Analysis of Institutional Capacity-Building Barriers in Urban Governance: A Strategic Approach in Tehran Metropolis

Reza Shadmanfar[1], Amirhosein Pourjohari[2*], Hosein Imani Jajarmi[3]

[1]Department of Urbanism, Institute of Society and Media, ISF.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.

[1]Tourism, Architecture and Urban Research Center, ISF.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran.

[2] Department of Urban Planning, ShQ.C., Islamic Azad University, Shahr-e Qods, Iran.

[3] Department of Social Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

*Corresponding Author: Amirhosein Pourjohari, Department of Urban Planning, ShQ.C., Islamic Azad University, Shahr-e Qods, Iran

Abstract

Introduction: Institutional capacity-building in neighborhood communities is a critical strategy for urban sustainable development. This study aims to analyze the challenges and implications of institutional capacity-building in Tehran's neighborhood communities.

Materials and Methods: This qualitative study employed conventional content analysis. The research sample consisted of 22 urban experts selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the Graneheim and Landman method with MAXQDA 2018 software.

Findings: The results revealed the multidimensional implications of institutional capacity-building in Tehran's neighborhood communities. Content analysis identified six key subcategories emerging from the interactions of individual, social, and institutional factors. At the individual level, participants emphasized personal capability enhancement and social skill development. Collective-level findings highlighted the importance of strengthening social capital and neighborhood solidarity.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that institutional capacity-building is a strategic approach to urban sustainable development. The primary challenges include structural limitations, a lack of specialized human resources, and cultural barriers. Success requires a comprehensive, participatory approach to address the ongoing urban changes. The key outcome is the identification of the necessity for continuous institutional restructuring to empower local communities.

Keywords: Institutional Capacity-Building, Neighbourhood Communities, Sustainable Development, Tehran, Urban Transformations.

Introduction

Urban development in the modern era demands innovative management and strategic planning approaches. Institutional capacity building, as a key strategy for empowering local communities, plays a vital role in enhancing urban quality of life. This concept transcends traditional urban management models, aiming to establish a dynamic and adaptable organizational ecosystem that can generate social value and effectively address complex urban challenges.

Theoretical studies by researchers such as Peters, March, and Olsen in the field of new institutionalism propose that institutional capacity building is a multifaceted process involving a complex interaction between an organization's internal and external mechanisms. Within the context of new institutional theory, these scholars have identified three key components for institutional capacity building: the development of human capital, the redesign of organizational structures, and the enhancement of strategic capabilities. This theoretical framework highlights the significance of the interaction between local actors, institutional capacities, and the socio-political environment (March & Olsen, 2006; Peters, 2019).

The concept of institutional capacity building emerged in the late 1980s alongside theoretical advancements in new public management. This approach evolved from centralized bureaucratic models to more flexible, network-based models. Recent comparative studies in Europe and North America, as well as research in developing countries, suggest that the shift from traditional state management to multi-level governance represents a turning point in the understanding of institutional capacity building (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Capano, Pritoni, & Vicentini, 2021). This transformation has increased the significance of local actors, NGOs, and citizens.

In the context of urban management in Iran, institutional capacity building encounters complex structural and functional challenges. Recent studies by Mokhtari Malekabadi, Goodarzi, and Fadaei Jazi, analyzing the capacity of urban governance in Tehran, reveal that despite efforts made, a significant gap remains between theoretical frameworks and the actual performance of local institutions. This discrepancy is attributed to factors such as strong centralization, legal restrictions in delegating powers, and the weakness of social participation mechanisms (Mokhtari Malekabadi, Goodarzi, & Fadaei Jazi, 2024).

