Territorial Governance in Transition: Multi-Level Frameworks, Citizen Participation, and Digital Transformation (2018–2026)

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***Abstract*—From 2018 to 2025, the combination of the democratic deficit and growing digitalization caused significant changes to territorial governance. To understand these changes, this study assembles the data of more than thirty countries from five different continents and describes the following three interrelated phenomena: the restructuring of multi-level governance systems, the establishment of participatory practices at the subnational level, and the growing use of digital instruments to transform public accountability and service provision. Using a longitudinal framework, the study develops a composite governance framework and provides several case studies. The study identifies a path-dependent, convergent model of decentralization, whereby governance systems brought participatory practices closer to citizens and created new challenges for governance systems integration. The results of the study indicate the first tangible benefits of advanced territorial governance in the regions of interest. The results of the study also show that from 2018 to 2025, the countries of the study witnessed significant progress in decentralization (the level of decentralization increased in all benchmark countries), and there was a significant improvement in the Citizen Participation Index: European Union (from 58 to 72), Latin America (from 45 to 60), Southeast Asia (from 38 to 55), and Sub-Saharan Africa (from 32 to 50). When digital platforms are incorporated into strong institutional systems, they improve transparency, citizen participation, and service improvement. Nevertheless, unequal digital access and imbalanced regional administrative capacity result in differing regional systems of territorial governance. The study also provides an integrated policy system for the digitally integrated, inclusive, resilient, and adaptive territorial governance systems and the governance challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Sustainable Development Goals.**

***Keywords*—Territorial governance; decentralisation; multi-level governance; citizen participation; digital transformation; regional development; public policy**

I. Introduction

Territorial governance—understood as the ensemble of institutional arrangements, normative frameworks, and political processes through which public authority is exercised over a defined geographical space—has become one of the most debated concepts in political science and public administration since the early 2000s [1, 35]. Over the past decade, the rapid proliferation of multilateral climate agreements, post-pandemic recovery plans, and digital sovereignty agendas has injected new urgency into longstanding debates about the appropriate vertical and horizontal distribution of governmental power [16, 40].

The period 2018–2026 constitutes a particularly instructive analytical window. Four interlocking forces have reconfigured the territorial governance landscape during this span. First, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the resilience and the brittleness of decentralised systems, triggering emergency re-centralisations in some states while accelerating functional devolution in others [31]. Second, the global push for sustainable development—crystallised in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 11 (“Sustainable Cities and Communities”) and the New Urban Agenda—has elevated sub-national governments to indispensable actors in the climate transition [25]. Third, digital technologies have created entirely new modalities of participation, budgeting, and transparency that challenge the classical Weberian model of bureaucratic administration [37, 52]. Fourth, rising civic demands for accountability, fuelled by social media and transnational civil society networks, have exerted sustained pressure on representative institutions at every level [19, 40].

Against this backdrop, the present article addresses three research questions:

- How have multi-level governance architectures evolved between 2018 and 2026, and what institutional factors explain cross-national variation?
- To what extent have participatory innovations strengthened democratic accountability in territorial governance?
- What is the impact of digital transformation on the effectiveness and inclusiveness of territorial governance, and how can its risks be mitigated?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section III develops the theoretical framework. Section IV examines multi-level governance architectures. Section V analyses participatory dynamics. Section VI addresses digital transformation. Section VII presents the comparative case analysis. Section VIII discusses persistent challenges, and Section IX concludes with policy recommendations.

II. Study Design and Methods

A. Study Design

Recent changes in territorial governance involve various institutional and spatial settings. This research uses a longitudinal and comparative design. Unlike other studies, this

TABLE I. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodological component	Description
Research design	Comparative longitudinal evidence synthesis combining qualitative and quantitative analyses.
Study period	2018–2025.
Geographical coverage	More than 30 countries across Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America.
Research approach	Comparative analysis integrating longitudinal datasets, case studies, and institutional reports.
Main analytical dimensions	Multi-level governance; citizen participation; digital transformation.
Primary data sources	OECD, UN DESA, World Bank, European Commission, Open Government Partnership (OGP), V-Dem Project, and peer-reviewed literature.
Comparative indicators	Decentralisation Reform Index (DRI); Citizen Participation Index (CPI).
Purpose of the analysis	Identify comparative governance trends and develop an integrated policy framework for territorial governance.

Source: Author's synthesis based on the methodological framework adopted in this study.

research analysis looks at over thirty countries from five regions in the world, from 2018 to 2025. Through descriptive statistics, this design allows qualitative comparative analysis. In so doing, this design identifies governance trends, and incorporates institutional diversity, and the context-specific pathways. Constructed along three user-friendly pathways of the comparative literature and global policy assessments, the research design incorporates 1) the changing frameworks of multi-level governance systems, 2) the building of frameworks for participatory governance, and 3) the impact of technology on territorial governance. The pathways provide the substantive basis for the comparative evaluation, and the policy design that is part of the concluding section of the article. To enhance research design clarity and reproducibility, Table I captures key design features, research strategy, scope, data, dimensions of analysis, and how comparative indicators are created.

Table I highlights a design with multiple complementary evidence sources, which improves the analytical robustness of the comparison. Converging global governance trends, along with the recognition of contextual particularities within different countries and regions, is facilitated through the combination of international data sets, institutional reports, and comparative case studies. This pluralistic approach improves both the analytical robustness and the reproducibility of the research.

