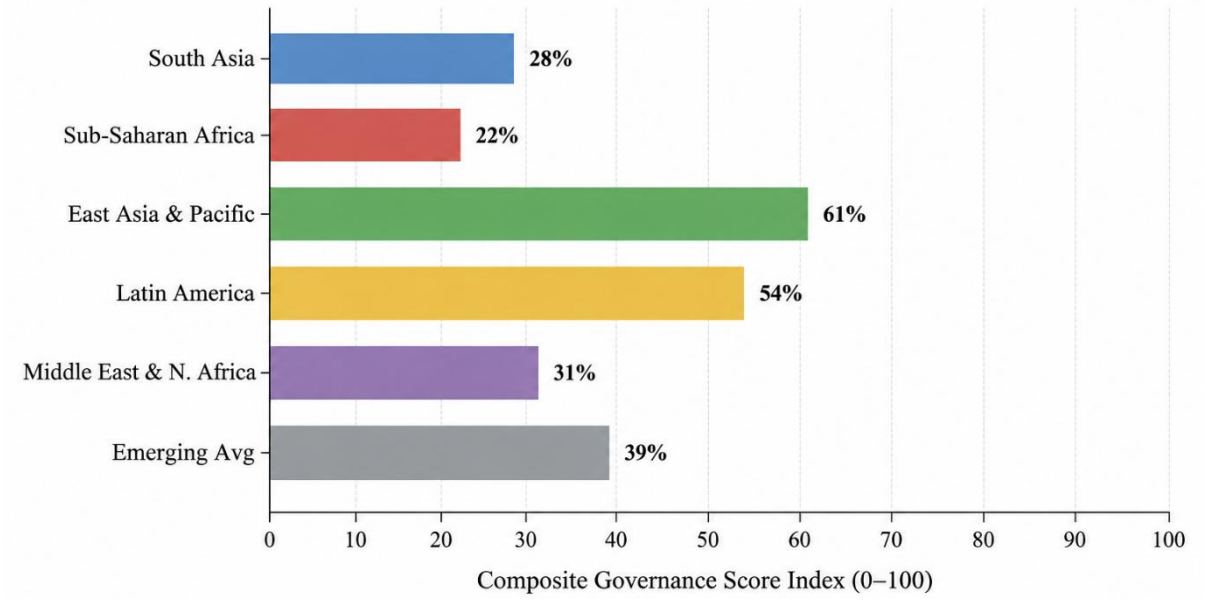


Figure 1. Composite Governance Score Index Across Emerging State Regions.

The distribution shown in Figure 1 should be interpreted as a comparative summary rather than as evidence that governance quality is uniform within each region. Its principal value lies in demonstrating the magnitude of the regional governance gap. The 39 point difference between East Asia and the Pacific and Sub Saharan Africa suggests that emerging states operate within substantially different institutional environments. These differences may influence administrative capacity, policy implementation, investment conditions, public service provision, and the ability of governments to sustain institutional reforms.

While Figure 1 provides a cross sectional comparison for 2022, Figure 2 introduces a temporal perspective by tracing changes in composite governance scores between 2000 and

2022. East Asia and the Pacific shows the clearest improvement, increasing from 42 in 2000 to 61 in 2022. Latin America records a more modest increase from 48 to 54, with relatively limited change after 2012. South Asia rises from 24 to 28, while Sub Saharan Africa increases from 18 to 22. These patterns suggest that regional governance differences are persistent and that convergence between stronger and weaker performing regions has been limited.

