

Theoretical and fundamental

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A comparative study of government and governance: investigating semantic differences in Iran's contemporary urban planning and management system

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Abstract

The semantic and functional ambiguities between “governance” and “governability” have created significant theoretical and practical challenges within contemporary Iranian urban planning and management systems. This research elucidates the conceptual distinctions between governance, defined as a formal, hierarchical, and state-centric structure, and governability, characterized as a networked, participatory, and multi-actor process. The core problem addresses the substantive differences between these two paradigms across dimensions such as legitimacy source, decision-making structure, stakeholder scope, governmental role, and ultimate policy objective, and how these ambiguities impact the efficacy of urban policies.

Employing a qualitative content analysis with a categorical approach, the study scrutinizes specialized texts and Iranian policy documents from the past two decades (2005-2025). It integrates deductive reasoning, based on theoretical frameworks, with inductive reasoning derived from textual data. The sample, drawn from upstream urban planning documents, utilized purposive sampling to ensure maximum diversity. Findings indicate that the conceptual confusion has led to inefficient policy design, diminished public participation, and weakened institutional effectiveness. This is evident, as governance-centric solutions, such as participatory development, prove incompatible with traditional governance frameworks and top-down decision-making approaches. The crucial distinction lies in the shift from exclusive state control in governance to coordination and facilitation within a network of governmental, private, and civil actors. This research proposes a conceptual framework to address these ambiguities, providing recommendations for enhancing the application of these concepts in urban policymaking to promote optimal urban governance.

Keywords

Local Decision-Making
Qualitative Content Analysis
Urban Management
Urban Planning
Urban Policymaking

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1. Introduction

In the 21st-century sphere of public policymaking and urban studies, the increasing complexity of urban issues, including informal settlements, environmental instability, and socio-economic inequalities, has posed fundamental challenges to traditional patterns of managing and administering societal affairs (Raschendorfer & Figueira, 2024, p. 815). The classic paradigm of "Government," which is based on the centrality of the state as the sole authority for power, decision-making, and implementation, has proven inefficient in facing the multi-faceted dynamics of contemporary societies, especially in the realm of urban planning and management (Harrison & Geyer, 2021, pp. 18-20). This inefficiency is particularly evident in issues tied to the daily lives of citizens, such as dilapidated infrastructure, spatial identity, ecological sustainability, and access to urban services (Peralta & Rubalcaba, 2021).

In this context, a new discourse under the title of "Governance" has emerged, which is not merely a lexical substitute but represents a paradigmatic shift in understanding the structure of power, the decision-making process, and the actors in the public sphere (Durose & Lowndes, 2021). However, despite the importance of this distinction, in many academic texts and policy documents, these two concepts are used synonymously or with ambiguity and imprecision (Filgueiras, Palotti, & Testa). This semantic confusion has significant practical consequences for the quality of policymaking, the effectiveness of development projects, and the level of citizen participation (Torfing et al, 2021), and for this reason, clarifying the differences between these two concepts has become a vital issue in urban studies and policy research (Meijer, Lips, & Chen, 2019).

The primary objective of this research is to analyze and explain the semantic, theoretical, and functional differences between "Government" and "Governance," as well as to examine the consequences of their

incorrect application in Iran's urban planning and management system (Figure 1). The government is traditionally referred to as the formal institutions and structures of the state (Harel & Shinar, 2022); specifically, the three branches (executive, legislative, and judicial) that, through legal and hierarchical processes, exercise power and formulate and implement policies (Torfing et al., 2021). In this model, the source of legitimacy is the constitution and elections, the decision-making structure is vertical and top-down, and citizens are primarily considered recipients of services or subjects of laws (de Souza & Rossoni, 2025).

In contrast, Governance refers to interactive processes and networks in which, in addition to the state, other actors from the private sector, civil society, and even individual citizens participate in the process of policymaking, decision-making, and implementation (Sekher, Parasuraman, & Kattumuri, 2018; Christiano, Creppell, & Knight, 2018). In the Governance model, power is distributed horizontally and within a network of stakeholders, and legitimacy stems not only from the law but also from efficiency, accountability, and consensus-building (Dahlström & Wängnerud, 2015; Börzel & Risse, 2021).

Based on this, the conceptual model of the article, in addition to the main dimensions that differentiate between Government and Governance (i.e., source of legitimacy, power structure, role of the state, stakeholders, and decision-making mechanism), includes a mediating dimension that presents the research topic. This dimension clearly illustrates how discursive shifts from 'Government' to 'Governance'

At the textual level, this leads to practical contradictions and inefficiencies due to the persistence of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures. Thus, the reader, while understanding the theoretical distinctions, will also be able to observe the direct consequences of these fluctuations on Iran's urban management.

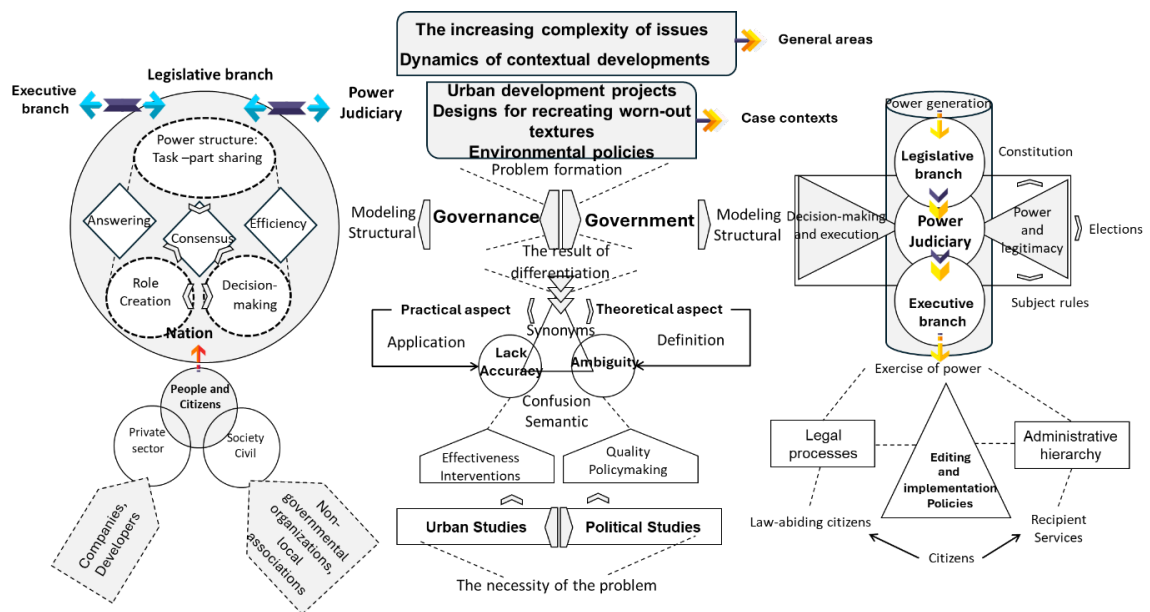


Figure 1. An informative framework for the problem statement based on existing ideas about the research topic

The importance and necessity of this research stem from the fact that many failures of urban development projects, regeneration plans for dilapidated textures, or environmental policies are rooted in this very conceptual ambiguity (Jäntti, Paananen, Kork, & Kurkela, 2023, p. 1533). For example, when a policy document speaks of “citizen participation” (one of the pillars of Governance), but in practice, its implementation mechanisms are defined within the framework of a rigid and unresponsive Government structure, the result will be nothing but tokenistic participation and public distrust (Durose & Lowndes, 2021, p. 1779; Åström, 2020). Comprehensive plans that are formulated without considering the local knowledge of residents and the interests of local actors are clear examples of thinking based on traditional Government, which quickly loses its efficiency when faced with the social and economic complexities of the city (Kiss et al., 2022).

Therefore, a precise explanation of this distinction is a fundamental step towards improving urban policymaking, strengthening stakeholder participation, and achieving sustainable and equitable development through a deep understanding of this difference. This understanding enables policymakers, planners, and urban managers to select the most suitable tools and approaches for each specific situation.

This research seeks to answer fundamental questions that arise from this problem. These questions are formulated to break down the main problem into analyzable components for more detailed examination:

1. What are the fundamental differences between

Government and Governance from the perspective of the source of power legitimacy, decision-making structure, and the role and scope of stakeholder participation?

2. How does this conceptual distinction affect the redefinition of the state’s role (from exclusive implementer to facilitator) and the change in the ultimate goal of policymaking (from maintaining order to sustainable development) in the public arena?

3. What are the practical consequences of the ambiguity and incorrect application of these concepts in Iran’s urban planning processes, and how can conceptual clarification help improve policy effectiveness?

In line with answering these questions, the present research pursues specific objectives, which are:

- Identifying and analyzing the semantic and conceptual differences between Government and Governance based on theoretical foundations and specialized literature (Figure 17).
- Examining the ambiguities arising from the incorrect application of these concepts in Iranian urban planning and policy texts (Figures 8 and 9).
- Analyzing the consequences of these ambiguities on the effectiveness of policymaking and implementation in case examples of urban projects (Findings results).
- Providing recommendations to resolve semantic ambiguities and improve the application of these concepts in policy documents to strengthen participatory and network-based approaches (Table 6).

2. Theoretical and Empirical Background

2.1. The Traditional Paradigm of Government

The concept of “Government” in its classic sense is deeply intertwined with the emergence of modern nation-states and Weberian state theory. Max Weber considered the state an institution that possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a specific territorial boundary (Anter, 2019, pp. 3-8). This definition forms the foundation of the traditional understanding of Government: a hierarchical, formal, and bureaucratic structure that exercises power through laws, regulations, and specific institutions (executive, legislative, and judicial branches) (Sørensen & Torfing, 2024). In this paradigm, the state is not only the primary actor but also the almost sole legitimate actor in the public policymaking arena.

The philosophical roots of this perspective can be traced back to social contract thinkers like Thomas Hobbes (Williams, 2025), who, in his classic work *Leviathan*, argues that citizens, to escape the “state of nature” and chaos, surrender part of their freedom to a central and powerful sovereignty to ensure order and security (Lloyd & Sreedhar, 2022; Sorell, 2025).

In the realm of public policy, this state-centric paradigm manifested as the “rational model” or the “top-down” approach. According to this model, the policymaking process is a linear and logical cycle led by government experts and bureaucrats (Rydin, 2021, pp. 19-40): first, the problem is identified, then various solutions are evaluated, the optimal option is selected, and finally, it is communicated as a directive or law for implementation (Rammata, 2024). In this view, other sectors of society, including the private sector and civil society, are considered either as tools in the state’s hands for implementing policies or as passive recipients of services (Macnaghten, 2022). Citizen participation, at best, is limited to participating in periodic elections to determine official representatives and plays no role in the complex process of policy formulation and implementation (Kurkela et al, 2023). In the field of architecture and urban planning, this thinking manifested in the form of “rational comprehensive planning” (Fainstein, 2025). This approach, which peaked in the mid-twentieth century, was based on the belief that through scientific and data-driven analysis, a “master plan” (Competing Models) and long-term vision for the city could be developed, specifying the physical development of the city for decades to come as a detailed roadmap (Masemann, 2024, pp. 17–31). Comprehensive urban plans in many countries, including Iran, are products of

this thinking; documents prepared by consulting engineers and government institutions (such as the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development) with minimal interaction with residents and local stakeholders, and communicated to municipalities for implementation (Lashkari & Khalaj, 2019, pp. 16-17). This Government model, although it had efficiencies in its time for creating basic infrastructure and organizing rapid urban development, gradually faced severe criticism (Pacchi, 2018). Critics argued that this approach ignores the complexities of social life, economic dynamics, and cultural diversity of the city (Purkarthofer, Humer, & Mattila, 2021) and, by imposing an abstract order from above, leads to spatial alienation, the destruction of valuable social fabrics, and the creation of soulless and dysfunctional urban environments (Abujder Ochoa, et al, 2025). The failure of many of these comprehensive plans in practice and their inability to predict and manage urban changes paved the way for doubting the adequacy of the traditional Government paradigm and searching for new models.

2.2. The Emergence and Evolution of the Governance Concept

From the 1980s onwards, a series of global transformations shook the foundations of the state-centric Government paradigm (Walls, 2018). The globalization of the economy and capital flows weakened the power of nation-states in controlling economic variables (Head, 2022). The emergence of “Wicked Problems” and “Perfect Storms” such as climate change, migration crises, and growing inequalities, which lacked technical and straightforward solutions (Head, 2022, pp. 21-36), revealed the state’s inability to solve complex problems by relying on rational linear approaches (Hartley, Kuecker, & Woo, 2019). Simultaneously, the financial crises of the welfare state in the West and structural adjustment programs in developing countries reduced the state’s financial capacity to provide public services (Hermann, 2014, pp. 112-113), thereby opening up space for the private sector and non-governmental organizations to play a greater role.

In this context, the concept of “Governance” moved from the margins to the center and became the primary keyword in public policy discourse (Ismail & Kamat, 2018). “Governance” in its new sense refers to the process of managing society’s affairs through a network of interactions among public, private, and civil society actors. This concept, rather than focusing

on formal state institutions, emphasizes the processes, relationships, and mechanisms of “cooperation” and “coordination” (Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024).

Two prominent theorists who significantly contributed to explaining this conceptual transition are R.A.W. Rhodes and Gerry Stoker. Rhodes, in his influential article, “The New Governance: Governing without Government,” argued that we are witnessing a process of “hollowing out the state.” This means that the state has delegated many of its executive functions to semi-autonomous agencies, the private sector, or local levels, and its role has changed from “Rowing” to “Steering.” In this view, policymaking is no longer a state monopoly. However, it takes shape in “Policy Networks,” where public and non-governmental organizations are forced to negotiate and exchange due to mutual dependence on each other’s resources (such as information, money, legitimacy) (Rhodes, 1996).

Gerry Stoker, offering a more comprehensive definition, proposed five main propositions to describe Governance: 1. Governance involves a set of institutions and actors from within and outside the government. 2. The boundaries and responsibilities between the public, private, and voluntary sectors are blurred and changing. 3. In Governance networks, there is an interdependence of power among actors, and cooperation is necessary to achieve goals. 4. These networks operate in a “Self-Governing” manner and resist direct state intervention. 5. The state is no longer the sole authority exercising power but needs to use new tools and cooperate with other actors to achieve its goals (Stoker, 1998).