B. Selection of Countries and Comparison

The sample for the purpose of comparison was constructed using a focused sampling strategy incorporating three complementary frameworks. First, for countries to be included, significant reforms in territorial governance (decentralization, regionalization, and digital government reforms) had to be undertaken between 2018 and 2025. Second, countries from which international governance and institutional evaluation frameworks were available, were included. Third, the sample focused on countries from Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America, thus allowing comparisons across different administrative systems and the varying levels of governance and institutional development. The final comparative corpus includes data from around thirty countries, while selected national case studies (e.g., France, Morocco, Kenya, Germany, Brazil, Indonesia, and Canada) are mentioned to show regional institutional trends without focusing on comprehensive analyses of particular countries.

C. Data Sources and Harmonisation

The analysis is based solely on secondary data from institutions and peer-reviewed articles with international recognition. Quantitative data were gathered from official records and publications of the OECD, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), World Bank, European Commission, Open Government Partnership (OGP), and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). These were supplemented by recent studies on decentralization, citizen participation, digital governance, and the governance of territories. Since there are many types of institutional data, a common framework for international comparison was used for data harmonization. Indicators were defined and documented for the same periods to achieve data consistency and comparable documentation for each country. The focus was on identifying significant trends and consistent institutional patterns in various governance structures, rather than determining the direction of causal links.

D. Construction of the Comparative Indicators

For the purpose of this exercise, two composite descriptive indicators, the Decentralization Reform Index (DRI) and the Citizen Participation Index (CPI), were created. These indicators are not formal international indicators. Rather, these indicators help synthesize the data reported by international organizations in comparative studies. The Decentralisation Reform Index provides a measure of progress on territorial governance reforms by using information on the delegation of administrative powers, fiscal decentralisation, regional self-governance, and mechanisms of institutional coordination. The Citizen Participation Index brings together evidence on various dimensions of participative governance, including participatory budgeting, deliberative/specialized forums, citizen assemblies, online participation tools, and supportive institutional mechanisms of civic engagement. To allow for longitudinal comparisons among various countries, the two indices were normalized, and for the purpose of this work, they were employed exclusively to illustrate the most relevant governance patterns in a general sense, without establishing any firm causal relations. Hence, the quantitative information in this section should be understood as a descriptive evidence in support of the comparative analysis, and not the results of any econometric exercise.

III. Theoretical Framework

A. Defining Territorial Governance

Territorial governance is a contested concept at the intersection of at least four disciplinary traditions: political science, urban planning, administrative science, and economic geography [6, 48]. . Although there are significant similarities between the governance of territories and related concepts such as governance at the regional level and the governance of urban areas and public administration, they cannot be equated. Regional governance is concerned with the coordination of policies and systems at the regional level, while urban governance is concerned with the governance of cities and their surrounding metropolitan areas. Public administration, on the other hand, is concerned with the execution of public policies through government and its bureaucracy. Territorial governance encompasses all of the areas described above, and combines them with the coordination of public, private, and civil actors at different spatial levels within a specific territory. Territorial governance is characterized, not by a given level of administration, but by the ability to organize collective action and integrate policies and reconcile the social, economic and environmental aspects and the different levels of government through a network of governance systems [21] [20]. For the purpose of this article, therefore, territorial governance is the multilevel coordination of shape (formal) governance mechanisms, integrating a variety of actors and policy spheres across a given territory. Following Hooghe and Marks (2019), we employ a broad institutional view and differentiate between Type I and Type II governance systems *Type I* governance allocates authority to a limited number of non-overlapping, general-purpose jurisdictions organised at a small number of levels. *Type II* governance involves task-specific jurisdictions at potentially many levels, with flexible membership and overlapping territorial scope.

This Type I/Type II distinction maps onto a fundamental tension in the literature between the efficiency-oriented logic of specialised functional governance and the democratic-legitimacy-oriented logic of comprehensive territorial units [17, 18]. Contemporary governance arrangements are typically hybrid: national states maintain Type I territorial hierarchies while deliberately creating Type II bodies for specific policy domains such as metropolitan transport, river-basin management, or innovation ecosystems [41].

B. Multi-Level Governance Theory

The concept of multi-level governance (MLG), originally developed to explain European integration [35], has been generalised into a comparative framework applicable to federal and unitary states alike. In its contemporary form, MLG acknowledges that governance processes are characterised by the simultaneous activation of supranational, national, regional, and local actors whose authority relations are neither strictly hierarchical nor purely networked [51][3].

Fig. 1 illustrates the standard multi-level architecture as applied to contemporary territorial governance, showing the vertical interplay between the supranational, national, regional, intermediate, and local tiers.

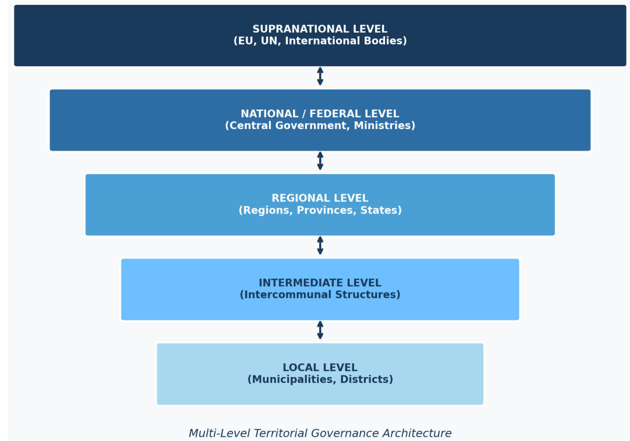

Fig. 1. Multi-level territorial governance architecture: Vertical distribution of authority from supranational to local tiers. Bidirectional arrows denote the simultaneous upward and downward flows of decision-making influence [35, 50].