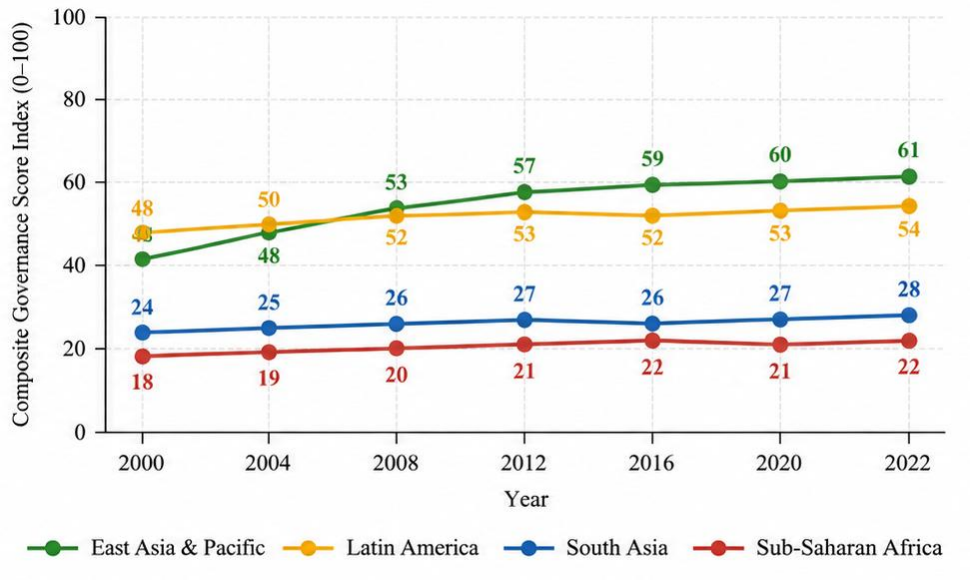


Figure 2. Trends in Composite Governance Scores Across Regions, 2000–2022.

The temporal pattern presented in Figure 2 provides three important insights. First, governance change appears incremental rather than rapid. Even in East Asia and the Pacific, where the largest improvement is observed, the increase occurred progressively over more than two decades. Second, the trajectories are not uniformly linear. Latin America, South Asia, and Sub Saharan Africa display periods of stagnation or slight decline, indicating that institutional progress can be interrupted or reversed. Third, the persistence of substantial differences between regions supports arguments that governance trajectories are strongly influenced by historical institutions, political incentives, and accumulated administrative capacity [4, 37]. Short term policy interventions may therefore have limited effects when they are not supported by deeper institutional and political changes.

3.2, Drivers of Governance Reform.

Understanding regional governance trajectories also requires identifying the forces that initiate institutional change. The literature indicates that governance reform rarely results from a single factor. Instead, reforms generally emerge from interactions among international pressures, domestic political demands, elite incentives, regional influences, and periods of economic or political disruption [17, 20, 22, 24, 27–31, 33, 35, 36]. Table 3 synthesises these mechanisms into five principal categories: external pressure, domestic demand, elite bargaining, regional diffusion, and crisis induced reform. The external pressure has historically been an important catalyst for governance reform, particularly where governments depend heavily on international financial assistance. Conditionality associated with International Monetary Fund programmes, World Bank lending, bilateral assistance, and other external agreements can create incentives for administrative, fiscal, and regulatory reform [17, 20]. However, external

pressure does not necessarily produce sustained institutional improvement. Dollar and Svensson [20] indicate that the success of structural adjustment programmes depends substantially on domestic political conditions rather than solely on the design of external conditionality. Similarly, Burnside and Dollar [22] associate the effectiveness of development assistance with the quality of the recipient country's existing policy and institutional environment. These findings suggest that external actors may facilitate reform, but domestic institutional conditions strongly influence whether externally encouraged changes become embedded in governance systems.

Table 3. Thematic Classification of Governance Reform Drivers in Emerging States.

Driver Category	Description	Illustrative Cases	Ref.
External Pressure	Conditionality imposed by international financial institutions, donor performance requirements, and trade related institutional commitments	Ghana, Indonesia, Bolivia	[17, 20, 22]
Domestic Demand	Civil society mobilisation, electoral accountability, citizen pressure, and investigative media activity	India, Brazil, South Africa	[24, 27]
Elite Bargaining	Negotiations among political and economic elites that influence institutional design, resource distribution, and reform sequencing	Rwanda, Botswana	[28, 30]
Regional Diffusion	Policy learning, institutional imitation, normative influence, and governance requirements promoted through regional organisations	ASEAN, ECOWAS, Mercosur	[31, 33]
Crisis Induced Reform	Economic, political, or security crises that disrupt existing arrangements and create opportunities for institutional change	Argentina, Kenya	[35, 36]