The analytical framework for institutional capacity building in contemporary studies offers a multidimensional and complex perspective that extends beyond traditional views of institutions. Five key components influencing the performance of local governments have been identified: 1) Social capital and local networks, emphasizing informal interactions, mutual trust, and civic participation; 2) Multi-level governance structures that facilitate interaction among various institutions at local, regional, and national levels; 3) Institutional innovation capacities, focusing on organizational creativity and adaptation to environmental changes; 4) Citizen participation mechanisms that empower local communities and enhance government performance; and 5) Organizational flexibility to address the complexities of the institutional environment (Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2015; UN-Habitat, 2022; Farajirad, Kazemian & Eftekhari, 2015). Empirical studies demonstrate that high levels of social capital, even when controlling for political and demographic variables, independently and significantly affect the quality of local government performance (Pierce et al., 2002). This analytical approach not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the intricate institutional interactions at the neighborhood level but also provides a basis for the ongoing regeneration of institutional capacities (Fanni, Niknami, & Saeedi, 2024).

Institutional empowerment strategies at the local level adopt a multidimensional and interactive approach, which is essential due to the complexities of the urban environment and social transformations. The success of these strategies relies on three key components: developing organizational capacities for effective decision-making, strengthening networks of informal collaboration, and enhancing institutional learning mechanisms (Wu et al., 2015).

The need for a multidimensional approach arises because institutions can no longer tackle urban issues with a one-dimensional or static perspective. A case study by Kazemian and colleagues in Tehran demonstrates that social, economic, and cultural complexities require a comprehensive and interactive approach (Farajirad et al., 2015). This approach not only improves institutional functions but also provides the foundation for the genuine empowerment of local communities. The challenges of institutional capacity building in urban management in Iran are complex and multifaceted, stemming from intricate structural, cultural, and organizational interactions.

Despite the growing significance of institutional capacity building in sustainable urban development, evidence shows that this process faces complex structural and functional challenges in the context of urban management in Iran. Studies indicate that, despite efforts, a substantial gap remains between theoretical literature and the actual performance of local institutions (Shadmanfar, Pourjohari, Amirhossein, & Imani Jajarmi, 2022).

A review of the research background reveals that, despite progress, significant gaps remain in neighborhood studies. First, the predominance of quantitative and survey-based approaches has hindered a deeper understanding of the subjective meanings and interpretations of local actors. Second, existing neighborhood studies have primarily focused on describing the current situation, with less attention given to analyzing internal dynamics and systemic relationships. Third, there is a notable gap between theoretical frameworks and field realities in local development programs. Other significant research gaps include the lack of a systemic and holistic approach, insufficient in-depth studies on institutional-social interactions, and the absence of a comprehensive framework for analyzing local capacity building (Jannatsharifi, Kazemian, Aslipour, & Narimani, 2023).

The absence of a systemic and holistic approach, the lack of in-depth studies on institutional-social interactions, and the absence of a comprehensive framework for analyzing local capacity building underscore the need for a thorough study. This is especially crucial in the metropolitan city of Tehran, which faces complex management, structural, and social challenges. To date, studies have predominantly focused on describing the current situation and offering general solutions, with less emphasis on a deep analysis of the barriers and challenges related to institutional capacity building at the neighborhood level. In this context, the present study aims to conduct a multidimensional analysis of the challenges of institutional capacity building in neighborhood communities in Tehran. This research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of institutional-social interactions and relationships, focusing on three main components through a qualitative approach: the role of institutional structures, an analysis of the experiences of local actors, and the identification of barriers to the development of social capacities.

Research Background: Transformation of Institutional Approaches in Urban Development Studies

The conceptual shift in institutionalism originates from North's economic studies, which emphasized the role of institutions in driving economic and social development (North, 1990). He defined institutions as the formal and informal frameworks that govern human interactions and shape economic and social behaviors. Over time, this approach expanded beyond economics to encompass other social sciences, including urban planning.

In urban planning, the new institutionalism approach, which focuses on social interactions and institutional structures, has contributed to a shift from one-dimensional, centralized perspectives to more multidimensional, participatory, and bottom-up approaches (Healey, 1997). The United Nations has also highlighted this approach in its global agendas. For instance, in Agenda 21 (1993) and the Habitat programs, the significance of community-based development and local participation (CCD) was emphasized (United Nations, 2022).

This approach views development not as a theoretical, top-down process, but as a practical, participatory one where local communities play a central role. According to World Bank reports, community-driven development programs have been implemented in over 80 countries worldwide, and this approach is recognized as one of the most important strategies for sustainable local development (Barron, Fernandes, Winkler, & Woolcock, 2024). This underscores the increasing importance of institutional and participatory perspectives in urban planning and local development.

