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Article

## Urban governance and quality of life: a systematic mapping review with bibliometric analysis

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**Abstract.** Although there are a large number of studies exploring the importance of quality of life (QoL) in cities, there is a significant gap in research linking the impact of urban governance on the QoL of their citizens. Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify and examine how the tools available to local governments have a significant impact on our area of study. Using a systematic mapping review with bibliometric analysis, 139 articles published in the last 10 years, from 2015 to 2025, were analyzed. Governance components such as transparency, e-government, responsiveness, rule of law, citizen participation, accountability, effectiveness and efficiency have been analyzed. The results of this research can help city planners prioritize those factors that have the greatest impact on or are most relevant to citizens' QoL.

**Keywords:** urban governance, quality of life, systematic mapping review

**JEL classification:** I31; I38

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### 1. Introduction

In the current "urban age," cities have become the primary habitat for more than half of the global population, acting as engines of innovation but also as the epicenters of significant environmental and social challenges (Popescu, 2020; Ptak-Wojciechowska et al., 2021). This figure is projected to reach approximately 66% to 68% by the year 2050 (United Nations, 2022), underscoring the vital role cities play as hubs for economic growth, innovation, and social interaction. However, this rapid urbanization also brings significant challenges, including environmental degradation (Al-Azzawi, 2016), densification and gentrification (Frauenfelder et al., 2023), infrastructure shortages (Pazhuhan et al., 2020), social injustice and economic inequality (Chełstowska et al., 2025; Frauenfelder et al., 2023). Consequently, urban areas are no longer viewed merely as physical

infrastructures but as complex ecosystems where individual needs must be balanced with collective sustainability and resilience goals (Aisyah et al., 2024; De Guimarães et al., 2020).

Central to the management of these urban systems is the concept of Quality of Life (QoL). QoL is widely acknowledged as a multi-dimensional, amorphous, and multi-level concept (Abu-Alrop, 2025; Pazos-García, López-López, Iglesias-Antelo, et al., 2025). Broadly, QoL measures an individual's level of happiness based on their standards of a "good life" (Prayitno et al., 2024) and includes both objective parameters—such as income, housing, and healthcare accessibility (Everatt, 2017)—and subjective dimensions—such as social inclusion, perceived safety, and a sense of belonging (Smith et al., 2024). The World Health Organization defines it more specifically as an individual's perception of their position in life within their specific cultural and value system (Gheitarani et al., 2020). Recent scholarship, particularly those utilizing the Capability Approach, emphasizes that QoL is not solely about access to resources but also concerns individual agency and the practical freedom citizens have to achieve their desired "functionings" (Bucheli, 2024; Doria, 2023).

The responsibility for fostering an environment conducive to a high QoL rests fundamentally with local governments and municipal authorities (De Guimarães et al., 2020). Essential elements for the success of such a government are the establishment of protocols, the proactive stewardship of bureaucracy as policy implementers, and the provision of public facilities, thereby promoting sustainable growth and social advancement (Aisyah et al., 2024). Local governance involves the administration of public affairs and managing the "bundle of services" provided to citizens (Weziak-Białowska, 2016). Furthermore, the rise of the "smart city" paradigm has redefined the relationship between local government and QoL. Modern urban governance is increasingly moving toward "Smart Governance". Beyond traditional bureaucratic tasks, modern "Smart Governance" strategies increasingly prioritize transparency, collaboration, and participation that are considered relevant practices to achieve the integration of technology to enhance a democratic environment and open government (De Guimarães et al., 2020). At the same time, the integration of technological innovation into government tasks not only contributes to improving transparency and accountability in the delivery of public services but also contributes to improving transparency and accountability in the delivery of public services (Aisyah et al., 2024). Governments play a significant role in stimulating technological innovation and this is as critical enabler of a city's "transformative capacity," allowing local authorities to respond flexibly to global trends like climate change (Popescu, 2020).

Within this framework, enhancing QoL has emerged as an essential and foundational aim of urban policy (Nakanishi, 2015). While traditionally measured through economic performance, there is a growing global consensus that the success of a city must be evaluated through the well-being of its citizens more than just its just Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Weziak-Białowska, 2016). Urban planners and policymakers utilize various frameworks, such as the OECD Better Life Initiative or the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), to monitor progress. However, a significant challenge persists in the mismatch between the accountable, easy-to-monitor indicators preferred by governments and the daily concerns and priorities of residents (Porio, 2015).

## 2. Quality of life

The concept of QoL can be viewed from a dual and interrelated perspective, in line with the positive psychology movement (Jonek-Kowalska, 2025). The objective perspective focuses on dimensions such as economy, standard of life, governance, infrastructure, mobility and environment (Brodny et al., 2024), whilst the subjective perspective emphasizes individual preferences, satisfaction and overall happiness (Weziak-Białowolska, 2016). This dual perspective gives rise to different scales of measurement. The objective perspective uses indicators that reflect a utilitarian view of welfare based on economic growth and income trends (Kuentz-Simonet et al., 2023). The subjective assessment of QoL is based on factors that reflect citizens' perceptions, asking them to evaluate their lives as a whole. The aim is to gather personal experiences, expectations and the ability to turn opportunities into achievements, based on the level of satisfaction or an increase in happiness (Kuentz-Simonet et al., 2023). This reflects the bottom-up approach adopted by the World Health Organization when defining QoL as individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value system in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns influenced by environmental conditions (Jonek-Kowalska, 2025).

However, there is no universally accepted definition of this concept, as it is closely linked to the personal characteristics of each evaluator, their expertise, their experience, and the psychological mechanisms that determine their level of satisfaction based on internal and external circumstances. Furthermore, citizens are constantly reinterpreting and redefining their ideal living conditions as local circumstances evolve (Ko & Choi, 2015). Even when we focus on the objective aspects of QoL, subjectivity will be reflected in the selection of the indicators used to assess it (Činčikaitė, 2025). Some authors go further and define QoL as "the citizens' overall perception of the correspondence between current and ideal community circumstances related to their lives" (Ko & Choi, 2015), by emphasizing the subjective aspects of citizens' lives and broadening the scope of QoL through the inclusion of the community sphere.

Other approaches focus on the assumptions underlying Amartya Sen's concept, in which QoL is assessed in terms of capabilities and functions. In this sense, it is closely linked to the right to freedom and self-determination and goes beyond the mere possession of material or spiritual goods (Jonek-Kowalska, 2025). This marks a shift from an economic-centric model to human-centred theories (Unerbayeva et al., 2025).