Domestic demand represents a second major reform pathway. Civil society mobilisation, electoral competition, citizen advocacy, and investigative journalism can increase the political costs of poor governance and create pressure for greater transparency and responsiveness [11, 24, 27]. Bratton and Chang [13] demonstrate that electoral accountability can improve government responsiveness in Sub Saharan Africa, although its effectiveness depends on the quality of electoral institutions and the organisational capacity of political opposition. Domestic pressure is therefore most likely to generate institutional change when citizens possess meaningful channels through which demands can be translated into political consequences.

Elite bargaining constitutes a different but equally important mechanism, particularly in transitional and post conflict settings. Institutional reforms frequently alter the distribution of political authority and economic resources, making elite support or resistance central to implementation. Negotiations among competing factions can determine the timing, scope, and sequencing of reforms, while political settlements may establish the boundaries within which institutional change becomes feasible [28, 30]. This helps explain why formally similar reform programmes can produce different outcomes across countries with different configurations of political power.

Regional diffusion provides another pathway through which governance practices spread across national boundaries. Governments may adopt reforms after observing neighbouring countries, participating in regional policy networks, responding to regional norms, or complying with institutional expectations promoted by organisations such as ASEAN and ECOWAS [31, 33]. Diffusion can accelerate the adoption of governance innovations, although formal adoption does not necessarily guarantee effective domestic implementation. Finally, crises can disrupt established political arrangements and create temporary opportunities for institutional reform [35, 36]. Economic collapse, political instability, or security shocks may

weaken resistance to change, but the durability of crisis induced reforms depends on whether new arrangements acquire sufficient political and institutional support after the immediate crisis subsides.

Taken together, Table 3 demonstrates that reform initiation and reform sustainability are analytically distinct. External pressure or crisis may create an opportunity for change, while domestic coalitions, administrative capacity, and elite incentives determine whether reforms become institutionalised. This distinction provides an important bridge between identifying the drivers of reform and understanding the conditions under which reforms ultimately succeed or fail.

3.3. Conditions for Reform Success and Failure.

The governance literature has increasingly moved beyond identifying the forces that initiate reform toward explaining why some institutional changes become durable while others remain superficial or are eventually reversed. A recurring finding is that technically sound reforms frequently produce limited results when they are not accompanied by corresponding changes in political incentives, implementation capacity, and institutional behaviour [7, 8, 29]. Governance reform should therefore be understood not simply as the adoption of new laws, administrative structures, or policy instruments, but as a process through which incentives and institutional practices are altered over time.

Grindle [29] advances the concept of "good enough governance," arguing that reform strategies should prioritise the institutional constraints most relevant to particular development problems rather than attempt comprehensive transformation according to an ideal governance model. This approach recognises that governments in emerging states operate under constraints involving financial resources, administrative expertise, political support, and implementation capacity. Attempting to reform multiple institutions simultaneously may therefore overextend available capacity and weaken implementation. More selective sequencing can allow governments to concentrate political and administrative resources on reforms with the greatest immediate developmental relevance.

Pritchett and Woolcock [8] similarly argue that institutional solutions must correspond to the administrative capacity and social conditions of the environment in which they are introduced. Formally sophisticated institutions may perform poorly when governments lack the organisational capability, professional expertise, monitoring systems, or social trust required to sustain them. This observation highlights an important distinction between institutional form and institutional function. Governments may adopt internationally recognised laws, agencies, or regulatory frameworks without achieving corresponding improvements in actual governance performance.

The durability of reform also varies according to the political conditions under which change occurs. Crisis induced reforms can generate substantial short term institutional openings because established interests may temporarily lose influence or because political leaders face strong pressure to demonstrate rapid action [35]. However, such reforms can be vulnerable to reversal once immediate economic or political pressures decline. By contrast, reforms supported by domestic social coalitions, particularly constituencies with sustained interests in effective public institutions, may have stronger political foundations and greater prospects for continuity [11, 24].

