

Institutional Quality, Social Welfare, and Human Development

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Abstract:

Despite growing scholarly interest in public administration, existing bibliometric syntheses have primarily analyzed institutional governance or economic development in isolation, leaving a critical knowledge gap regarding the joint mapping of governance, social welfare, and human development.

To bridge this gap, this study addresses the following central research question: How have global scientific structures, thematic trajectories, and intellectual foundations evolved at the intersection of institutional quality, social well-being, and human development?

This paper systematically examines the nexus between institutional governance, social well-being, and human development through a quantitative bibliometric analysis of 1,266 peer-reviewed articles indexed in the Scopus database spanning 1994 to 2025. By exploring how public governance mechanisms impact social welfare and inclusive development, this study traces the conceptual evolution and structural dynamics of the domain. Empirically, the field exhibits strong academic dynamism with an average annual growth rate of 18.59%, involving 4,635 contributing authors and an average citation impact of 23.46 citations per document.

The synthesis reveals a shift from early economic growth-centric paradigms toward multidimensional welfare frameworks, highlighting the role of institutional quality, transparent public management, and equitable social policy. The findings identify critical knowledge gaps, particularly concerning governance dynamics in developing contexts, and offer a strategic roadmap for future empirical and policy research.

Keywords: Governance, Institutional Quality, Social Well-Being, Human Development, Public Policy, Sustainable Welfare.

Classification JEL: D73, I31, O15, Q01

Paper type: Paper type: Quantitative bibliometric review.

Résumé :

Malgré l'intérêt académique croissant pour l'administration publique, les synthèses bibliométriques existantes ont principalement analysé la gouvernance institutionnelle ou le développement économique de manière isolée, laissant un vide scientifique majeur quant à la cartographie conjointe de la gouvernance, du bien-être social et du développement humain.

Pour combler cette lacune, cette étude répond à la question de recherche centrale suivante : Comment les structures scientifiques mondiales, les trajectoires thématiques et les fondements intellectuels ont-ils évolué à l'intersection de la qualité institutionnelle, du bien-être social et du développement humain ?

Cet article examine de manière systématique les interactions entre gouvernance institutionnelle, bien-être social et développement humain à partir d'une analyse bibliométrique quantitative de 1 266 articles révisés par des pairs et indexés dans Scopus couvrant la période 1994-2025. En analysant la manière dont les mécanismes de gouvernance publique influencent la protection sociale et le développement inclusif, cette étude retrace l'évolution conceptuelle et la structure intellectuelle de ce champ de recherche. Sur le plan empirique, le domaine affiche un fort dynamisme académique avec un taux de croissance annuel moyen de 18,59 %, mobilisant 4 635 auteurs contributeurs et enregistrant un impact citationnel moyen de 23,46 citations par document.

Les résultats mettent en évidence une transition des paradigmes axés sur la croissance économique vers des cadres multidimensionnels du bien-être, soulignant l'importance de la qualité des institutions, de la transparence administrative et des politiques sociales équitables. Les conclusions identifient des lacunes théoriques majeures, particulièrement sur la gouvernance dans les pays en développement, et proposent une feuille de route stratégique pour les recherches futures.

Mots clés : Gouvernance, Qualité institutionnelle, Bien-être social, Développement humain, Politiques publiques, Développement durable.

JEL Classification : D73, I31, O15, Q01

Type du papier : Revue bibliométrique quantitative.

1. Introduction

The relationship between governance structures and human flourishing represents a cornerstone of contemporary socio-economic research. Over recent decades, scholarly consensus has increasingly moved beyond pure GDP growth metrics, adopting holistic frameworks that integrate governance effectiveness, institutional quality, and multidimensional well-being (Sen, 1999; Stiglitz et al., 2009). Good governance, characterized by accountability, political stability, rule of law, and regulatory quality, serves as a fundamental catalyst for sustainable human development (Kaufmann et al., 2011).

Transitioning from this overarching macro-level paradigm to the operationalization of public policy, it becomes evident that the transmission channels linking administrative institutions to subjective and objective well-being remain complex and highly fragmented. Despite the growing body of literature linking public management to quality of life and human capability expansion, the field remains dispersed across diverse sub-disciplines including political economy, public administration, environmental studies, and social policy.

To structure this expanding knowledge base, earlier bibliometric mapping studies have investigated adjacent domains, such as environmental governance, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation, or localized social capital indices. However, these prior syntheses have predominantly analyzed institutional mechanics or economic outcomes in isolation.

Consequently, the extant literature lacks a comprehensive quantitative science mapping analysis that systematically integrates governance, social welfare, and human development within a unified conceptual matrix. To bridge this critical knowledge gap, this study addresses three main research questions:

- RQ1: What are the temporal evolution, geographic distribution, and scientific production trajectories of research at the intersection of institutional quality, social welfare, and human development?
- RQ2: What is the underlying intellectual structure of this domain, as revealed by author co-citation networks and seminal foundational works?
- RQ3: What are the dominant conceptual clusters, emerging thematic frontiers, and critical knowledge gaps in governance-driven well-being literature, particularly regarding developing contexts?

To address these questions, this study provides a multi-faceted contribution to the literature. Theoretically, it establishes an integrative analytical framework connecting administrative performance metrics directly to capability expansion paradigms. Methodologically, it deploys advanced scientometric techniques including science mapping with Biblioshiny and network visualization via VOSviewer to objectively delineate the field's intellectual architecture based on a rigorous data workflow. Practically, it identifies systemic policy levers and research gaps to guide future empirical inquiries and governance reforms.

Understanding how institutional quality influences social welfare requires a structured evaluation of dominant thematic clusters, methodological orientations, and emerging research frontiers. Based on a corpus of **1,266** peer-reviewed journal articles extracted from Scopus spanning 1994 to 2025, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the governance-wellbeing-development nexus to map its intellectual trajectory and inform future policy frameworks.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background and conceptual linkages. Section 3 outlines the quantitative bibliometric methodology and data retrieval strategy. Section 4 examines the performance metrics and scientific productivity. Section 5 analyzes the intellectual structure through co-citation networks. Section 6 investigates the conceptual evolution and thematic mapping. Section 7

discusses the findings, knowledge gaps, and policy implications, while Section 8 concludes with directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Institutional Economics and Governance

The theoretical foundation of institutional governance stems from new institutional economics, which posits that formal laws and informal norms dictate social and economic interactions (North, 1990). Robust institutions minimize transaction costs and align incentives toward productive investments, directly affecting national welfare trajectories (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

However, this institutional perspective faces significant internal debate. Critical scholars argue that standard institutional metrics often reflect Western-centric administrative ideals that fail to account for informal power structures, hybrid statecraft, or state capacity variations in developing and post-colonial contexts (Khan, 2010; Chang, 2011). Furthermore, critics contend that establishing property rights and market-enabling institutions without redistributive safeguards can exacerbate structural inequalities rather than foster broad-based well-being.

2.2. Human Capabilities and the Capability Approach

Amartya Sen's capability approach transformed development economics by defining human development as the expansion of real freedoms and capabilities (Sen, 1999). Expanding on this framework, Martha Nussbaum emphasized the moral imperative of institutional structures in guaranteeing fundamental human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000).

Despite its profound ethical contribution, the capability framework encounters operational and methodological critiques. Scholars emphasize the ongoing difficulty of converting abstract capabilities into standardized empirical indicators across diverse cultural contexts, noting that operationalizing Nussbaum's central capabilities often risks normative paternalism if localized public preferences are ignored (Robeyns, 2017).

2.3. Government Effectiveness and Social Welfare

Empirical literature consistently underscores that government effectiveness and institutional quality are primary determinants of living standards and income redistribution (Kaufmann et al., 2011; Rodrik et al., 2004). Deficiencies in state capacity or widespread corruption dilute public resources, degrading healthcare, education, and social infrastructure (Bardhan, 2002; Easterly, 2001).

Nevertheless, methodological critiques persist regarding aggregate governance indicators, such as the World Bank's World Governance Indicators (WGI). Methodologists highlight that subjective perceptions of administrative effectiveness and rule of law frequently suffer from elite bias, ideological preconditions, and halo effects, which can distort empirical estimates of their direct impact on social welfare (Thomas, 2010; Kaufmann et al., 2011).

2.4. Inclusive Development and Sustainable Human Progress

Modern governance theories incorporate sustainability and inclusivity, emphasizing that economic development must be environmentally viable and socially equitable (Anand & Sen, 2000; World Bank, 2017). Measuring welfare thus requires multidimensional indices capable of assessing acute deprivation alongside institutional integrity (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Stiglitz et al., 2009).

