

Governance for Sustainability: Public Administration Capacity, Collaborative Governance, and Accountability in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Public administration has become central to sustainable development because the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require governments to convert broad international commitments into coordinated, accountable and locally responsive public action. This review paper examines how public administration contributes to sustainability through institutional capacity, collaborative governance, inclusive public finance, evidence-based policy tools, digital transparency and community participation. Drawing on a structured narrative review and qualitative document analysis of scholarly and policy sources, the paper argues that sustainability is not only an environmental agenda but also an administrative challenge involving coordination across sectors, equitable allocation of resources, integrity in public institutions and meaningful citizen engagement. The review finds that public administration supports the SDGs most effectively when it moves from narrow rule-bound implementation toward adaptive governance, integrates social and environmental assessment into development projects, uses spatial and digital tools for targeted policy, and respects local knowledge in planning. It also shows that weak local capacity, bureaucratic fragmentation, corruption and symbolic participation continue to limit implementation. By linking sustainability goals with administrative reform, the article offers a practical framework for scholars, policy makers and public managers. The paper concludes that strengthening administrative systems, improving accountability and aligning public service delivery with long-term sustainability outcomes are essential for achieving inclusive and resilient development.

Keywords: public administration; sustainable development; sdgs; collaborative governance; accountability; administrative capacity

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is now one of the most important tests of modern public administration. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, governments have been expected not only to provide traditional public services but also to address poverty, inequality, food

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insecurity, climate risk, environmental degradation and social exclusion in an integrated manner (United Nations, 2015). The classic definition of sustainable development emphasizes meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987). This definition places public administration at the centre of sustainability because public institutions translate collective goals into budgets, laws, programmes, monitoring systems and services.

The public administration literature has long recognized that the state is not merely a law-making body; it is also an implementing system through which policies are delivered and public value is created (Basu, 2019; Mohanty et al., 2017). Wilson's (1887) early argument that administration deserves systematic study remains relevant because today's administrative tasks are more complex than ever. Governments must now manage cross-sectoral problems that cannot be solved by a single department, profession or level of government. Sustainability therefore requires an administrative model that is coordinated, evidence-based, inclusive and accountable.

The central argument of this article is that sustainable development depends on the quality of governance. The shift from government to governance has changed the role of public administrators from direct service providers to coordinators of multi-actor processes involving public agencies, civil society, communities, universities and private organizations (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Osborne, 2010). This is especially important in the Global South, where public institutions often work under conditions of resource scarcity, rapid urbanization, social inequality and environmental vulnerability. In such contexts, the challenge is not simply to design good policies but to build administrative capacity for implementation, accountability and learning.

This paper is organized around three questions. First, how does public administration contribute to the achievement of the SDGs? Second, which governance mechanisms appear most important for sustainability-oriented public action? Third, what administrative challenges limit sustainable development implementation, and how can they be addressed? By answering these questions, the paper offers a stronger academic foundation for understanding public administration as a driver of sustainable development.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Background

2.1 Public Administration and Sustainable Development

Public administration refers to the institutional processes through which governments implement policies, manage public resources and deliver services. It includes planning, coordination, staffing, budgeting, regulation, monitoring and evaluation. In relation to the SDGs, public administration performs at least four functions: it sets implementation priorities, mobilizes resources, coordinates stakeholders and evaluates outcomes. These functions connect the administrative state directly with the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Sustainability is commonly understood through three interdependent pillars: economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection. A sustainability-oriented

administrative system must therefore avoid treating these pillars as separate policy areas. Bond et al. (2025) argue that sustainability assessment requires attention to interactions between development choices and their long-term social and ecological consequences. For public administration, this means that infrastructure, health, education, taxation, land use and environmental policy should be assessed not only for immediate efficiency but also for intergenerational equity and resilience.