Besley and Persson [38] provide a theoretical explanation for this relationship by demonstrating that investments in fiscal capacity and property rights protection become more attractive when political cohesion is stronger and conflict among groups is relatively limited. Where political actors expect institutions to benefit broad constituencies rather than opposing factions alone, incentives to invest in state capacity are strengthened. Conversely, intense political fragmentation can reduce incentives for long term institutional investment because governing groups may fear that stronger institutions will subsequently benefit political competitors.

Overall, the evidence indicates that governance reform outcomes depend less on the formal sophistication of institutional designs than on the interaction among political incentives, administrative capacity, social support, and historical context. Reform strategies that are technically appropriate but politically unsupported are unlikely to become institutionalised, while politically feasible reforms that exceed administrative capacity may fail during implementation. Sustainable governance improvement therefore requires alignment between institutional ambition, state capability, domestic political incentives, and societal demand. This perspective helps explain why governance trajectories remain heterogeneous even among emerging states exposed to similar international reform agendas and development pressures.

4. Institutional and Contextual Dimensions of Governance

4.1. State Capacity and Bureaucratic Quality.

State capacity, defined as the ability of state organisations to implement official goals, particularly when confronted by resistance from powerful social actors, constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for effective governance [9, 25]. Evans and Rauch [6] demonstrate that states with more Weberian bureaucracies, characterised by meritocratic recruitment, competitive salaries, and internal promotion, achieve significantly higher rates of economic growth, independent of specific policy choices. Subsequent research has reinforced this relationship. Charron and Lapuente [39] show that bureaucratic quality is positively associated with governance performance across both democratic and nondemocratic systems, suggesting that professional public administration represents an institutional resource that extends beyond regime type. In emerging states, capacity constraints are often most pronounced at the subnational level, where decentralisation has transferred substantial service delivery responsibilities without corresponding financial resources, technical expertise, or administrative capability [15, 16, 26].

The relationship between state capacity and accountability is more complex. States with strong administrative capacity may use institutional resources for either developmental or extractive purposes, as demonstrated by historical institutionalist accounts of extractive colonial institutions [2, 3]. Conversely, democratisation without parallel improvements in administrative capacity may generate public expectations and accountability demands that exceed the ability of weak state institutions to respond effectively [8, 37]. This imbalance can weaken service delivery and institutional legitimacy despite greater political participation. Mazzuca and Munck [40] emphasise the importance of sequencing state building and democratisation, arguing that electoral competition introduced under conditions of limited state capacity may reinforce clientelism and neopatrimonial practices rather than promote programmatic accountability.

4.2. Decentralisation and Local Governance.

Decentralisation has become one of the most widely implemented governance reforms in emerging states over the past three decades, driven by international development agendas and domestic demands for greater participation and local responsiveness [15, 16]. Its theoretical rationale draws partly on the Tiebout model, which suggests that competition among jurisdictions can encourage greater efficiency in public service provision. It is also supported by participatory governance perspectives, which argue that bringing decision making closer to citizens can strengthen accountability and improve the responsiveness of public institutions [34]. Using municipal evidence from Bolivia, Faguet [16] finds that decentralisation increased local investment in education and sanitation, supporting the argument that local governments can respond more effectively to community priorities.

However, decentralisation does not automatically improve governance. Manor [15] highlights the risks associated with transferring responsibilities to local governments without sufficient fiscal resources, administrative authority, or technical capacity. Under such conditions, decentralisation may simply relocate governance weaknesses from the national to the local level, potentially undermining public confidence in both levels of government. The effectiveness of decentralisation therefore depends on the balance between devolved responsibilities and the institutional resources available to fulfil them.

Political incentives further shape decentralisation outcomes. Central political elites may support or resist the transfer of authority according to its anticipated electoral, fiscal, and territorial consequences. In ethnically diverse states, decentralisation may be used to accommodate regional interests and reduce secessionist pressures, but it can also strengthen local patronage networks rather than citizen accountability [26, 28]. Local governance performance also depends on existing levels of social capital and civic participation. Putnam [34] demonstrates the importance of civic engagement for regional institutional performance, while subsequent studies in Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia similarly associate collective action and citizen participation with stronger local governance outcomes [13, 24].