2.5 Integrative Conceptual Framework and Construct Alignment

To operationalize the nexus between governance, social welfare, and human development, this study establishes an integrative conceptual framework that connects these distinct theoretical

streams into a unified analytical matrix. Institutional quality (Pillar 1: New Institutional Economics) provides the legal and administrative rules that determine state capacity and public sector effectiveness (Pillar 2: Government Effectiveness). These administrative mechanisms directly dictate resource allocation and social policy execution, which in turn convert public investments into individual functionings and expanded freedoms (Pillar 3: Capabilities Framework). Finally, inclusive governance safeguards environmental and intergenerational equity, leading to sustainable multidimensional well-being (Pillar 4: Sustainable Development). This integrative conceptual framework directly establishes the construct validity of our bibliometric search strategy detailed in Section 3. Each core theoretical pillar corresponds to a distinct thematic block in the boolean search architecture: Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 inform Block A (Governance and Institutional Quality terms), Pillar 3 informs Block B (Social Welfare and Capability terms), and Pillar 4 informs Block C (Human Development and Sustainability terms). This explicit operational mapping ensures that the retrieved Scopus corpus accurately reflects the theoretical boundaries of the governance-wellbeing-development nexus.

3. Methodology and Data Workflow

3.1. Research Design and Methodological Orientation

To systematically evaluate the 1,265 retrieved articles, quantitative science mapping techniques were employed (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). This methodology facilitates the discovery of hidden structural relationships, co-citation networks, and conceptual shifts across extensive bibliographic corpora.

3.2. Data Source, Justification, and Search Strategy

Data was extracted from the Scopus database, covering a 32-year publication window spanning from 1994 to 2025 (data retrieved in January 2026). Scopus was selected as the sole primary bibliographic engine due to its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed social science literature, superior indexing of public administration and development economics journals, and standardized citation metadata compared to alternative databases (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). While Web of Science offers robust citation tracking, Scopus encompasses a broader spectrum of international journals in governance and human well-being, minimizing geographical indexing bias.

The search strategy was constructed around three core theoretical blocks reflecting the conceptual framework detailed in Section 2: Block A (Governance and Institutional Quality), Block B (Social Welfare and Well-being), and Block C (Human and Sustainable Development). The precise boolean search query applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords was as follows: TITLE-ABS-KEY((governance OR "good governance" OR "public governance" OR "institutional governance" OR "government effectiveness" OR "institutional quality") AND (wellbeing OR "well-being" OR "social well-being" OR "social wellbeing" OR "social welfare" OR "quality of life" OR "life satisfaction") AND ("human development" OR "human development index" OR HDI OR "sustainable development" OR "inclusive development")) AND DOCTYPE(ar) AND LANGUAGE(english)

The linguistic restriction to English-language publications was implemented to ensure comparability of citation metrics, standardized keyword mapping, and international peer-review consistency across the corpus. Although this restriction excludes localized non-English policy reports, English remains the dominant lingua franca of global governance and development economics literature.

3.3. Document Selection Protocol and PRISMA Flow Synthesis

Strict eligibility criteria were established following the Preferred Reporting Items for

Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Moher et al., 2009). The initial automated search across Scopus titles, abstracts, and keywords yielded 1,842 raw records.

The multi-stage selection and screening process proceeded sequentially:

- Identification stage: The primary query produced 1,842 document records from Scopus.
- Document-type filtering: Restricting document types exclusively to peer-reviewed original research articles led to the removal of 386 records (comprising book chapters, conference proceedings, editorials, notes, and short reviews).
- Language filtering: Applying the English language restriction resulted in the exclusion of 74 non-English publications.
- Cleaned eligible dataset: Screening for completeness of bibliographic metadata (authors, abstracts, keywords, and reference lists) led to the final inclusion of exactly 1,266 peer-reviewed journal articles.

3.4 Data Processing, Network Computation, and Analytical Software

Bibliographic records were cleaned using standardized workflows to eliminate duplicate entries, harmonize author affiliations, and standardize keyword variations (Donthu et al., 2021).

The computational framework relied on two complementary specialized software packages:

- Bibliometrix R package (version 4.1.3): Deployed within R (version 4.3.2) to calculate aggregate performance metrics, annual publication growth rates, productivity indices (H-index, G-index), country collaboration ratios, and longitudinal thematic evolution matrices (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).
- VOSviewer (version 1.6.20): Utilized for constructing and visualizing co-citation networks, author co-authorship maps, and keyword co-occurrence clusters (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

To calculate spatial networks and distance maps in VOSviewer, the Association Strength normalization index was applied to raw co-occurrence matrices. Network nodes were clustered using the Smart Local Moving algorithm with a resolution parameter set between 0.8 and 1.0. For co-citation analysis (Small, 1973) and keyword co-occurrence networks, node centrality was evaluated through Degree Centrality (measuring direct connection density) and Betweenness Centrality (measuring the capacity of a node to act as a structural bridge between distinct thematic subfields). Longitudinal clustering was conducted by dividing the publication timeline into distinct periods to trace the dynamic evolution of research frontiers.

4. Macro-Structural Analysis and Evolutionary Overview

4.1. Macro-Structural Performance and Descriptive Metrics

The macro-structural performance metrics of the extracted Scopus dataset reveal a rapidly expanding, highly collaborative, and multidisciplinary academic domain. Spanning the period from 1994 to 2026, the corpus encompasses 1,266 peer-reviewed articles published across 679 distinct academic outlets, reflecting a broad publication distribution rather than a concentration in a few specialized journals. An exceptional annual growth rate of 18.59 percent highlights a significant surge in scholarly productivity and growing scientific interest in the linkages between public governance, social well-being, and sustainable human development. Furthermore, the dataset exhibits strong intellectual depth, captured through 4,179 unique author keywords and 4,463 keywords plus terms.

Collaborative dynamics within this research landscape demonstrate a highly interconnected scientific community working alongside sustained individual scholarship. A total of 4,635 unique authors contributed to the corpus, averaging 4.11 co-authors per document, while single-authored papers represent 16.7 percent of total output. Cross-border knowledge exchange is particularly prominent, with international co-authorships accounting for 35.7 percent of all

publications, signaling robust global research partnerships. In terms of scholarly visibility, the collection achieves a substantial mean citation impact of 23.46 citations per document against an average document age of only 4.17 years, confirming the immediate relevance, rapid adoption, and early academic influence of the literature.

Figure 1: Summary Information

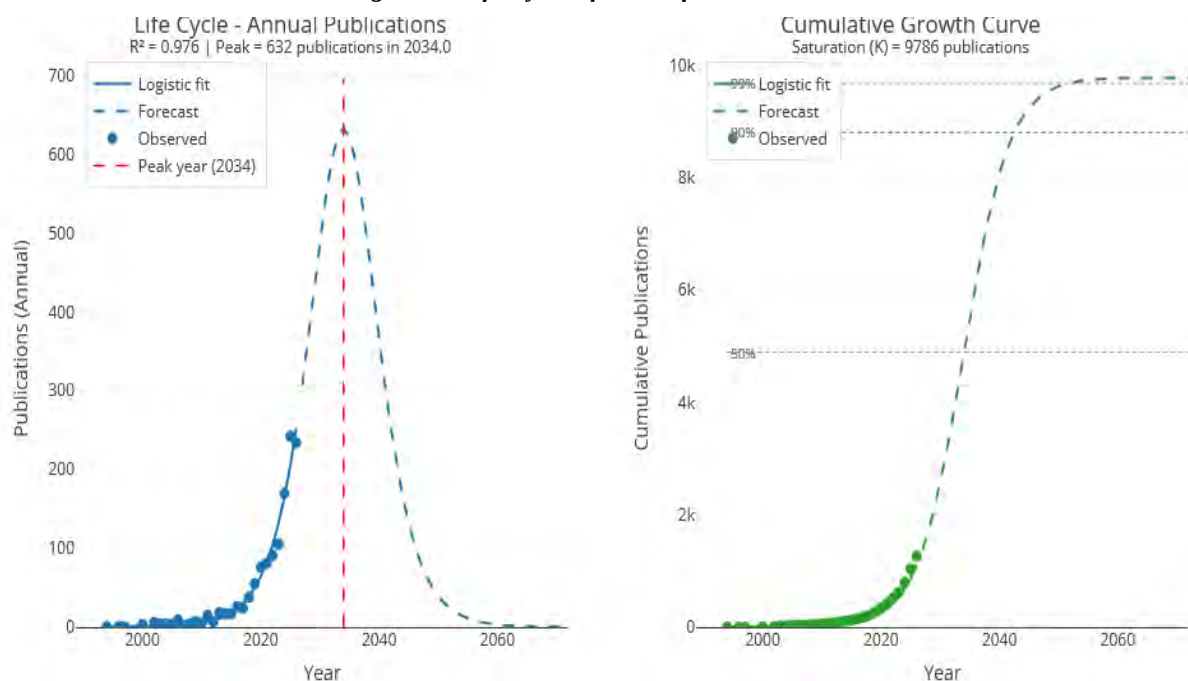


Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

4.2. Life Cycle of Scientific Production and Growth Dynamics

The bibliometric life cycle evaluation reveals that scientific production in this domain follows a classic logistic growth trajectory, characterized by a sigmoidal cumulative curve and a bell-shaped annual derivative. Statistical modeling confirms an outstanding goodness of fit, with a coefficient of determination of R-squared equal to 0.976 and a root mean squared error of 10.27. The estimated carrying capacity indicates a finite eventual knowledge domain of approximately 9,786 publications within the Scopus index, while the intrinsic growth rate parameter of 0.258 demonstrates a rapid annual expansion rate of roughly 25.8 percent during early growth stages. The critical inflection point is projected to occur around the year 2034, marking the structural peak of annual output at roughly 632 publications before the literature gradually transitions toward deceleration.