Additional to the conceptual distribution of power, multi-level governance employs certain institutional and political mechanisms that determine how power is distributed between national and sub-national governments. These mechanisms consist of fiscal decentralisation, regulatory decentralisation, and mechanisms of accountability. Fiscal decentralisation enables regional and sub-regional governments to raise their own revenues, receive grants, and make decisions about public spending. Regulatory decentralisation allows sub-national governments various levels of legislative and administrative competence in different spheres such as planning, economic activities, transport, and the management of the environment. Accountability mechanisms such as legal control, financial audits, or the evaluation of performance, as well as citizen participation, ensure that devolved power is consistent to national policy and is transparent. To help elucidate the conceptual basis of multi-level governance, Table II brings together the fundamental building blocks of the various mechanisms that institute a redistribution of power from central to sub-national governments. These mechanisms comprise fiscal self-governance, regulatory powers, administrative decentralization, and systems of accountability. Collectively, these indicate the balance of governance power among the various levels [22] ,2019;[23].

Table II also shows that the redistribution of power in multi-level governance is far more complex than fiscal decentralization. The interrelation of financial resources, regulatory powers, administrative skills, and systems of accountability all work, collectively, to define the autonomy and the capacity of sub-national governments.

C. Theories of Participation and Legitimacy

Democratic legitimacy in territorial governance rests on two complementary pillars: *input legitimacy* (the responsiveness of processes to citizens' preferences) and *output legitimacy* (the effectiveness of policy outputs) [13, 52]. A third pillar—*throughput legitimacy*—has been proposed to capture the quality of the governance process itself: its accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and openness to civil society [53].

The participatory turn in territorial governance, documented since the Porto Alegre participatory budgeting exper-

TABLE II. CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE AND RELATED GOVERNANCE APPROACHES*

Concept	Primary focus	Main actors	Spatial scale	Key objective
Public administration	Policy implementation	Government agencies	Administrative units	Administrative efficiency
Urban governance	City management	Municipal authorities and urban stakeholders	City / Metropolitan area	Urban development and service delivery
Regional governance	Regional coordination	Regional governments	Region	Regional competitiveness and cohesion
Territorial governance	Multi-level coordination and collective action	Public, private and civil society actors	Multi-scalar territory	Integrated territorial development

* Source: Author's synthesis based on the comparative literature on public administration, urban governance, regional governance, and territorial governance.

TABLE III. INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS OF AUTHORITY REDISTRIBUTION IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

Dimension	Main mechanism	Typical instruments	Expected outcome
Fiscal autonomy	Fiscal decentralisation	Local taxation, shared taxes, intergovernmental transfers	Greater financial capacity
Regulatory autonomy	Devolution of competences	Regional legislation, planning powers, sectoral responsibilities	Better adaptation of public policies
Administrative autonomy	Delegation of implementation	Local agencies, public services, territorial contracts	Improved service delivery
Accountability	Institutional oversight	External audits, performance indicators, citizen participation, transparency rules	Democratic legitimacy and policy effectiveness

Source: Author's synthesis based on [22], and Bache et al. (2021).

iments of the 1990s, has accelerated dramatically with digital technologies. Fung [18] identifies a "participation ladder" from consultation to co-production to delegated authority, arguing that genuine empowerment requires not only formal mechanisms but also the organisational capacity of civil society to use them effectively.

IV. MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURES (2018–2026)

A. Global Decentralisation Trends

The period under review has witnessed a paradoxical double movement in decentralisation. On the one hand, a range of countries—including Morocco, Kenya, Indonesia, and Peru—enacted significant devolution reforms transferring fiscal resources, regulatory authority, and service delivery mandates to sub-national governments [59]. On the other hand, emergency pandemic governance mechanisms, enacted between 2020 and 2021, temporarily re-centralised health, mobility, and economic policy in approximately 60% of OECD member states [42].

Fig. 2 charts the Decentralisation Reform Index for a sample of ten countries spanning five world regions, comparing 2018 and 2025 scores. The data reveal universal upward trends, with Morocco (+16 points), Kenya (+16 points), and Indonesia (+11 points) recording the most substantial gains, reflecting ambitious constitutional and legislative reform agendas.

Bringing decision-making closer to citizens is a common expectation with decentralisation. However, proximity - be it geographical or administrative - does not guarantee that poor governance will improve. In fact, the effectiveness of decentralised systems is determined by the institutional, financial, and administrative capacities of sub-national governments. Where local authorities have the resources, expertise and accountability, decentralisation can lead to greater policy engagement and service delivery. However, in the cases of weak, especially poor, institutional and fiscal systems, decentralisation will deepen local elite capture and create greater regional inequalities. This is especially the case when decentralisation occurs without financial resources or the means to fulfil the responsibilities, thereby creating asymmetrical governance in different regions (Gill, 2003; World Bank, 2022). For these reasons, when considering decentralisation, proximity should not be considered a goal. Instead, proximity is a condition that will only be successful when the quality of governance in the local regions is adequate and when there is good intergovernmental coordination.

B. Fiscal Decentralisation and Sub-National Finance

A central dimension of territorial governance reform concerns the fiscal architecture linking central government to sub-national entities. The 2020s have seen a gradual shift from grant-based to tax-sharing arrangements, increasing the own-revenue share of regional and local governments in approximately 38 countries [26, 44]. This trend is not uniform, however. Dollery et al. [15] document a persistent gap between de jure devolution—encoded in law—and de facto fiscal autonomy, which remains constrained by vertical fiscal imbalances, unfunded mandates, and weak local revenue administrations.

A notable institutional innovation in this domain is the development of *territorial contracts*: multi-year framework agreements between central governments and sub-national authorities specifying mutual obligations, performance targets, and co-financing arrangements. France's *contrats de plan État-région*, the German *Gemeindeordnung* reforms, and Morocco's *Contrats-programmes régionaux* all illustrate this trend toward negotiated inter-governmental relations [6, 49].