2.2 From Government to Governance

Traditional public administration emphasized hierarchy, legality and rule compliance. These principles remain necessary because sustainable development requires lawful and accountable institutions. However, contemporary sustainability problems also require collaboration across administrative boundaries. New Public Governance highlights networks, public value, inter-organizational cooperation and citizen engagement as key features of public service systems (Osborne, 2010). Collaborative governance theory similarly emphasizes that public agencies must work with non-state actors when problems are complex and resources are distributed across society (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Open government also matters for sustainability because citizens are more likely to trust public institutions when they can access information and participate in decision-making. Schmidhuber et al. (2021) show that the relationship between government openness and public trust is mediated by democratic capacity. In practical terms, transparency alone is insufficient unless citizens have meaningful opportunities to influence policy. This insight is important for SDG implementation because sustainability programmes often require behavioural change, local cooperation and long-term public legitimacy.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative document analysis and structured narrative review approach. Document analysis is appropriate where the research objective is to interpret policy documents, scholarly literature and institutional evidence in order to identify themes, patterns and gaps (Bowen, 2009). The article does not claim to be a full systematic review because it does not present a complete database search strategy, screening table or PRISMA flow diagram. Instead, it follows a transparent narrative logic, using selected academic and policy sources that directly address public administration, governance and sustainable development. This correction strengthens the methodological accuracy of the manuscript because the PRISMA statement is designed for formally reported systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).

The review focused on literature related to public administration, collaborative governance, sustainability assessment, food security, inequality, public finance, social impact assessment, local knowledge, digital governance and sectoral examples from different national contexts. Thematic analysis was used to organize the material into major categories. Following the logic of qualitative data analysis, relevant information was reduced, displayed and interpreted in relation to the research questions (Mezmir, 2020). The analysis was inductive in the sense that themes were derived from repeated patterns across the selected literature rather than imposed only from a single theory.

The main limitation of this method is that it does not provide statistical generalization. However, it is suitable for conceptual development and for identifying governance lessons across cases. To reduce bias, the review connects theoretical sources with applied examples from public finance, agriculture, health, land use, tourism, education, taxation and infrastructure governance.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Public Administration as the Institutional Engine of the SDGs

The SDGs are global in ambition but administrative in implementation. Goals such as ending hunger, reducing inequality, ensuring healthy lives, improving education and protecting ecosystems require functioning public institutions. Public administration provides the machinery through which these commitments become operational. It develops national strategies, assigns responsibilities, allocates budgets, coordinates ministries, monitors indicators and reports progress. Without administrative capacity, the SDGs remain political aspirations rather than practical outcomes.

Administrative capacity is especially important because sustainability policy often requires coordination across sectors. Food security, for example, cannot be addressed only through agricultural production; it also depends on land tenure, infrastructure, nutrition policy, social protection and local institutions. Ningrum and Nurfaiziya (2026) show that agrarian policy and land tenure reform are closely connected to food security in the Global South. Similarly, Astuti and Panglipursari (2026) emphasizes collaborative governance in food security policy in Indonesia, where state agencies must coordinate with local actors and community organizations. India's POSHAN Abhiyaan also illustrates how nutrition governance requires monitoring, interdepartmental coordination and local delivery systems (Aayog, 2020).

However, administrative systems often suffer from fragmentation. Agencies may work in silos, budgets may not align with policy goals, and local governments may lack technical capacity. Such conditions create an implementation gap between SDG promises and real development outcomes. Public administration must therefore move beyond formal planning and focus on institutional integration, performance monitoring and practical problem solving.

4.2 Collaborative Governance and Social Participation

Collaboration is one of the most important governance requirements for sustainability. Complex development problems usually involve multiple causes and multiple stakeholders. In food security governance, Astuti and Panglipursari (2026) and Ukeje and Durokifa (2026) show that stakeholder capability, participation and coordination are central to policy effectiveness. These findings support the wider argument that sustainability cannot be achieved through top-down administration alone.

Collaboration also helps governments mobilize local knowledge. In tourism governance, Sawir et al. (2026) highlight the importance of stakeholder collaboration for sustainable tourism development in Tolitoli, while Pardosi et al. (2026) show that local wisdom can be integrated into tourism policy to protect culture and support development. These cases

demonstrate that local communities are not merely beneficiaries of public programmes; they are knowledge holders and co-producers of sustainable outcomes.

Social capital also plays a role in sustainable governance. Soegiharto et al. (2026) connect social capital with self-reliant villages, suggesting that community networks can support resilience and local development. For public administrators, this means that policy design should not treat communities as passive recipients. Instead, administrative systems should create participatory platforms, strengthen local organizations and build trust between citizens and the state.