This conceptual transformation is not just a lexical change but represents a fundamental shift in the logic of governing society. Table 1 summarizes the contrast between these two paradigms based on the key dimensions considered in this research:

Table 1. Comparative comparison of government and governance paradigms in existing ideas

Feature	Government	Governance
Nature	An institution or formal structure (The State)	A process or set of relationships (A Process)
Main Actors	Government institutions and bureaucracy	State, private sector, civil society, citizens
Power Structure	Hierarchical, vertical, centralized	Networked, horizontal, decentralized
Role of State	Controller, exclusive implementer, rower	Coordinator, facilitator, steerer
Source of Legitimacy	Constitution, elections, sovereignty	Efficiency, accountability, consensus, participation
Decision-Making Mechanism	Command, order, legislation (top-down)	Negotiation, dialogue, consensus-building, cooperation
Approach to Policy	Policy Making and Implementation	Collective Problem-Solving
Boundaries	Clear boundaries between state and society	Blurred and intertwined boundaries between sectors

This table clearly shows that Governance recognizes the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the administration process and, unlike the apparent simplicity of the Government model, emphasizes interaction and interdependence. However, it should be noted that Governance does not necessarily mean the weakening of the state. Instead, as Pierre and Peters argue, the state can play a central role in “Meta-Governance” (Pierre & Peters, 2020); that is, instead of direct control, it designs and manages the rules of the game in networks and ensures that these networks move in the direction of the public interest (Sørensen, 2006).

2.3. Governance in Architecture and Urban Planning

The inherent complexities of the city have turned it into a natural laboratory for the transition from Government to Governance (Dijk, Edelenbos, & Rooijen, 2017, pp. 1-5). In no field is the conflict of interest, diversity of actors, and intertwining of social, economic, and physical issues as evident as in urban planning (Ochoa et al, 2025, p. 5). In this context, the concept of “Urban Governance” emerged as an approach to managing these complexities.

Patsy Healey, one of the prominent theorists in this field, presented the “communicative or collaborative

planning” model, which breathes the spirit of Governance into the body of urban planning (Healey, 2007). Healey, by criticizing the rational-technical approach, argues that urban planning is fundamentally a social and political process in which different values and interests collide (Healey, 2005, pp. 202-207). Therefore, the goal of planning should not be to impose a predetermined optimal plan, but to create “public arenas” for dialogue and “consensus-building” among all stakeholders of an urban space (from residents and local businesses to developers and government institutions) (Lin, 2022). In this view, expert knowledge is only one type of knowledge. It must be placed alongside the indigenous and experiential knowledge of citizens to lead to more

sustainable and just solutions (Herzog et al, 2023). Simultaneously, international organizations such as the UN-Habitat also promoted the concept of “Good Urban Governance” (UN-Habitat, 2007, pp. 18-23). This concept is based on a set of norms and principles considered essential for achieving sustainable, just, and livable cities. These principles include: sustainability, decentralization and the principle of subsidiarity, equity and justice, efficiency, transparency and accountability, civic engagement and citizenship, and security (UN-Habitat, 2025). This framework demonstrates that effective governance focuses not only on structures and processes but also on outcomes and the quality of life for citizens.

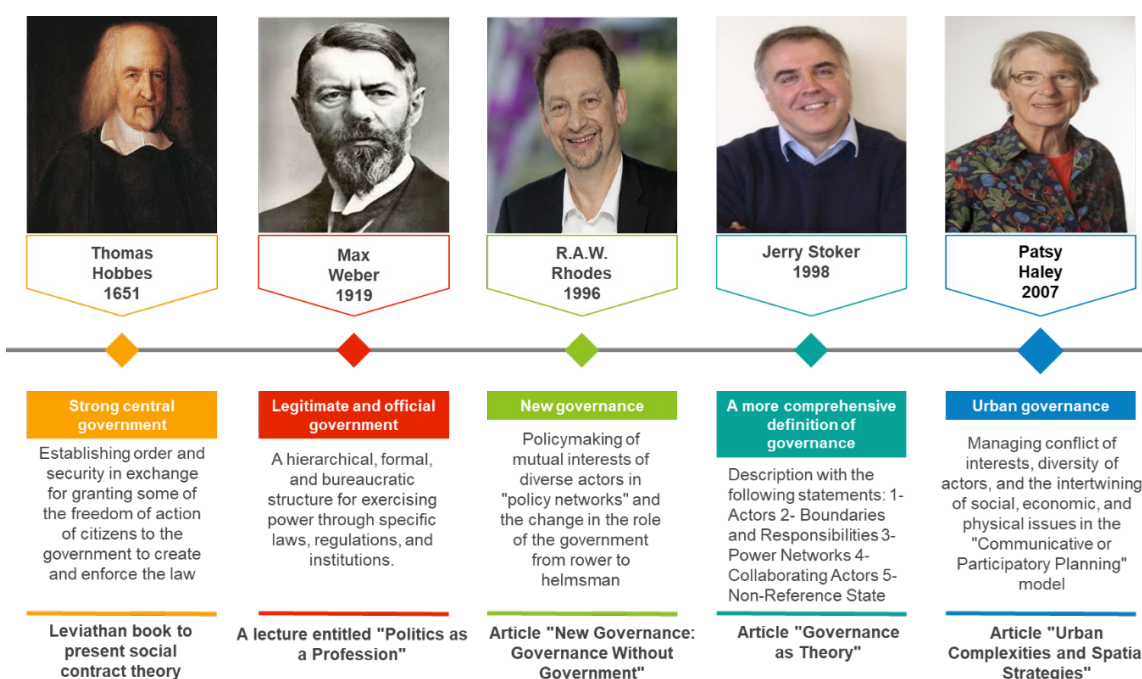


Figure 2. The theoretical evolution from government to governance

However, the discourse of urban governance has not been immune to criticism. Some critics, such as Fainstein (2010), believe that excessive emphasis on process and consensus-building may lead to neglecting fundamental issues of power and inequality (Breen et al, 2020). In many participatory processes, more powerful groups (like large developers) have a greater ability to influence outcomes due to access to more resources, and the voices of marginalized and subordinate groups are not heard (Wedel, 2009). There is also concern that governance networks, due to a lack of transparency and accountability in relation to formal democratic mechanisms, may lead to a

“shadow government” and undermine responsibility (Bortel & Mullins, 2009; Levelt & Metz, 2013).

At the international level, extensive literature has been devoted to the comparative study of Government and governance, as well as the examination of its instances in various fields. Many studies have shown that environmental, health, and regional development policies designed based on the principles of network governance have achieved more effective and sustainable results (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007). In Iran, too, attention to the concept of urban governance in academic literature has increased in the last two decades. Many researchers have criticized

Iran's centralized and state-centric urban management structure, considering it a significant obstacle to sustainable urban development. Gholamreza Kazemian, in his works, has detailed the challenges of transitioning from "urban government" to "urban governance" in Iran's metropolises and explained the structural, legal, and cultural obstacles to its realization (Kazemian et al., 2019). Marzieh Jalali, in presenting a successful local example of attracting citizen participation by examining urban regeneration experiences, demonstrates that projects lacking a participatory approach based on governance have failed to achieve their social objectives (Jalali & Hatami-Nejad, 2024). The meta-analysis research presented by Zamani and Asadpour highlights that, despite the formulation of guidelines for implementing urban regeneration projects in Iran, these projects still encounter executive obstacles during the implementation stage (Zamani & Asadpour, 2023). Fatemeh Farjamtalab, in the article extracted from her dissertation, emphasizes the necessity of regenerating Iran's urban planning system based on the principles of good governance, emphasizing the role of civil institutions and citizen participation (Farjamtalab & Sajadzadeh, 2024). Despite this valuable research, a specific research gap remains. Most existing research has either focused on

the theoretical explanation of the governance concept or on a general critique of the Government structure in Iran. However, research that specifically addresses the "semantic ambiguity" between these two words in "policy documents" and "planning texts" using a rigorous methodology, such as qualitative content analysis, and traces the "practical consequences" of this ambiguity has received less attention. Many upstream documents and urban development plans in Iran utilize keywords such as "participation," "empowerment," and "cooperation," which are part of the governance discourse. However, in the deeper layers of the text and in the proposed executive mechanisms, they still adhere to the hierarchical and top-down logic of the Government. This "Discursive Duality" creates expectations that the existing structures are unable to meet, ultimately leading to frustration and distrust. The paradigmatic shift from Government to Governance (Figure 3) encompasses dimensions beyond changes in social structures and participatory procedures, and at its core, represents a transformation in economic logic and the rearrangement of political power in the public arena, particularly at the urban scale. Understanding these dimensions is essential for a more precise analysis of why centralized systems resist the actual acceptance of governance.

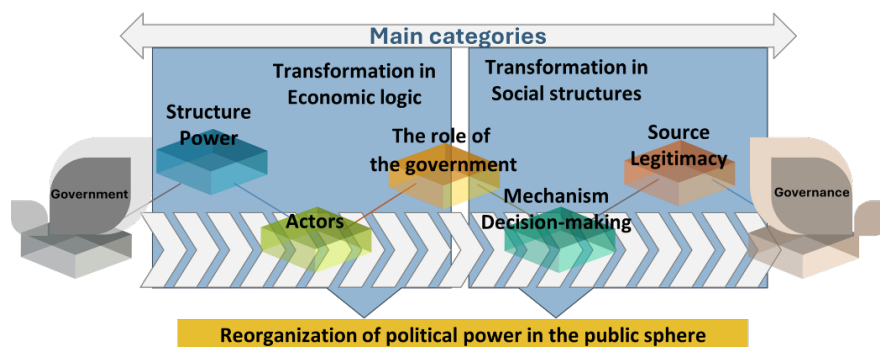


Figure 3. Representation of this research's conceptual framework

Based on the above literature review, this research builds its theoretical framework on a combined and critical basis. This framework, on the one hand, recognizes the fundamental distinction between Government and Governance based on the dimensions proposed by theorists such as Rhodes, Stoker, and Healey. These five dimensions (power structure, actors, role of the state, decision-making mechanism, and source of legitimacy) will be used as the "main categories" in the qualitative content analysis process

of this research. On the other hand, inspired by critical perspectives, this research not only describes these two paradigms but also critically examines them. However, it seeks to explore how the ambiguous and instrumental use of governance terminology in a structural context, still dominated by the logic of Government, can lead to the reproduction of unequal power relations and the weakening of genuine participation.

3. Research Methodology

The selected research method is “Qualitative Content Analysis” of the “Categorical Analysis” type. This method is one of the most systematic approaches to analyzing textual data in the social sciences, enabling the researcher to gain a structured understanding of the data by breaking down the text into specific units and then classifying these units into predefined or emerging categories (ÖZDEN, 2024). This method was chosen for two main reasons (Sandhiya & Bhuvanewari, 2025): first, its ability to manage a large volume of textual data systematically, and second, its flexibility in combining deductive (theory-based) and inductive (data-based) approaches, which is essential for providing a logically inquiry-based answer to the research questions. The components of this methodology are detailed below.

The statistical population of this research comprises all upstream documents and texts related to urban policymaking and planning in Iran that have been formulated or published over the last two decades (2005-2025). Given the vast size of the statistical population, analyzing all documents is impossible; therefore, “Purposive Sampling” of the “Typical Case Sampling” and “Maximum Variation Sampling” types is used. The goal of this sampling method is not to achieve statistical representation but to select “Information-Rich Cases” that can best illuminate the phenomenon under study.

The executive process of the current research follows the standard stages of categorical qualitative content analysis and includes nine interconnected steps, which are detailed below:

- a. Text Transcription: In this initial step, all selected documents from various formats are collected and converted into a standard and uniform text format (PDF, Word) to be prepared for import into the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. This standardization facilitates the coding and search process in the later stages.
- b. Defining the Unit of Analysis and Unit of Meaning: In this research, the “unit of analysis” is each complete document (e.g., the entire Tehran Comprehensive Plan document), which allows us to make overall comparisons between documents. However, the central working unit is the “unit of meaning” or “coding unit,” defined as the smallest part of the text that contains a complete and interpretable meaning. This unit can be a sentence, a paragraph, or a clause of a legal article. The decision on the

boundaries of each unit of meaning was based on the researcher’s judgment to extract a coherent idea.

- c. Developing the Coding Manual: This stage is the methodological heart of the research. The coding manual acts as the “measurement tool” of the research and includes a list of all categories, codes, their precise definitions, and rules for assigning codes to the text. This manual is compiled as a table to ensure the reliability and transparency of the process.
- d. Pilot Coding: Before the main coding, a small portion of the data (10 to 15% of the total texts) was pilot coded by the research team. The purpose of this stage was to test the efficiency and clarity of the coding manual in practice. In this process, ambiguous definitions were corrected, similar codes were merged, and, if necessary, new codes that emerged inductively from the text were added to the manual.
- e. Main Coding: After finalizing the coding manual, the process of systematically coding the entire dataset began. Each unit of meaning in the text was read carefully, and one or more appropriate codes from the manual were assigned to it. This was done using MAXQDA software to facilitate the management and retrieval of codes in the analysis stage.
- f. Assessing Coding Consistency: To ensure that the coding process was not conducted arbitrarily and possessed sufficient objectivity and reliability, the “Inter-Coder Reliability” method was used.
- g. & 8. Extracting Results and Data Analysis: These two stages are intertwined. After coding is complete, the analysis process begins at two levels:
 - Descriptive Analysis: At this level, the coded data is described. This includes counting code frequencies, drawing tables and charts that show the presence of each category in different documents, and creating matrices to examine code co-occurrence (e.g., whether the “participation” code often appears alongside the “centralized decision-making” code). This part constitutes the research findings.
 - Interpretive Analysis: This level goes beyond description and seeks to answer the “So what?” question. Here, the patterns identified in the previous stage are interpreted and analyzed in light of the theoretical framework and research questions. The relationships between categories are analyzed, and macro-themes are extracted from them. This part forms the research results and discussion.
- h. Reporting the Data Process: At the end of the

research, a transparent report of all stages undertaken, challenges (such as difficulty in accessing some documents), and methodological decisions made will be provided. This transparency is essential to increase the “Trustworthiness” and “Confirmability” of the findings, which are the qualitative equivalents of reliability and validity.

4. Research Design Implementation Process

This section, as the beating heart of the research, provides a transparent and precise report on how the

qualitative content analysis method was implemented step-by-step. The purpose of this detailed report is not to repeat methodological discussions but to demonstrate the concrete and operational process of the research so that the reader can clearly trace the path taken from raw textual data to the initial findings (Figure 4). This transparency is the cornerstone of the validity and confirmability of the final results. Below, the report on the implementation of the nine key research steps, from data preparation to final analysis, is presented in detail.

