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BRIDGING POLICY AND PEOPLE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Public trust in government institutions is a central pillar of democratic governance, effective public policy, and social cohesion. In the Philippine local governance context, where citizens most frequently encounter the state through policy implementation and service delivery, concerns regarding declining trust have been linked to perceptions of corruption, weak transparency, uneven service quality, and limited citizen participation. This qualitative study examines how citizens experience government institutions across salient policy arenas, particularly local administrative services, health and social welfare programs, and law enforcement, and how these experiences shape trust in institutions, officials, and policy outcomes. The study employed a qualitative design informed by phenomenological sensibilities and utilized reflexive thematic analysis to examine lived experiences, attitudes, and interpretations of governance and policy implementation. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 adult community members who had direct and recent engagement with local government institutions. Analysis generated five interrelated themes: (1) transparency and accountability in policy processes, (2) quality and consistency of public service delivery, (3) perceived integrity and corruption in institutional practices, (4) government communication in routine and crisis contexts, and (5) inclusion and citizen participation in decision-making. Findings indicate that public trust is not produced solely by formal policy design but is continuously negotiated through everyday encounters between citizens and government institutions. Trust is strengthened when policies are implemented fairly, communicated clearly, and aligned with citizens' expectations and lived realities. The study concludes that bridging policy and people requires inclusive governance arrangements, ethical leadership, and sustained two-way communication, and it offers policy-relevant recommendations to enhance trust at the local level.

Keywords: Public Trust, Government Institutions, Policy Implementation, Transparency, Citizen Participation.

INTRODUCTION

Public trust in government institutions is widely regarded as a foundational element of democratic governance and effective policy implementation. Trust influences how citizens perceive laws, public programs, and state authority, shaping compliance, civic participation, and cooperation with government initiatives. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD. (2021) emphasizes that trust enables governments to implement policies effectively without excessive reliance on coercive mechanisms.

In the Philippines, declining trust in government has emerged as a persistent concern, particularly at the local government level, where policies are translated into concrete services and regulatory practices. Local government units are responsible for

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implementing national policies in areas such as social welfare, health services, public safety, and administrative regulation. However, recurrent issues related to corruption allegations, inconsistent service delivery, limited transparency, and weak citizen engagement have contributed to public skepticism toward institutions. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2023) similarly suggests that trust erosion often results from a perceived gap between policy intentions and citizens lived experiences.

Scholarly literature suggests that trust does not emerge solely from policy formulation but is constructed through routine interactions between citizens and government institutions. Rothstein and Stolle (2019) argue that procedural fairness, ethical conduct, and reliability in service delivery are critical determinants of institutional trust. Fukuyama et al. (2018) likewise highlights that trust develops when institutions demonstrate competence, integrity, and concern for public welfare. From this perspective, policy design, implementation, and street-level practice are analytically distinct yet interrelated dimensions shaping trust.

Despite extensive research on governance and public trust, much of the existing literature relies on quantitative surveys that measure trust levels without adequately capturing how citizens interpret, experience, and evaluate government action. This study addresses this gap by adopting a qualitative approach that foregrounds citizens' narratives and lived experiences. Public trust is defined in this study as citizens' confidence in (a) government institutions as systems, (b) public officials as actors who exercise discretion, and (c) policy outcomes as mechanisms that affect everyday life. This working definition guided the development of interview questions and the analytical coding process.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How do citizens describe their experiences with policy implementation and service delivery by government institutions? (2) What factors shape trust or distrust in institutions, officials, and policy outcomes? and (3) How can government policies and practices be better aligned with citizen expectations and needs in the Philippine local governance context?

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative research design informed by phenomenological sensibilities to explore citizens lived experiences of trust in government institutions. While the study does not adhere strictly to a single classical phenomenological tradition, it draws on phenomenological principles by prioritizing participants' subjective meanings and interpretations. To address potential researcher bias, reflexive bracketing was practiced through memo writing and reflective journaling during data collection and analysis. Given the analytic focus on patterns of meaning rather than essence description, the design is best characterized as phenomenologically informed qualitative research using reflexive thematic analysis Braun and Clarke (2006).

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

A total of 20 adult participants were recruited using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old, reside within the selected Philippine locality, and have had direct interaction with at least one government institution within the past 12 months. Recruitment was conducted through community referrals and local networks. Variation was intentionally sought across age, gender, occupation, educational background, and types of institutional contact, including local administrative offices, health services, social welfare agencies, and law enforcement.