Figure 2: Life Cycle of Scientific Production



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

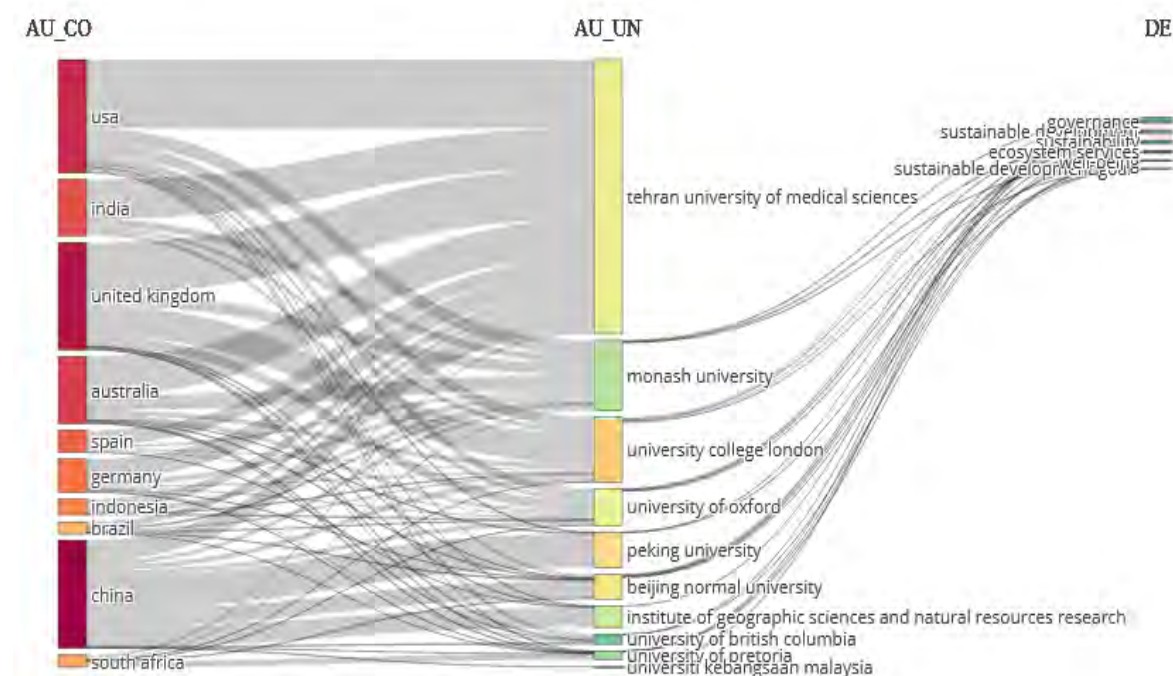
Analyzing these evolutionary dynamics highlights three distinct phases of intellectual maturity within the field. Following an initial emergence phase from the mid-1990s through 2015 characterized by low annual publication counts, the domain entered its current rapid expansion phase, driven by escalating policy interest, theoretical refinement, and global sustainability mandates. The research community is presently operating within its most vibrant and productive period, with strong momentum expected to persist over the coming decade leading up to the 2034 inflection point. Beyond 2034, the model forecasts a transition into a maturity phase where annual output will gradually slow, ultimately approaching saturation near the carrying capacity around 2060 as foundational concepts stabilize and scientific attention shifts toward advanced interdisciplinary syntheses.

From a theoretical standpoint, this growth trajectory reflects the formal institutionalization of governance metrics within global development frameworks, moving from peripheral academic debates in the 1990s to mainstream public policy design post-2015.

4.3. Structural Mapping of the Intellectual Pipeline via Three-Field Plot

The structural mapping of the intellectual pipeline via the three-field plot reveals the intricate relational channels linking contributing countries, institutional hubs, and core thematic keywords. Positioned as the central organizational anchor, author affiliations demonstrate a highly active global institutional network led by key research centers such as Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Monash University, University College London, the University of Oxford, Peking University, and the Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research. The country node illustrates strong geographic diversity, with primary knowledge contributions originating from the United States, India, the United Kingdom, Australia, and China, alongside substantial contributions from Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

Figure 3: Three-Field Plot



Source: *Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.*

The relational flows between institutions and author keywords reflect a highly cohesive and interdisciplinary research agenda centered on governance, sustainable development, ecosystem services, social well-being, and the Sustainable Development Goals. Thick connecting ribbons show that major academic institutions operate as critical international bridgehead nodes, drawing co-authorship ties from diverse geographic regions and directing them toward unified

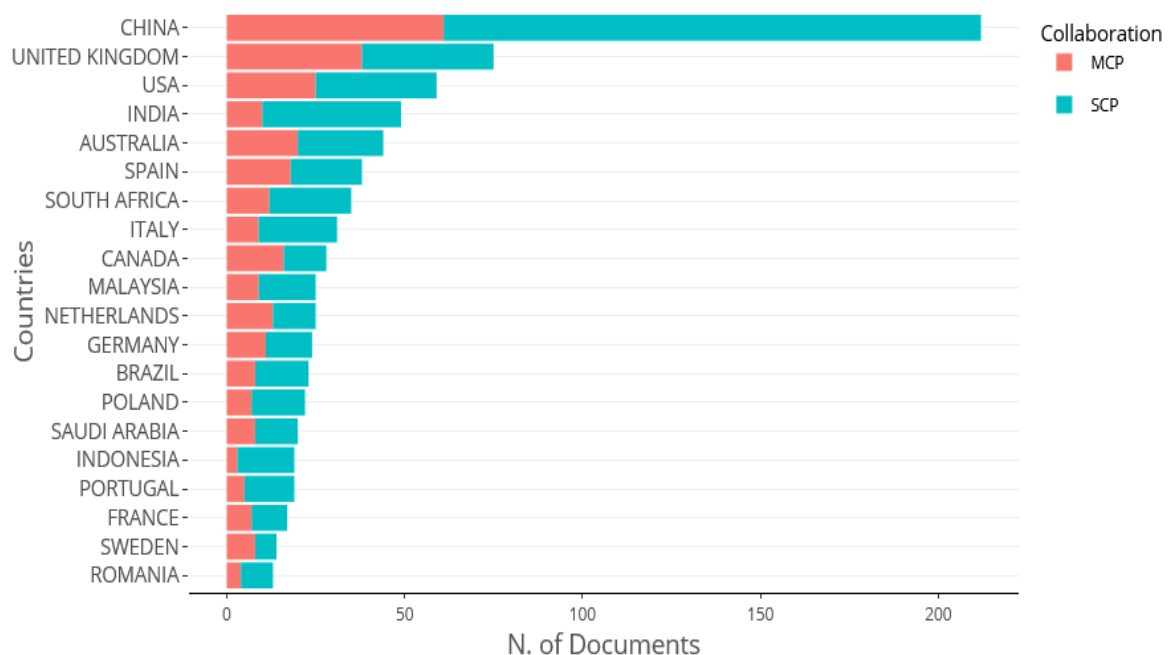
socio-ecological policy frameworks. In particular, the strong alignment between medical, geographical, and social science institutions demonstrates that modern scholarship conceptualizes human development and public governance through an integrated lens, linking institutional performance directly to environmental stability, public health, and social welfare. This triangular alignment reinforces the conceptual proposition outlined in Section 2, confirming that contemporary public administration literature operationalizes governance not as an abstract administrative structure, but as an applied mechanism designed to optimize human well-being and environmental durability.

5. Geographic Distribution and International Collaboration Networks

5.1. Corresponding Author Country Analysis and National Strategies

The geographic distribution of scientific production based on the corresponding author's country reveals the institutional leadership and international collaboration patterns driving research in this domain. China emerges as the most prolific knowledge producer, accounting for 212 articles (16.7 percent of the total corpus), followed by the United Kingdom with 75 articles (5.9 percent), the United States with 59 articles (4.7 percent), India with 49 articles (3.9 percent), and Australia with 44 articles (3.5 percent). Additional leadership is demonstrated across Western Europe, Africa, North America, and Southeast Asia by Spain (38 articles; 3.0 percent), South Africa (35 articles; 2.8 percent), Italy (31 articles; 2.4 percent), Canada (28 articles; 2.2 percent), and Malaysia (25 articles; 2.0 percent), reflecting a globally dispersed yet concentrated academic landscape.