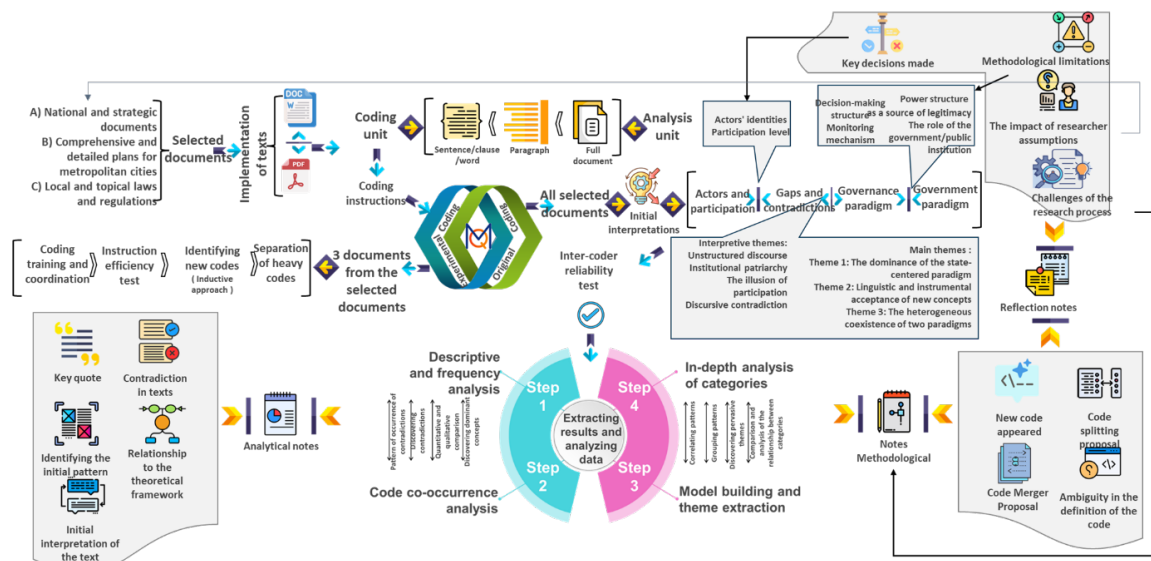


Figure 4. The process of implementing the research method

a. Report on the Process of Text Implementation and Preparation: Based on the purposive sampling strategy described in the methodology section, after preliminary reviews, 18 key documents were finally selected as the textual corpus for this research (Table 2 and Figure 5). The main criterion for this selection was the strategic impact of these documents on shaping the physical and managerial space of Iranian

cities, as well as their explicit or implicit engagement with concepts related to Government and Governance. This collection, aiming for maximum variation, included documents at different national and local scales, as well as various types (laws, comprehensive plans, and strategic documents). The list of selected documents is as follows:

Table 2. List of key documents selected for content analysis and the reasons for their selection

No.	Document Title	Reason for Selection and Importance for Research
A) National and Strategic Documents		
A1	7th Five-Year Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan Law (2024-2028)	As a macro-level upstream document, it specifies the general orientations of the state in all sectors, including urban management and participation, and outlines the official language of the state.
A2	National Spatial Planning Document (Approved 2020)	This document establishes the framework for the spatial distribution of activities and population at the national level, revealing the theoretical basis for centralization or decentralization within the state.

No.	Document Title	Reason for Selection and Importance for Research
A) National and Strategic Documents		
A3	National Strategic Document for Sustainable Urban Regeneration (Approved by the Cabinet, 2014)	One of the first national documents to extensively use Governance literature (participation, community-based, facilitation). Its analysis is vital for understanding the discursive gap.
A4	Law on Organizing and Supporting Housing Production and Supply (Approved 2008)	This law defines the roles of the state, private sector, and other institutions in one of the most important urban sectors (housing) and is a good example of Government logic in action.
A5	Law on Supporting Knowledge-Based Companies and Institutions and Commercializing Innovations (Approved 2010)	To examine whether the discourse of Governance and networking is used differently in modern fields (knowledge-based economy) compared to traditional fields (development).
B) Comprehensive and Detailed Plans of Metropolises		
B6	Main Document of the Comprehensive Plan of Tehran City (Approved 2007)	As an example of second-generation comprehensive plans that, despite a predominantly physical approach, made efforts to include social concepts. Its analysis is a good basis for comparison.
B7	"Guiding Document for the Comprehensive Plan of Tehran City" Report	This document outlines the theoretical and intellectual foundations underlying the Tehran Comprehensive Plan, providing essential insight into its governing principles.
B8	Main Document of the Comprehensive Plan of Isfahan City (Approved 2016)	As an example of new-generation comprehensive plans that claim a structural-strategic and participatory approach. Its analysis is key to evaluating the realization of these claims.
B9	Main Document of the Comprehensive Plan of Mashhad City (Approved 2016)	Mashhad was chosen due to its unique economic-religious structure and the powerful role of non-governmental institutions (like Astan Quds) in urban development, showing the complexities of governance.
B10	Sections of the Detailed Plan for District 22 of Tehran	This district, due to rapid development, large-scale projects, and the presence of cooperatives and powerful institutions, is an excellent example for analyzing the conflict between formal planning logic and the real power of actors.
C) Local and Thematic Laws and Resolutions		
C11	Law on the Establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran (Approved 1972, with subsequent amendments)	This law serves as the legal foundation for Iran's centralized planning structure, and its analysis is essential for understanding the legal roots of the centralized Government.
C12	Law on Supporting the Revitalization, Improvement, and Renovation of Dilapidated and Inefficient Urban Textures (Approved 2010)	This law specifically addresses one of the most complex urban issues, the resolution of which is impossible without the participation of residents, and the legislator's language in this regard is very telling.
C13	Collection of Resolutions of the Islamic City Council of Tehran (Fifth Term) regarding "Public-Private Partnership"	To analyze how a city council that came to power with reformist and participatory slogans operationalized and defined the concept of participation in its resolutions.
C14	Articles of Association and Executive Guideline for Renovation Facilitation Offices (Tashilgary) in Dilapidated Textures	These offices were designed as intermediary institutions and examples of Governance mechanisms. Analyzing their articles of association reveals the extent to which authority and power were delegated to them in practice.
C15	Justification Report and Support Studies for the Farahzad River-Valley Revitalization Project in Tehran	Selection of a specific, large-scale project with complex environmental, social, and economic dimensions, and analyzing how its document addresses the conflicting interests of various stakeholders.
C16	Municipalities Law (with latest amendments)	As the parent document that defines the framework of authorities and duties of the local urban management institution, it is crucial for understanding the structural limitations of municipalities.

No.	Document Title	Reason for Selection and Importance for Research
C) Local and Thematic Laws and Resolutions		
C17	Executive Bylaw of Article 33 of the Building Engineering and Control System Law (Second Part of National Regulations)	This bylaw regulates the relationships between engineers, municipalities, and builders, and is an example of micro-scale regulation in one of the high-conflict urban fields.
C18	Selected Minutes of Article 5 Group Meetings in Provincial Centers	To directly and immediately observe the decision-making logic in one of the most important urban planning institutions and to analyze members' arguments for or against requests.

Doc...	Docume...	Document ...	Introduction / Overview / Outlook	Goals and strategies	Legal Articles / Implementing Regulations	Mechanisms and processes	Attachments / Supporting Studies
A1	National	Law	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
A2	National	Strategic	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
A3	National	Strategic	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A4	National	Law	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A5	National	Law	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B6	Local	Master plan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
B7	Local	Supporting ...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
B8	Local	Master plan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
B9	Local	Master plan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
B10	Local	Detailed plan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
C11	National	Law	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C12	National	Law	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
C13	Local	Enactment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C14	Local/N...	Regulations	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C15	Local	Supporting ...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C16	National	Law	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C17	National	Regulations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C18	Local	Enactment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 5. List of key documents selected for content analysis

b. Final Definition of Units of Analysis and Coding:

After importing the data into the software, the units of analysis and coding were operationally and finally defined.

- Unit of Analysis: Each of the 18 documents was considered an independent unit of analysis. This approach allowed us to make meaningful comparisons between different documents in the final analysis stage.

- Unit of Meaning or Coding: After preliminary reviews and pilot coding, it was determined that the "paragraph" was the most suitable unit of coding for the bulk of the texts (reports and analyses). A paragraph usually contained a coherent idea or argument that allowed for interpretation and code assignment. Choosing a smaller unit (such as a sentence) would lead to excessive fragmentation of meaning, while choosing a larger unit (such as a page or section) would reduce the precision of the analysis. However, this rule had one important exception: for legal and juridical texts (such as laws passed by parliament or bylaws), each independent "article,"

"note," or "clause" was considered a coding unit, as each of these components carried a specific and independent command or rule.

c. Presentation of the Final Coding Manual: The initial coding manual, developed based on theoretical foundations, was significantly refined and completed during the pilot coding stage. Ambiguous codes were clarified, similar codes were merged, and most importantly, several new codes emerged inductively from the data itself. The final manual included six main categories and 32 sub-codes. This manual was used as the detailed roadmap for coding all the data.

d. Report on the Pilot Coding Process and Instrument Refinement: This stage played a vital role in increasing the research's validity and reliability. To conduct the pilot coding, three documents representing three different types of text were selected. These documents, accounting for about 18% of the total textual corpus, were independently coded by the two researchers (authors of the research) using the initial version of the coding manual, with the following objectives:

- Testing the Manual's Efficiency: To check if the code

definitions were sufficiently unambiguous.

- Identifying New Codes (Inductive Approach): To see if there were important themes in the texts that were not included in the initial framework.
- Training and Coordinating Coders: To create a common understanding and uniform procedure among the research team. The results of this stage were very insightful. During this stage, it was found that some codes needed further differentiation. It was also found that some of the initial codes were too general and, in practice, could not distinguish between semantic nuances. After these corrections, the final manual was prepared for the next stage.

e. Report on Main Coding Implementation: After finalizing the coding manual, the primary coding process began on all 18 documents by the principal researcher. This intensive process spanned several years. To increase accuracy and record interpretive ideas, the advanced features of MAXQDA software were used extensively. Specifically, a separate “memo” was created for each important or ambiguous coding. In these memos, the reason for choosing that code, initial interpretations, its connection to other parts of the text, and questions that arose during the analysis

stage were recorded. These memos, which collectively covered the main categories, served as an “analytical notebook” and played a crucial role in reconstructing the logic of interpretations during the final data analysis stage. At the end of this stage, a total of 87,128 segments (coding units) were coded and classified throughout the textual corpus, indicating the depth and breadth of the analysis performed.

f. Report on Assessing Coding Consistency and Reliability: To ensure the reliability and objectivity of the coding process, an inter-coder reliability test was performed. In this method, a portion of the data (usually 20% of the sample) that was not part of the pilot coding process was selected and independently coded by the other author of the research (the second coder). Their results were then compared using the “Intercoder Agreement” module in MAXQDA, and the agreement coefficient was calculated using the “Cohen’s Kappa” statistic (Figure 6). Disagreements were resolved through discussion between the coders, and in some cases, agreement was reached on the correct code to make the definitions in the manual more straightforward.



Code	Agreements	Disagreements	Cohen's Kappa	Percent
29947	26464	3483	0.88	88.37

Figure 6. Assessing inter-coder reliability between the primary and auxiliary coders regarding the pilot coding of “government”

The analysis result was a Cohen’s Kappa coefficient of 0.88. Since values above 0.8 are considered “very good” or “excellent” agreement in methodological literature, this result showed that the coding manual was sufficiently clear and precise, and the coding process was conducted with a high degree of consistency and stability.

g & h. Describing the Process of Extracting Results and Data Analysis: After completing and validating the coding reliability, the multi-stage data analysis process began to extract the results. This process moved from description to interpretation:

- **Step 1: Descriptive and Frequency Analysis.** In the first step, using the software’s statistical tools, the

frequency of each of the 32 main themes/codes in the entire dataset, as well as broken down by each document, was calculated. This provided a general overview of the dominant concepts in Iran’s urban policymaking discourse (Figure 6). For instance, the presence/absence and frequency of codes related to “Governance” in a “new generation comprehensive plan” (like Isfahan’s plan) could be compared with an “old generation comprehensive plan” (like Tehran’s plan), or with “Government” in the same or other documents.

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	B6	B7	B8	B9	B10	C11	C12	C13	C14	C15	C16	C17	C18
Original content coding																		
1. Government paradigm																		
1-1. Power Structure (in Government)	359	67	17	5	3	82	17	65	253	4	1	6	185	35		24	23	17
1-2. Source of Legitimacy (in Government)	3243	53	94	120	39	542	69	129	2497	51	16	96	13003	161	3	301	152	50
1-3. The role of the government/public institution (in Government)	988	64	42	34	30	154	75	117	403	30	3	40	3031	80	6	108	49	78
1-4. Decision-making structure (in Government)	340	3	4	17	1	73	39	8	54	16		6	927	21	2	8	31	8
1.5. Oversight Mechanism (in Government)	148	11	1	6	3	13	33	19	75	5	1	4	824	45		21	52	14
2. Governance paradigm																		
2.1. Power Structure (in Governance)	504	222	31	23	12	323	57	66	986	38	1	11	4683	133	2	11	33	88
2.2. Source of Legitimacy (in Governance)	500	49	8	18	11	122	59	73	1074	8	4	6	1248	102	6	29	5	107
2-3. The role of the government/public institution (in governance)	1188	149	39	48	38	281	105	118	1814	52	7	25	2512	168	8	168	102	82
2-4. Decision-making structure (in governance)	620	224	20	11	15	204	51	67	758	4	3	12	1710	72	1	232	5	60
2.5. Oversight Mechanism (in Governance)	230	7	3	2	4	18	8	19	41	3		2	1038	25		30	4	3

Figure 7. Comparison of the presence and non-identical frequency of codes in the sources

- **Step 2: Code Co-occurrence Analysis.** In the next step, the “Code Relations Browser” tool was used to analyze the simultaneous occurrence of codes within a single segment. This analysis was crucial in identifying “discursive contradictions” (Figure 9). For example, it was examined how often the “genuine participation” code appeared alongside the “centralized decision-making” code (an apparent contradiction) and how often it appeared alongside the “delegation of authority” code (a logical consistency). The results of these analyses, in the form of cross-tabulation

matrices, led to the creation of three different types of gaps. The occurrence pattern of these contradictions (Figure 8) also shows that national documents contain the fewest contradictions; however, their interpretability has led to comprehensive and detailed city plans, which, contrary to this trend, create the most contradictions in implementing these strategies in a concrete context. The most common type of this contradiction is idealism in the laws, which, due to the hierarchical structure in governments, has increased its emergence at the lower level, i.e., local resolutions.

