

WHETHER TO TRUST LOCAL GOVERNMENT? : FROM THE GOOD GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT – The public's impression of the overall government structure is greatly influenced by the performance of the local governments. As indicated by Public Complaint Bureau statistics, the operational responsibilities that these local authorities are expected to depict have to some extent fallen short of the public expectations. This could give a negative impact on the public's confidence in their local government. As a result, this study aims to investigate the factors associated with public trust in local government. Purposive sampling was used in this quantitative study, which included 120 Kuantan residents as respondents. As a part of this study, the data was analysed using SPSS 24. Transparency, accountability, and responsiveness were found to be strongly connected with public trust in Kuantan City Council. This study adds to the body of knowledge about the components of good governance and the effect they have on public confidence in local government. It is intended that this study would help the local government in Pahang to establish a sound public policy and programme in order to increase the public trust.

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INTRODUCTION

Local government is the lowest level of government under the three-tier government with the upper government being the federal government followed by the state government (Ibrahim et al., 2016). The Local Government Act 1976 provides the local government with a very comprehensive set of functions and responsibilities, which cover the aspects of the residents' environmental, public, and social development. In Malaysia, local government is often referred to as a local council, city hall, or local authority. They collect assessment taxes, formulate and implement by-laws, and issue a business license for any trade within their constituents (Izlizam et al., 2019).

Since they are the closest government to the people, they need to provide good services, especially in high-density areas. According to Giannoccaro (2008), high-quality service is a primary goal of many public organizations, particularly local government agencies. Public service is essentially the fulfilment of the rights to the basic needs of the state to its people. In public services, the government is expected to provide the best service for the community, so that the community's demands for quality public services such as services with clear procedures, fast, and uncomplicated can run well and sustainably (Muazzinah et al., 2021).

An expansion of local government functions has marked the past few decades. There has been a shift in emphasis away from the traditional focus on 'property services' and toward more expansive 'services to people' (Woods, 2016). According to Ariffin (2011), local governments are responsible for eight main areas: housing, facilities and amenities, planning, water supply and sewerage, environmental protection, health and welfare, development incentives and control, and roads. There is a crucial need for local government to update their operations to better serve the needs and meet the people's desires. Since the level of government in the service to the people is the local authorities, they act as the managers of the town environment while the communities are the stakeholders.

Local government services become more significant day by day in terms of gaining the ability to deal with the numerous issues affecting the communities they serve and finding rapid and practical answers to these needs. Instead of being the lowest level of government, they should become the highest in meeting the people's demand for services. All local authorities should strive to give their best services and be accountable to the people they serve. Effective and efficient local authorities require excellent and transparent leadership accountable to the people. According to Mariana et al. (2014), local governments' performances are essential in giving positive public perception to the overall governance structure. In developing countries, improving the quality of government delivery systems is quite challenging, but effective delivery systems are crucial in achieving people's satisfaction levels.

However, the operational roles these local governments are supposed to portray do not meet the public expectations, resulting in various complaints being filed, as evidenced by Public Complaint Bureau statistics (Rashidah et al., 2020). Ineffective management by local government can lead to bad governance. However, there is a lack of study related to public trust in local government in Kuantan. Previous researchers such as Zaini et al. (2018) had surveyed responsiveness (one of the elements of good governance) on public trust in local government in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur. Therefore,

this study examines factors associated with public trust in local government. According to Ridzuan et al. (2021), the local government is the government component closest to the people's lives. As the population of educated individuals grows, so does the pressure on local government to deliver these demands and meet these expectations in a meaningful way. Since there may be complaints, the local government must respond to and address them within a reasonable period. If the local government does not react quickly to the local people's complaints or grievances, the local people are more likely to default on the assessment tax.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Trust

A substantial amount of scholarly resources throughout the social sciences have been dedicated to deriving a better understanding of the factors that influence citizens' trust decisions (Im et al., 2013; Cucciniello et al., 2017; Mabillard, 2021). According to Christensen et al. (2020), trust in government is expected to promote the effective implementation of public services. Trust involves questioning citizens' emotions, beliefs, opinions, and experiences formed through many processes. According to Nag (2018), signs of trust in a political community are the extent to which individuals and groups in society liaise in associations that cut across primary divisions such as ethnicity, race, religion, and class. Still, citizens have much more contact with administrative institutions or organizations than with political, representative institutions and organizations.

Moreover, if a service the public relies upon fails to meet their expectations, this is likely to contribute to a breakdown in trust. According to Jung and Sea (2012), public trust in government is one of the critical factors that determine the government's competitiveness. Public confidence in government is essential as it speaks to the quality of the relationship between citizens and their government (Porumbescu, 2015). Trust in government is a critical element of good governance and may be built up with sound policies that promote people's safety and security (Popovski, 2010). Public trust and good governance practices have normally been observed as directly interrelated. Good governance components can affect public trust in a positive manner (Jameel et al., 2019).