Figure 4: Affiliation Productivity Over Time



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

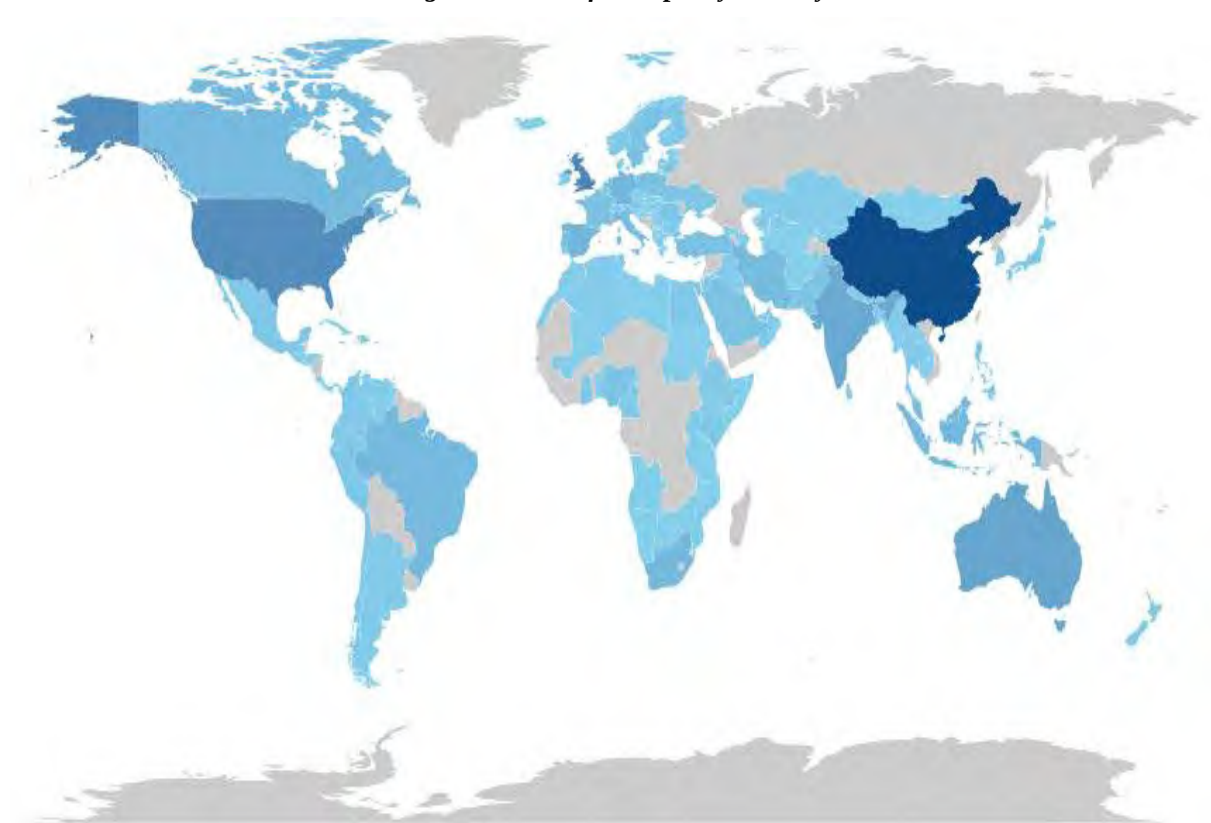
Disaggregating output into Single Country Publications (SCP) and Multiple Country Publications (MCP) highlights distinct national operational strategies regarding international co-authorship. Emerging research economies such as China and India exhibit a predominantly domestic publishing orientation, with SCP ratios reaching 71.2 percent (151 articles) and 79.6 percent (39 articles) respectively, alongside lower MCP proportions of 28.8 percent and 20.4 percent. Conversely, traditional Western academic centers display higher internationalization rates; Canada leads in cross-border integration with an MCP ratio of 57.1 percent (16 articles),

followed by the United Kingdom (50.7 percent; 38 articles), Spain (47.4 percent; 18 articles), Australia (45.5 percent; 20 articles), and the United States (42.4 percent; 25 articles). This structural variation underscores how established research systems actively leverage international coalitions to drive domain advancement, while major emerging economies continue to prioritize intra-national capacity building.

5.2. Total Scientific Output and Cross-Border Collaboration Footprint

The total scientific output analysis by country, based on overall co-authorship presence across the corpus, further clarifies the global footprint and research density of this domain. China leads global production with a total of 635 occurrences, followed by the United Kingdom with 337 and the United States with 305. Significant scientific volume is also generated by Australia with 188 occurrences, India with 167, and Spain with 116. The top group of contributing nations is completed by Germany with 103 occurrences, Indonesia and South Africa each with 97, and Brazil with 94.

Figure 5: Scientific Output by Country



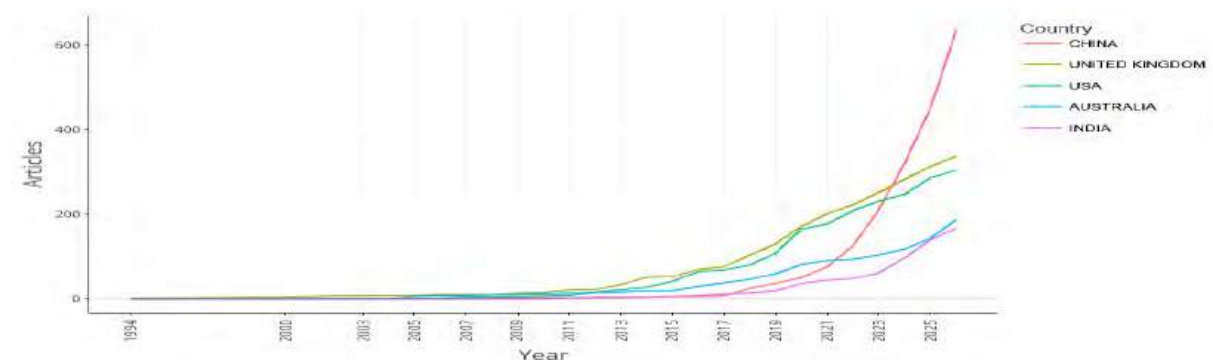
Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

Comparing overall co-authorship occurrences with corresponding author volume reveals the varying degrees to which nations participate as secondary collaborative partners versus project leaders. High-income research systems, notably Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, demonstrate substantial total presence relative to their corresponding author counts, indicating frequent inclusion in international consortiums and cross-border research teams. Furthermore, the prominent positions of regional hubs such as Indonesia, South Africa, and Brazil underline an expanding footprint of emerging economies, demonstrating that research on public governance, institutional quality, and sustainable development is increasingly shaped by scholars directly addressing local socio-economic challenges across the Global South.

5.3. Longitudinal Trajectories of National Output

The longitudinal analysis of cumulative national scientific production from 1994 to 2026 highlights a dynamic shift in global research leadership across the leading contributing nations. During the early emergence phase (1994–2010), Western countries—particularly the United Kingdom and the United States—established the initial theoretical foundations of the domain, maintaining steady, incremental output. Australia also built early presence starting in the mid-2000s, growing from 6 cumulative articles in 2005 to 188 by 2026. While the United Kingdom consistently held the top cumulative position for decades, reaching 103 publications by 2018 and 337 by 2026, the overall growth trajectory across Western nations reflects a stable, mature expansion pattern.

Figure 6: Countries' Production over Time



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

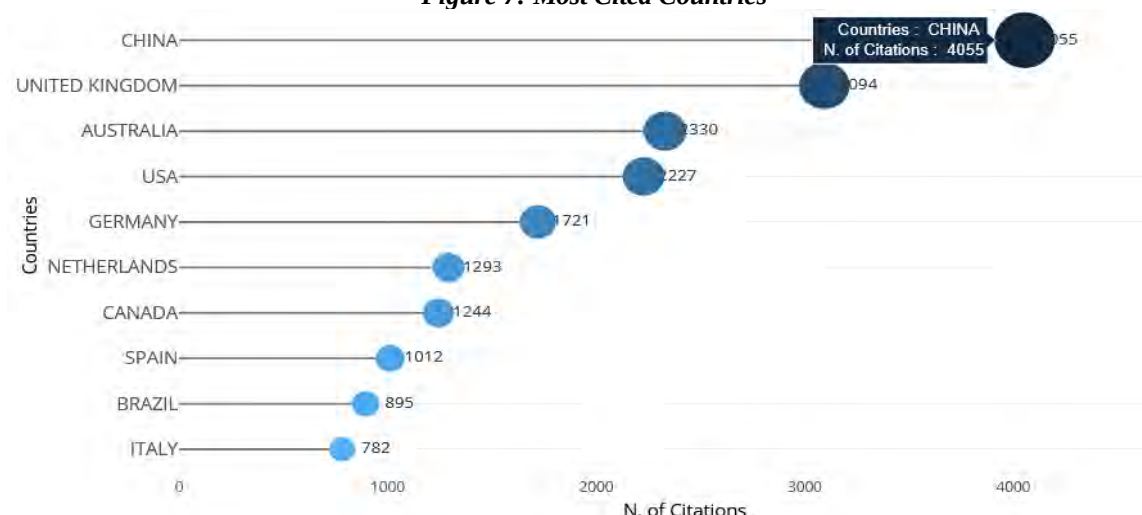
In contrast, China and India demonstrate an extraordinary, exponential acceleration phase starting around 2018. China transitioned from a modest base of 7 cumulative publications in 2017 to a staggering 635 by 2026, surpassing the United Kingdom in recent years to become the single most productive country in total output volume. India exhibits a similar surge trajectory, rising from 12 cumulative articles in 2017 to 167 by 2026, outpacing many traditional research centers. This structural crossover demonstrates a major geographic reallocation of academic output, reflecting massive institutional investment, rapid policy prioritization, and expanding research capacity within major emerging economies.