Code System	A) National and strategic documents	B) Comprehensive and detailed plans for metropolitan cities	C) Local and topical laws and regulations
Original content coding			
4. Discursive gap and contradiction			
4.1. Idealistic language (rule-making) versus operational logic (governance)	■	■	■
4.2. Conditional delegation of authority	■	■	■
4.3. Instrumental use of concepts (such as participation for financing)	■	■	■

Figure 8. Pattern of contradiction occurrence in the documents

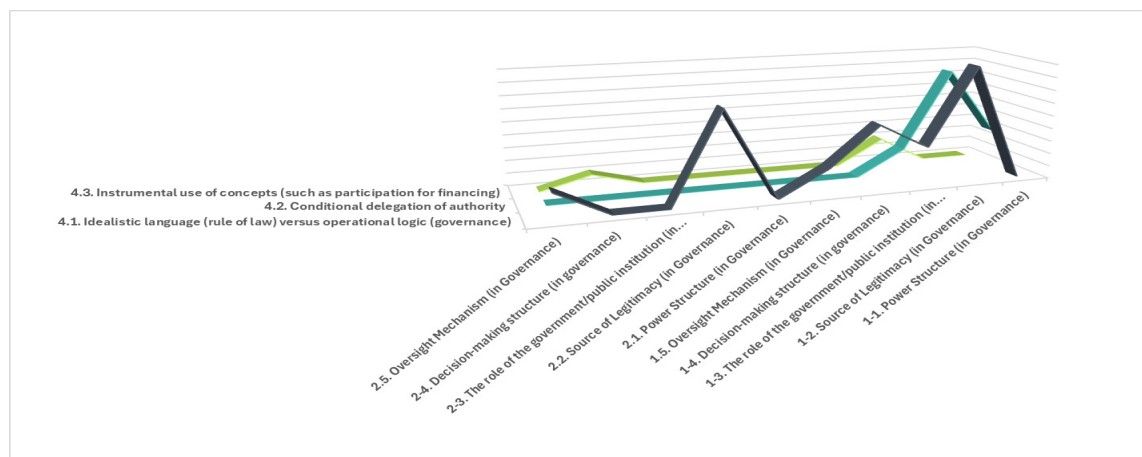


Figure 9. Revealing and comparing the role of contradictions and gaps in government and governance

- **Step 3: Model Building and Theme Extraction.** In the most complex analytical step, an effort was made to correlate the identified patterns using various tools (Figure 10). In this process, related codes were grouped, and macro-“themes” were extracted from

them. For example, the codes “discursive contradiction,” “illusion of participation,” “institutional paternalism,” and “discourse without structure” were linked in a conceptual model and placed under a comprehensive theme titled “Interpretive Themes.”

Other themes that form the primary foundation of the “Findings” and “Discussion and Conclusion” sections are presented in the next section.

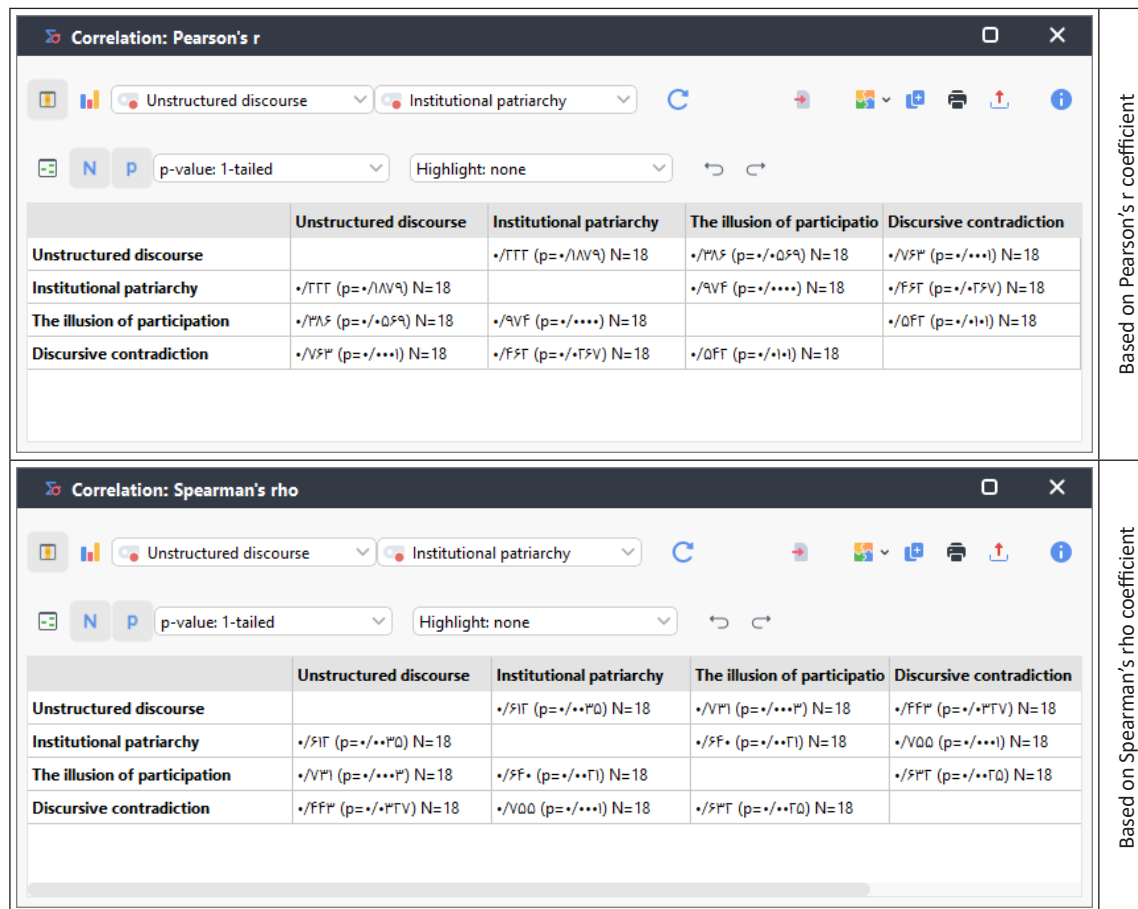


Figure 10. Correlation of interpretive themes arising from the analysis of contradictions and gaps

- **Step 4:** This step is the heart of the research’s intellectual process and goes beyond mere data reporting. Analysis in this research was conducted at two levels:

- Intra-categorical analysis: At this level, all segments related to each category (e.g., “role of the state”) were carefully re-read and compared to identify the main patterns in describing that category from the Government and Governance perspectives.
- Inter-categorical analysis: At this level, the

relationships between different categories were examined. For example, it was analyzed how a change in the “source of legitimacy” (category 1) leads to a change in the “role of the state” (category 4) and the “ultimate goal” (category 5). In this stage, the Analytical Memos written during coding played a key role (Figure 10). These memos, alongside other types such as methodological and reflexive memos (Figure 9), helped develop a coherent analytical narrative that was not just a description of codes but sought to explain the underlying relationships and processes.

Code System	A) National and strategic ...	B) Comprehensive and detailed plans...	C) Local and topical laws ...
Key Quotation	1998	1582	3581
Observed Contradiction in Text	182	544	625
Initial Pattern Identification	116	390	111
Connection to Theoretical Framework	2339	1422	3045
Initial Interpretation of Text	47	7	21

Figure 11. Report on the variety and distribution of codes attributed to types of analytical memos (top part) and types of methodological and reflexive memos

Key Quotation Hadi, 25/07/1404 04:44

The following codes from the “main content coding” can be used in the “Linked codes” section. These codes help to extract and analyze key statements that explicitly or implicitly reflect one of the two governance or governance paradigms, or the tension between the two. Below, segments of the “thematic and interpretive codes” that can be used in the “Linked coded segments” section for this analytical note are presented in the form of a table of keywords. These keywords are used to identify and code key quotes that represent the main and interpretive themes of the research

> Code summary

▼ Linked codes (8)

- 1-1-1. سلسله مراتبی (Hierarchy)
- 1-4-2. دستوری / ابلاغی (Command & Control)
- 2-1-1. شبکه‌ای (Networked)
- 2-4-2. مذاکره / همکاری (Negotiation/Cooperation)
- 3-2. سطح مشارکت (Level of Participation)
- 4-1. زبان آرمانی (حکروایی) در مقابل منطق عملیاتی (حکمرانی).

Linked coded segments (1573)

- ..Key Quotation (الفبا)
- ..Key Quotation (الفبا)
- ..Key Quotation (الفبا)
- ..Key Quotation (الفبا)
- ..Key Quotation (الفبا)
- ..Key Quotation (الفبا)

Figure 12. Example of an analytical memo for organizing key quotations in the documents

i. Final Report of the Data Process (Transparency and Reflexivity): At the end of this implementation process, it is necessary to point out a few notes on transparency and reflexivity. The researchers acknowledge that, as analysts, they were not passive, and their theoretical assumptions, used in developing the initial framework, certainly influenced their initial view of the data. However, an effort was made to control these potential biases and maintain the fidelity of the findings to the textual data by simultaneously adopting an inductive approach, meticulously recording analytical and reflexive memos, and

conducting an inter-coder reliability test.

It is also necessary to point out the inherent limitation of this method. Content analysis, at its best, analyzes “official and written discourse.” What happens “in practice,” in “informal meetings,” and “behind-the-scenes lobbying” in the policymaking process is not directly traceable through this method. Therefore, the results of this research provide an accurate picture of “what the documents say,” and its interpretation of “what happens in practice” must be made with caution, considering this potential gap between discourse and practice.

5. Findings

This section presents the results of the categorical qualitative content analysis of selected Iranian urban planning and management policy documents (2005-2025). It explains the semantic and functional differences between “Government” and “Governance” in three meta-themes. A deeper interpretation of these findings will be provided in the results section, in light of the theoretical framework and research questions.

Theme 1: Dominance of the State-Centric Government

Paradigm: The most prominent and frequent finding

across all examined documents (Table 4) was the undisputed dominance of the “Government” logic over the structure and content of policies. Despite the increasing use of modern terminology, the primary foundation of decision-making, resource allocation, and bureaucratic power application remains based on the classic principles of state-centricity (legal-formal) and top-down control, serving as the backbone of legal-bureaucratic legitimacy.

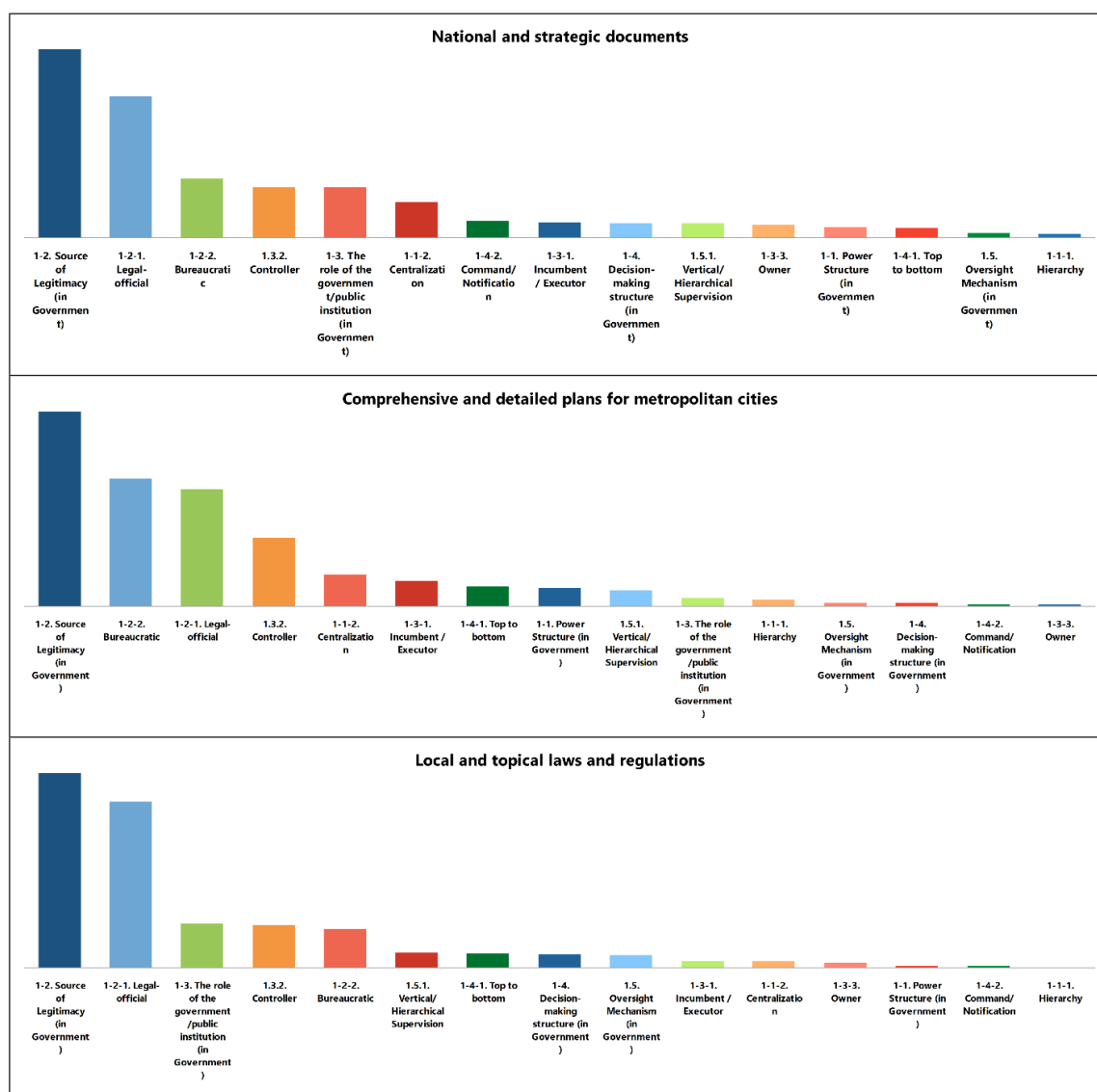


Figure 13. Distribution of sub-codes constructing the government in the sources

- Absolute Centrality of National and Regional Superordinate Institutions
Findings clearly show that key and fateful decisions for

cities are made not within the cities themselves, but in centralized national or regional institutions. The “Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture

of Iran” and the “Article 5 Group”, as the two main arms of this centralized control, have a strong presence in almost all comprehensive and detailed plans as the final authority for approval and changes. This structure

effectively weakens the independence and self-governance of local urban management. This is contrary to the will intended by the laws in the field of Governance (Figure 14).