At the national level, Iranian researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of institutional approaches. Rafieian and colleagues employed document analysis to assess the capacity of social institutions in the local planning process (Piran, Rafieian, Rezaei, & Dehghan, 2016). Farajirad and colleagues, in a study titled "The Relationship between Institutional Capacity and Regional Sustainable Development," used both quantitative-survey and qualitative methods to investigate the relationship between institutional capacity and regional sustainable development, focusing on its procedural implementation in the decision-making, actions, and activities of local institutions (Farajirad et al., 2015). Jannatsharifi and colleagues explored a framework for enhancing the institutional capacity of the private sector in the development of Iran's upstream oil and gas industries, with a particular focus on governance approaches (Jannatsharifi et al., 2023). Molaei and colleagues examined institutional capacity and its impact on regional sustainable development in the cities of Bojnord, Raz, and Jargalan in North Khorasan province. Their findings indicated that institutional capacity in both cities was below the desired average, resulting in inefficiencies in achieving sustainable development goals. Moreover, a positive and significant relationship was found between some components of institutional capacity and the progress of

sustainable development, highlighting the need to enhance institutional capacity through competitive and incentivized policymaking (Molaei, Kouzehgar Kalaji, Razavian, & Tavakolinia, 2023).

A review of the research background shows that despite significant efforts in the field of institutional studies, notable theoretical and methodological gaps remain. These include the dominance of quantitative and survey-based approaches, the focus on merely describing the current situation, and the insufficient attention given to internal dynamics and systemic relationships. At the same time, global experiences highlight that the success of community-based development programs requires a deep understanding of institutional-social interactions and local capacities. This research aims to bridge these gaps by adopting a unique approach. Unlike previous studies that have primarily concentrated on inefficiencies and structural reforms, this study seeks an in-depth, multidimensional analysis of institutional-social interactions. Specifically, three key aspects are addressed: exploring the role of institutional structures, analyzing the experiences of local actors, and identifying the challenges in developing social capacities. This analytical and comprehensive approach can provide a better understanding of the barriers to institutional capacity-building at the local level.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach and is categorized as exploratory research. The study process was carried out in two main stages: In the first stage, a document analysis was conducted to establish the conceptual framework and design the interview questions. In the second stage, the challenges of institutional capacity-building in neighborhood communities were identified and analyzed using a conventional content analysis approach.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, purposive sampling was used. A total of 22 participants were selected based on their minimum of 5 years of specialized experience and deep knowledge of the topic. The participants were divided into three groups: academic experts (8 individuals), municipal managers and experts (7 individuals), and local social actors (7 individuals).

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, each averaging 50 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted both in person (at municipal offices, neighborhood management offices, and public spaces) and virtually (via teleconference), continuing until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were conducted with informed consent from the participants and adhered to confidentiality guidelines.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, Guba and Lincoln's criteria were followed. This included ensuring diversity in the sample, confirming findings with participants, having experts in qualitative research review the analyses, and providing a detailed description of the research process. Data analysis involved using specific coding, and direct quotations from participants were extensively incorporated into the final report.

For data collection, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face. The researcher took notes as needed during the interviews. An interview guide was used (see Table 1). It is important to note that the order of the interview questions varied among participants, and additional exploratory questions were posed based on their responses. The participants determined the time and location of the interviews. The duration of the interviews varied depending on the information available to the participants. Interviews took place at locations such as workplaces or via telephone. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent.

Table 1: Main Interview Questions

Number	Questions
1	What are the most important challenges facing institutional capacity-building in neighborhood communities in Tehran?
2	How do you assess the main barriers to institutional participation at the neighborhood level?
3	What are the structural weaknesses in the process of institutional capacity-building?
4	What factors contribute to the reduction in the effectiveness of institutional capacity-building in neighborhoods?
5	What are the solutions to overcome the challenges in institutional capacity-building in neighborhoods?