Another perspective that has gained prominence in recent years is the resource-based view, which allows us to analyze not only the background but also the outcomes that result from it (Pazos-García, López-López, Iglesias-Antelo, et al., 2025).

On the other hand, many of the measures used to assess QoL are based on a top-down approach, combining different perspectives into a single indicator (Jonek-Kowalska, 2025). The underlying reason is the need to adopt a holistic approach that allows us to assess QoL, rather than simply through individual measures (Floková et al., 2023), analyzing both tangible and intangible aspects of QoL (Czyża & Kowalczyk, 2024).

### 3. Research methodology

Our research has been carried out in three phases: searching, screening and synthesis.

The first phase consists of conducting an initial search. The selection of articles is based on the search carried out in prestigious journals included in the Scopus database. The search was conducted using the following simultaneous selection criteria: the term 'quality of life' must appear in the title of the article, the term 'city' must appear in the title, abstract, or keywords and the concept of 'governance' or 'accountability' or 'e-government' or 'transparency' or 'citizen participation' or 'rule of law' or 'responsiveness' or 'effectiveness and efficiency' must appear in any field of the article.

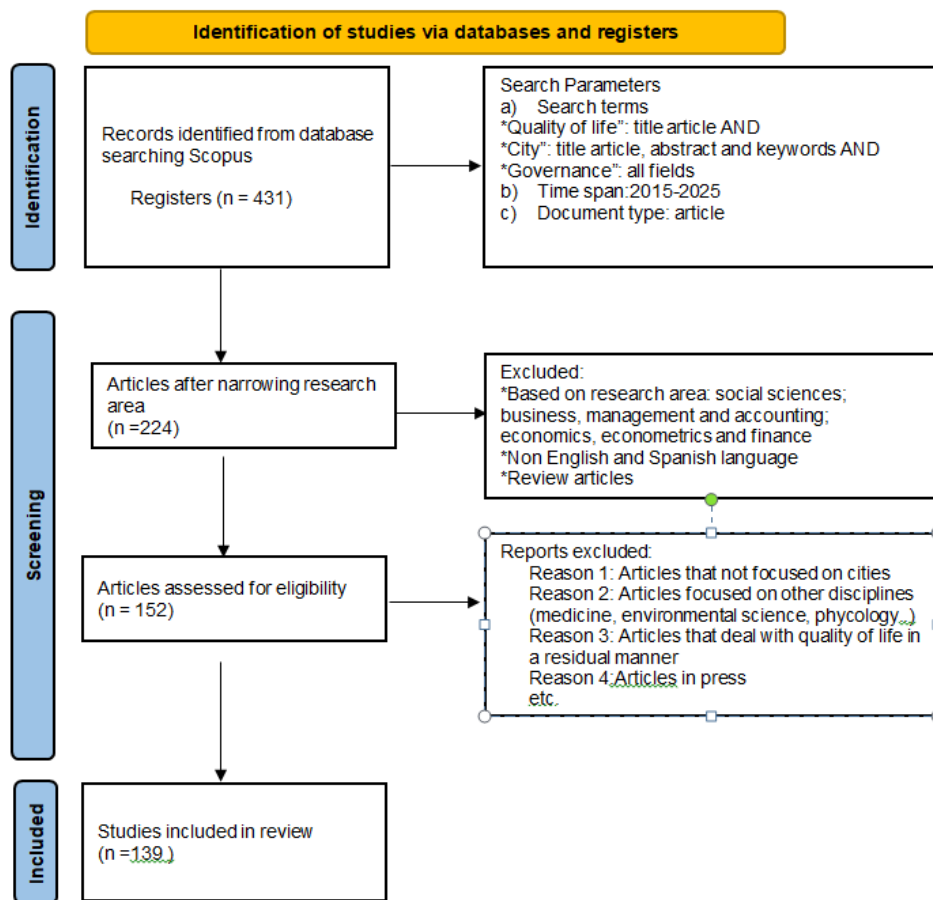
The protocol for searching for existing academic research is based on the following formula:

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TITLE("quality of life") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(city) AND ALL(governance OR accountability OR "e-government" OR transparency OR "citizen participation" OR "rule of law" OR responsiveness OR "effectiveness and efficiency")
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Additionally, we have established other search criteria, limiting the publication period to the last 10 years, i.e., our study covers the period from 2015 to 2025, and the type of document to articles already published, excluding other types of documents such as book chapters, conference papers, or working papers from our study. We have also excluded papers published in languages other than English and Spanish, as well as those that correspond to the category of systematic literature review. As a result of all this, a total of 431 articles were found.

The second phase focuses on screening. Once the list of articles had been obtained from the SCOPUS database in accordance with the established pre-selection criteria, the abstracts of the articles were read and reviewed independently by two of the authors between June and October 2025, excluding those considered irrelevant due to their content, subject matter or methodology. A second review of the excluded articles was carried out by the third author, who determined whether or not they should be definitively included in our study. This methodology eliminated the risk of bias arising from the authors' subjective analysis.

By narrowing down the areas of research, the number of articles searched decreased to 224 articles and 207 documents were excluded from our study. The next phase of screening focuses on methods. To this end, we have discarded all articles that do not focus on cities, that analyze QoL from other scientific disciplines such as medicine, psychology, environmental sciences, etc., or that study QoL in a residual manner rather than through a comprehensive analysis of the concept, as well as the papers in press. As a result of this screening process carried out through reading and analyzing the abstracts, a total of 139 articles were retained and subjected to review of the full text of the document.