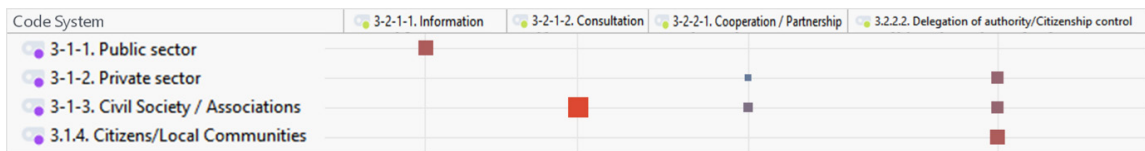


Figure 14. The guideline intended by the documents for the division of labor tasks among government actors

Evidence 1 (from source B6 and B7): “The preparation of the detailed plan based on this comprehensive plan is the responsibility of the Tehran Municipality, but its final approval and any fundamental changes to it are within the jurisdiction of the group subject to Article 5 of the Law on the Establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture.”

Evidence 2 (from source A2): “All development plans at regional and local scales must be prepared within the framework of the orientations and requirements of this national document, and their non-contradiction with the spatial plan will be a condition for final approval.”

- The State/Municipality as Operator and Exclusive Implementer

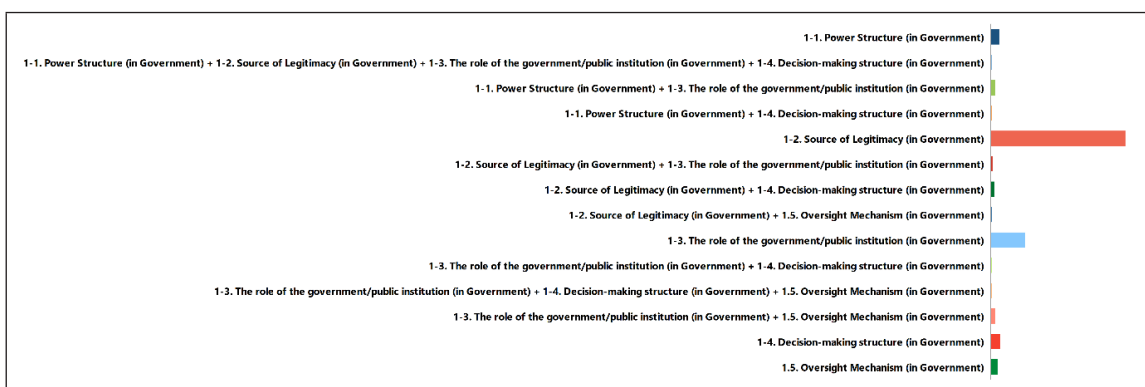
In most documents, especially in sections related to development projects, the role of municipalities and government institutions is defined as an “operational” one. They are directly responsible for the acquisition, construction, and operation of projects. This view is in complete contrast to the “facilitator” and “regulator” roles proposed in the Governance literature.

Evidence 3 (from source C15): “The acquisition of registered properties conflicting with this project and the clearance of the route will be carried out directly

by the district municipality using the foreseen development funds.”

Evidence 4 (from sources C16, A3, A4, and A5): “Municipalities can use their legal powers to acquire lands and properties located within the boundaries of approved urban plans in order to implement them.”

Theme 2: Presence of the Governance Discourse: The second key theme is the widespread and growing presence of terminology and concepts related to the “Governance” paradigm in the documents (Figure 15). Words such as “participation,” “cooperation,” “empowerment,” “private sector,” “civil society,” and “integrated management” are frequently found in the introductory sections, goals, and visions of these documents. However, deeper analysis shows that this adoption is often “linguistic” and “instrumental” rather than a genuine paradigmatic shift. This is because, according to the analysis reported in the lower part of Figure 12, the role of the power structure and the state are considered the most prominent factors of Governance, which is itself an apparent contradiction in the documents. This is because the stated desire of Governance laws in the upper part of Figure 12 is a very high reliance on legitimizing sources to create state-people cooperation and participation.



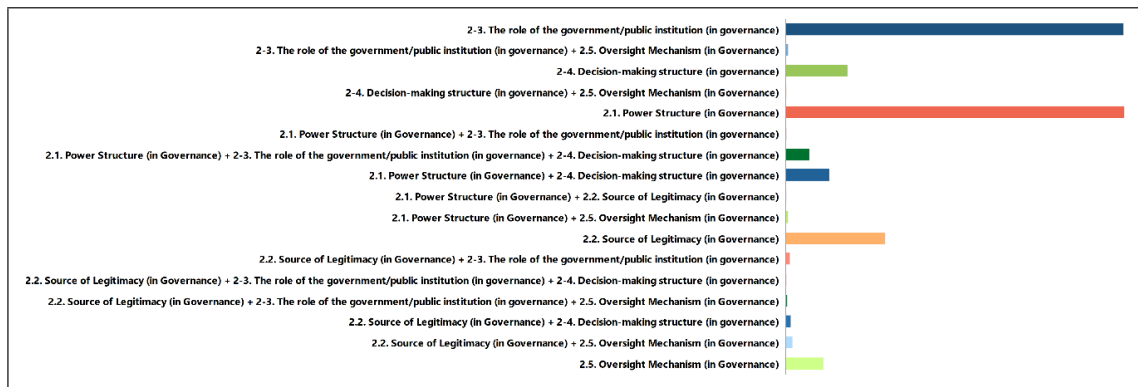


Figure 15. Co-occurrence of sub-codes constructing government (top) and governance (bottom)

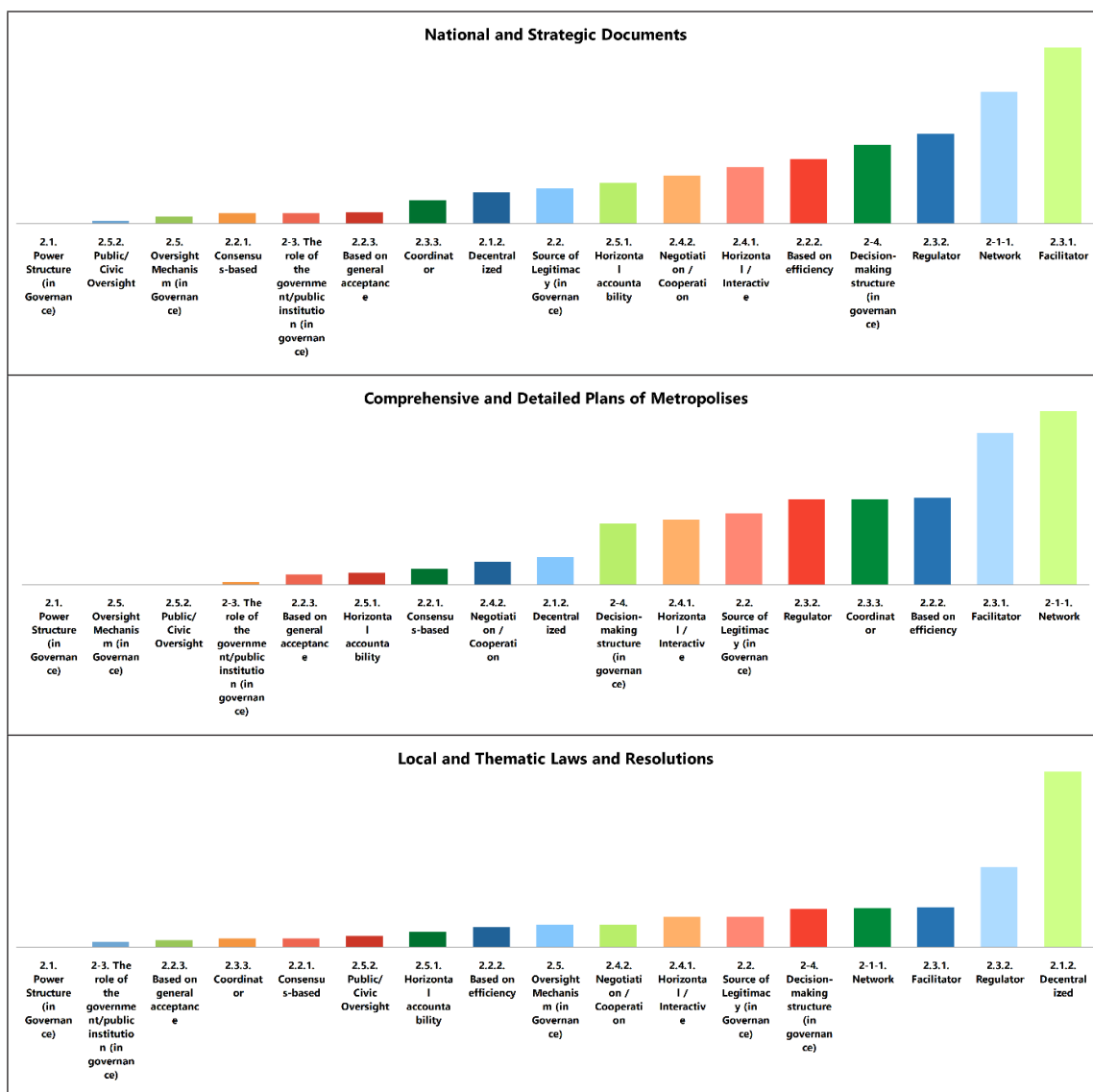


Figure 16. Distribution of sub-codes constructing governance in the sources

- Lexical Inflation of “Participation” without Executive Backing
The combination of “decentralized network

facilitation” terminology was the most frequent code related to Governance in the data (Figure 16). However, in most cases, this word is used in a general, vague

manner, lacking operational mechanisms to grant real power to citizens. Participation is often reduced to “information dissemination” or “polling” and has become a rhetorical device.

Evidence 5 (from source A3): “The main approach in this document is the transition from a purely physical perspective to an integrated and community-based perspective, in which the participation and empowerment of residents of the target neighborhoods are the main axis of actions.” (This statement appears in the goals section, but no specific mechanism for this participation is provided in the strategies section).

Evidence 6 (from sources B6, B8, and B9): “It is necessary for the municipality to inform the general public of the goals and strategies of this plan through appropriate methods and to use their opinions and suggestions in the subsequent stages.” Here, “using opinions” has no executive or legal guarantee.

Participation in this view is often reduced to a one-way, ceremonial process: “Before the project implementation, briefing sessions were held for the local residents to inform them of the project’s benefits.” (from source C15). In this quote, the purpose of the meeting is “information dissemination,” not “seeking opinions” or “participation in decision-making.”

- Governance as a Tool for Financial Procurement

One of the interesting findings was the close link between the “private sector participation” discourse

and the “limitation of government financial resources.” In many documents, inviting the private sector is presented not as a strategy to increase efficiency and innovation through cooperation, but as a necessity to compensate for the budget deficits of the state and municipalities. This instrumental view reduces Governance from a management philosophy to a financial technique.

Evidence 7 (from source C18): “Given the severe limitation of the municipality’s cash resources and the multiplicity of unfinished projects, it is necessary to formulate and communicate incentive packages to attract private sector investors for the completion of these projects as soon as possible.”

Theme 3: Discursive Gap and Contradiction: This theme, derived from the co-occurrence analysis of the sub-codes that construct Government and Governance within the meaningful framework of meta-themes and interpretive themes (Figure 17), reveals the core of the research problem. The findings indicate a “discursive heterogeneity” in the policy documents: the aspirational and idealistic language of the documents borrows from the Governance literature, while their operational, legal, and executive logic is deeply rooted in the traditional Government paradigm. This heterogeneous coexistence leads to the production of contradictory texts, which, in practice, render their aspirational parts unexecutable. Table 3 clearly shows examples of this contradiction.

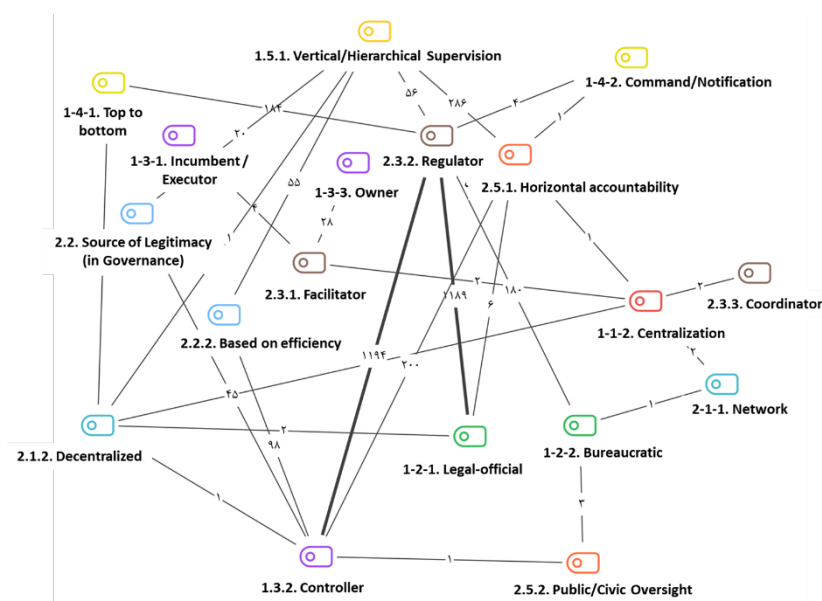


Figure 17. Network of relationships between the sub-codes of government and governance

Table 3. Examples of discursive contradiction in urban policymaking documents and their occurrence pattern

Document	Proposition based on Governance discourse (Aspirational language in introduction or goals)	Proposition based on Government discourse (Operational logic in executive articles)
A Metropolis Comprehensive Plan	"The vision of this plan is a human-centered and livable city, managed through constructive interaction and effective participation of all stakeholders (citizens, private sector, and civil institutions)." (Vision Section)	"Any change in the main lines of urban divisions and major land uses is subject to the municipality's proposal and the final approval of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran." (Executive Article)
Dilapidated Texture Regeneration Document	"The key strategy in this document is the delegation of authority to local facilitation offices and the empowerment of resident communities to make decisions about the fate of their own neighborhood." (Strategies Section)	"All executive actions of the facilitation offices must comply with the regulations of the approved detailed plan, and their performance reports must be sent monthly to the parent specialized company for urban development and improvement for review and approval." (Executive Bylaw)
Investment Support Law	"This law, aiming to remove production barriers and create a competitive environment, seeks to facilitate and accelerate private sector investment processes and reduce state operations." (Justificatory Preamble)	"Determining the investor's competence and their technical and financial eligibility is the responsibility of a commission composed of representatives from the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade, and the Central Bank, and the issuance of any permit is subject to this group's approval." (Legal Article)

- Achieving Different Goals: Data analysis revealed that these two paradigms aim to achieve distinct objectives, which also distinguishes their success criteria.