Hypotheses Development

In democratic societies, the transparency of public institutions is essential, and both developed and developing countries recognize that free access to information is fundamental to democracy (Androniceanu, 2021). Transparency is the availability of information about an organization or actor allowing external actors to monitor the internal work or performance (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Meijer, 2013). Moore (2017) contends that increasing the public's access to state agencies' processes and data has become a core aim of 21st-century public policy. Transparency and instrumental politics, more broadly, depends upon the idea that the more the government shows the public, the more the public will trust them (Moore, 2017). If the government provides more information on its actions and inactions to its citizens, levels of trust will increase (Bannister, 2011).

Accountability carries two fundamental connotations: answerability, the obligation of public officials to inform about and explain what they are doing; and enforcement, the capacity of accounting agencies to impose sanctions on power holders who have violated their public duties (Schedler, 1999). Accountability is defined as the obligation to explain, justify, and take responsibility for one's action as well as the nature of the accountability of an individual, leader, or organisation entrusted to carry out any planning, policy, action, or decision-making for the public at a large or private entity (Wan Husain, 2020).

Nag (2018) contends that accountability is a crucial requirement of good governance. Being accountable is a positive quality in organizations or officials (Bovens, 2010). Accountability can increase the trust and commitment of stakeholders because it can prove an organization's effectiveness and demonstrate whom the organization represents (Lee, 2004). Studies also indicate that one of the most critical factors creating distrust is a lack of accountability (Fard & Rostamy, 2007). Lack of accountability has resulted in the removal of many governments or citizens losing trust in their government (Minja, 2013). Government accountability can also play a key role in creating public trust in government (Yousaf et al., 2016; Cheema, 2010). Whenever people are accountable for their actions, they indirectly effectively teach them to value their work. In general, an organization is accountable to those who will be affected by its decisions or actions and the applicable rules of law. Not only governmental institutions, the private sector and civil society organizations must be answerable to the public and their institutional stakeholders. In short, accountability holds public officials responsible for government performance and makes it essential for them to be responsive to the community's needs.

Governance is a process of decision-making in which every decision taken will lead to its own implication (Sapuan et al., 2020). Good governance requires that administrations and their practices are considered to serve the best interests of stakeholders within a reasonable time frame (Nag, 2018). In the context of public administration, responsiveness is the perception by individual citizens of how public administration can include the demands of the citizen and how effectively public administration has succeeded in implementing these demands in their decisions (Rolle, 2017). Adams (2012) highlighted that responsiveness could be measured in terms of public official's ability to listen to the demands and opinions of the public, easy access to complaints for service users, whom to contact with the suggestion to change, and the ability of councils' decision to reflect the demands of the public. It seems that the responsiveness of the local government is supposed by the public to be particularly important. The responsiveness to complaints, for example, was primarily structured with satisfaction levels. Complaints should be logged and responded to promptly (Nag, 2018). Scholars argued

responsiveness of government is directly related to public trust in government (Yousaf et al., 2016). Responsive governance is a key to restoring trust in government (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011). Hence, several hypotheses were developed as follows:

- H1: There is a significant relationship between transparency and public trust in local government.
 H2: There is a significant relationship between accountability and public trust in local government.
 H3: There is a significant relationship between responsiveness and public trust in local government.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative methodology was applied to test the hypotheses by surveying the residents in Kuantan, Pahang. This study employed a correlation study and cross-sectional approaches. The purposive sampling technique was adopted, and only respondents living in Kuantan were eligible to answer the questionnaires. Green's (1991) table shows that the study's sample size should be at least 76 respondents since this study only has three independent variables. Green (1991) only set the minimum sample size for a survey. The researchers are allowed to have more sample sizes than the table requires. The sample size of the study was 120 respondents which exceed the minimum sample size. All data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. The measurements of the independent and dependent variables were adopted from Beshi and Kaur (2020). The respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement based on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 indicates the respondents' profiles. In terms of gender, 83 respondents were male while 37 respondents were female, which shows 30.8 per cent and 69.2 per cent, respectively. There are five categories of respondents' education levels: Primary School, SRP/PMR, SPM, STPM/Matriculation, and University/College. The highest number of respondents who participated in this survey had studied at university/college (71.7%). Most of the respondents are civil servants (35%). Last but not least, in terms of ethnicity, the majority of the respondent are Malays (90%), followed by Chinese (7.5%) and Indian (2.5%).

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	37	30.8
Female	83	69.2
Total	120	100
Level of Education		
Primary School	3	2.5
SRP/PMR	2	1.7
SPM	24	20
STPM/Matriculation	5	4.2
University/College	86	71.7
Total	120	100
Occupation		
Government	42	35
Private	36	30
Own business	9	7.5
Housewife	5	4.2
Student	28	23.3
Total	120	100
Ethnicity		
Malays	108	90
Chinese	9	7.5
Indian	3	2.5
Total	120	100

Correlational Analysis

The Pearson Correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between the variables. Table 2 depicts that there is a significant relationship between transparency ($r = .792^{**}$, $p = .000$), accountability ($r = .814^{**}$, $p = .000$), and responsiveness ($r = .893^{**}$, $p = .000$) with public trust in local government. Therefore, all alternate hypotheses were supported.