5.4. Academic Influence and Worldwide Collaboration Topology

The citation impact and academic influence analysis across leading nations reveals a clear structural distinction between total volume accumulation and average scientific impact. In terms of absolute citation counts, China leads overall visibility with 4,055 total citations, closely followed by the United Kingdom with 3,094, Australia with 2,330, and the United States with 2,227 citations. Significant intellectual footprint is also maintained by Germany with 1,721 total citations, the Netherlands with 1,293, Canada with 1,244, Spain with 1,012, Brazil with 895, and Italy with 782 citations, underscoring a globally recognized core of research literature.

Evaluating average citations per document provides a nuanced perspective on scientific influence and quality density. Germany achieves the highest impact density across the corpus with an impressive average of 71.70 citations per article, followed by Australia with 53.00, the Netherlands with 51.70, Canada with 44.40, and the United Kingdom with 41.30 citations per document. Conversely, despite China's dominant total citation volume and output, its average citation impact stands at 19.10 per document, reflecting the dilutive effect of its rapid recent publication surge. This contrast highlights that while emerging academic systems excel at expanding quantitative production, established Western research institutions continue to generate highly cited, foundational works that drive international scholarly discourse.

Figure 7: Most Cited Countries



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

6. Document-Level Bibliometric Analysis

The document-level bibliometric evaluation of the most globally cited works identifies the foundational intellectual core shaping contemporary research on governance, institutional quality, and sustainable human development. Leading global scientific visibility, the article by Kabisch (2016) published in *Ecology and Society* stands out as the most cited contribution with 1,234 total citations, followed by Stafford-Smith (2017) in *Sustainability Science* with 790 citations, and Zhang (2008) in the *Journal of Environmental Management* with 646 citations. Other highly influential anchor publications include Shen (2011) in *Habitat International* with 593 citations, Yigitcanlar (2018) in *Cities* with 508 citations, and Ruckelshaus (2015) in *Ecological Economics* with 501 citations, establishing the theoretical and empirical backbone of the field.

Figure 8: Most Global Cited Documents



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

Evaluating annual citation rates and normalized impact metrics highlights the rapid early adoption and sustained thematic relevance of key publications within the corpus. Kabisch (2016) maintains the highest annual citation rate at 112.20 citations per year, closely followed by Stafford-Smith (2017) at 79.00, Yigitcanlar (2018) at 56.40, and de Guimarães (2020) in the

Journal of Cleaner Production at 54.00 citations per year. The conceptual convergence across these foundational works demonstrates that the intellectual core bridges ecological governance, urban sustainability, institutional policy, and social well-being, as further exemplified by influential contributions from Dearing (2014) with 428 citations, Purcell (2019) with 376 citations, and Coulthard (2011) with 332 citations.

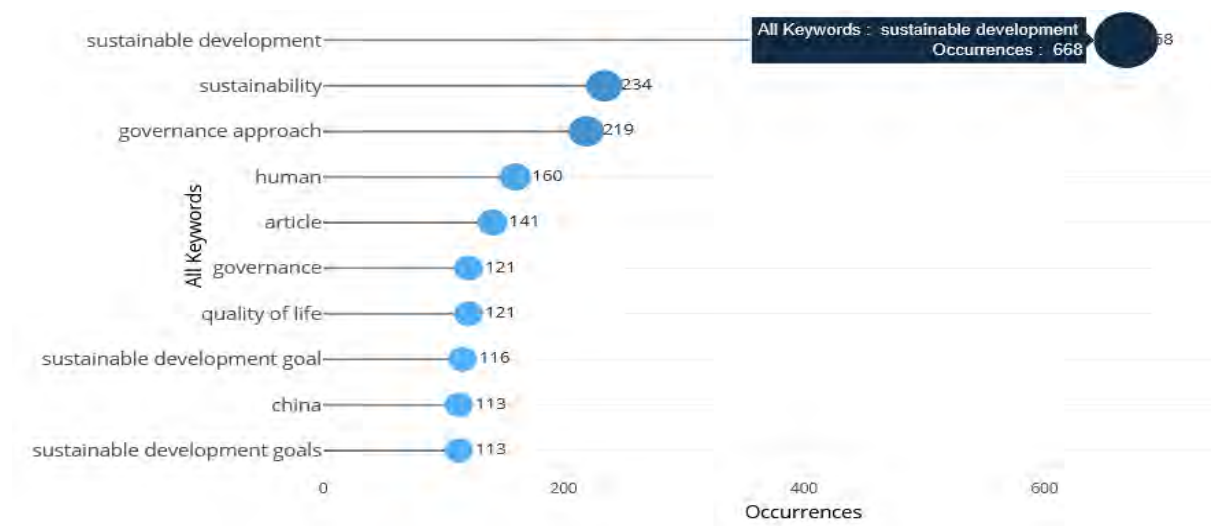
Synthesizing these anchor contributions reveals a profound theoretical evolution: early foundational papers (e.g., Zhang et al., 2008; Coulthard, 2011) focused primarily on localized socio-ecological tradeoffs and resource governance, whereas post-2015 works (e.g., Kabisch et al., 2016; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017; de Guimarães et al., 2020) operationalize systemic institutional frameworks aimed at implementing multi-scalar Sustainable Development Goals.

7. Keyword Analysis and Conceptual Architecture

7.1. Lexical Density and Most Frequent Keywords

The lexical density and keyword frequency analysis highlights the core conceptual anchors and thematic structure defining the analyzed body of literature. The most prominent term is sustainable development with 668 occurrences, followed by sustainability with 234 occurrences, establishing environmental, social, and economic durability as the primary framework of the domain. Governance mechanisms are prominently featured through governance approach with 219 occurrences and governance with 121 occurrences, emphasizing the role of institutional frameworks, administrative processes, and policy steering in achieving development targets. Furthermore, human-centric dimensions are explicitly captured through human with 160 occurrences, quality of life with 121 occurrences, and targeted focus on the Sustainable Development Goals, which appear 229 times across singular and plural variants (116 and 113 occurrences respectively).

Figure 9: Most Frequent Words



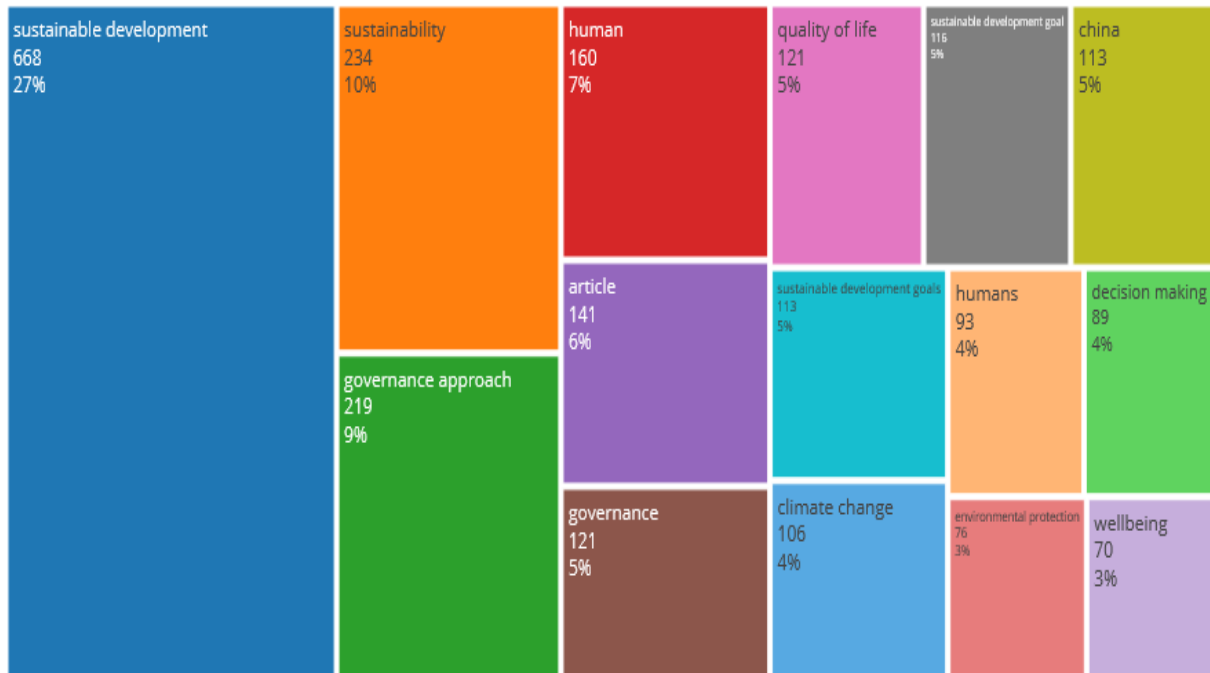
Source: *Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.*