4.3 Public Finance, Taxation and Equity

Sustainable development requires fair and effective public finance. The SDGs cannot be implemented without reliable revenue, responsible expenditure and equitable service delivery. Public expenditure can reduce inequality when it is directed toward education, health and social protection. Zerihun (2025) shows that public spending can influence income inequality in low- and lower-middle-income Sub-Saharan African economies. This finding is important for public administration because budgeting is not a neutral technical exercise; it is a distributive instrument that shapes social opportunity.

Taxation is equally important. A weak or unfair tax system limits the state's ability to deliver services and undermines the social contract. Munjeyi and Schutte (2026) discuss inclusive taxation in Zimbabwe, where informal economic activity creates challenges for revenue collection and fairness. For sustainable development, taxation must be efficient, transparent and perceived as legitimate. Digital tools may support tax administration, but technology alone cannot solve problems of trust, corruption or inequality. Administrative reforms must therefore combine technical modernization with fairness and accountability.

4.4 Evidence-Based Policy Tools for Sustainability

Sustainability-oriented public administration requires strong evidence systems. Governments need reliable data to identify where problems are concentrated and which interventions are most effective. Spatially explicit tools can improve policy targeting by showing that poverty, education outcomes and service needs vary across places. Ngowi et al. (2026) demonstrate the value of spatial diagnosis for precision policy in Tanzania. Such tools help public administrators move beyond national averages and design interventions for specific communities.

Assessment tools are also vital. Social Impact Assessment (SIA) evaluates how policies, projects and programmes affect people's lives, livelihoods, rights and social relations. Aucamp and Vanclay (2026) describe SIA as a mature field that can guide more responsible development. Hanna and Vanclay (2013) further emphasize the importance of human rights and free, prior and informed consent, especially for Indigenous peoples and affected communities. These principles are highly relevant for infrastructure, energy and land-use decisions because development projects may produce both public benefits and local harms.

Hydropower governance in Nepal illustrates the need to balance clean energy goals with cultural and ecological values. Rai and Rai (2026) show that hydropower projects can create

tensions around riverine moral ecologies and local identity. Similarly, land-use and forest changes in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, highlight the administrative importance of environmental data, conflict-sensitive planning and local resource protection (Haji Muhammad et al., 2026). These examples show that sustainable development requires public administrators to assess trade-offs before decisions are implemented, not after damage has occurred.

4.5 Digital Governance, Openness and Accountability

Digital governance can strengthen sustainable development by improving service delivery, monitoring, transparency and citizen access to information. E-governance may reduce administrative costs, simplify procedures and provide real-time data for decision-making. Yet digital tools should be treated as governance instruments rather than purely technical solutions. Their value depends on institutional capacity, data quality, inclusiveness and accountability.

Government openness is especially important for the SDGs because sustainability programmes often require public cooperation. When citizens can see how resources are allocated and how decisions are made, they are more likely to trust public institutions. However, as Schmidhuber et al. (2021) argue, openness becomes more meaningful when it is connected to democratic capacity. Public administration should therefore use digital platforms not only to publish information but also to support participation, feedback, grievance redress and social accountability.

Corruption remains a major barrier to sustainability. It diverts resources away from public needs, weakens service delivery and damages trust. Anti-corruption measures should be integrated into SDG implementation through transparent procurement, performance audits, open budgeting, citizen monitoring and stronger administrative ethics. In this sense, accountability is not an optional governance value; it is a condition for sustainable development.

4.6 Sectoral Illustrations of Sustainability-Oriented Public Administration

4.6.1 Health and Human Development

Health systems show how public administration affects social sustainability. Bao and Liu (2026) trace the development of public hospitals in China from 1949 to 2024, illustrating the long-term administrative role of the state in expanding and reforming public health provision. Effective health administration requires planning, resource allocation, professional management, accountability and equity in access. These are central to SDG 3 and to broader human development.

4.6.2 Education and Sustainability Learning

Higher education institutions also contribute to sustainable development by producing knowledge, professional capacity and responsible citizenship. Leal Filho et al. (2024) discuss student participation in SDG implementation at higher education institutions, while Agboola et al. (2026) examine sustainability-integrated curricula. For public administration, education

is both a service sector and a capacity-building mechanism. Training future administrators in sustainability, ethics, evidence use and collaborative governance can improve long-term institutional performance.