To enhance the quality of the results, Lincoln and Guba's Trustworthiness Criteria were applied. To improve the validity of the research, the principle of diversity in sampling was followed, ensuring participants were selected to represent maximum diversity in terms of demographic characteristics and expertise. Additionally, the research findings were shared with several participants to obtain their feedback, and the findings were ultimately confirmed by all of them. For confirmability, the data analysis and findings were reviewed by three researchers with expertise in qualitative research, who provided feedback on the analysis process and findings. To increase credibility, the research team's input was incorporated during the analysis and coding process, with their insights shared in meetings held specifically for this purpose. To enhance transferability, a detailed description of the entire research process was provided, and direct quotes from the participants were extensively included.

Results

In the research conducted to identify the framework for institutional capacity-building for neighborhood-based planning in the metropolitan area of Tehran, it was found that participants most frequently highlighted the challenges of institutional capacity-building. Through the content analysis of 22 in-depth interviews with specialists and local experts, all of whom had direct experience in social development projects in Tehran's municipal neighborhoods, 37.12% of the codes were related to the challenges and obstacles of institutional capacity-building. The table below presents the results of the qualitative analysis and the extraction of main categories and their subcategories, which were derived from a detailed review of the semi-structured interviews with urban specialists and local managers. This table serves as an analytical roadmap to understanding the multifaceted barriers to participation and institutional capacity-building at the neighborhood level in urban areas.

Table 2: Subcategories and Codes Related to the Category of Institutional Capacity-Building Challenges

| Subcategories	Codes
Government totalitarianism and lack of opportunity for local capacity participation	Reluctance of the central government to involve the public, dominance of the state and governmental institutions over institutional participation, destruction of participation by formal institutions, superficial view of authorities regarding the formation of institutions and participation, disbelief in local capacities for solving issues, dominance of mass ideology, authoritarianism and reluctance to change, authoritarianism and a preference for centralization (totalitarianism), interference of the state and formal institutions, lack of recognition of public institutions by the state, unwillingness of governmental institutions to delegate power to the people, low willingness for public participation at larger levels, persistence of feudal governance in managing the city, belief in public participation only in words, not actions, changing the rules of the game by the state to its benefit, weakness of social institutions under the control of a powerful central state, unequal access of people to resources of wealth and power, separation of local institutions from larger structures.
Conflict of interests between local organizations and institutional capacity-building in neighborhood communities	The municipality's interest in not involving the public, reluctance of the municipality to local participation and institutional building, focusing on revitalization rather than local participation and services, obstruction of successful grassroots participation by formal institutions, formal institutions obstructing the organic growth of concerned actors, limitation of people's institutions by higher authorities, limitation of NGOs by the state, lack of surveys from the people in urban projects, marginalization of the public, institutional building failing due to lack of collaboration from formal institutions, local actors' dependency on larger institutions, sidelining participation by other activities.
Lack of an efficient organizational-	Weak communication between public actors, functional - performance confusion, inability of officials to implement institutional building and participation, top-down planning, poor planning and budgeting without a strategy, imposed top-down perspective, lack of organizational structure, lack of meritocracy, overlapping tasks and responsibilities, mass