A) Government: Maintaining Order, Efficiency, and Law Enforcement The ultimate goal in this model is to ensure stability, control, and predictability through the strict execution of laws and procedures. Success is measured by input and process criteria.

Evidence 8 (from source C14): "The success of this organization lies in reducing the permit issuance time from 30 days to 15 days. This indicates an increase in bureaucratic efficiency."

"After the final approval of the comprehensive plan by the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture, the land use map is communicated to the municipalities as a binding upstream document, and their decisions regarding urban development must be made within the framework of this map" (from sources B6 and C11).

B) Governance: Achieving Social Outcomes and Sustainable Development. In contrast, Governance focuses on the long-term outcomes and consequences of policies. Qualitative goals such as justice, sustainability, and quality of life are at the center of attention.

Evidence 9 (from sources C16 and C18): "The ultimate goal of an urban transport policy is not just to build bridges and highways, but to improve all citizens' access to opportunities and reduce carbon emissions. Success must be measured by criteria such as reduced travel time, increased citizen satisfaction, and improved air quality."

Evidence 10 (UN-Habitat, 2025): "We should no longer ask if the law was properly implemented; we must ask if the policy implementation led to a more just, prosperous, and sustainable society? This change in the question is the essence of good governance."

Evidence 11 (from sources C18 and UN-Habitat, 2007): "A top-down order did not make the final decision to create a dedicated bicycle path, but after months of dialogue in a joint working group consisting of traffic experts, police, environmental activists, and representatives of cyclists. This was a consensus-building process, not the issuance of a command."

Furthermore, in examining the relationship between interpretive themes and meta-themes (Figure 18), meaningful connections can be stated. However, institutional paternalism has the most significant impact in Theme 1; it is the main influential factor in all three main themes, creating a gap between the desires expressed in Government and the realities of Governance. Theme 3, which is a combination of Themes 1 and 2, shows that the effort of the country's executive and administrative structure to maintain power and legitimacy in the state power institution has led to the emergence of both "discourse without structure" and "institutional paternalism" simultaneously, resulting in a discursive contradiction between Government and Governance. These contradictions (Figure 19) are not merely a weakness in document drafting but reflect a deeper conflict in the mental and institutional structure of Iran's policymaking system (Figure 18).

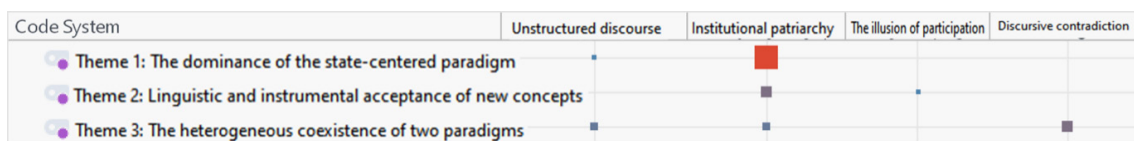


Figure 18: Relationship between meta-themes (rows) and interpretive themes (columns)

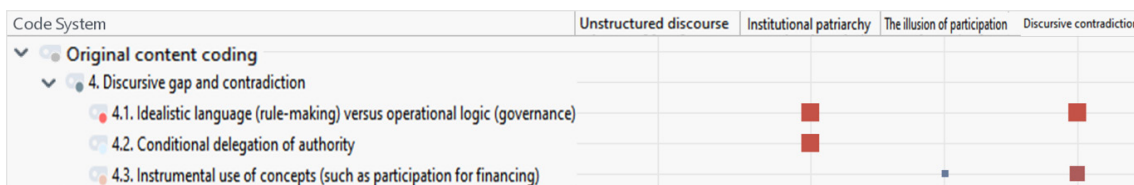


Figure 19. Relationship between gaps and contradictions (rows) and interpretive themes (columns)

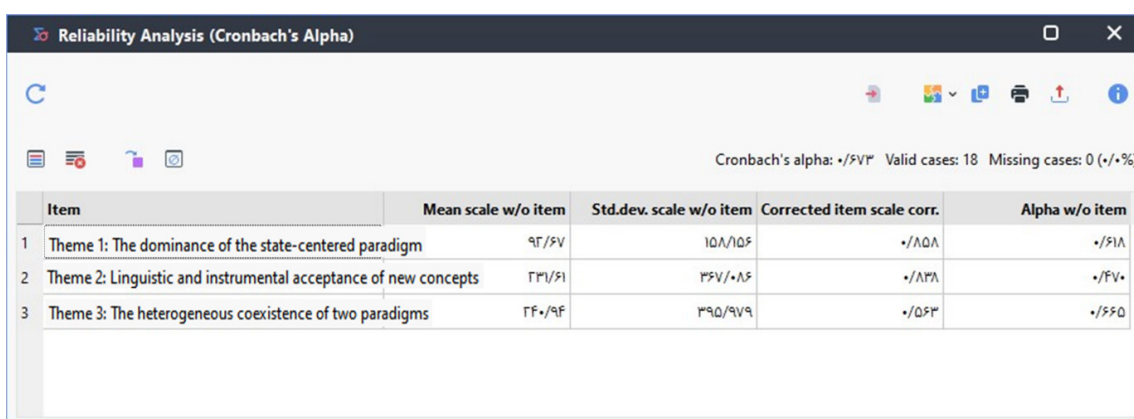


Figure 20. Reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of meta-themes

Next, the reliability analysis of the research's main themes based on the Cronbach's Alpha test results (Figure 20) is presented as follows:

Regarding the first theme, the high value of the Corrected Item Scale Correlation, at 0.858, indicates internal consistency and a powerful conceptual relationship among the codes that form this theme. This shows that the indicators identified for this theme all cohesively measure a single construct (state-centric Government). The Cronbach's alpha value if the item is deleted (Alpha w/o item), reported as 0.618, indicates that the presence of this theme is essential for the overall reliability of the analysis tool. Its removal would reduce the internal consistency of the entire model. The mean scale if item deleted (Mean scale w/o item) (92.67) and the standard deviation scale if item deleted (Std.dev. scale w/o item) (158.156), respectively, represent the central tendency and the degree of dispersion of the data in the absence of this theme, showing a change in the scale's statistical profile.

For the second theme, the corrected item-total correlation (0.838) remains at a very desirable level,

indicating a coherent and meaningful relationship between the codes under this theme (such as participation and cooperation) and the general concept of "Governance." The significant decrease in Cronbach's alpha when the item is deleted, from 0.470 to 0.470, confirms the vital role of this theme in maintaining the overall reliability of the measurement tool; its removal would severely weaken the internal validity of the analysis, highlighting its importance in the research's conceptual structure. The mean (231.61) and standard deviation (367.086) of the scale without this item depict a considerable change in the distribution and dispersion of the remaining data.

Finally, for the third theme, the corrected item-total correlation (0.563), although lower than the other two themes, is still within the acceptable range for social science analyses and indicates a meaningful relationship between the items. The relatively higher Cronbach's alpha if item deleted (0.665) compared to the other two themes could be a sign of the more complex and heterogeneous nature of this theme, which is conceptually consistent with its title "Gap and

Contradiction.” This value indicates that the internal consistency of this part, although acceptable, may be limited, as its codes may cover more multifaceted dimensions of a phenomenon. The mean (240.94) and high standard deviation (395.979) of the scale in the absence of this theme indicate a significant dispersion of the remaining data.

The overall summary of the reliability analysis results confirms the validity and robustness of the research’s conceptual framework for measuring the semantic differences between “Government” and “Governance” in Iran’s urban planning and management system. This analysis, which extends beyond a mere technical check, provides quantitative evidence to support the research’s qualitative arguments. The results show that both themes, “Dominance of the State-Centric Government Paradigm” and “Presence of the Governance Discourse,” have very high internal consistency. The high correlation values and the vital role of these two themes’ codes in maintaining the overall reliability of the tool statistically prove that each of these two paradigms is present in the policy documents in a cohesive, powerful, and distinguishable manner. This finding empirically confirms the main argument of the research, namely, the existence of two separate discourses in Iran’s urban management system: one, a deeply rooted and operational paradigm (Government), and the other, a new and essentially linguistic discourse (Governance).

On the other hand, the relatively lower reliability of the third theme, “Discursive Gap and Contradiction,” is a meaningful finding in itself. This statistical heterogeneity reflects the conceptual nature of the theme itself, which deals with “heterogeneous coexistence” and “contradiction.” This result demonstrates that the analysis tool has successfully identified and measured the gray area of friction between the two main paradigms.

In total, the reliability analysis shows that the research’s measurement tool has successfully managed to formulate the two main discourses and the semantic gap between them in Iran’s urban planning system, validly and reliably, paving the way for the comparative analysis and explanation of their semantic differences, which is the primary goal of the research.

6. Results

Fundamental Differences in Key Dimensions: The analysis of the findings reveals that the distinction between Government and Governance in the context

of Iranian documents is evident in all key dimensions. However, this distinction often manifests as a gap between “discourse” and “structure”:

- **Legitimacy:** Although at the discursive level, “public satisfaction” and “efficiency” are mentioned as new sources of legitimacy (Theme 2), at the structural and legal level, the only effective source of legitimacy remains “legal-hierarchical legitimacy” (Theme 1). A decision is considered legal and binding not because of public acceptance, but because a superordinate institution approved it.

- **Decision-Making Structure:** The “networked” and “horizontal” structure discussed in Governance literature (Rhodes, 1996) rarely transforms into an operational mechanism in Iranian documents. Even when “joint working groups” are mentioned, these groups often have an advisory nature, with the chairmanship and final voting rights held by government representatives. As a result, the dominant structure remains “hierarchical” and vertical.

- The research findings clearly showed that the difference between Government and Governance in the dimensions of legitimacy and decision-making structure is not superficial or formal, but expresses a fundamental transformation in the “logic of governing.” Government follows the logic of “hierarchical control,” in which power originates from the law, is concentrated in state institutions, and is exercised through vertical and command-based structures. This is the classic Weberian bureaucratic model, designed for simpler societies and predictable problems.

- In contrast, Governance operates based on the logic of “networked cooperation.” In this logic, legitimacy is an acquired and performance-based concept, and power is a distributed resource arising from the mutual dependence of actors on one another. This is the phenomenon Rhodes calls the “Hollowed-out State,” a state that, although still an important actor, no longer has the exclusive ability and authority to impose its will. The decision-making structure in this model transitions from a linear production line to a complex and interactive ecosystem, where policies are developed through dialogue and consensus within policy networks. This result fully confirms the research hypothesis regarding the fundamental distinction in these two dimensions. It demonstrates that these two concepts represent two distinct worldviews regarding the relationship between the state and society.

- **Stakeholders and Participation:** The findings confirm that despite the lexical inflation of “participation,” an “unwritten hierarchy of stakeholders” exists.

Government and public institutions are at the top, followed by large private investors, and finally, citizens and civil society are at the base of this pyramid. This is in stark contrast to the concept of an “inclusive public sphere” in communicative planning theory (Healey, 2005), which transforms participation into a tool for social management and lends apparent legitimacy to pre-existing decisions.

6.1. The Distinction Between Ultimate Goals

Perhaps the most significant practical outcome of this research lies in the distinction between the ultimate goals of the two paradigms, particularly in the context of urban planning. The findings showed that traditional Government is a “process-oriented” paradigm. Success in this model is measured by criteria such as strict adherence to the law, effective budget execution, and efficient administrative procedures. This approach is efficient for simple and specific tasks (like issuing permits based on regulations). However, it fails when facing “wicked problems” in urban settings, as discussed in the background, such as spatial injustice, environmental degradation, or sustainable development, which do not have a specific, single solution. In contrast, Governance is an “outcome-oriented” paradigm. Success here is measured by the extent to which macro-social goals, such as improving quality of life, increasing resilience, or strengthening social capital, are achieved. This shift from focusing on “outputs” (such as the number of campuses built) to focusing on “outcomes” (like the extent of citizen use of public spaces and increased social interactions) represents a fundamental change in the philosophy of urban policymaking.

Answering Question 2: Redefining the Role of the State and Policy Goals

- Role of the State: Analyses show that the transition from the “rower” to the “steerer” role (Stoker, 1998) has not occurred in Iran’s policymaking system. The state (and municipalities) still see themselves as the primary “implementers” and have a strong tendency to maintain “control” and “operation” (Theme 1). The “facilitator” role mentioned in the documents is often interpreted as “providing incentives to the private sector to do what the state wants,” not “providing the platform for achieving the common goals of different actors.” This means a “pseudo-facilitation” in which the state remains the primary director of the scene.

- Ultimate Goal: The discursive gap (Theme 3) is best revealed in the policy goals. The declared ultimate

goal in many documents is to achieve “sustainable development,” “social justice,” and “quality of life,” which align with Governance goals. However, the tools and executive mechanisms defined in the same documents are mainly geared towards achieving the classic Government goals, namely “maintaining physical order,” “facilitating capital flow,” and “physical development” (building highways, commercial complexes, etc.). This contradiction yields a policy that is ostensibly humane and social, yet remains project-based and economically driven at its core.

6.2. Sphere of Influence and Function

The findings related to stakeholders and the role of the state confirm a fundamental redefinition of the boundaries of the public sector. The Government paradigm establishes rigid boundaries between the “state” (as the decision-maker) and “society” (as the decision-receiver). In this model, public participation is, at best, a controlled consultation process, and at worst, it is considered an obstacle to expert decision-making. The state, in this view, is the “rower” that single-handedly moves the boat of society. In contrast, Governance makes these boundaries fluid and permeable. As evident in the findings, this paradigm is based on the coalition of public, private, and civil actors, considering participation not an option, but an essential element for efficiency and legitimacy. This is the transition from “customer” to “citizen-partner” emphasized in communicative planning literature by theorists like Patsy Healey. The change in the state’s role from “rower” to “steerer” also means that the state, instead of exclusive implementation, focuses on empowering, facilitating, and creating the rules of the game for others’ cooperation. These results suggest that Governance seeks a more democratic and decentralized model of public administration, one that is better suited to the complexities of contemporary societies.