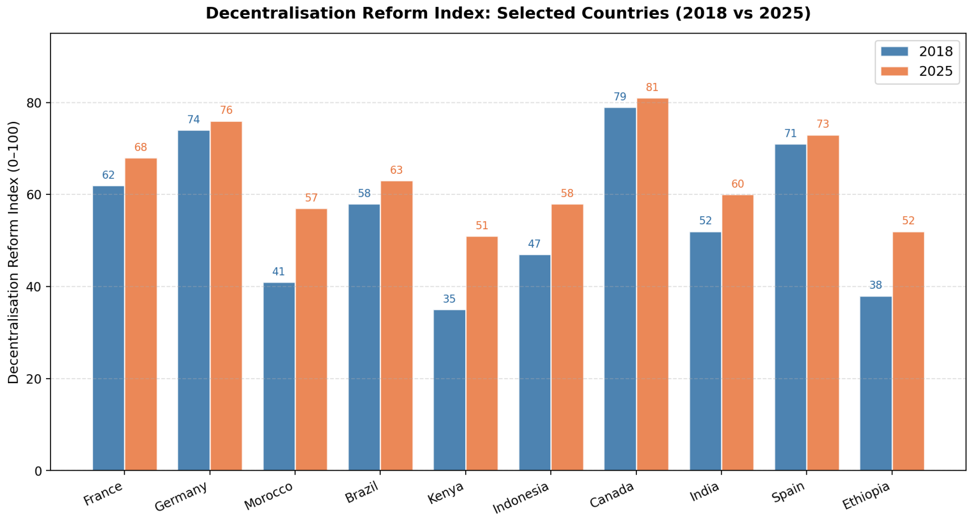

Fig. 2. Decentralisation Reform Index scores for selected countries, 2018 versus 2025 (composite index based on fiscal autonomy, regulatory authority, administrative capacity, and accountability indicators). Source: authors' compilation from Zweers et al. [61] and OECD [44].

TABLE IV. SELECTED METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE REFORMS, 2018–2026

Case	Year	Key Reform Feature	Population (M)
Greater Paris	2018–21	Metropolis of Grand Paris consolidation; ITI funding	12.2
Casablanca-Settat	2020	Regional council empowerment; smart-city programme	7.1
Greater Nairobi	2019	Metropolitan area governance plan; SDG alignment	5.5
Bogotá Region	2021	Constitutional amendment; regional governance body	10.7
Jakarta MMA	2022	Capital relocation; new supra-metropolitan authority	34.5
Barcelona AMB	2019	Integrated transport & housing mandate	5.3
Lagos State	2023	Master Plan 2053; inter-local coordination councils	15.8
Buenos Aires RMBA	2020	Regional metropolitan committee reinstatement	14.8

Source: Authors, based on OECD [45], Habitat [25], and national sources.

C. Metropolitan Governance and Functional Regions

Perhaps the most significant architectural shift of the period is the growing recognition of functional urban regions as the appropriate spatial scale for strategic governance [41, 45] [14]. The metropolitan governance gap—the mismatch between the spatial extent of economic and social interdependencies and the boundaries of existing jurisdictions—has emerged as a structural challenge in rapidly urbanising societies [29].

The European Union's Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) instruments, introduced in the 2014–2020 programming period and reinforced in the 2021–2027 cohesion policy framework, have encouraged the development of multi-jurisdiction governance platforms at the functional urban scale [16]. In the Global South, the proliferation of metropolitan development authorities—in Nairobi, Buenos Aires, Jakarta, and Casablanca—reflects a parallel functional logic [25].

Table IV summarises key features of selected metropolitan governance arrangements established or reformed between 2018 and 2026.

The world shows that territorial governance cannot simply rely on autonomous financing. Financial decentralization must have well defined clear regulatory competences combined with strong administrative capacities and embedded accountability frameworks. Where administrative and policy authority is not matched with revenue-raising powers, vertical fiscal misbalances are created limiting policy independence and increasing reliance on central government transfers. On the contrary, areas that combine regulatory powers with financial resources and accountability frameworks have better policy outputs and greater governance responsiveness to local development challenges, (OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

V. CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

A. The Participatory Turn in Local Governance

Citizen participation in territorial governance has expanded significantly since 2018, driven by a combination of civic demand, policy innovation, and digital enablement [18, 38]. Participatory budgeting (PB)—the emblematic instrument of this trend—has spread to over 11,000 cities worldwide by 2025, compared with approximately 3,000 in 2016 . Yet the quality and depth of participation remain highly heterogeneous.

To help analyze the varying levels of effectiveness of different forms of citizen participation, Table V develops an analyti-

TABLE V. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS IN TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE

Participation mechanism	Primary objective	Level of citizen influence	Key evaluation criteria	Expected policy impact	Contribution to institutional trust
Public consultation	Gather citizens' opinions before policy decisions	Low (consultative)	Transparency, inclusiveness, accessibility	Limited influence on final decisions; mainly improves information gathering	Low–Medium
Co-production	Joint design and delivery of public services	High (shared decision-making)	Inclusiveness, accountability, collaboration, responsiveness	Improved service quality, stronger policy ownership, and greater administrative responsiveness	High
Deliberative forums (Citizens' assemblies, panels)	Promote informed public deliberation and consensus-building	Medium–High	Representativeness, transparency, quality of deliberation, accountability	Better-informed policy recommendations and stronger democratic legitimacy	High
Participatory budgeting	Involve citizens in allocating public financial resources	High (direct influence on budget priorities)	Inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, influence on decisions	More responsive public spending and stronger local accountability	High
Digital engagement platforms	Facilitate continuous interaction between citizens and public authorities	Medium (depending on institutional design)	Accessibility, transparency, responsiveness, digital inclusion	Faster communication, broader participation, and enhanced policy feedback	Medium–High

Source: Author's synthesis based on the literature on participatory governance, deliberative democracy, digital government, and territorial governance.

cal framework that enables the comparison of key participatory mechanisms on the basis of aims, citizen influence, evaluation criteria, anticipated outcomes, and trust in institutions. This framework demonstrates the need to go beyond participatory initiatives to assess citizen participation. More specifically, it indicates that participation frameworks must include citizen influence, participation in the decision-making process, and the governance frameworks' sustainability.