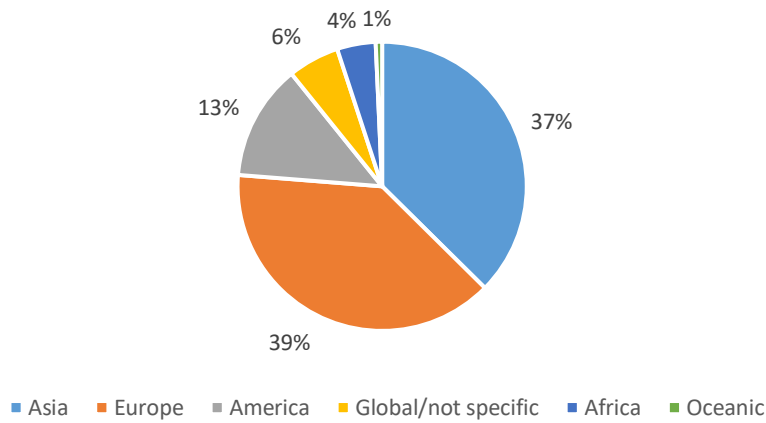
**Figure 1.** Flowchart for literature search and selection. Source: PRISMA.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Descriptive analysis

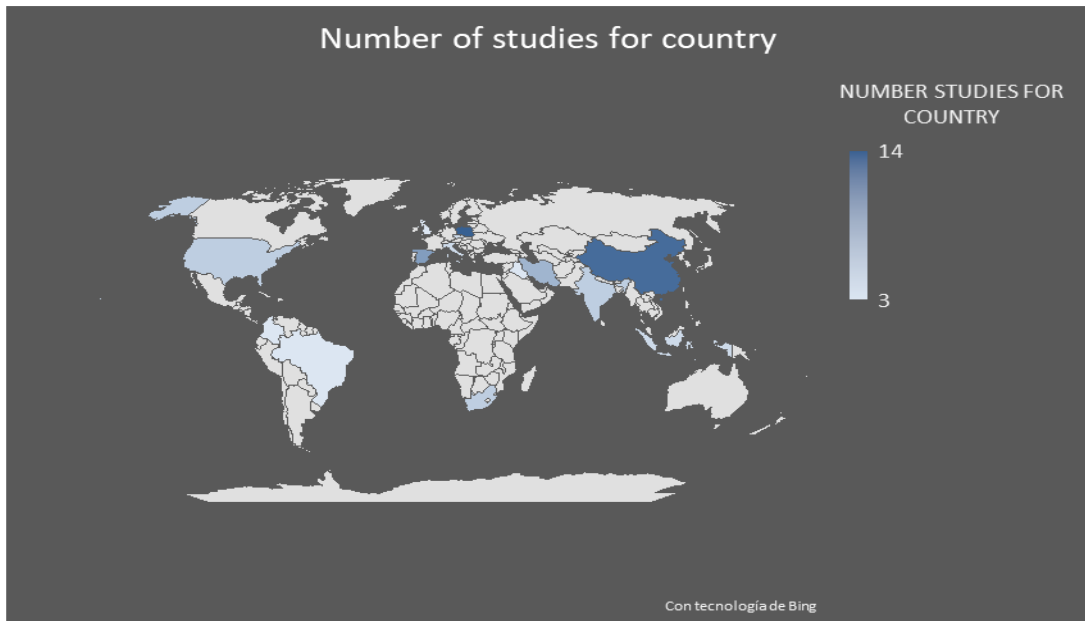
In this section, we will analyze the geographical area with the highest number of publications, the journals with the greatest presence of publications related to our field of study, and the period of time in which research activity is most prolific.

The geographical spread of the studies carried out can be analyzed from the point of view of the region under analysis, the country or the city. We note that the regions attracting growing interest are mainly concentrated in Asia and Europe (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Regions with the greatest amount of research. Source: Own design.

In terms of distribution by country (see Figure 3), it is striking how two countries as politically, economically and culturally different as China and Poland are the focus of numerous studies. Next, Spain and Iran are focusing their efforts on assessing QoL in relation to local governments.



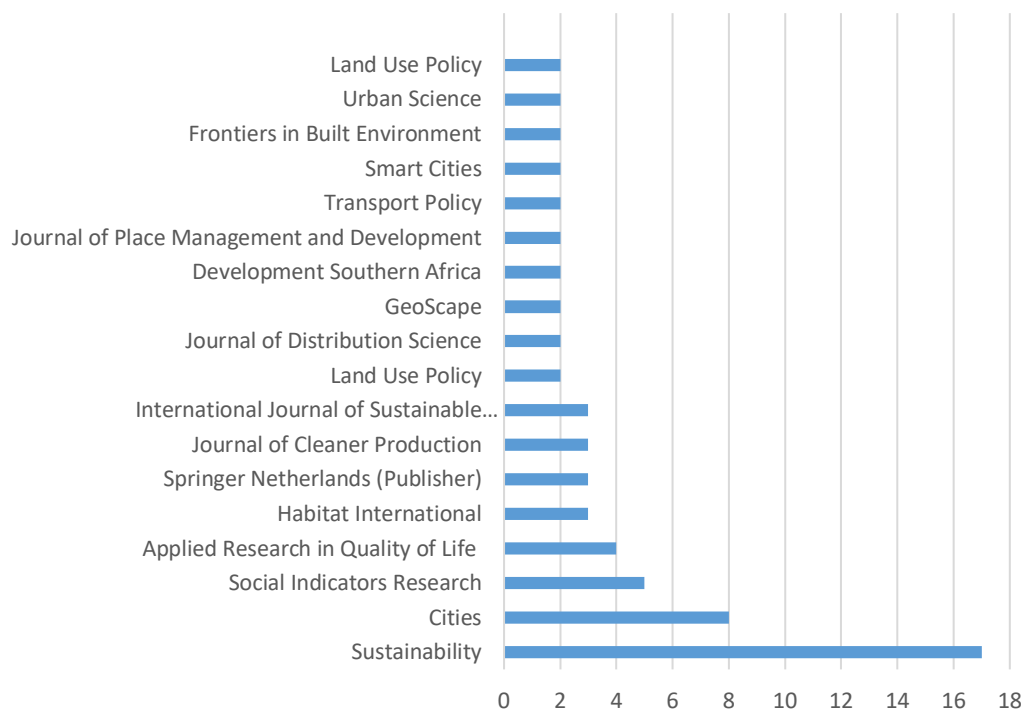
**Figure 3.** Distribution of research by country. Source: Own design.

The number of studies was lower on the oceanic continent with a single study conducted in Canberra (Nakanishi, 2015) and in Africa, where most of the research was carried out in South Africa (Everatt, 2017; Greyling & Tregenna, 2017; Katumba et al., 2022; Mahlakanya & Willemse, 2017; Metheny et al., 2025).

Although there are certain studies that focus on a global analysis of different cities across the five continents (Popescu, 2020), they either carry out a comparative analysis at a global level with a

specific city (Mouratidis, 2021b; Ptak-Wojciechowska et al., 2021) or do not refer to any specific city (Doria, 2023; Kabisch, 2019; Tichaawa et al., 2023). Some studies analyze different cities within the same country, such as 70 Mexican cities (Durazo et al., 2025), 50 Spanish cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants (Pazos-García, López-López, Iglesias-Antelo, et al., 2025), or the 29 largest Polish cities (Brodny et al., 2024). In other cases, comparisons are made between cities belonging to the same region, Europe (Cooper et al., 2023) or big Asian cities (Audi & Ali, 2023) or between similar cities (Vienna, Zürich, Vancouver, Munich, Auckland) located in different geographical regions (Šulyová & Kubina, 2022).