4.3. Anticorruption Strategies and Rule of Law.

Corruption, commonly defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, remains one of the most persistent governance challenges in emerging states. It can discourage investment, distort public expenditure, weaken service delivery, and erode public confidence in state institutions [1, 14]. Research examining the determinants of corruption indicates that professional bureaucracies, effective judicial institutions, adequate public sector remuneration, and greater media freedom are generally associated with stronger corruption control [6, 14]. Knack and Keefer [14] further demonstrate that secure property rights and effective corruption control are important institutional predictors of investment and economic growth across countries.

Anticorruption reform nevertheless presents a fundamental political challenge because actors who benefit from existing arrangements may have strong incentives to resist or weaken institutions designed to constrain them [3, 11, 36]. Independent anticorruption commissions have therefore produced uneven outcomes. Their effectiveness appears to depend not merely on formal institutional independence but also on sustained political commitment, credible

enforcement, judicial autonomy, adequate institutional capacity, and meaningful civil society oversight [20, 29]. Establishing a specialised agency without these supporting conditions may result in formal institutional change without substantial improvement in accountability.

The rule of law provides a broader institutional foundation for effective corruption control. Judicial independence, reliable contract enforcement, predictable legal procedures, and the consistent application of legal norms determine whether accountability mechanisms can function effectively. Weak legal institutions can reduce the credibility of anticorruption measures by limiting investigation, prosecution, and enforcement. Cross national evidence consequently associates stronger rule of law with greater government effectiveness, more favourable investment conditions, and improved human development outcomes [1, 5, 38]. Strengthening anticorruption governance therefore requires not only targeted enforcement mechanisms but also broader improvements in judicial capacity, administrative professionalism, transparency, and institutional accountability.

5. Research Gaps, Conclusions, and Policy Implications

5.1. Critical Research Gaps in the Governance Literature.

Despite the substantial growth of governance research over the past two decades, several critical gaps remain in the evidence base, as summarised in Table 4. One of the most persistent limitations is the reliance on national aggregate indicators, which can obscure subnational differences that are often highly relevant to governance performance and policy implementation [4, 29]. Governance conditions can vary considerably across provinces, districts, municipalities, and service sectors within the same country. Although such variation is frequently documented in qualitative studies, it remains inadequately represented in the quantitative datasets commonly used for comparative governance analysis [26].

Table 4. Identified Research Gaps and Proposed Future Directions in Governance Studies.

Research Gap	Nature of Gap	Suggested Future Direction
Subnational governance variation	Most studies rely on national aggregate measures that mask important differences within countries	Multilevel mixed methods designs examining provincial, district, and local governance dynamics
Gender disaggregated analysis	Systematic evidence on gender dimensions of governance quality remains limited	Integration of gender sensitive indicators into governance measurement frameworks
Digital governance transformation	Evidence on electronic governance outcomes in low and middle income countries remains limited	Longitudinal studies examining digitalisation, accountability, and public service delivery
Informal institutions	Formal indicators inadequately capture customary institutions, social norms, and patronage networks	Ethnographic and survey based approaches for mapping informal institutional arrangements
Governance and development nexus	Causal evidence linking governance quality with human development outcomes remains underdeveloped	Quasi experimental and instrumental variable approaches using appropriate natural experiments

A second important gap concerns the gender dimensions of governance. Although feminist institutionalist scholarship has examined how gender norms influence bureaucratic cultures, political representation, institutional behaviour, and accountability [12], systematic quantitative evidence on gender differences in governance experiences and outcomes remains limited. Greater attention to gender sensitive measurement is therefore required to determine whether governance institutions affect different population groups equitably. Digital governance represents another rapidly developing research area in which empirical evidence has not kept pace with policy implementation. Many developing countries have invested

substantially in electronic governance platforms, including citizen service portals, digital land registries, and biometric identification systems. However, longitudinal evidence concerning the effects of digitalisation on accountability, corruption, administrative efficiency, and equity in service delivery remains limited [39, 40]. This gap is increasingly important as digital systems become embedded in routine interactions between governments and citizens.