A brief participant profile indicated diversity across demographic characteristics and service-use experiences. This variation enabled comparison of trust narratives across different forms of policy encounter. Sampling adequacy was determined through thematic saturation, as no substantively new themes or insights emerged in the final interviews, indicating sufficient information power to address the research questions.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. An interview guide aligned with the research questions was used to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. The guide was pilot tested with two participants and refined based on clarity and relevance. Probing questions were used to explore perceptions of policy design, implementation practices, service encounters, and institutional trust.

LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

Interviews were conducted in Filipino or English, depending on participant preference. Filipino interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. Meaning equivalence was ensured through careful comparison of transcripts and iterative review during analysis to preserve contextual nuance.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and all data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

DATA ANALYSIS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Coding was conducted by a single researcher using sentence-level meaning units. An initial codebook was developed inductively and refined through multiple analytic cycles. Dependability was enhanced through an audit trail and peer debriefing, while credibility was supported through thick description and selective member checking. Reflexive journaling and documentation of analytic decisions strengthened confirmability, and detailed contextual description supported transferability.

RESULTS

Analysis of the interview data produced five interrelated themes that capture how public trust in government institutions is formed, sustained, and challenged across different policy arenas.

Theme 1: Transparency and Accountability in Policy Processes

Participants emphasized that transparency and accountability in policy procedures strongly influenced institutional trust. Clear explanations of decision-making processes and visible accountability mechanisms enhanced trust, whereas opaque procedures and perceived favoritism undermined confidence. Some participants reported maintaining trust despite limited transparency when officials were perceived as personally honest.

Theme 2: Quality and Consistency of Public Service Delivery.

Trust was closely tied to everyday service encounters. Efficient, respectful, and timely service fostered positive perceptions of government competence. Conversely, delays, complex requirements, and unprofessional behavior generated distrust. Notably, several participants reported continued trust despite service inefficiencies when frontline staff demonstrated empathy and fairness.

Theme 3: Integrity and Perceptions of Corruption

Perceived corruption emerged as a major source of distrust. Even indirect exposure to corruption narratives weakened institutional confidence. However, encounters with ethical officials occasionally mitigated broader negative perceptions, illustrating variation within trust narratives.

Theme 4: Government Communication.

Participants distinguished between routine communication and communication during crises. Clear and timely messaging strengthened trust, particularly in emergency situations, while poor communication led to confusion and exclusion.

Theme 5: Inclusion and Citizen Participation.

Opportunities for consultation and feedback enhanced trust by fostering a sense of partnership. In contrast, symbolic or tokenistic participation produced skepticism and disengagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that public trust in government institutions is a multidimensional and relational construct shaped by policy design, implementation practices, and street-level encounters. Unlike survey-based studies, this qualitative analysis reveals contradictions and negative cases, such as trust persisting despite poor service or distrust emerging despite competent delivery. These insights refine institutional trust theories by highlighting the mediating role of perceived fairness, communication, and ethical conduct. This study contributes to the literature by showing how trust is negotiated through everyday policy encounters in a local governance context, thereby bridging macro-level policy frameworks and micro-level citizen experiences.

CONCLUSION

Public trust in government institutions is constructed through lived experiences of policy enactment, service delivery, ethical behavior, and meaningful engagement. Bridging policy and people requires more than sound policy design; it demands inclusive governance, accountable leadership, and sustained dialogue between institutions and citizens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Public trust in government institutions is constructed through lived experiences of policy enactment, service delivery, ethical behavior, and meaningful engagement. Bridging policy and people requires more than sound policy design; it demands inclusive governance, accountable leadership, and sustained dialogue between institutions and citizens.

LIMITATIONS

This study is context-specific to Philippine local governance and relies on self-reported experiences, which may introduce recall and social desirability bias. The purposive sample may also overrepresent active service users. As a qualitative study, findings are interpretive and not statistically generalizable, though they offer analytic insights transferable to similar governance contexts.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE.

Introduction: Section A

Background information.

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

Services of the government regularly used:

Section B: Interview Questionnaires.

Please explain your experience with the government institutions?

What makes you put your faith or doubt government offices?

Does transparency and honesty influence your trust in government?

What are your impressions of government services and are they satisfactory or not?

What impact might government communication have on your policy trustworthiness?

How are the citizens engaged in the processes of decision-making?

How can the government institutions improve themselves to win the trust of the people?