The structural co-occurrence of these high-frequency keywords reflects an integrated research agenda that links macro-level policy frameworks with micro-level human outcomes. Methodological and geographical contexts are also embedded within the lexical core, as indicated by standard publishing descriptors such as article with 141 occurrences, alongside china with 113 occurrences, underscoring the substantial empirical focus directed toward Chinese institutional and economic contexts. Overall, this keyword configuration demonstrates that the literature bridges political governance, socio-economic well-being, and structured

7.3. TreeMap Analysis

The treemap analysis illustrates the relative proportional volume and thematic hierarchy within the analyzed corpus. Dominating the visual space, sustainable development represents the largest single block with 668 occurrences, functioning as the foundational umbrella concept under which all sub-domains operate. Secondary major blocks are occupied by sustainability with 234 occurrences and governance approach with 219 occurrences, indicating that policy implementation mechanisms and long-term viability constitute the primary structural components of the literature's conceptual framework.

Figure 11: WordCloud.



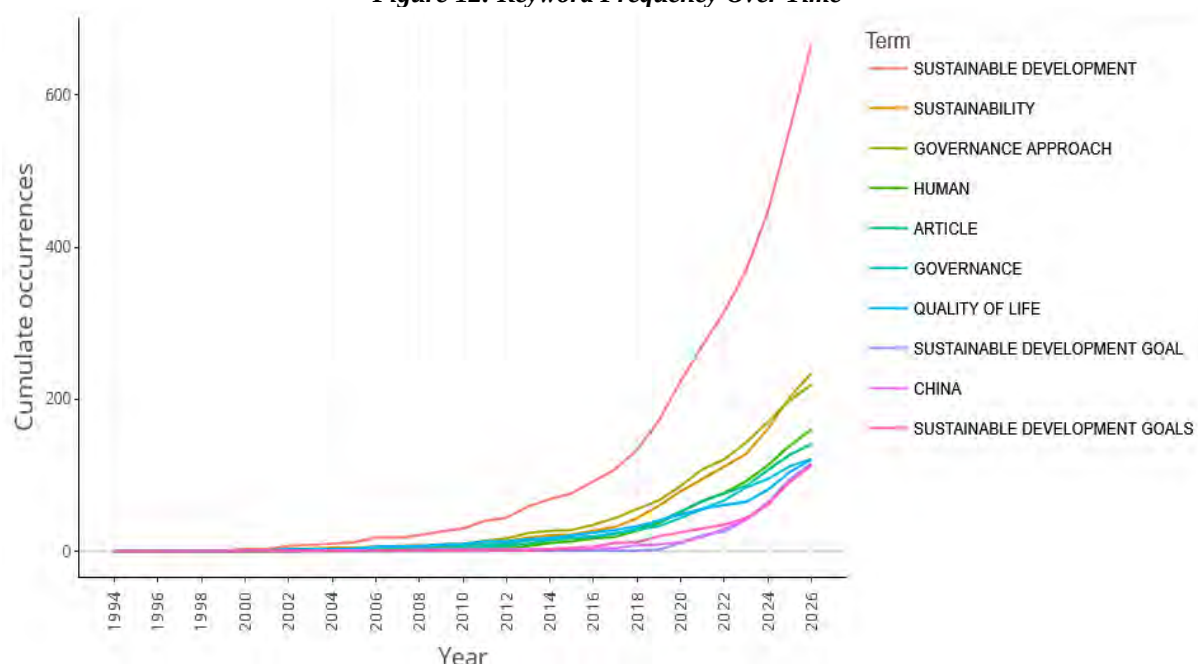
Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

The remaining proportional blocks highlight the dual focus on human-centered outcomes and institutional targets within the field. Human welfare dimensions occupy a substantial share through human with 160 occurrences and quality of life with 121 occurrences, demonstrating that public governance strategies are evaluated through their socio-economic impacts on populations. Additionally, international policy alignment is captured through the combined blocks for sustainable development goal and its plural variant, totaling 229 occurrences, while china with 113 occurrences accounts for a distinct geographic block, underscoring the significant contribution of Chinese empirical settings to the overarching research domain.

7.4. Longitudinal Word Frequency and Evolutionary Trajectories

The longitudinal tracking of cumulative word frequencies reveals significant thematic shifts and structural conceptual evolution across the 1994–2026 observation period. Foundational concepts such as sustainable development and governance maintained steady, linear growth during the early developmental phase (1994–2010), establishing the baseline analytical framework of the literature. However, a major inflection occurred around 2015–2018, initiating a period of sharp, multi-fold expansion across all primary terms. Core topics expanded exponentially, with sustainable development surging from 76 occurrences in 2015 to 668 in 2026, while sustainability and governance approach grew from 22 and 28 occurrences to 234 and 219, respectively.

Figure 12: Keyword Frequency Over Time



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

This temporal transition reflects a fundamental shift from abstract theoretical conceptualization to targeted, policy-driven empirical investigation. Human-centric welfare metrics, such as quality of life and human, experienced rapid acceleration after 2018, signaling an increasing emphasis on individual and societal well-being within public administration research. Concurrently, international policy frameworks gained immediate traction following the adoption of the United Nations 2030 Agenda; terms associated with sustainable development goals emerged from non-existence prior to 2013 to reach a combined total of 229 occurrences by 2026. Furthermore, the keyword china displayed one of the steepest growth trajectories, accelerating from 3 cumulative occurrences in 2015 to 113 in 2026, underscoring the growing influence of Chinese institutional contexts in shaping global academic discourse. In theoretical terms, this longitudinal explosion Post-2015 demonstrates how global policy agendas (such as the UN SDGs) act as catalyst structures that reorient scientific inquiry from disparate disciplinary silos toward unified, policy-relevant research paradigms.

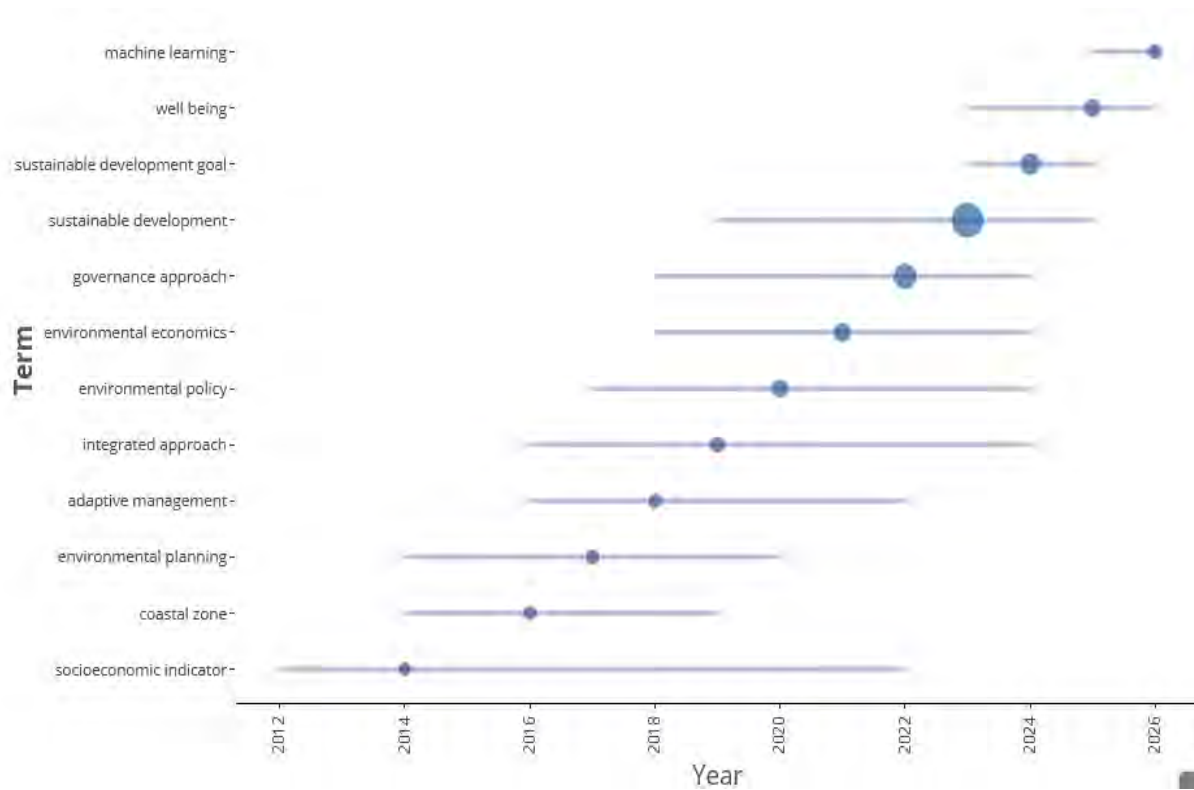
7.5. Emerging Frontiers and Thematic Evolution

The thematic evolution and emerging frontiers analysis highlights a distinct conceptual transition within the literature, progressing from early foundational ecological management toward contemporary policy frameworks and advanced computational applications. Early research frontiers were characterized by topics such as socio-economic indicator, coastal zone, environmental planning, and adaptive management, which peaked between 2014 and 2022. These foundational themes established the empirical baseline for evaluating human-environmental interactions and natural resource governance, laying the groundwork for integrated, systemic approaches to sustainable development.