In terms of typology, much of the research focuses on the study of a single city: New York (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022), Metro Manila (Porio, 2015), Hong Kong, Barcelona (Sanchez-Sepulveda et al., 2024), Bogotá, and São Paulo (Contreras Pinochet et al., 2024).

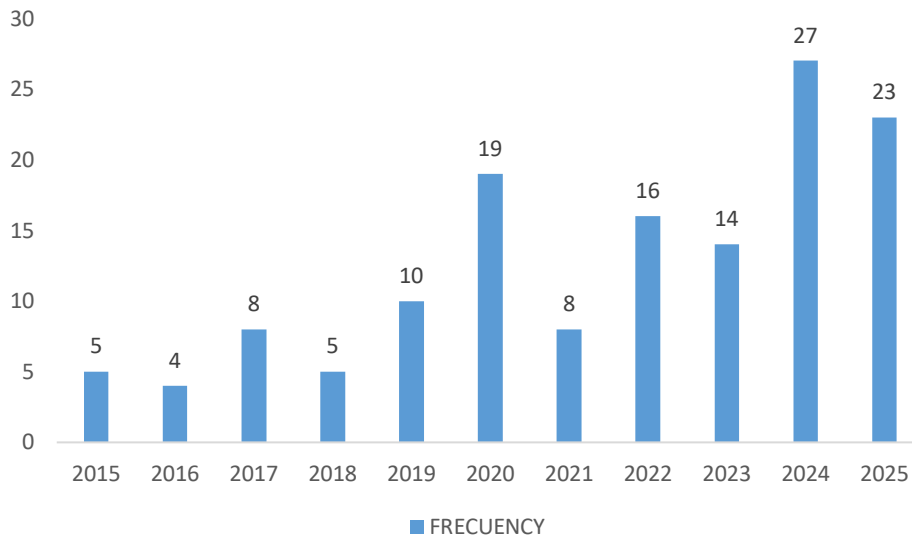


**Figure 4.** Number of publications by journal. Source: own design.

Figure 4 shows the journals with the most publications on our subject of study. The journal Sustainability attracts by far the most attention on the subject, either because of its very fast response time or because of its growing interest through the publication of special editions. Another reason could be the high degree of connection between sustainability, QoL and governance. It is followed by the journal Cities, which accumulates publications focusing on urban development, urbanism and public policy. Some distance behind, with only six publications, are Social Indicators Research and Applied Research in Quality of Life.

On another note, it should be noted that both 2024 and 2025 have been the most prolific years in this area. Although publications were very limited before 2020, there has been growing interest since

then. The Covid-19 pandemic situation at that time may have generated growing interest in the study of quality of life and how local governments can take measures to improve it. Although 2021 was a year with few articles, since then there has been a steady upward trend, which we believe will continue in the future.



**Figure 5.** Articles published by year. Source: own design.

## 4.2 Thematic analysis

We use cluster analysis to recognize modules, groups or clusters. These clusters are represented by nodes or bubbles whose size indicates the frequency of that term in the different studies. Between these nodes there are connections to other terms, represented by lines, which reflect the different relationships with other concepts. In this way, we obtain a visual representation of the main concepts linked to our study.

The bibliometric mapping (Figure 6) reveals five distinct thematic clusters that categorize the current discourse on QoL and its intersection with governance and urban management.



**Figure 6.** Results of the term co-occurrence analysis. Source: VOSviewer

The categorization of the five main groups or clusters was carried out using the following analytical procedure:

- Co-occurrence intensity: We placed terms that show a high frequency of association within the same cluster.
- Semantic proximity: When one node shares a conceptual framework or analytical focus with another, they are positioned close to one another.
- Central networks: The most important nodes, such as quality, life or city, serve as anchors due to their high frequency or connectivity.
- Relational density: We have identified the clusters based on the intensity of their internal connections relative to their external ones.
- Thematic coherence: The label of each cluster reflects a research perspective or an analytical domain.

### 3.2.1. Institutional Frameworks and Smart Governance (Green Cluster)

This cluster highlights the structural and institutional dimensions of modern urban management. Key terms such as governance, sustainability, and smart city are central to this group. It explores how

infrastructure and technological integration (smart cities) influence citizen perception. The presence of "case study" and "country" suggests that governance research in this area is heavily grounded in empirical evidence, focusing on how sustainable policies translate into perceived quality for the inhabitants.

### 3.2.2. Community Dynamics and Subjective Well-being (Yellow Cluster)

Centered around the node "life", this cluster emphasizes the psychosocial aspects of urban experience. It includes terms like community, sense, place, and satisfaction. This group examines the emotional and social ties that individuals form within their environments. The inclusion of "covid" and "time" indicates a growing body of literature reflecting on how global crises and temporal changes affect the sense of community and overall life satisfaction.

### 3.2.3. Service Quality and Structural Models of Satisfaction (Red Cluster)

The red cluster is the most expansive and revolves around the primary node "quality". It connects systemic variables like environment, service, and dimension with individual outcomes like life satisfaction. It utilizes a model-based approach to understand the relationship between environmental factors and service delivery. The term "China" appears as a significant node here, suggesting a high volume of specific research or a prominent case study focus within this geographical context regarding life satisfaction and service evaluation.

### 3.2.4. Territorial Indicators and Urban Management (Blue Cluster)

This cluster, anchored by the term "city", focuses on the technical and spatial metrics of urban life. Key nodes include indicator, district, region, and condition. It deals with the quantification of living standards. By linking education and urban life through specific indicators, this cluster represents the administrative and planning side of governance that seeks to improve physical and social conditions at a local (district) and regional level.

### 3.2.5. Theoretical Foundations (Purple Cluster)

Represented primarily by the term "concept", this smaller cluster acts as a bridge between the more practical urban indicators and the abstract definitions of quality of life. It signifies the ongoing academic effort to redefine and refine what "urban life" and "quality" mean in a changing global landscape.

The overlap between the Green (Governance) and Red (Quality) clusters demonstrates that governance is not an isolated administrative task but a direct determinant of service quality and life satisfaction. Furthermore, the connection with the Blue cluster suggests that successful governance must be data-driven, utilizing indicators to monitor the conditions of the city.