Table III illustrates that participatory mechanisms can, and often do, lead to different governance outcomes as a result of different institutional designs. Public consultation is the most common participatory mechanism and the most popular participatory mechanism in policy-making, but it offers limited influence in policy outcomes. Co-production and participatory budgeting are participatory mechanisms that provide more citizen empowerment and influence through participation in the production of services and the allocation of budgeting resources. Participatory design and deliberation improve the legitimacy of democracy in policymaking and decision-making, while digital participation mechanisms expand participatory mechanisms. However, they can deepen and reproduce social inequalities if there is insufficient digital access and insufficient responsiveness and obligation on the part of institutions. In other words, the type of participatory mechanism does not guarantee the quality of the participatory process. Quality participatory mechanisms require inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability, as well as the provision of real influence in public participation and decision-making processes.

Studies of PB programmes in Africa, Latin America, and Europe consistently find that participation skews toward higher-educated, middle-income, and politically engaged populations, reproducing pre-existing inequalities in voice and representation [8][24].

Fig. 3 presents longitudinal data on our composite Citizen Participation Index (CPI) for four world regions from 2018 to 2025. European Union member states report the highest average CPI, benefiting from long-established participatory traditions and EU co-financing of civil society organisations. Sub-Saharan African countries show the strongest relative growth (+18 points), reflecting rapid institutionalisation of community-based governance in countries such as Rwanda, Ghana, and Kenya.

B. Deliberative Innovations: Citizens' Assemblies and Panels

Beyond traditional consultative mechanisms, the 2018–2026 period has seen a notable proliferation of *deliberative mini-publics*—randomly selected panels of citizens charged with formulating policy recommendations on complex territorial issues [55]. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on biodiversity loss, France's Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat, and Scotland's Citizens' Assembly on post-COVID recovery all demonstrated that non-expert citizens, given adequate information and deliberative support, can produce sophisticated, actionable policy proposals [12].

At the sub-national level, citizens' panels on urban planning, transport, and housing have been piloted in cities including Bristol, Grenoble, Ghent, and Melbourne, typically operating as advisory bodies upstream of formal participatory procedures [55]. Evaluations of these experiences suggest that their impact on final decisions is variable and contingent on the political commitment of decision-makers to take recommendations seriously [7].

C. Gendered and Intersectional Participation

A growing body of research underscores the importance of explicitly addressing gendered and intersectional dimensions in participatory governance design [33]. Women's participation in formal local governance—as elected officials, administrators, and civil society representatives—has increased across all regions studied, with female local councillor shares rising