4.6.3 Business, Sport and Hybrid Governance

Sustainability also involves actors outside the state. Corporate social responsibility can support public goals when it is aligned with national priorities and community needs. Elayah and Alassi (2026) discuss hybrid CSR governance in post-rentier states, showing that public-private arrangements can balance state direction with business initiative. Sport organizations may also contribute to social inclusion, health and environmental awareness. Jaczina and Schubring (2025) show that Swedish sport organizations have begun aligning policy work with sustainable development, although implementation remains challenging. These examples confirm that public administration increasingly works through hybrid governance systems.

4.6.4 Society-Nature Relations

Environmental governance requires administrators to understand the relationship between society and nature. Schandl (2026) argues for a sociology of society-nature relations, which is relevant to public administration because environmental problems are shaped by social institutions, consumption patterns and development models. Public administration must therefore integrate environmental considerations into economic planning, infrastructure development, urban governance and social policy.

4.7 Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Development

Several challenges limit the contribution of public administration to sustainable development. First, bureaucratic fragmentation creates coordination failures. Ministries and departments often operate with separate mandates, budgets and reporting systems, even when SDG problems require joint action. Second, weak local capacity prevents policies from reaching communities effectively. Local governments may lack trained staff, reliable data, financial resources or administrative autonomy.

Third, a compliance-driven administrative culture may prioritize procedures over outcomes. While rules are necessary for legality and fairness, excessive proceduralism can delay implementation and discourage innovation. Fourth, corruption and patronage weaken trust and reduce the impact of public spending. Fifth, participation may become symbolic if citizens are consulted without having real influence over decisions. Finally, many governments struggle to integrate long-term sustainability into short-term political and budget cycles.

These challenges show why sustainable development is not only a policy agenda but also a public administration reform agenda. Administrative systems must become more adaptive, transparent, ethical and learning-oriented. Without such reforms, the SDGs may be formally adopted but weakly implemented.

5. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Based on the review, public administration for sustainable development should begin with stronger whole-of-government coordination mechanisms that connect national planning, budgeting, monitoring and local implementation. Such mechanisms can reduce fragmentation by aligning ministry-level responsibilities with SDG targets and by ensuring that local authorities have the administrative, financial and technical capacity to implement national commitments. Governments should also institutionalize collaborative governance platforms through which civil society, communities, universities and private actors can contribute to policy design, implementation and monitoring. These platforms should be designed as meaningful participation spaces rather than symbolic consultation exercises.

Public finance should be aligned with equity objectives so that poor and marginalized communities benefit from public expenditure, social protection and fair taxation. Before major development decisions are finalized, administrators should use spatial data, social impact assessment and sustainability assessment to identify risks, distributional effects and long-term consequences. Digital governance should be strengthened as a tool for transparent service delivery, public feedback, grievance redress and anti-corruption oversight. Finally, local wisdom and community knowledge should be recognized as legitimate inputs into tourism, land, water and environmental governance, while continuous administrative training should prepare public officials to work across sectors, use evidence and manage participatory processes effectively.

6. Conclusion

Public administration is the institutional bridge between sustainable development commitments and real improvements in people's lives. The SDGs require more than policy declarations; they require administrative systems capable of coordination, accountability, evidence use, fair resource allocation and public participation. This paper has argued that governance for sustainability depends on the transformation of public administration from a narrow rule-enforcement system into an adaptive, collaborative and results-oriented system.

The review shows that sustainable development is advanced when public institutions coordinate across sectors, collaborate with stakeholders, protect rights, use data for targeted policy and maintain transparency in resource use. It also shows that implementation gaps arise when bureaucracy becomes fragmented, local capacity is weak, participation is superficial or public finance fails to reach disadvantaged groups. A sustainable future therefore depends not only on what governments promise but on how public administration functions.

For scholars, the paper highlights the need to study sustainability as an administrative challenge. For practitioners, it emphasizes that SDG implementation requires institutional reforms, ethical leadership, participatory mechanisms and evidence-based planning. Public administration remains one of the most important instruments for building a fair, resilient and sustainable society.

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