## 5. Discussion

Enhancing QoL has become the foundational aim of modern urban policy and local governance across the globe (Nakanishi, 2015). However, it cannot be considered a goal in itself; the transformation towards sustainability encompasses resource efficiency, resilience and QoL (Kabisch, 2019).

Traditional public governance—defined as the intersection of administrative rules and government functions—is evolving toward "Smart Governance" (De Guimarães et al., 2020; Dhenge & Nimbarte, 2024), which relies on five key pillars: transparency, accountability, collaboration, communication, and participation. This modern paradigm prioritizes the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to foster a more transparent, collaborative, and participatory environment (De Guimarães et al., 2020).

In contemporary urban studies, QoL is increasingly viewed not just as a final objective but as a strategic resource that enhances city competitiveness (Iglesias-Antelo et al., 2021; Pazos-García, López-López, Iglesias-Antelo, et al., 2025). Drawing on the Resource-Based View (RBV), some scholars argue that a city's performance—measured by the QoL of its residents—is driven by strategic resources such as e-government, transparency, and reputation.

A central theme across several studies is that Smart Governance—characterized by technology use and citizen participation—directly impacts the well-being of inhabitants (De Guimarães et al., 2020). According to research conducted in Brazilian smart cities, five pillars of governance significantly influence QoL: transparency, collaboration, participation and partnership, communication and accountability (De Guimarães et al., 2020). Among these, De Guimarães et al., (2020) emphasize the role of transparency, as it empowers citizens and reduces corruption, sharing information with the use of ICT. However, literature has not identified a consistent pattern of influence. While some studies find a positive influence (e.g., De Guimarães et al., 2020), others found no significant influence (e.g., Iglesias-Antelo et al., 2021; Pazos-García, López-López, Iglesias-Antelo, et al., 2025a).

Strategic resources like e-government and information and communication technologies (ICT) were found to serve as catalysts (Iglesias-Antelo et al., 2021). Governance is increasingly pivoted in digital technologies and ICT related to leisure and public participation that support the delivery more efficient, inclusive and sustainable of urban services and amenities (Popescu, 2020). The integration of the Internet of Things (IoT) and open data platforms facilitates accountability and allows researchers to address overlooked factors like indoor air quality, which directly impacts public health and QoL (Pietraru et al., 2025) or smart grids, smart cars or intelligent city services that monitor, predict and react to flows in real time (Popescu, 2020).

Contemporary urban governance paradigms increasingly emphasize citizen participation and community engagement as essential for creating "just cities" (Cooper et al., 2023). The emergence of community identity as a QoL indicator—incorporating functional, affective, and governance dimensions—highlights that residents value their ability to influence local affairs and the trust their community leaders (Fan & Fan, 2024).

A significant tension in local governance arises from the need for sustainable revenue. In some metropolises, municipal governments rely on unsustainable financial resources, which can prioritize

the interests of private developers over the social well-being of residents (Forouhar et al., 2021). To counteract this, experts advocate for periodic household surveys to give a "public voice" to urban management, allowing policymakers to monitor progress and adjust programs based on the actual results produced for their constituents (Marans, 2015).

A strong local government reputation is a necessary condition for high performance. When citizens perceive their local leaders as capable and transparent, it fosters trust, which is a fundamental component of perceived QoL (Iglesias-Antelo et al., 2021). Furthermore, a good reputation generates security and confidence among citizens and industry, which increases a city's attractiveness for investment, boosting its performance and competitiveness (Pazos-García, López-López, Vila-Vázquez, et al., 2025). However, a good reputation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for cities to achieve high levels of performance (Pazos-García, López-López, Iglesias-Antelo, et al., 2025).

Furthermore, institutional trust is a critical predictor of life satisfaction; when local governments are perceived as corrupt or self-serving, they undermine social cohesion and discourage civic participation (Roszkowska et al., 2025). Furthermore, transparency in information for decision-making builds trust between the community and local government (Sanchez-Sepulveda et al., 2024). Studies across European cities show that higher satisfaction with local administration generally coincides with greater overall life satisfaction, with governance explaining more than 56% of the variability in perceived QoL in some models (Roszkowska et al., 2025).

Moving beyond seeing QoL merely as an outcome, some sources propose it acts as a strategic resource (Pazos-García, López-López, Iglesias-Antelo, et al., 2025). Greater competitiveness in inputs significantly improves the well-being of the population and therefore income and facilities are not competitors but complementary factors for improving urban living conditions (Díaz-Sánchez et al., 2025). Cities that provide a high QoL are better positioned to attract human capital and qualified professionals. This talent pool enhances the city's competitiveness, creating a "positive resource spiral" that allows local governments to reinvest in more smart city infrastructure (Pazos-García, López-López, Iglesias-Antelo, et al., 2025).

Empirical evidence suggests that social capital—characterized by civic participation, trust, social networks, and neighbourhood bonds—serves as a vital mediator between government actions and individual life satisfaction (Tjønndal & Nilssen, 2019; Yazdanpanah Shahabadi & Sajadzadeh, 2020). Thus, neighbourhood level of social capital, walking environments, and neighbourhood facilities play an important role in the quality of life of older people (Han et al., 2022). Effective local governance is crucial for addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. For individuals with disabilities, smart city initiatives that focus on inclusive urban planning and "Inclusive Information" significantly enhance accessibility and health outcomes (Attar et al., 2024). For the elderly, collaborative design (Padrón Nápoles et al., 2025) and "active ageing" policies (Astiaso Garcia et al., 2017) are essential to mitigate loneliness and improve physical well-being. Community-led initiatives, such as community gardens, demonstrate how collaborative management can enhance social relationships and physical health, thereby boosting QoL (Dubová & Macháč, 2019; Yazdanpanah Shahabadi & Sajadzadeh, 2020).

Residential fragmentation is an increasing phenomenon globally and is linked to the increasing inequalities, social and spatial exclusion (Jimmy et al., 2020). To address these challenges, local

governments shape QoL through specific planning interventions such as:

- **Urban Green Infrastructure:** to mitigate environmental degradation and improve liveability. However, residents often perceive government efforts as insufficient or critical of the unequal distribution of these spaces across neighbourhoods (Dipeolu, 2025), specially limited areas of leisure, well-maintained green spaces and poorly equipped parks.

- **Transit-Oriented Development:** which can reduce travel times by up to 41% and enhance accessibility (Udachan & Patil, 2025) to employment hubs and educational centres.