Table 2. Correlation Results

		Public Trust
Transparency	Pearson Correlation	.792**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	120
Accountability	Pearson Correlation	.814**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	120
Responsiveness	Pearson Correlation	.893**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	120

Transparency is an essential means of strengthening citizen trust (Gibson & Caldeira, 2009; Worthy, 2010; Meijer et al., 2012). Transparency is often related to how an entity reveals relevant information about its own decision processes, procedures, and performance (Heald, 2003; Gerring & Thacker, 2004; Welch et al., 2005; Curtin & Meijer, 2006; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). The finding of this study is in line with the past studies' findings carried out by Grimmelikhuijsen & Klijn (2015), Schmidhuber et al. (2020) and Sofyani et al. (2021). Grimmelikhuijsen and Klijn (2015) carried out a study on the effects of judicial transparency on public trust. They found that judicial transparency indeed has a significant relationship with public trust. This finding shows that transparency is significantly associated with public trust in local government. Besides, Schmidhuber et al. (2020) carried out a study that also found that transparency is highly related to public trust. Sofyani et al. (2021) conducted a study to examine the relationship between transparency and citizens' trust in Indonesia. They found that transparency is positively associated with village community trust.

Padideh et al. (2014) highlighted that transparency plays a crucial role in maintaining trust. Understanding the relationship between transparency and trust also clarifies which thresholds for public disclosure may best align with public expectations and supports policy responses that might best see public trust sustained. Access to information develops citizens' trust in public institutions, enabling citizens to understand public policy decisions and monitor their implementation (Androniceanu, 2021). Androniceanu (2021) also contend that applying the principle of transparency would lead to greater trust in laws and regulations. Ott et al. (2019) and Klun et al. (2019) mentioned that transparency might reduce uncertainty and increase citizens' trust in managing the public budget.

The study's findings also found that accountability was significantly correlated with public trust in local government. The results are in line with the findings of past studies. Abuhasein (2017) tested the impact of accountability elements on public trust in Palestinian authorities in the Gaza Strip, from the authority's employees' perspectives. The research results indicated that the public trust in the Palestinian authorities was affected by accountability. Khanbashi et al. (2011) and Shahbazi et al. (2012) demonstrated the positive impact of accountability on increasing public trust in citizens. Sobhkhiz et al. (2020) carried out a study on the impact of accountability on voluntary tax compliance by influencing taxpayers' public trust in Iran. They found a strong correlation between accountability and public trust. As mentioned previously, the finding of this study points out the significance and necessity of accountability mechanisms in local government administration. It is difficult to imagine that citizens would trust the government when they feel that government officials are irresponsible in their work or decisions (Beshi & Kaur, 2020). Haron et al. (2020) contend that a type of accountability for trusting the provider is the essence of the implementation of Islamic principles.

This study also found that responsiveness is significantly correlated with public trust in local government. This result is consistent with the study conducted by Yousaf et al. (2016) who found that responsiveness is crucial in building public trust. Van Craen and Skogan (2015) tested the effects of responsiveness and fair treatment in accounting for citizens' trust in the Belgium Police. The research found that perceptions of police responsiveness are more influential than perceptions of the way the police treat people in accounting for respondents' trust. Beshi and Kaur (2020) carried out a study related to public trust in Ethiopia's Local Government. They found that responsiveness was highly influential in describing the public's level of trust in their local government. Thus, to regulate its credibility and competitiveness and, most notably, to uphold public trust, the government should play its part in adequately managing the demands of its citizens.

CONCLUSION

The local government is the closest government to the citizen. They play an essential role in ensuring that the local people live in a conducive atmosphere. However, their task is increasingly challenging as the population grows and forces local governments to deliver services to the people more efficiently. Apart from that, the people's level of education is

also higher compared to the past. Therefore, the people's expectations of the government are high, and they always demand the local government provide efficient services. Therefore, local governments need to practice good governance such as accountability, transparency, and responsiveness. Otherwise, the people's trust in the local government will be tarnished, affecting the amount of assessment tax payments. According to Tannimalay et al. (2021), intensive efforts must be made to instil noble, ethical principles, and integrity among public officials to increase performance and develop good work culture and integrity.

The findings of this study indicate that transparency, accountability, and responsiveness have a strong relationship with public trust in local government. Therefore, local governments need to ensure that they practice the principles of good governance as discussed in this study to ensure that the people's trust in them can be enhanced. If the people's trust is high, it will benefit the local government. This is because the people will realize that local government is an important institution. Therefore, they will comply with the laws set by the local government. They will also pay assessment tax because they know that the local government often provides the best service for them.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge related to good governance elements and their impact on public trust in the local government. However, the scope of the study is limited to Kuantan, Pahang. It is suggested that more research be carried out in other places in Malaysia to understand the relationship between the variables better. Further input from various respondents' locations will improve the study outcome. Both the future researchers and the city administrators should conduct a similar survey annually or biannually to familiarize residents with all the services offered by the local government. This will leave residents more informed about the roles played by the local government and, at the same time, can elevate their motivation to pay the assessment tax.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s), as noted, certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organisation or agency with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, jobs, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, expertise or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials addressed in this manuscript.

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