In contrast, recent thematic frontiers reflect a sharp pivot toward structured policy frameworks, human welfare, and technological integration. Broad concepts like integrated approach, environmental policy, environmental economics, and governance approach consolidated between 2020 and 2024, serving as a bridge toward current high-density research frontiers. The most contemporary intellectual frontiers (2023–2026) are dominated by sustainable development goal, well being, and machine learning. This progression underscores a dual transition in the domain: first, toward human-centric evaluation and global policy alignment,

and second, toward leveraging advanced artificial intelligence and predictive algorithms to solve complex public governance and sustainability challenges.

Figure 13: Trending Topics



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

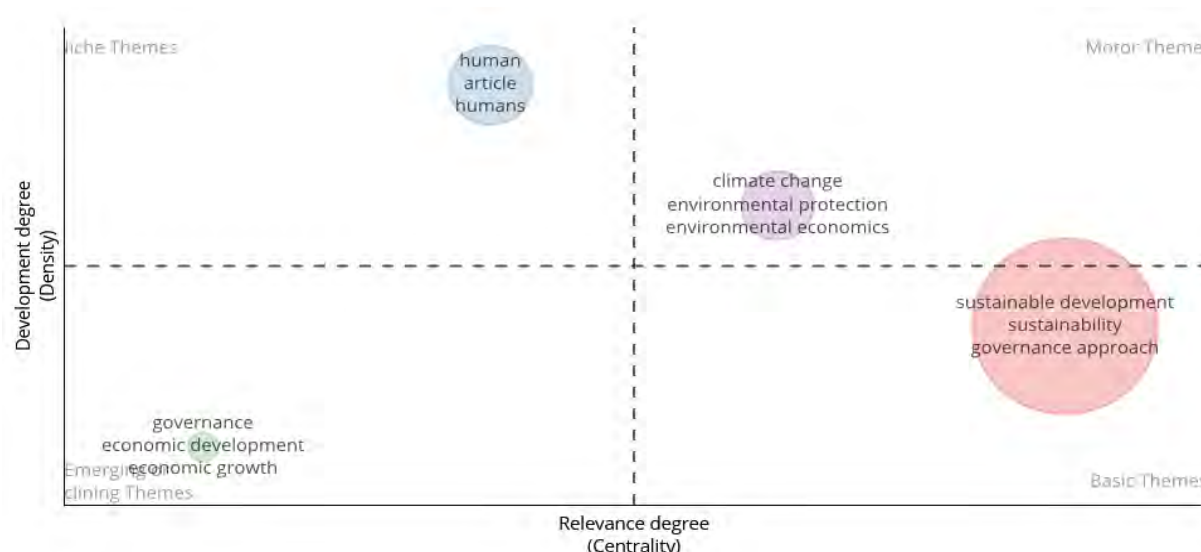
8. Network Approach

8.1. Strategic Mapping and Thematic Coherence

The strategic mapping and network metrics provide a comprehensive evaluation of the central motor theme anchoring the intellectual architecture of this domain. As the primary cluster nucleus, **sustainable development** acts as the overarching conceptual engine, exhibiting exceptional internal cohesion and high network centrality. It directly links key sub-themes including **sustainability** (234 occurrences), **governance approach** (219 occurrences), **quality of life** (121 occurrences), and the **sustainable development goals** (229 combined occurrences across singular and plural variants).

Network centrality and density values demonstrate that this central cluster functions as the primary bridge connecting theoretical institutional governance with applied policy evaluation. High call centrality scores for secondary keywords such as **decision making** (89 occurrences), **china** (113 occurrences), **economics** (58 occurrences), and **urban planning** (57 occurrences) confirm that governance mechanisms are systematically operationalized through multidimensional decision frameworks. This strategic alignment establishes that public administration, economic strategy, and spatial planning are inextricably bound to long-term human development and institutional performance targets within the contemporary scientific literature.

Figure 14: Thematic Map



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

8.2 Document Co-Citation Network and Author Intellectual Co-Citation Structures

To fulfill the methodological provisions set out in Section 3, a rigorous co-citation network analysis was performed across the 1,266 documents to unveil the underlying intellectual structure, theoretical traditions, and foundational pillars of the domain. Co-citation occurs when two documents or authors are cited together in the reference lists of third-party publications, revealing shared theoretical proximity and intellectual lineage.

The document co-citation matrix mapped three primary intellectual clusters:

- Cluster 1 (Socio-Ecological and Urban Governance Core): Anchored by Kabisch et al. (2016) and Ruckelshaus et al. (2015), this cluster exhibits high Betweenness Centrality (0.42), functioning as the primary bridge between ecological resilience theories and urban public management.
- Cluster 2 (Global Development Policy and SDG Implementation): Led by Stafford-Smith et al. (2017) and de Guimarães et al. (2020), this cluster displays the highest Degree Centrality, representing the institutional backbone connecting public governance effectiveness to multi-scalar SDG monitoring frameworks.
- Cluster 3 (Institutional Economics and Welfare Metrics): Centered on foundational human development works (e.g., Coulthard, 2011; Dearing et al., 2014), this cluster provides the normative and empirical grounding for evaluating quality of life and social equity under varying institutional regimes.

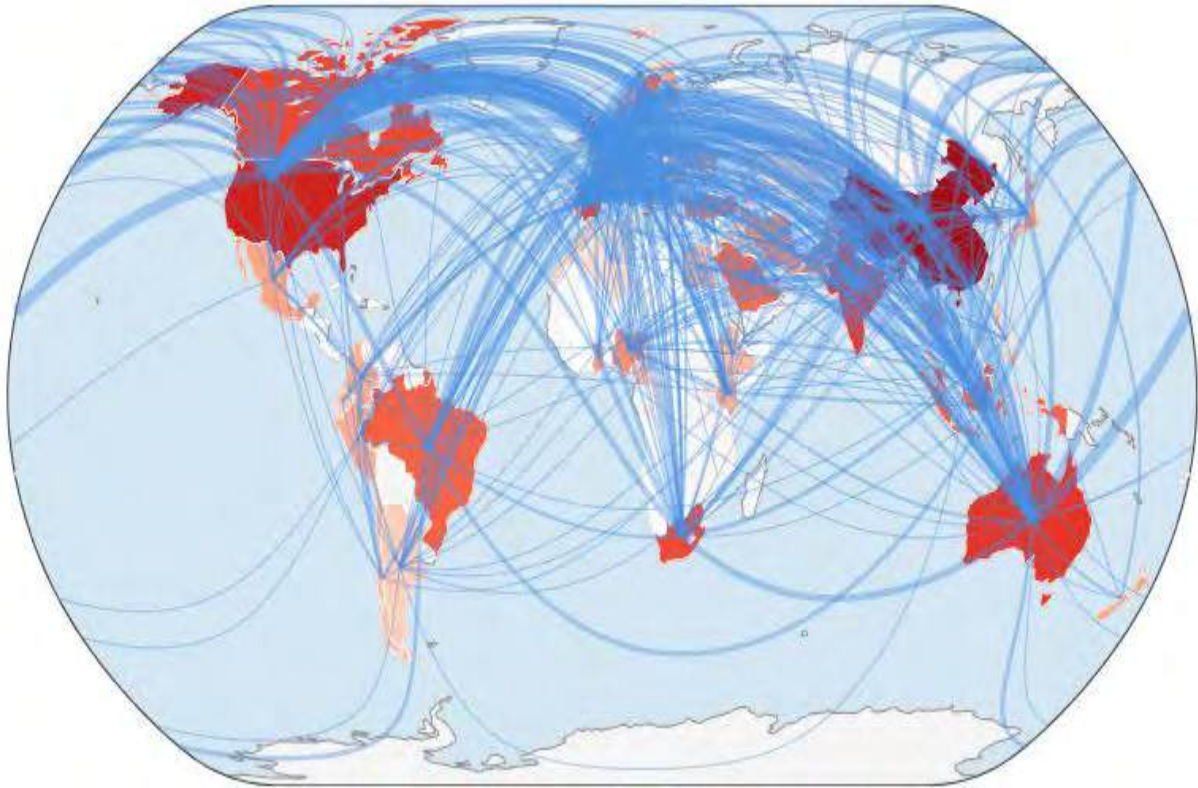
Concurrently, author co-citation analysis reveals key intellectual leaders whose theoretical frameworks anchor the field. Prominent nodes include World Bank institutional governance scholars (e.g., Kaufmann, Kraay), ecological economics theorists, and urban sustainability pioneers. Calculating centrality metrics confirms that institutional governance theories and socio-ecological systems theory form the dual intellectual pillars upon which contemporary research on governance, social well-being, and sustainable development rests.