- **Land-use regulations:** to reduce traffic congestion and degrading local identity and privacy (Forouhar et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the quality of planning and budget realization is vital; in Aceh, for instance, inconsistencies between planning documents and actual budget implementation were found to hinder the improvement of residents' QoL (Zulkifli et al., 2019). Conversely, in Taipei, data-driven governance using big data and open data facilitated more transparent decision-making for sustainable transportation strategies (Wey & Huang, 2018).

However, the literature also reveals a "governance gap" in certain contexts:

- **Corruption:** In cities like Kabul and Mashhad, residents often report high levels of dissatisfaction with urban governance due to systemic corruption, lack of legal status, and the absence of participatory mechanisms (Hosseini et al., 2023; Prayitno et al., 2024; Shahraki et al., 2020).

- **Pollution:** In coal hubs like Linfen, China, or industrial poles like Arak, Iran, QoL is often hindered by environmental pollution and inadequate public services, like urban infrastructures, which residents perceive as failures of local government oversight (Kokchang et al., 2023; Pazhuan et al., 2020).

- **Fairness and political participation:** While citizens often perceive tangible benefits (like improved transportation or health) from smart city programs, they remain more skeptical about the government's ability to improve abstract governance factors like fairness or political participation (Hartley, 2023).

- **Trustworthiness and efficiency of public administration** (Weziak-Białowolska, 2016). Empirical evidence from European cities suggests that dissatisfaction with administrative services and a lack of institutional trust significantly contribute to overall urban dissatisfaction (Weziak-Białowolska, 2016).

- **Resilience:** Studies indicate that while many cities rank high in QoL, few are simultaneously recognized for climate resilience, suggesting a gap in long-term governance strategies. Remodeling QoL assessment tools to include environmental risks and blue-green infrastructure is therefore necessary to inform more effective urban policy (Ptak-Wojciechowska et al., 2021).

- **Socio-Economic Stratification:** Local governments often use geographic or socio-economic stratification to guide policies like utility subsidies and tax collection. However, research in cities like Medellín suggests that these classifications—often based solely on physical dwelling characteristics—may not accurately reflect the actual quality of life of households. This highlights a governance gap where administrative rankings fail to account for critical non-economic drivers of QoL, such as neighborhood safety and personal freedom (Chica-Olmo et al., 2020).

- **Inconsistency in Budgeting:** In regions like Aceh, Indonesia, QoL indicators (employment,

economy, and education) suffered because the quality of planning was insufficient. A lack of synergy between provincial and district/city levels, combined with budget realization that did not match strategic documents, led to poor social outcomes (Zulkifli et al., 2019).

- **Infrastructure and Demographic Pressure:** In Bratislava, the "baby boom" and rapid suburbanization put immense pressure on primary school capacity (Čajková & Ruc, 2024). This study highlights that when local self-governments lack financial autonomy or legislative flexibility to respond to population growth, the QoL of citizens—specifically in education—is compromised.

- **Spatial Inequalities:** Local governance must address intra-urban gaps. Mapping overcrowding and health indicators in cities like Rosario, Argentina, shows that decentralization efforts aim to achieve a "more balanced city" with greater equity (Martinez, 2019).

- **Citizens' Perception:** In mid-sized Indian smart cities, research shows that Citizens' Perception has a stronger impact on QoL than the formal structures of governance themselves. This suggests that QoL is more of a "psychological construct" where individuals feel satisfied when they perceive the environment as safe and the government as responsive to their feedback (Dhenge & Nimbarte, 2024b).

Numerous empirical studies have analysed public policies designed to tackle these governance barriers that limit improvements in citizens' quality of life. By examining diverse contexts—from smart city implementations to post-conflict reconstruction—it highlights the critical role of public administration in fostering sustainable, inclusive, and liveable environments.

1. *Public Policy and Strategic Management:* Community QoL is a critical factor influencing developmental, allocational, and redistributive public expenditure at the local level (Ko & Choi, 2015). Local authorities are increasingly using formalized QoL surveys to measure the impact of government actions, finding that cities that prepare surveys often report higher satisfaction with local governance (Ligarski & Owczarek, 2023, 2024). The direct participation of residents in quality-of-life assessments enhances civic engagement and attachment to the city, as well as fostering participatory practices and collaborative governance (Jonek-Kowalska, 2025). Furthermore, the tools used by local governments to obtain information and provide feedback can help improve participation and social inclusion (Smith et al., 2024). Smart governance, often driven by specific municipal regulations, relies on the "Quadruple Helix" collaboration between government, communities, the private sector, and media to improve indicators like the Human Development Index (HDI) (Aisyah et al., 2024). Monitoring QoL is now considered essential for smart city management, and the existence of dedicated QoL departments contributes positively to urban performance (Wolniak & Jonek-Kowalska, 2021). The Community Consultation project in planning helps improve the quality of life in neighbourhoods by gathering information, in UK (Purohit et al., 2024).

Effective governance must prioritize "people-centric" metrics, particularly in post-disaster contexts where Post-disaster Quality of Life (PQL) measures a city's ability to regain functionality (Jonek-Kowalska, 2022). Involving all segments of society in decision-making is essential to achieving long-term credibility and trust (Klingmann, 2023). For example, adequate promotion of the positive impact of tourism improves confidence in government actors (Tichaawa et al., 2023) and trust in government is a significant predictor of QoL, serving as an antecedent to community support for sustainability and tourism development goals (Mihalic & Kuščer, 2022; Ramkissoon et al., 2025).

However, power relations and weak collaboration can sometimes reproduce social inequalities in smart city implementation (Smith et al., 2024). Ultimately, governance quality—characterized by corruption-free environments, integration among the authorities and political stability—is a core domain for assessing urban life (Sultana et al., 2022). Furthermore, governance and security are closely linked, so the role of government must be to ensure the safety of its citizens (Greyling & Tregenna, 2020).

2. *Infrastructure, Housing, and Urban Services*: The provision of quality-of-life amenities (Vanderleeuw & Sides, 2016), access to public transportation (Patil & Sharma, 2022) and an efficient road system and public works (Martín & Viñán, 2017) are fundamental drivers of economic development and individual satisfaction. Conversely, the destruction of infrastructure, as seen in post-occupation Iraq, leads to a grave deterioration of QoL and serious health hazards (Al-Azzawi, 2016). Satisfaction with urban life is also heavily dependent on the individual allocation of time, social interactions and accessibility of services and the deficiency of these services must be corrected to narrow the QoL gap (Biagi et al., 2018). The same is true in cities such as Arak, where lack of investment in urban infrastructure is behind the low perception of QoL (Pazhuhan et al., 2020). In many contexts, such as West Bengal, basic amenities are unevenly distributed across the urban hierarchy, with significant scarcity in lower-order centres (Bhunia et al., 2023). In Kabul, informal settlements should be provided with public urban goods to improve their QoL (Shahraki et al., 2020).