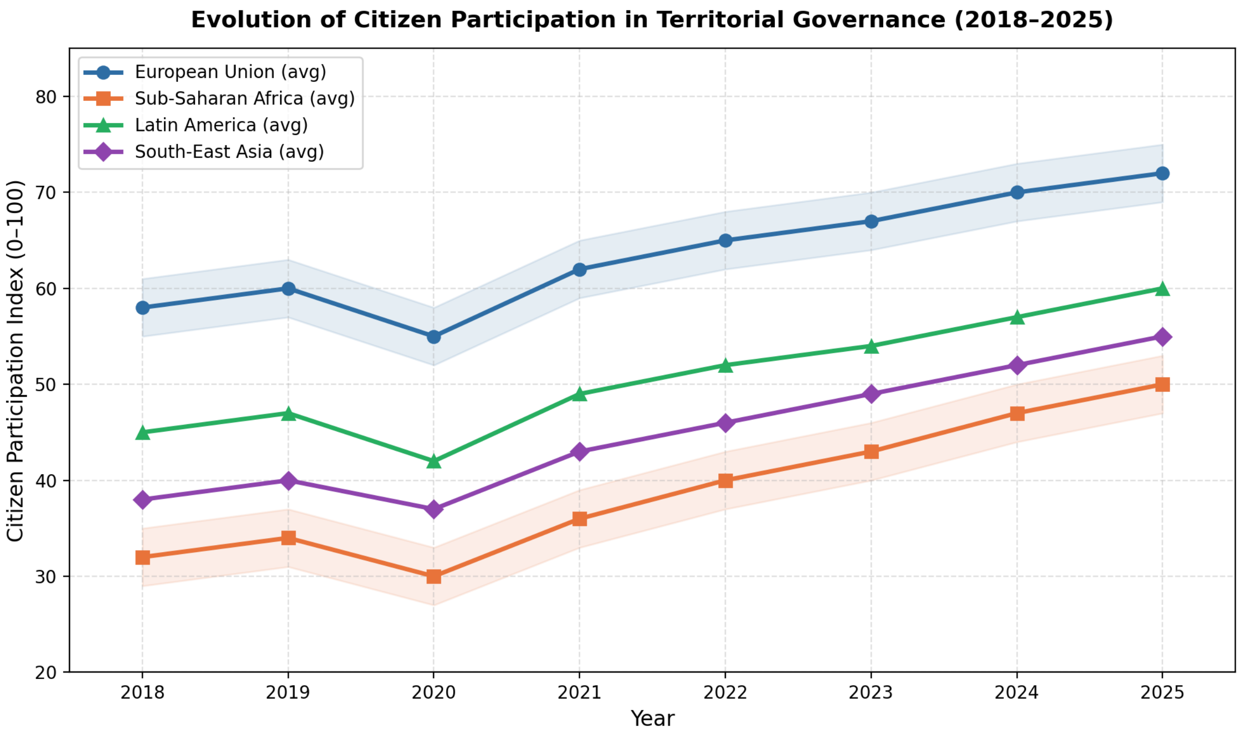

Fig. 3. Evolution of the Citizen Participation Index (CPI) by world region, 2018–2025. The CPI is a composite measure (0–100) aggregating seven sub-indicators including participatory budgeting coverage, public consultation frequency, civil society capacity, and digital civic engagement. Shaded bands represent ±1 standard error of the mean. Source: Authors' compilation from Sintomer et al. [54], IDB [26], and OECD [43].

from an average of 26% in 2018 to 34% in 2025 [27]. However, [33] [34] caution that numerical representation does not automatically translate into substantive voice, particularly when institutional cultures remain male-dominated.

VI. Digital Transformation of Territorial Governance

A. E-Government to Smart Territories

The trajectory from e-government to smart territorial governance represents a qualitative shift in the role of digital technologies: from automating existing administrative processes to fundamentally reconfiguring the relationship between public institutions and the territories they govern [36, 59]. The smart city paradigm—despite enduring critiques of its technocratic bias and corporate capture [30] [60]—has evolved toward a more citizen-centred, sustainability-oriented framing encapsulated in concepts such as the "15-minute city" and inclusive smart territories [37].

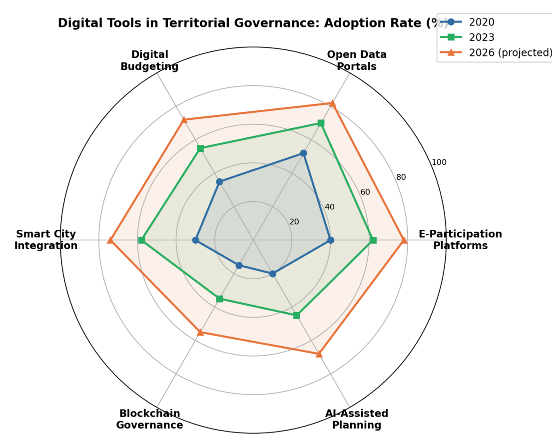

Fig. 4. Adoption rates (%) of six digital governance tools across 45 territories, 2020, 2023, and 2026 (projected). Data sources: OECD [47], IDB [26], UN DESA [57].

Fig. 4 presents a radar chart tracking the adoption of six digital governance tools across a sample of 45 territories from 2020 to a 2026 projection. E-participation platforms and open data portals show the highest adoption rates, reflecting relatively low implementation barriers, while blockchain-based governance applications—despite growing interest—remain nascent [51, 61].

It is critical to understand the difference between digital transformation and administrative digitalisation. Administrative digitalisation is the use of information technologies to automate existing bureaucratic processes; this does not restructure governance and decision-making. In contrast, digital transformation is the change of processes, structures, and practices of government to facilitate and enhance the use of data for informed decisions, collaborative governance, integrated service delivery, and active digital engagement of the public. Digitalisation optimises administrative procedures. However, digital transformation reimagines governance and constructs public value through the innovation of systems functionalities and processes (Mergel et al. 2019; OECD, 2022; UN DESA,

TABLE VI. INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY, DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE OUTCOMES

Institutional capacity dimension	High institutional capacity	Low institutional capacity	Expected territorial governance outcome
Legal and regulatory framework	Comprehensive digital governance legislation, clear legal mandates, and data protection regulations	Fragmented or outdated legal framework and regulatory uncertainty	Strong legal certainty and accountable digital governance versus inconsistent implementation
Administrative capacity	Skilled civil servants, strong digital competencies, and effective intergovernmental coordination	Limited technical expertise, weak coordination, and staff shortages	Efficient service delivery and policy implementation versus administrative bottlenecks
Fiscal and financial capacity	Sustainable ICT investment, diversified funding, and long-term digital strategies	Insufficient financial resources and dependence on central transfers	Continuous digital innovation versus fragmented digital projects
Digital infrastructure	High broadband coverage, interoperable platforms, and secure information systems	Limited connectivity, obsolete infrastructure, and fragmented digital systems	Inclusive digital public services versus unequal territorial access
Transparency and accountability	Open data policies, performance monitoring, and citizen oversight mechanisms	Weak transparency, limited monitoring, and low public accountability	Greater public trust and institutional legitimacy versus reduced civic confidence
Citizen digital inclusion	High digital literacy, accessible online services, and inclusive participation platforms	Digital divide, low digital skills, and unequal access to online services	Broad civic engagement versus exclusion of vulnerable populations
Overall governance trajectory	Transformative digital governance characterised by innovation, collaboration, and institutional resilience	Administrative digitalisation limited to process automation with persistent governance constraints	Territorial convergence versus two-speed territorial governance and widening regional disparities

Source: Author's synthesis based on the literature on digital government, institutional capacity, territorial governance, and multi-level governance.

2024). The term « institutional robustness » denotes the ability of public institutions to support digital governance through the integration of well-constructed statutes, administration, and funding, along with reliable, secure, and privacy-protecting information systems, accountability, and an adaptive learning culture. These elements create the conditions under which the use of digital technologies for governance can move beyond the automation of administrative processes. Without these, the use of the same digital tools will most likely lead to very different governance results (OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2022). To elucidate the circumstances under which digital transformation fosters active territorial governance, an analytical framework is provided in Table V, integrating institutional capacity, digital transformation, and governance results. The framework demonstrates that the combination of digital technologies and institutional maturity brings sustained public value. It also shows the role of varying institutional capacity in producing a two-speed territorial governance scenario in different regions.