Answering Question 3: Practical Consequences of Conceptual Ambiguity. This heterogeneous coexistence of the two paradigms has tangible and destructive consequences for the urban planning and development process:

1. Creating an “Illusion of Participation” and Eroding Social Capital: The most important consequence of this contradiction is the creation of a “mirage of participation.” Citizens are invited to participatory processes but quickly find that their opinions have no real impact on the final decisions. This repeated

experience leads to cynicism, indifference, and a severe erosion of public trust in planning institutions, which is itself the greatest obstacle to any future collective action.

2. Paralyzed and Unimplementable Policies: Documents built on this contradiction are inherently unimplementable. A policy cannot be both “centralized” and “participatory” at the same time. This contradiction becomes apparent at the implementation stage, leading to confusion among implementers, resistance from stakeholders, and ultimately, the abandonment of the document’s aspirational and social goals in favor of simpler, project-based objectives. This finding well explains the “gap between plan and implementation,” which is one of the historical problems of Iran’s planning system.

3. Subtle Recreation of Central Control: The analysis results show that the Governance discourse can, unintentionally, become a tool for “recreating” and “legitimizing” the same old central control. By using the language of participation and holding consultative meetings, the state can claim to be pursuing a democratic policy, while in practice, it holds all the levers of power. This makes it more difficult to critique the power structures.

In a general summary, the results of this research show that the main issue in Iran’s urban policymaking system is not the “absence” of the Governance discourse, but its “instrumental and appended presence” in a structural and mental context that remains intensely loyal to the Government paradigm. This situation has created a “discourse without structure” that neither has the efficiency and authority of the classic Government model nor achieves the benefits of flexibility, justice, and sustainability of the Governance model.

7. Discussion and Interpretation

This final section of the research, which aims to deepen and develop the obtained results, discusses and explores the findings within a broader context. The goal of this section is to establish a meaningful connection between the findings of this research and the theoretical literature and background, to elucidate the origins of the phenomenon under study, and to offer practical recommendations for policymakers and future researchers. This discussion will ultimately lead to a general conclusion of the research’s achievements and outline a vision for the future.

While the findings of this research confirm many classic theoretical foundations in the Iranian context,

they also reveal meaningful complexities and differences that require further reflection. The research results clearly showed that the operational and structural logic governing Iran’s urban policymaking documents fully conforms to Weber’s descriptions of the bureaucratic state and the “Government” paradigm. The dominance of “legal-hierarchical legitimacy,” “centralized decision-making” structure, and the “operational” role of the state all confirm the persistence of a classic and state-centric model, in which the state, as a modern Leviathan, is the center of gravity for power and decision-making.

While the findings of this research confirm many classic theoretical foundations in the Iranian context, inspired by critical perspectives, they also reveal significant complexities and differences that necessitate further reflection. The research results clearly showed that the operational and structural logic governing Iran’s urban policymaking documents fully conforms to Weber’s descriptions of the bureaucratic state and the “Government” paradigm. The dominance of “legal-hierarchical legitimacy,” “centralized decision-making” structure, and the “operational” role of the state all confirm the persistence of a classic and state-centric model, in which the state, as a modern Leviathan, is the center of gravity for power and decision-making.

However, it is worth noting that reducing the “Government” paradigm to a single, unified model can lead to oversimplification. As global experiences demonstrate, we encounter diverse types of nation-states that, although falling within the general framework of Government, exhibit fundamental differences among them. These distinctions are important because they show that each Government model has a different context and capacity for transitioning towards “Governance” patterns. Understanding this spectrum helps us analyze the roots of the “discursive gap” in Iran’s policymaking system more deeply.

However, the findings of this research challenge Rhodes’s “hollowed-out state” theory in the Iranian context. While Rhodes’s theory emphasizes the real delegation of power and functions to self-governing networks, our findings show that in Iran, the state, despite delegating some “tasks” (especially high-cost tasks), refrains from delegating real “power”. Final control remains in the hands of central institutions, and the networks formed are not self-governing but instead satellite networks dependent on the center.

Therefore, in Iran, instead of a “hollowed-out state,” we face the phenomenon of “apparent decentralization” or “controlled outsourcing,” in which the state maintains final authority while distributing executive responsibilities.

On the other hand, the results of this research problematize the practical application of Patsy Healey’s “communicative planning” theory in a non-democratic and centralized context. The finding related to “tokenistic participation” and “illusion of participation” shows how the “form” and “language” of communicative planning (like holding consultative meetings) can be emptied of their “content” and “spirit” (real consensus-building and power-sharing) and become a tool for social management and gaining legitimacy for decisions already made. This is a warning that Governance tools, if implemented in an asymmetric power structure, can turn into their opposites.

Healey’s emphasis on the importance of dialogue, consensus-building, and forming a “common understanding” among multiple stakeholders is precisely what was observed in the findings related to decision-making structure and participation in the Governance paradigm. The findings of this research showed that in texts related to urban governance, the planning “process” (how actors interact) is as important as, and even more important than, the final “product” (map and plan). This is in complete contrast to the technocratic and product-oriented models of traditional Government (comprehensive plans).

Additionally, the results indicate that in the Government paradigm, the state is a “producer,” whereas in the Governance paradigm, it serves as an “enabler” and “coordinator.” This finding strengthens the argument of Pierre and Peters (2020), who believe that Governance does not mean the end of the state, but the transformation of the state and learning to play new and more complex roles.

Finally, the findings of this research provide strong textual and empirical evidence for the previous analyses of Iranian researchers reviewed in the background. While these researchers correctly pointed out the structural challenges of urban management in Iran, this research, by meticulously analyzing the

content of documents, showed how this challenge is reproduced at the level of “language” and “discourse” of policymaking, creating an “institutional heterogeneity” between what is said and what is done.

7.1. Explaining the Roots of the Discursive Gap

This raises the question: why has Iran’s policymaking system fallen into such a gap and contradiction between the language of Governance and the practice of Government? Answering this question requires looking beyond the documents themselves and analyzing historical, political, and cultural roots:

1. Historical Path Dependency: The state structure in Iran has historically been centralized, paternalistic, and state-centric. This deep-rooted pattern has created a strong inertia and stagnation that resists change. The logic of top-down control shapes institutions, laws, and even the mindset of bureaucrats and policymakers, and changing it requires a fundamental shift that has not yet occurred.
2. Rentier State Logic: One of the key explanations is the rentier state theory. Since a significant part of the state’s revenue in Iran is secured not through citizen taxes but from the sale of natural resources (oil), the state feels less need for accountability and gaining absolute citizen satisfaction. In such a structure, participation is a “favor” from the sovereignty, not a “right” for the citizens. This lack of financial dependence on the people severely reduces the state’s motivation to share real power.
3. Global Pressures and Institutional Mimicry: In recent decades, Iran, like other countries, has been influenced by global development discourses promoted by international organizations (like the World Bank and the UN). These organizations condition the granting of loans and technical aid on the acceptance of principles like “good governance,” “participation,” and “private sector empowerment.” Iran’s policymaking system incorporates these terms into its documents to gain international legitimacy and access to resources. However, these concepts are pasted as a “veneer” onto the same old traditional, centralized structure, leading to the phenomenon of “isomorphism.”

Table 4. Operational recommendations for the transition from government to governance in the urban planning and management system

Area of Intervention	Identified Problem (Based on findings)	Proposed Solution	Responsible Institution (Proposed)
Legal and Structural	Excessive concentration of decision-making power in national and regional institutions (Supreme Council, Article 5 Group)	Amending the Law on the Establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture to fully delegate authorities related to detailed plans and non-fundamental land use changes to Islamic City Councils and municipalities.	Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament), Supreme Council of Provinces
Procedural and Process	Tokenistic, consultative, and non-binding citizen participation	Establishing "Neighborhood Councils" (Shourayari) with independent legal personality, a specific budget, and a "conditional veto right" on development projects that directly affect their neighborhood.	Ministry of Interior, Islamic City Councils
Financial and Economic	Instrumental view of the private sector solely for financial procurement	Developing a transparent national "Public-Private Partnership" (PPP) framework with a precise definition of risk and profit sharing, and with the presence of civil oversight bodies to guarantee public interest.	Plan and Budget Organization, Ministry of Economy, Municipalities
Informational and Transparency	Lack of public access to complete information on plans and contracts	Legally mandating all public institutions to publish all documents (except for security matters) on a "Comprehensive Transparency Portal" with easy search and access for the public.	The Government (creating the portal), all executive agencies
Capacity Building and Training	Lack of skills among urban managers and experts in facilitation, negotiation, and conflict management	Revising the curricula of architecture, urban planning, and urban management fields, and holding mandatory training courses for current managers focusing on soft skills in Governance.	Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, Universities, Organization of Municipalities and Dehyaris

The findings of this research show that the Government model in Iran, due to factors such as "path dependency" on centralization and the "rentier state" logic, strongly tends towards a rigid, hierarchical model that is resistant to power distribution. It is this specific characteristic that causes the linguistic adoption of Governance concepts (like participation and delegation of authority) in policy documents to become a "formal isomorphism" when faced with this deep-rooted structure, being emptied of its real content in practice. Therefore, the main issue is not just the conflict between Government and Governance, but the conflict between a specific and powerful type of centralized Government and the distributed and networked ideals of Governance, which explains the depth of the contradictions observed in the findings. The interpretation of the practical consequences and recommendations for policymaking, as outlined in Table 4, suggests that the gap between discourse and practice has detrimental consequences, ranging from the erosion of social capital to policy inefficiency. To exit this impasse, one cannot be content with superficial solutions and minor reforms. The transition from Government to Governance requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional policy package, which is presented below:

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Table 5. Framework based on theoretical-practical solutions, fostering the realization of desirable urban governance

Type	Title	Theoretical and practical implications of the revealed distinction between Government and Governance
Theoretical	Necessity of Revisiting State Theories	This research demonstrates that traditional state theories, which emphasize exclusive sovereignty and Weberian bureaucratic structures, are no longer sufficient to describe the complex realities of governing contemporary societies. Public policy theories must increasingly focus on analyzing “networks,” “interdependence,” and “non-state power resources.”
	Developing the Concept of Legitimacy	The findings challenge the notion that legitimacy is merely a formal legal concept. In the age of Governance, legitimacy has become a dynamic and functional variable that must be continuously “earned” by the governing system. This requires developing new theoretical frameworks for measuring and analyzing legitimacy in networked and multi-actor structures.
	Enriching Planning Theories	This research, by providing a clear analytical framework, offers urban planning theorists a tool for critically analyzing urban plans and policies. They can use these five dimensions to assess the extent to which a specific plan belongs to the traditional Government paradigm and how much it has moved towards participatory Governance.
Practical & Policy	Need for Clarity in Policy Language	The most significant practical implication of this research for policymakers and planners is the need to apply these concepts precisely and consciously. Policy documents must clearly specify whether, when they refer to “participation” or “cooperation,” they mean a formal and controlled process (within the Government framework) or a genuine and empowering partnership (within the Governance framework). This linguistic transparency is the first step to preventing unrealistic expectations and policy failures.
	Creating Institutional Structures for Governance	Governance is not just a good idea; it requires appropriate institutional structures and processes. Municipalities and government institutions must go beyond purely hierarchical structures and create spaces for dialogue and joint decision-making, such as “policy roundtables,” “joint citizen working groups,” and “digital platforms for public participation.”
	Changing Performance Evaluation Systems	Performance evaluation systems in the public sector must shift from focusing solely on internal efficiency criteria (such as cost and time) to outcome-oriented criteria (such as quality of life, social justice, and environmental sustainability). An urban manager’s success should not be measured merely by the number of projects inaugurated, but by the real impact of those projects on people’s lives.
	Empowering Non-State Actors	Since Governance is based on the cooperation of partners, the state must actively work to empower the private sector and especially civil society. This can include financial support, providing transparent information, training, and building technical and managerial capacity in NGOs, enabling them to play a role as equal and effective partners in policy processes.

8. Conclusion

This research aimed to reveal the semantic differences and practical consequences of the ambiguity between the two concepts of “Government” and “Governance.” The results clearly showed that Iran’s urban policymaking system is trapped in a discursive limbo (Figure 21): while its language and literature increasingly lean towards the attractive and modern

concepts of Governance, its power structure, decision-making logic, and operational processes remain confined within the traditional, centralized, and state-centric paradigm of Government. This “discursive duality” is not merely an academic issue, but a practical problem that leads to the production of contradictory and inefficient policies, eroding public trust.

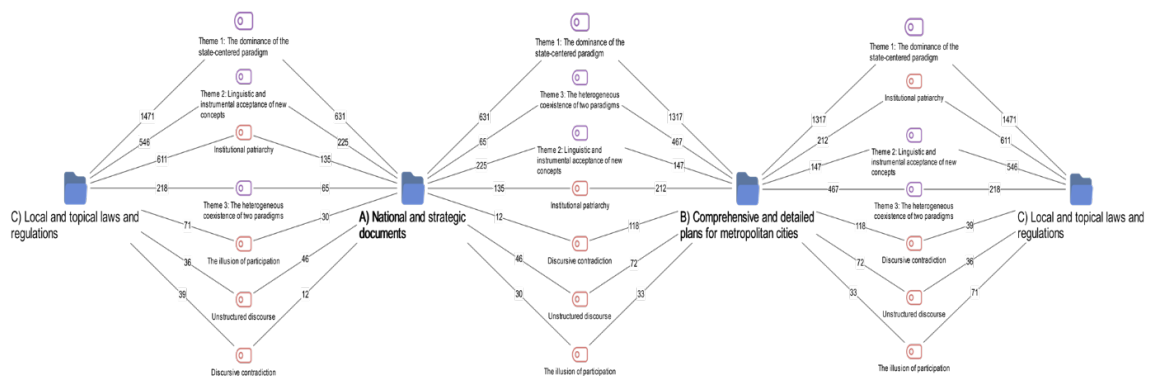


Figure 21. The constant and high-frequency presence of gaps (red codes) and main themes (purple codes) constructs contradictions in the sources.