Informal institutions constitute a further limitation in existing governance research. Customary courts, traditional authorities, ethnic associations, social networks, and patronage relationships frequently operate alongside formal state institutions and can substantially influence political and administrative outcomes [28, 30, 36]. However, conventional governance indicators are poorly suited to measuring these arrangements. As summarised in Table 4, addressing these gaps requires greater methodological diversity, including subnational analysis, gender sensitive indicators, longitudinal studies of digital governance, and research designs capable of capturing interactions between formal and informal institutions. Table 4 also demonstrates that the principal research limitations are both substantive and methodological. Existing evidence remains concentrated at the national level and gives comparatively limited attention to differences within countries, population groups, emerging digital institutions, and informal governance arrangements. The proposed research directions therefore emphasise more context sensitive measurement and stronger approaches to causal identification.

5.2. Advancing Governance Research through Methodological Innovation.

Addressing the identified research gaps requires methodological approaches that capture the complexity, contextual variation, and dynamic nature of governance in emerging states. Future studies should move beyond reliance on aggregate national indicators by adopting multilevel research designs that integrate national statistical analysis, subnational surveys, and qualitative case studies. Such approaches can reveal institutional differences within countries that are frequently obscured by national averages, particularly in administrative capacity, public service delivery, accountability, and local governance performance [4, 37]. Greater attention to subnational variation would also help explain why similar national reforms produce different outcomes across provinces, municipalities, and administrative institutions.

Strengthening causal inference represents another important methodological priority. Experimental and quasi experimental approaches, including randomised evaluations of governance interventions, difference in differences analysis of institutional reforms, and regression discontinuity designs based on electoral thresholds, can provide more rigorous evidence of the effects of governance policies and institutional changes [16, 22]. These approaches are particularly valuable for distinguishing the effects of specific reforms from broader political, economic, and social developments. However, their application requires careful consideration of institutional context, data availability, and the assumptions underlying causal identification.

The increasing availability of administrative data through government digitalisation also creates opportunities to improve governance measurement. Tax administration records, public procurement databases, civil service information, and digital service delivery systems can provide more direct evidence of institutional performance than perception based indicators alone [38, 39]. Integrating these administrative sources with established governance indicators could improve measurement reliability and allow researchers to examine relationships between

institutional arrangements, administrative processes, and measurable public sector outcomes. Nevertheless, differences in data quality, accessibility, institutional transparency, and digital capacity across emerging states must be considered when interpreting such evidence.

Mixed methods research offers further opportunities to connect statistical patterns with the political and institutional mechanisms underlying governance outcomes. Combining quantitative comparative analysis with qualitative interviews, institutional case studies, and process tracing can help explain how political incentives, informal institutions, administrative practices, and stakeholder interactions influence reform implementation [37, 40]. Comparative historical analysis involving countries or regions with similar structural conditions but different institutional trajectories may also clarify why governance reforms succeed in some settings but produce limited or temporary improvements in others. Future investigations should additionally incorporate the roles of local governments, civil society organisations, private sector actors, and international development institutions, recognising that governance outcomes emerge from interactions among multiple actors rather than state institutions alone [15, 31, 33]. Collectively, these methodological directions would strengthen the explanatory capacity, contextual relevance, and practical usefulness of governance research.

5.3. Policy Implications for Institutional Reform and Governance Improvement.

The findings of this review have important implications for governance reform in emerging states. First, governance should be approached as a multidimensional institutional process rather than evaluated through a single composite indicator. Political stability, administrative effectiveness, accountability, economic governance, and social governance represent interconnected dimensions that may develop at different rates and respond differently to policy interventions [1, 4, 9]. Consequently, governments and development institutions should adopt comprehensive assessment frameworks that identify specific institutional strengths and weaknesses instead of relying exclusively on aggregate governance rankings.