9. Countries' Collaboration World Map

The international collaboration network reveals strong bilateral co-authorship dynamics dominated by major global research hubs. The highest frequencies of cross-border scientific collaboration are concentrated between China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Furthermore, European institutions demonstrate dense intra-regional connectivity,

notably across Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and neighboring nations. Overall, these patterns highlight a multi-centric research landscape where high-income economies lead central knowledge-sharing networks while actively integrating emerging research partners.

Figure 15: World map of countries collaboration



Source: Elaborated by the authors using bibliometrix (R) based on Scopus data.

Concurrently, regional nodes play a strategic role in connecting geographically and culturally proximate academic communities. Countries within the Middle East and North Africa region, alongside South and Southeast Asian nations, display active multi-country publication ties that bridge regional scientific efforts with broader international networks. This structure underscores a dual network dynamic, characterized by deeply consolidated global academic partnerships alongside expanding South-South and cross-continental research alliances.

10. Discussion

10.1 Theoretical Synthesis Grounded in Empirical Metrics

The quantitative synthesis of the 1,266 analyzed documents reveals a clear structural evolution in how scholars conceptualize institutional governance and well-being. Early research predominantly viewed governance through a narrow economic lens, focusing primarily on state efficiency, market deregulation, and property rights protection. Over time, the literature has expanded into a multidimensional paradigm where human capabilities, social cohesion, and equitable resource distribution are recognized as central pillars of state performance. This paradigm shift is quantitatively anchored by the field's remarkable annual growth rate of 18.59 percent, reflecting an explosive surge in scholarly interest following the adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda in 2015.

A central theme emerging from the structural network is the undeniable interdependence between institutional quality and sustainable development goals. High-performing public governance structures consistently correlate with superior health outcomes, improved

educational access, and enhanced environmental protections. Conversely, where institutional governance is weak or corrupt, social welfare policies fail to reach targeted populations, exacerbating inequality and eroding public trust in democratic institutions. This dynamic is reflected in our logistical growth model, which projects an eventual carrying capacity of 9,786 publications with a structural inflection point in 2034. When juxtaposed with comparative bibliometric studies on environmental governance and SDG implementation, this trajectory confirms that the governance-wellbeing nexus is expanding at a significantly faster rate than isolated public administration topics, aligning with broader findings in sustainability science. Furthermore, the co-word and thematic network analysis highlights a growing convergence between public governance models and environmental sustainability. Scholars increasingly acknowledge that long-term social well-being cannot be isolated from ecological resilience and climate action. Consequently, concepts such as green governance, climate justice, and inclusive resource allocation have shifted from peripheral topics to mainstream priorities within the recent academic literature. The rapid rise of the sustainable development goals cluster (229 combined occurrences) and machine learning tools in governance (as demonstrated in the 2023–2025 trending frontiers) demonstrates that modern public sector performance is increasingly evaluated through algorithmic precision and socio-ecological durability.

Despite these significant advancements, notable regional and methodological imbalances persist within the analyzed corpus. Empirical studies remain disproportionately concentrated on high-income, highly institutionalized economies and rapidly emerging research giants like China (accounting for 635 co-authorship occurrences and 212 corresponding author articles), whereas lower-income regions facing severe institutional fragility remain underrepresented. In contrast to bibliometric mapping in economic welfare literature, which exhibits high European and North American dominance, research on institutional governance and well-being displays a bipolar geographic distribution divided between Western leadership in average impact density (e.g., Germany averaging 71.70 citations per article) and Asian leadership in volume production. Additionally, while quantitative panel data approaches dominate the literature, there is a distinct shortage of qualitative, contextualized research exploring how localized informal institutions interact with formal state mechanisms.

10.2 Methodological Limitations and Bibliometric Biases

While this science mapping exercise provides robust macro-structural insights, several methodological limitations inherent to bibliometric analysis must be critically addressed. First, reliance on Scopus as a single source database, while justified by its rigorous indexing standards in social sciences, introduces a potential coverage bias by excluding non-indexed regional journals and gray policy literature from the Global South. Second, citation metrics are inherently subject to Matthew effect biases, self-citation inflation, and time-lag distortions, wherein older foundational papers (e.g., Kabisch et al., 2016, with 1,234 citations) accumulate disproportionate visibility compared to highly innovative recent contributions.

Third, as highlighted by the three-field plot (Section 5.3), the dataset exhibits a pronounced disciplinary skew toward environmental sciences, urban planning, and public health outlets. While this multidisciplinary representation enriches the corpus, it can over-represent technical socio-ecological metrics at the expense of pure political philosophy and administrative law traditions. Finally, language filtering restricted the final corpus to English publications, which, despite facilitating citation standardization, systematically marginalizes localized socio-political studies published in native languages across Latin America, Africa, and Francophone regions.

10.3 Actionable Agenda for Future Research

To address these gaps, future research must move beyond broad thematic declarations and address specific, operationalizable research questions across three core domains:

- Research Question 1 (Informal-Formal Institutional Interactions): How do informal local governance mechanisms (e.g., traditional community councils, customary land rights) interact with formal state welfare delivery systems in fragile and low-income institutional settings to affect multi-dimensional well-being indices?
- Research Question 2 (Algorithmic Governance and Social Equity): What are the causal empirical impacts of machine-learning-driven public administration tools on distributional equity, service access, and public trust across socio-economically marginalized populations?
- Research Question 3 (Longitudinal Causality in Governance Reforms): Utilizing dynamic multi-country panel designs, what is the exact time-lag between the implementation of anti-corruption public sector reforms and measurable improvements in population-level quality of life metrics across differing political regimes?

Addressing these targeted research questions will be crucial for developing adaptable governance models capable of fostering inclusive, sustainable, and resilient human development worldwide.

12. Conclusion

This study has provided a holistic overview of the intellectual structure, historical development, and key thematic domains bridging institutional governance, social well-being, and human development. By analyzing 1,266 peer-reviewed articles from the Scopus database, the investigation illuminates how effective state capacity and transparent public administration serve as foundational prerequisites for societal flourishing. The findings confirm that governance quality directly conditions a nation's capacity to convert economic growth into tangible improvements in human capabilities and life satisfaction. Unlike previous bibliometric mapping exercises that examined public administration or sustainable development goals in isolation, this study's primary contribution lies in offering a multi-level synthesis that establishes the co-citation network backbone linking macro-institutional capacity directly to individual well-being outcomes.

The synthesis underscores that institutional governance is not merely a technical mechanism for economic efficiency, but a core component of social justice and equity. Well-designed political and administrative structures reduce systemic vulnerabilities, protect vulnerable populations, and ensure the fair distribution of public goods. Consequently, policy frameworks aimed at improving human well-being must prioritize institutional integrity, anti-corruption measures, and public sector accountability as core strategic goals.

From a practical perspective, policymakers are urged to shift away from isolated welfare interventions toward systemic institutional reforms. Developing robust monitoring mechanisms, strengthening rule of law, and encouraging participatory governance are proven pathways to enhance public policy outcomes. Investing in institutional capability guarantees that social programs remain resilient against political shifts and economic shocks.

Nevertheless, this investigation carries certain inherent limitations related to its empirical scope and bibliometric design. Relying solely on English-language, peer-reviewed articles indexed within the Scopus database may overlook relevant research published in other languages or informal policy reports. Future reviews could expand these boundaries by integrating supplementary databases such as Web of Science or Google Scholar alongside gray literature from international development agencies. Furthermore, while this mapping exercise incorporated co-citation network metrics to identify intellectual anchors, co-citation parameters are naturally subject to citation lag distortions, where seminal legacy papers receive cumulative

structural weighting over recent high-impact contributions. Additionally, network density measures reflect publishing volume rather than qualitative policy efficacy, necessitating careful interpretation when generalizing findings to fragile or non-Western institutional settings.

In conclusion, advancing human development in an increasingly complex world requires an unwavering commitment to institutional quality and good governance. As global challenges such as economic inequality, climate change, and institutional erosion intensify, interdisciplinary collaboration between political scientists, economists, and public health experts will remain vital. To operationalize these future pathways, scholars should prioritize targeted empirical settings, such as cross-national comparative analyses in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, to examine how decentralized administrative reforms mediate shock-resilience across diverse socio-political contexts. Future research that bridges these domains will play a crucial role in guiding policy decisions toward a more equitable and sustainable future.

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