The “relationship-ology” between urban government laws and the demands of urban governance (Figure 22) reveals that only two aspects—the source of legitimacy and the backing for urban governance actions—have a connection to the urban government sector in the existing laws. The logical compulsion for executive and legal backing in these two cases is the only reason that can be found. Meanwhile, other layers of the governance sector (decision-making structure, role of the state and public institutions, and also the power structure) have not found any

connection in these documents with the various and even peer layers in the urban government structure. This amount of difference between the declared will in the laws and the reality that has occurred in those same laws indicates an inability to create legal frameworks, a contradiction in the legislator’s intent and desire, a lack of infrastructural readiness for a track change in the executive and oversight bodies, and finally, this change of procedure being stalled at its very first step.

Code System	2.1. Power Structure (in Governance)	2.2. Source of Legitimacy (in Governance)	2.3. The role of the government/public institution	2.4. Decision-making structure (in governance)	2.5. Oversight Mechanism (in Governance)
1-1. Power Structure (in Government)					
1-2. Source of Legitimacy (in Government)					
1-3. The role of the government/public institution (in Government)					
1-4. Decision-making structure (in Government)					
1.5. Oversight Mechanism (in Government)					

Figure 22. The current pattern of the relationship between government laws and governance in the documents studied in this research

Ultimately, it must be emphasized that the solution is not to eliminate one in favor of the other. An efficient system requires an intelligent combination of both paradigms: the authority and efficiency of “Government” for providing vital public goods and infrastructure, and the flexibility, justice, and innovation of “Governance” for solving complex social and environmental problems. However, achieving this balanced combination requires, first and foremost, “discursive honesty” and the “political will” to carry out deep structural reforms. The future of Iran’s cities and the quality of life of their residents depends less on the beautiful words used in documents and more on the political system’s courage to move from “exclusive control” towards “real cooperation” and from “granting the privilege of participation” to “recognizing the right of citizens to determine their own destiny.”

The conclusion is that this research, by revealing the conceptual and practical distinction between Government and Governance, emphasizes that the transition towards more effective and democratic models of administration requires, more than anything, a “mental transition” and “conceptual clarity.” As long as policymakers and implementers use these two paradigms interchangeably, policies written with Governance literature will continue to be implemented with the inefficient tools of Government, and the cycle of inefficiency will persist.

It is further stated that every research faces limitations, acknowledging which helps in better understanding the results:

- Methodological Limitation: This research was based on “text” analysis. Content analysis cannot fully capture the “practice” of policymaking. Informal conversations, lobbying, and executive resistance that occur in practice remain outside the scope of this research’s view.
 - Interpretive Nature of Research: Qualitative content analysis is inherently an interpretive process. Despite efforts to systematize the process through a coding manual and assessing inter-coder reliability, the possibility that the researcher’s assumptions may have even a slight influence on the final analysis still exists. This was attempted to be minimized through a pre-publication Delphi process involving urban management experts and urban planning professors.
 - Sampling Limitation: Although an attempt was made to select a diverse and representative sample, these 18 documents do not represent all urban policymaking documents in Iran, and caution must be exercised in generalizing the results.
 - Time Limitation: This research is a cross-sectional analysis and does not fully show the dynamic process of discourse evolution over time.
- Given these limitations, the following recommendations for future research are provided:
- Ethnographic Research: Conducting fieldwork within planning institutions (such as municipalities and consulting engineering firms) to directly observe the decision-making process and understand the gap between discourse and practice from the actors’ own perspectives.
 - Experimental and Case Studies: A deep comparison

of two urban projects, one known as a “successful” example of attracting participation and the other “unsuccessful,” to identify the key institutional, political, and social variables that helped or hindered the realization of governance. Also, conducting in-depth case studies on specific urban projects in Iran (such as urban regeneration or waste management projects) to examine the extent to which decision-making processes in practice follow Government or Governance patterns. This will help bridge the gap between discourse and practice.

- International Comparative Studies: Comparing the challenges and successes of implementing urban governance models in Iran with the experiences of other countries (especially developing countries) can provide valuable lessons for domestic policymakers.
- Longitudinal-Historical and Genealogical Analyses: Examining policy documents over a more extended period (e.g., from the 1980s or pre-revolution to the present) to more accurately trace the evolution of the participation and governance discourse and identify its turning points. Examining the evolution of the terms “Government” and “Governance” in Iran’s policy documents (such as the five-year development plans) can show how and under the influence of which discourses these concepts entered the country’s official literature.
- Quantitative and Survey Research: Conducting surveys to measure the attitudes of citizens and urban managers towards the concept of participation, assessing the level of public trust in planning institutions, and analyzing the relationship of these variables with urban quality of life.

Therefore, this research, by systematizing the distinctions between Governance and Government through qualitative content analysis, not only confirms previous theoretical findings but also, by providing a precise comparative framework in five key dimensions, contributes to the coherence and clarity of these concepts, bringing them closer from the theoretical level to the operational level. This is because the results of this research show that the distinction between Government and Governance is not a linguistic game or academic fancy, but a deep paradigmatic gap with serious consequences for how societies are governed and cities are designed. Understanding this distinction is the first and most necessary step for transitioning towards more efficient, just, and democratic policymaking models in the twenty-first century.

Endnotes

¹ In explaining this issue, it can be stated that within Iran’s urban management system—particularly over the past two decades—there has been a persistent tension between the logic of hierarchical Government and that of network-based Governance. On one hand, bureaucratic laws and institutional structures emphasize the concentration of power within superior governmental bodies; on the other hand, new discourses in policy documents introduce concepts such as participation, empowerment, and network collaboration. This conceptual oscillation has led to the emergence of a “discursive duality” in urban management: while the vocabulary of Governance is frequently employed in policy texts, the classical logic of Government continues to dominate at the institutional and operational levels. Such a contradiction not only generates ambiguity in interpretation but also negatively affects the quality of urban policymaking and the extent of genuine stakeholder participation.

Moreover, a review of recent experiences in Iran’s urban management indicates that older generations of comprehensive plans (such as those for Tehran) have remained most loyal to the state-centered logic of Government, whereas some newer plans (for example, in Isfahan or Mashhad) have attempted to move toward Governance by adopting participatory language. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the results of the qualitative content analysis presented in this paper, this shift has often remained rhetorical, rarely translating into substantive institutional reform. Therefore, representing these conceptual fluctuations within the study’s conceptual model can help illuminate the gap between policy discourse and managerial practice in Iran.

² At times, the exercise of centralized state power (Government) is essential for providing critical infrastructure, while in other cases, creating platforms for dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders (Governance) becomes the only effective approach to addressing a complex local problem.

³ From an economic perspective, the traditional paradigm of Government manages the urban economy primarily through the implementation of large-scale infrastructural and development projects led by the state or major private developers. In this model, other economic actors are either government contractors or remain at the periphery. In contrast, urban Governance conceives the economy as a complex “networked ecosystem” in which dynamism and innovation emerge from interactions among a wide range of actors. This ecosystem includes knowledge-based firms, innovative startups, local small and medium-sized enterprises, cooperatives, and non-governmental financial institutions. Within this paradigm, the role of the state shifts from “operator” to “facilitator” and “enabler”—that is, instead of direct implementation, it focuses on creating legal frameworks, removing barriers, supporting innovation clusters, and linking diverse actors together. The ultimate goal within this logic

is not merely physical development, but the enhancement of resilience, competitiveness, and economic equity through the strengthening of local assets and capacities. More importantly, it is the political dimension of Governance that is often neglected in analyses, particularly in contexts characterized by centralized power structures such as Iran. Government views “politics” as a phenomenon defined within the framework of formal institutions, the constitution, and electoral processes, deriving its legitimacy from these legal sources. In this model, power is exercised vertically—from top to bottom—and citizens are primarily policy recipients. Governance, however, is inherently a “political” process grounded in the redistribution of power. This paradigm conceives policymaking as an arena of negotiation, bargaining, and coalition-building among multiple actors with divergent interests, values, and power resources. In this view, the legitimacy of a policy depends not only on its conformity with legal frameworks but also on the degree of consensus achieved among stakeholders and its effectiveness in addressing shared challenges. This shift from the logic of “command and control” to that of “dialogue and collaboration” requires recognizing political pluralism and genuinely delegating authority to local levels and non-state actors. It is precisely this aspect that provokes deep structural resistance within hierarchical systems, since embracing Governance ultimately entails accepting a redistribution of power and reducing the state’s exclusive control over decision-making processes.

⁴ This time period was selected due to the growing attention to contemporary urban discourses such as Governance and participation in Iran’s policy documents.

⁵ The criteria for selecting the samples are as follows:

1. Significance and impact of the document: Documents that have played a key role in shaping urban policies and projects are selected.
2. Geographical coverage: Efforts are made to include documents from various metropolitan areas with differing socio-economic structures.
3. Scale diversity: The samples include documents at national, regional, and local scales.
4. Explicit engagement with the topic: Priority is given to documents that explicitly address concepts such as citizen participation, integrated urban management, and empowerment.

⁶ During the preparation process, all extensive tables, maps, and non-textual charts were removed, and only the textual content—including legal provisions, reports, analyses, and guidelines—was retained.

⁷ The Seventh Development Plan Law is considered the national–legal document, selected sections of the Isfahan Comprehensive Plan represent the local–planning document, and the resolutions of provincial capital city councils serve as the local–executive documents.

⁸ In this study, two researchers worked in parallel and simultaneously on coding the main categories related to Government. After merging their work, the Cohen’s Kappa coefficient was calculated. Once the reliability of the coding for the same topic between the two coders

was confirmed, their results were integrated.

⁹ This statistic eliminates the effect of chance agreement from the calculations and serves as a precise measure of reliability. According to the criteria proposed by Landis and Koch (1977), a Kappa coefficient above 0.8 is considered an excellent level of agreement, indicating an “Almost Perfect Agreement.”

¹⁰ These discrepancies were primarily due to differences in the interpretation of textual nuances. For instance, in one case, one coder labeled a passage as “state facilitation,” while the other coded it as “state control.” After discussion and a more careful rereading of the text, both coders reached an agreement on the code “facilitation.”

¹¹ Although the present research is grounded in a qualitative paradigm and employs interpretive content analysis, complementary validation strategies were adopted to enhance the reliability and confirmability of the findings. One of the main challenges in categorical analysis is ensuring that the codes grouped under a given theme or main category exhibit sufficient conceptual homogeneity and coherence, thereby accurately representing a single construct. In other words, it must be demonstrated that the extracted thematic framework constitutes a stable and trustworthy structure rather than a merely subjective classification.

To address this methodological requirement, Cronbach’s alpha test was applied as an indicator of the internal consistency of the overarching themes in the study. It should be emphasized that this approach does not imply a paradigmatic shift toward a mixed-methods design; rather, it represents a validation technique situated within the qualitative paradigm itself, wherein the extracted codes are treated as items and the overarching themes as scales. The purpose of this procedure is to provide quantitative evidence in support of the qualitative argument concerning the conceptual coherence of the themes.

A high alpha coefficient for a theme indicates that its constituent codes are strongly correlated and collectively measure a single, coherent concept. This enhances the credibility of the categorization process and assures the reader that the analytical structure of the research possesses adequate robustness. The results of this analysis, presented in Figure (16), demonstrate very high reliability for the first two themes and acceptable reliability for the third theme, which are subsequently interpreted in detail.

¹² For example, the model of the state in France has historically been founded upon a centralized and elitist structure in which power is exercised from the center toward the periphery. In contrast, the federal model of Germany distributes power between the national and state levels, recognizing higher degrees of local self-governance. From another perspective, the welfare-oriented states of Scandinavia, emphasizing extensive public service provision and social participation, play a role distinct from that of neoliberal governments in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (such as the United Kingdom), which prioritize downsizing the state, deregulation, and

delegating affairs to market mechanisms.

¹³ In other words, it is necessary in this context to distinguish between two principal approaches in the field. The theory of collaborative planning, developed by Patsy Healey within the European context, emphasizes the importance of establishing institutional structures and arenas for inclusive dialogue and consensus-building among all stakeholders. In contrast, John Forester's communicative planning approach, emerging from the American context, focuses on the micro level, analyzing speech acts, power relations, and the necessity of achieving undistorted communication in the everyday practice of planning.

The significance of this distinction lies in the fact that the article at certain points has used these two concepts interchangeably. Healey's perspective primarily focuses on creating public arenas and consensus-building processes at institutional and structural levels, enabling stakeholder groups to collaboratively shape the future of place. Conversely, Forester—drawing on Habermas's theory of communicative action—centers his analysis on speech acts and power dynamics at the micro level, within planners' everyday interactions.

Acknowledging this distinction strengthens the article's argument, as it demonstrates that the form of "formal participation" identified in Iranian policy documents aligns with neither Healey's structural-institutional criteria nor Forester's standards of communicative ethics.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, the findings of the present study also highlight the need for a critical perspective toward the very theories of communicative planning themselves. Exclusive reliance on Healey's consensus-oriented model—deeply influenced by Habermas's notion of the "ideal speech situation"—carries the risk of overlooking the complexities and power inequalities that characterize the real world. In contrast, John Forester's perspective, grounded in critical pragmatism, offers a more realistic approach. Forester argues that planning is an arena of action under conditions of informational and power asymmetry, and that the planner's role extends beyond merely facilitating dialogue to include ethical agency—actively challenging misinformation and empowering marginalized voices.

This theoretical distinction is crucial for analyzing the Iranian context. In an environment where the findings reveal the dominance of a centralized and hierarchical Government structure, the realization of Healey's ideal consensus appears unattainable. In contrast, Forester's approach provides an analytical framework for understanding how, even within such a rigid structure, actors can create limited spaces for negotiation and resistance.

¹⁵ Nevertheless, it must be noted that applying the rentier state theory to contemporary Iran faces serious challenges and debates, as the country's complex politico-economic structure cannot be fully reduced to this single concept. Critics rightly argue that the state in Iran is not merely a distributor of rents but also possesses significant productive and bureaucratic capacities. Therefore, instead of employing this label directly, it may be more

accurate to discuss the influence of the logic of rentierism or the rentier mindset on the culture of Government.

This mindset—stemming from the state's lack of fiscal dependence on citizens through a comprehensive taxation system—creates a structural rupture in the accountability relationship. In such a model, the state's financial survival does not critically depend on securing citizens' satisfaction. Consequently, participation ceases to be a fundamental right of citizens and a necessity for governmental efficiency, and instead becomes a privilege or favor granted by the ruling authority, one that can be selectively and controllably bestowed. This logic effectively explains the persistence of paternalistic structures and the resistance to genuine power redistribution.

Authors' contributions

The authors of this study contributed equally to the creation of this study.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors acknowledge that they have no conflicts of interest in the preparation and publication of this research.

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