Housing is a central pillar of well-being; satisfaction with housing quality often correlates with a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood (Jimmy et al., 2020) and house design (Lau et al., 2018). Different urban cells, neighbourhoods or districts show disparities in their living conditions (Floková et al., 2023) and have distinct physical characteristics with specific needs and features (Astiaso Garcia et al., 2017) who need to have the current deficiency in services corrected (El Karim & Awawdeh, 2020). A geographical spillover effect has also been identified: neighbourhoods with good/poor living conditions tend to be close to other areas with similar characteristics (Sepúlveda-Murillo et al., 2020). Curiously, in Iran, the historic centres of its cities have the worst quality of life (Mirzakhani et al., 2022). Similarly, in Bordeaux, individuals with high levels of well-being are more likely to live in peri-urban areas (Kuentz-Simonet et al., 2023). In Central European cities, there is a sense of place that comes from living by the Danube River, leading to greater citizen satisfaction (Mousazadeh, 2022rel). Policies should prioritize improving existing housing rather than relocation, as many residents perceive their QoL as "good" despite environmental risks (Surjono et al., 2025). Furthermore, the role played by residents' associations in local social planning should receive greater government support (Lau et al., 2018), since citizen participation plays a pivotal role in enhancing housing outcomes (Roslan et al., 2025). Different types of informal housing, such as backyard rooms, significantly affect socio-economic dynamics in regions like Gauteng (Mahlakanya & Willemse, 2017). Access to affordable housing, transportation, healthy food and digital education are crucial mediators that boost overall life satisfaction (Ramkissoon et al., 2025; Roslan et al., 2025). Furthermore, infrastructure must accommodate both existing and new residents to ensure equitable access to services (Ebraheem et al., 2024). Additionally, happiness-related concepts should be incorporated into the design and planning of cities (Papachristou & Rosas-Casals, 2019).

3. *Environmental Sustainability and Ecological Resilience*: Environmental quality is often prioritized by citizens over economic concerns like income, as it is fundamentally linked to basic health and family well-being (X. Li & Tilt, 2018). Therefore, local governments must incorporate ecological and energy factors into QoL assessment methodologies to transition toward a green economy (Belik et al., 2017). Greenery areas and sustainable urban mobility initiatives—aimed at improving air quality and decreasing congestion—are vital for making cities more resilient (Amiraslani, 2021; Przybyłowski, 2019). Additionally, the development of blue-green infrastructure (BGI), such as bioswales and green bus stops, strengthens ecosystem resilience and public health (Czyża & Kowalczyk, 2024). Fully efficient and environmentally friendly vehicle technologies and the promotion of public transport should be encouraged in order to improve environmental quality (Audi & Ali, 2023). In short, governments should focus their efforts on creating an ecosystem of services, with an emphasis on sustainability (Papachristou & Rosas-Casals, 2019), prioritising environmental domains over economic or social ones (Huynh et al., 2023). Furthermore, in economically or socially marginalised communities, the impact of sustainability on quality of life is stronger (Huete-Alcocer et al., 2024). In this regard, the European Union's cohesion policies aim to create a greener, smarter, more connected, more social Europe that is closer to its citizens by mobilising significant urban investments (Kusterka-Jefmańska et al., 2024).

Public spaces, including community gardens and green parks, provide net social benefits that often exceed the perceived benefits of their members, contributing to social inclusion and relaxation (Di Giulio et al., 2022; Dubová & Macháč, 2019). However, negative externalities like odour nuisance must be systematically measured to inform policies and maintain a city's attractiveness (Wojnarowska et al., 2021). To achieve carbon neutrality and meet greenhouse gas reduction targets, local administrations must increase citizen awareness, education and engagement in renewable energy projects (Kokchang et al., 2023). There is also a concerning negative correlation in some affluent cities between GDP per capita and the environment and energy assessment, indicating a need for more aggressive greening efforts (Brodny et al., 2024).

4. *Technology, Digital Economy, and Smart Cities*: Digital transformation and the digital economy have the potential to narrow income gaps, but significant digital divides persist between regions. There are differences in the speed of implementation and distribution of ICT (Ma & Ma, 2025; Panzabekova et al., 2020). Furthermore, spending on science and technology improves eco-efficiency, thereby enhancing quality of life (J. Zhang et al., 2024). Smart technologies aim to improve efficiency and QoL, with "assisted purchase" technologies being favoured by younger generations like Gen Z (Contreras Pinochet et al., 2024). Generation X and Baby Boomers also associate smart cities with the creation of a better environment and a better solution to the environmental problems caused by climate change (Cho & Maeng, 2024). While smart city investments can reduce perceived government corruption, they are sometimes negatively associated with immediate happy emotions, depending on the education level and age of the population (Wang & Zhou, 2023). In smart cities, the quality of housing infrastructure can vary significantly compared to regional averages (Jonek-Kowalska, 2022). Smart living measures now include advanced technologies like humanoid robots to assist an ageing society (Halicka & Surel, 2022). Improving digital literacy is essential for the

elderly to leverage smart public environments effectively (Yu et al., 2025). The beneficial effects of smart city initiatives on the health and wellbeing, accessibility and inclusive information of people with disabilities have also been demonstrated (Attar et al., 2024). Additionally, the use of smart furniture provides publicity, mobility services, and improved communication between local governments and citizens (Padrón Nápoles et al., 2025). Despite technological advancements, concerns remain regarding reduced face-to-face interaction and privacy (Alshaikh et al., 2024).

Ultimately, the growing wave of techno-fetishism may lead governments to overestimate the benefits of smart cities. However, governments must ensure robust access to public information that reveals the limits of smart cities' capabilities (Hartley, 2023).