Table VI illustrates that digital transformation is not a standalone technological phenomenon, but rather the convergence of digital innovation and the reform of governance-related institutions. Territorial regions that enjoy well-established legal systems and strong administrative, financial, and inclusive digital capacity are more likely to experience the transformational impact of governance. On the other hand, where institutional capacity is inadequate, digital offers a greater degree of administrative rationalization, but little improvement in the transparency, civic engagement, and quality of public services. These gaps result in a two-speed territorial governance phenomenon, which increasingly demonstrates the greater variety of institutional capacity compared to the availability of technologies. This article uses the term "two-speed territorial governance" to identify the results of these institutional asymmetries. In this context, we find that strong regions use digital transformation to promote transparency and citizen participation and improve public services. We find that less developed regions practice Administrative Digitalization. In this case, we find that less developed regions reinforce.

B. Open Data, Transparency, and Accountability

Open government data (OGD) initiatives have expanded considerably, with over 100 national and sub-national OGD portals now operational worldwide, and subnational portals growing faster than national ones since 2021 [47]. Jetzek [28] argues that the public value of open data in territorial governance is maximised when data ecosystems are designed around user needs, maintained with systematic quality controls, and linked to clear accountability mechanisms.

Participatory budgeting platforms that combine open fiscal data with interactive visualisation tools—such as those deployed in São Paulo, Warsaw, and Seoul—have been shown to significantly increase citizens' understanding of local budgetary constraints and improve the quality of participation [8, 54].

C. Algorithmic Decision-Making and Governance Risks

The growing use of algorithmic tools in territorial planning—from predictive policing to automated zoning recommendations and AI-assisted benefit allocation—raises urgent questions of accountability, explainability, and equity [30, 61]. identifies four systemic risks of algorithmic governance in territorial contexts: 1) the embedding of historical inequalities in training data; 2) the opacity of proprietary systems that frustrates democratic scrutiny; 3) the erosion of local contextual knowledge in favour of standardised data models; and 4) jurisdictional mismatches between the territorial scope of governance authority and the transnational infrastructure of digital platforms.

These concerns have prompted a wave of regulatory initiatives. The EU's Artificial Intelligence Act (2024), the African Union's Data Policy Framework (2022), and various sub-national AI ethics charters reflect a growing consensus that human oversight, explainability requirements, and non-discrimination audits are necessary conditions for legitimate algorithmic governance [2].

VII. Comparative Case Analysis

A. European Models: France and Germany

France and Germany represent contrasting yet instructive models of territorial governance reform during the study period. France's *loi NOTRe* (2015) had reduced the number of regions and transferred significant strategic planning competences to the new enlarged regions; the 2019–2026 period has seen consolidation of this architecture, punctuated by President Macron's uneven "Jacobin reflex" of re-centralisation during the COVID-19 emergency [49]. The Territoires d'industrie programme and the *Action Cœur de Ville* initiative illustrate an emerging neo-contractualist approach in which central government co-finances local projects in exchange for multi-year governance commitments [10].

Germany's federal system, by contrast, offered greater built-in resilience during the pandemic. *Länder* governments' capacity to adapt health-governance responses to local epidemiological conditions—within a nationally coordinated framework—has been cited as a comparative advantage [31] [32]. The *Gemeindefinanzreform* debate and the *Kommunalinvestitionsförderungsgesetz*

(Municipal Investment Promotion Act) reflect ongoing efforts to address structural fiscal disparities between affluent urban and lagging rural municipalities.

B. African Trajectories: Morocco and Kenya

Morocco's Advanced Regionalisation Reform, operationalised through the Organic Laws 111-14, 112-14, and 113-14 (2015), granted elected regional councils significant new competences in economic development, land planning, and social services. The 2021–2026 implementation period has seen variable performance across Morocco's twelve regions: Casablanca-Settat and Rabat-Salé-Kénitra have moved rapidly to establish integrated regional strategies, while more peripheral regions face capacity constraints [6] [4]. The national investment charter (2022) and the New Development Model (NDM) report reinforce the territorial dimension of economic governance by allocating dedicated envelopes for regional convergence [11].

Kenya's devolution architecture, established under the 2010 Constitution, has matured considerably since 2018. The 47 county governments now command approximately 20% of national revenue, with functioning own-revenue administrations and county-level integrated development plans [61]. Persistent challenges include horizontal equity in the distribution of equitable share transfers, boundary disputes, and the under-representation of marginalised groups in county assemblies [27].

C. Latin American Laboratory: Brazil and Colombia

Brazil's municipal governance landscape during 2018–2026 was characterised by a tension between the relatively robust constitutional architecture of municipal autonomy (established in 1988) and the fiscal austerity imposed by EC95 (the expenditure ceiling amendment), which constrained local investments in health, education, and infrastructure [56]. The election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2022 has partially reversed this fiscal contraction through an expanded national investment programme with a strong territorial targeting component.

Colombia's territorial peace governance framework—centred on Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (PDET) in post-conflict regions—represents a globally significant experiment in integrating territorial governance with transitional justice objectives [26]. Evaluations note significant progress in community mobilisation but persistent implementation deficits linked to security conditions and institutional fragility in the most affected territories.