Second, governance strategies must account for differences in institutional capacity and political conditions across countries and regions. Although the reviewed evidence indicates comparatively stronger aggregate governance performance in parts of East Asia and continuing challenges in South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa, these regional patterns should not obscure substantial variation within individual countries [5, 25, 30]. Reform priorities should therefore be informed by national and subnational institutional assessments that consider administrative resources, implementation capacity, political incentives, and public expectations. Policies that are effective in one institutional setting may require considerable adaptation before implementation elsewhere.

Third, institutional reform should be understood as a continuous process rather than a discrete policy intervention. The literature identifies external pressures, domestic political demands, elite bargaining, regional policy diffusion, and periods of political or economic crisis as important influences on reform initiation [17, 22, 27, 35]. Nevertheless, the adoption of new legislation, administrative structures, or accountability mechanisms does not necessarily translate into sustained improvements in governance performance. Effective reform requires institutional ownership, adequate administrative capacity, consistent implementation, and mechanisms for monitoring outcomes and addressing implementation failures [3, 29, 36]. Governments should therefore prioritise reforms that can be implemented within existing

institutional capabilities while progressively strengthening the foundations for more comprehensive transformation.

Fourth, international development organisations and bilateral donors should move away from uniform institutional reform prescriptions toward approaches that reflect domestic political realities and administrative constraints. External assistance is likely to be more useful when it supports locally identified priorities, strengthens existing institutional capabilities, and allows flexibility in implementation [7, 8, 29]. Similarly, domestic reform programmes should emphasise achievable improvements in public service delivery, administrative transparency, institutional coordination, and citizen accountability. Demonstrable improvements in these areas may strengthen public confidence and create more favourable conditions for subsequent institutional reforms.

Finally, governance improvement requires greater attention to emerging institutional challenges, particularly digital transformation, informal governance arrangements, subnational inequalities, and gender dimensions of public administration. As identified in Table 4, these areas represent important priorities for future research and policy development [4, 39, 40]. Digital technologies may improve administrative efficiency, transparency, and access to public services, but their effectiveness depends on institutional readiness, equitable access, and appropriate accountability mechanisms. Likewise, recognising informal institutions and differences in local governance capacity can help policymakers design reforms that respond more effectively to actual administrative and social conditions.

Overall, the policy implications emphasise that sustainable governance improvement depends not simply on adopting formal institutional reforms, but on ensuring that those reforms are politically feasible, administratively achievable, contextually appropriate, and supported by effective accountability mechanisms. Integrating these principles into governance strategies can help emerging states move beyond formal institutional compliance toward more consistent improvements in public sector performance, institutional responsiveness, and long term governance effectiveness.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review demonstrates that governance in emerging states is a multidimensional and context dependent process shaped by interactions among political institutions, administrative capacity, accountability mechanisms, economic governance, and social participation. Comparative evidence reveals substantial variation across and within regions, indicating that national aggregate indicators alone cannot adequately capture the complexity of governance performance. Governance reform is influenced by external pressures, domestic demands, elite bargaining, regional diffusion, and periods of crisis, but the sustainability of reform ultimately depends on political incentives, institutional capacity, and domestic support. The evidence further highlights the importance of professional bureaucracies, effective decentralisation, strong rule of law, and credible accountability mechanisms in strengthening governance outcomes. Nevertheless, significant research gaps remain, particularly concerning subnational variation, gender dimensions, digital governance, informal institutions, and the causal relationship between governance and development. Future research should therefore employ multilevel, mixed methods, and rigorous causal approaches that better capture institutional diversity and changing governance processes. For policymakers, governance reform should be context sensitive, realistically sequenced, and aligned with existing

administrative and political capacities. Sustainable improvement is unlikely to result from standardised institutional models alone, but rather from reforms that combine capable state institutions, appropriate political incentives, effective implementation, citizen participation, and sustained accountability.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing financial or nonfinancial interests that could have influenced the work reported in this study.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualisation, methodology, literature review, analysis and interpretation, manuscript preparation, review, and editing. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for the integrity of the work.

Data Availability Statement

All data supporting the findings of this study were obtained from publicly available sources and published literature cited in the manuscript. No new primary datasets were generated or analysed specifically for this systematic review.

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