*5. Socio-Economic Inclusion, Equity, and Culture:* Inclusive development requires the commitment of all social groups and a focus on overcoming historical damages, such as the legacy of Apartheid through education (Everatt, 2017). Quality of life is profoundly impacted by the intersectionality of race (Katumba et al., 2022), gender (Hosseini et al., 2023), and sexual orientation (Metheny et al., 2025) or age (Astiaso Garcia et al., 2017) which can create distinct vulnerabilities that current equity policies may not fully address. Migrant children and refugees often face lower life satisfaction due to socio-economic precariousness and a lack of formalized status (J. Zhang, 2018). However, residents of socially excluded communities have shown levels of life satisfaction comparable to those who are not socially excluded in the Czech Republic (Murgaš & Drápela, 2020). In any case, the authorities should create initiatives to ensure that socially excluded populations have access to green food products because of the long-term health benefits they can bring (Khan, 2024).

Cultural factors also play a significant role; for instance, European Capital of Culture initiatives only guarantee long-term QoL improvements if integrated into wider regeneration plans (Liu, 2016, 2017). Cultural Built Heritage (CBH) remains vital for daily life in small and medium-sized towns (Książek et al., 2022). Beyond standard "livability," the concept of "loveability"—prioritizing emotional connections to "third places"—is emerging as a solution for better urban environments (Rambhoros et al., 2025). Furthermore, community pride can act as a mediator between large-scale events, such as Expo Milano 2015, and citizen QoL (Magno & Dossena, 2020). Quality of life influenced support for events such as marathons in China (Duan et al., 2020).

*6. Economic Dynamics, Migration, and Regional Variation:* Economic structure is more closely related to QoL than mere quantitative growth; future urban development should focus on high-value, environmentally friendly industries (Zeng et al., 2020), such as green and low-carbon industries (Shi et al., 2023) and promote the robust development of energy and technology industries with the support of research institutes. Interestingly, shrunken cities sometimes present higher QoL than growing ones, and per capita expenditure by local governments has a positive effect on resident satisfaction (Barreira et al., 2021). Urban livability even has a compensation effect on executive pay, which tends to drop as city conditions improve (C. L. Li, 2020; L. Li et al., 2021).

The search for a better QoL remains a primary driver for migration, which often occurs when QoL reaches a critical threshold (Činčikaitė, 2025). The Iranian population has moved to Hungary in search of prestigious universities and has developed a deep sense of place (H. Mousazadeh et al., 2023). Regional differences are stark: urban QoL is generally higher than rural, like Czechia (Petrovič

& Maturkanič, 2022), and proximity to regional capitals positively influences the well-being of adjacent counties (Szaja & Ziemia, 2025). In Italy, cities located further south maintain lower levels compared to northern cities (Bonatti et al., 2017). Disparities continue to exist and shift across borders, as is the case in border cities between the United States and Mexico (Talmage et al., 2019) or in settlements on the border between Nigeria and the Benin Republic (Ojo, 2024). In contrast, living in inner urban areas with high unemployment is associated with lower mental health and increased loneliness (Weckroth et al., 2022). In USA, suburbanites have modestly but measurably higher subjective wellbeing than urbanites (Morris, 2019). Finally, overtourism and negative tourism impacts can cause resident irritation and harm the habitability of urban centres (X. Zhang & Ren, 2024).

*7. Health, Wellbeing, and External Pressures:* Health-related themes are consistently ranked as the most important aspects of QoL (X. Li & Tilt, 2018). Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic underline the need for adaptive resilience (AR) (Mouratidis, 2025), address inequities and better support for vulnerable groups during crises (Mouratidis, 2021a). Urban seismic resilience and the ability to minimize social disruption after disasters are also critical components of city performance (Pan et al., 2022).

Promoting physical activity through targeted sustainable public health interventions is essential for long-term well-being, especially in alignment with national visions like Saudi Vision 2030 (Algamdi & Al Amer, 2024). Interestingly, car ownership is still positively linked to health and individual life satisfaction in certain cities, contrasting with its negative effect on societal wellbeing. However, a transition to sustainable transport alternatives remains urgent for climate mitigation (Mouratidis, 2025). Finally, construction logistics must be managed carefully, as noise pollution, availability of stores, cleanliness of urban spaces, social communities and impacts on the real estate market can negatively influence local (Chełstowska et al., 2025).

The relationship between local policy and QoL is a complex interplay of environmental situation (Kirchhof, 2015), sustainable mobility (Przybyłowski, 2019), and digital literacy (Yu et al., 2025). Whether through managing the impacts of socio-spatial segregation (Bakour et al., 2025), optimizing waste management in island communities (Dekanić & Ježić, 2025) or development of human capital in regions with industrial potential (Unerbayeva et al., 2025), local governments must secure both the participation and involvement of the local urban population. Likewise, collaboration with urban planners, architects, designers, etc. is necessary to achieve sustainable urban development based on core dimensions such as resource efficiency, quality of life, and resilience (Kabisch, 2019).

The literature establishes a strong positive correlation between effective local governance and the Quality of Life in cities (De Guimarães et al., 2020; Iglesias-Antelo et al., 2021). Effective governance acts as a driver for QoL through transparency and the use of ICT, while QoL serves as a resource that fuels urban competitiveness.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the insights provided, this study is subject to several limitations that should be considered. First, the analysis is confined to a specific period of ten years, from 2015 to 2025, which may exclude foundational historical trends or very recent emerging data outside this window. Second, the search was conducted using a single database, Scopus; while prestigious and multidisciplinary, its use alone might have omitted relevant studies indexed in other platforms such as Web of Science or Google Scholar. Third, the study is limited by the specific number of keywords analysed during the selection process. This focus on terms like ‘governance’, ‘accountability’, or ‘e-government’ may have overlooked articles that use alternative terminology to describe similar phenomena within the complex intersection of urban management and quality of life.

Furthermore, the decision to include only studies explicitly containing the term “quality of life” in the title was intended to ensure conceptual consistency and maintain a focused scope of analysis. However, this approach may have omitted some relevant studies addressing related constructs such as well-being, liveability, subjective well-being, or capability-oriented perspectives. Although this does not undermine the validity of the findings presented, future research could broaden the search criteria to incorporate these related concepts and thereby provide a more comprehensive overview of the field.

Moreover, this review did not incorporate a formal quality appraisal or risk-of-bias assessment of the included studies. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted cautiously, as studies with different levels of methodological robustness were considered equivalent. Future research could complement this mapping approach with systematic reviews focused on evidentiary quality and causal inference.

Future research could also expand these parameters by incorporating multiple databases and a broader lexicon to capture a more diverse range of global perspectives. An interesting field of research could focus on the other pillars of governance, such as citizen participation, collaboration and partnership, communication and accountability, on which there is little empirical research regarding their impact on citizens' quality of life and well-being.

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