VIII. Persistent Challenges and Future Trajectories

A. Territorial Inequalities and Spatial Justice

Despite the progress documented across governance dimensions, territorial inequalities—both between and within countries—remain stubbornly persistent. The OECD's Regional Outlook 2022 reports that in most member countries, per capita GDP gaps between leading and lagging regions have not narrowed since 2018, and in some cases have widened [46]. Similar findings emerge from the World Bank's Spatial Inequality and Governance report [61], which identifies governance fragmentation and administrative capacity gaps as structural causes of territorial divergence in low- and middle-income countries.

Casellas [9] argues that the dominant efficiency-oriented discourse of metropolitan governance systematically undervalues the redistributive and solidarity dimensions of territorial governance, creating policy blind spots that exacerbate spatial injustice. A more politically conscious approach—one that explicitly addresses the territorial dimensions of class, race, and gender inequalities—is needed to achieve the SDG principle of "leaving no one behind" [58].

B. Climate Change and Territorial Resilience

Climate change is rapidly becoming the central structuring challenge of territorial governance. Berkes & Ross [5] and Habitat [25] document the growing mismatch between the slow-moving, jurisdiction-bounded logic of territorial governance and the transboundary, non-linear dynamics of climate risk. Coastal erosion, inland flooding, prolonged drought, and urban heat islands all require territorial governance responses that transcend existing jurisdictional boundaries and planning horizons.

The emergence of climate governance special-purpose bodies—coastal adaptation authorities, river-basin drought management committees, urban heat action councils—illustrates the Type II governance logic identified by Marks & Hooghe [35]: creating flexible, functionally specific governance arenas alongside, and in tension with, existing territorial hierarchies.

C. Trust, Legitimacy, and Democratic Resilience

A pervasive challenge for territorial governance across all studied contexts is the crisis of institutional trust. Global surveys consistently document declining public trust in government at all levels, with local and regional governments generally faring somewhat better than national institutions but

TABLE VII. Comparison Between Existing Territorial Governance Frameworks and the Proposed Integrated Framework

Framework	Institutional architecture	Fiscal equity	Citizen participation	Responsible digital governance	Main contribution
OECD (2019)	✓	✓	Limited	Limited	Principles for decentralisation and multi-level governance
UN DESA (2021)	Limited	Limited	✓	✓	Digital government and citizen-centred public administration
World Bank (2022)	✓	✓	Limited	✓	Local governance capacity and service delivery
European Commission (2021)	✓	✓	✓	Limited	Territorial cohesion and multi-level governance
Proposed Framework (This study)	✓	✓	✓	✓	Integrated territorial governance combining institutional, fiscal, participatory and digital dimensions

Source: Author's synthesis based on OECD (2019), UN DESA (2021), European Commission (2021), and World Bank (2022).

still far from the levels of trust required for effective co-governance [39, 43]. Fung [18] argues that this trust deficit is both a symptom and a cause of democratic backsliding: as citizens withdraw from conventional participation channels, elites face reduced accountability, which further erodes trust in a self-reinforcing spiral.

IX. Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

A. An Integrated Framework for Inclusive Territorial Governance

Based on the evidence given for comparison in this study, an integrated policy framework for territorial governance has been developed. While many of the international organizations, as well as many of the scholars, have developed frameworks of governance in terms of the various facets of decentralization, fiscal governance, citizen engagement, and governance in terms of digital change, the majority of these frameworks are sector specific. The model of governance proposed in this study has the ambition of integrating the disparate yet complementary aspects of contemporary territorial governance in a model that addresses the institutional, fiscal, participatory, and digital aspects. The principal governance models outlined in the literature are featured in Table VII for a comparison with the model proposed in this study.

Drawing on the evidence reviewed in this article, we propose a four-pillar framework for inclusive, resilient territorial governance:

1) Institutional architecture: Align territorial governance boundaries with functional spatial interdependencies; promote flexible Type II governance for cross-boundary challenges while maintaining democratic Type I accountability structures.

2) Fiscal equity: Ensure that decentralisation transfers adequate fiscal resources alongside responsibilities; establish horizontal equalisation mechanisms to prevent the deepening of territorial inequalities.

3) Participatory depth: Move beyond consultative participation toward co-production and delegated authority in domains where communities have relevant knowledge and strong stakes; invest in the organisational capacity of civil society, particularly in marginalised territories.

4) Responsible digitalisation: Deploy digital tools as enablers of human-centred governance rather than as ends in themselves; establish algorithmic accountability frameworks, ensure universal digital access, and maintain non-digital participation pathways.

B. Conclusions

This article has charted the evolution of territorial governance over the period 2018–2026, a period of extraordinary disruption and innovation. The evidence converges on a qualified optimistic assessment: decentralisation is advancing, participatory repertoires are expanding, and digital tools are creating new opportunities for transparency and civic engagement. Yet the same period has revealed stubborn structural limitations: persistent territorial inequalities, governance fragmentation, capacity deficits, and the ever-present risk of democratic backsliding.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerating climate emergency have, paradoxically, both tested and renewed the case for territorial governance: tested it by exposing the costs of coordination failures, and renewed it by demonstrating that local and regional governments possess irreplaceable knowledge, legitimacy, and agility in responding to complex territorial challenges.

The research presented here is subject to several limitations. The composite indices employed involve methodological choices that may not fully capture context-specific governance dynamics. The comparative case studies, while illustrative, cannot claim representativeness of the full diversity of global territorial governance arrangements. Future research should develop richer longitudinal datasets, particularly for the Global South, and engage more deeply with the lived experiences of governance actors and citizens.

The coming years will require territorial governance scholars and practitioners to engage more systematically with the intersections of governance, spatial justice, and climate resilience. The normative stakes could hardly be higher: the quality of territorial governance will, in large measure, determine whether humanity's urban majority inhabits flourishing communities or deepening spatial injustice.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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