executive structure	participation planning instead of targeted planning, problems in effective participatory planning, incompetence of managers, lack of practical engagement of public officials in neighborhoods, presence of experts without problem-solving skills, lack of strong experts in urban management, diverse levels of literacy and knowledge, lack of education and empowerment, reliance on written education to increase knowledge, lack of continuity in neighborhood capacity-building programs, lack of an executive structure (executive - operational institutions), appointment of individuals with no neighborhood concerns to executive positions, non-local goals of some institutions, lack of intergenerational transfer of information and programs, absence of research and development units, lack of monitoring systems, ineffectiveness of universities and intellectual elites in promoting participation, short-term management programs.
Legal and regulatory barriers	Legal void, instability of laws, upper-level laws, instability in upper-level policy-making and planning, lack of focus on duties and responsibilities with emphasis on citizens' rights, illegality of attempts to involve the public, failure to define institutional capacity-building and participation in the laws, existence of legal support for government actors, administrative-security barriers, red lines and prevention of neighborhood participatory actions.
Conflict of interests and the potential for corruption in institutional participation programs	Viewing participation as a source of income, understanding participation as giving money from the public, reducing participation to material issues, local institutional capacity-building: breeding ground for corruption and rent-seeking, rent-seeking nature of the state and official participatory institutions, creating rent through the neighborhood councils, entry of corrupt managers into participatory and institutional domains, viewing participation as a goal rather than a means, pressure groups imposing their demands, self-interest of the neighborhood councils, existence of parallel powers (mosques, neighborhood councils, etc.), incorrect representation of public interests by public institutions, conflicts of interest, resistance of pressure groups and rent-seekers against citizen participation, need to apply techniques to maintain positions and power relations, the neighborhood council as an example of the failure of civil society in democratizing society, lobbying, official institutions applying pressure for their own interests, turning local trusted figures into government representatives: opportunistic participation, the organizational aspect of neighborhood centers replacing the neighborhood aspect, power-seeking and efforts to empower the powerful, power of urban planners and their dependency on city managers, cooperation between formal and informal institutions with the municipality to achieve benefits.
Imposed institutional building without considering neighborhood contexts	Lack of active institutions and organizations in all neighborhoods, unnecessary capacity-building in all neighborhoods (viewing the city as homogeneous), lack of attention to neighborhood contexts (one-sided view of all neighborhoods), uniformity in services and construction across all neighborhoods, uniformity of rules without regard to neighborhood capacities, lack of alignment of activities with the needs of the people, lack of attention to common points of action among actors, failure to attract all segments and audiences, absence of institutions in all neighborhoods, imposed institutional building without providing necessary conditions, lack of participation and activity opportunities for all groups, exacerbating neighborhood conflicts, disrupting the atmosphere of participation and institutional building, urban planning.
Lack of localization in institutional capacity-building	Difference between theory and practice in participation, imported concept of capacity-building, lack of localization of capacity-building concepts, failure to include all existing institutions in the definition of institutions, ambiguity in the concept of public participation in city management, disparity between the global and local understanding of neighborhood planning, failure of traditional institutions to modernize, failure to link traditional knowledge with modern participatory literature.

Absence of a cohesive and integrated interaction network	Weak cooperation, lack of synergy among stakeholders and actors, ineffective interactions and cooperation, overlapping roles and actions, lack of clear boundaries between actors' tasks, limited interactions among citizens, unclear and unregulated relations between actors, lack of a clear framework for tasks and interactions, unregulated and non-institutionalized interactions, lack of collaborative networks (non-networked), competitive prestige, intermittent interactions, working in isolation.
Low social capital	Lack of trust in public actors, low social capital and potential among actors, social distrust, lack of sense of belonging among people, low impact of public participation in decision-making and people's reluctance, low social and community ties in neighborhoods, lack of place-based social capital due to tenancy, tenancy and lack of a sense of belonging due to frequent relocations, unwillingness to participate in government-affiliated affairs, decreased sense of belonging to the neighborhood due to economic problems, lack of place-based identity and social capital, low cohesion, low trust in participation and related institutions, lack of trust in the government and affiliated institutions, formalizing informal institutions: sense of exploitation and reduced public participation, formalizing informal institutions: increased public expectations.
Low participatory knowledge of citizens	Lack of long-term vision among people, public dissatisfaction and aversion to participation and neighborhood belonging, reluctance of influential people in the neighborhood towards participatory institutions, low public participation, lack of belief in the people's role in decision-making, following a savior rather than being an actor, not seeing the impact of voting by people, citizens' preference for remaining unknown and avoiding interaction, public withdrawal from participation due to lack of trust, viewing local institutions as power structures, negative views on volunteer work, viewing local institutions as tools of social control, reluctance to participate due to the ideological and political nature of institutions, lack of legitimacy and aversion to participation, unwillingness to participate despite existing organizations (municipality), reluctance to participate in neighborhood council elections.
Heterogeneous social fabric	Nature of modern urbanization: separating people, heterogeneous social fabric, temporary and diverse Tehran, unwanted residence, cultural and identity diversity due to migration and displacement, unequal distribution of services and displacement of citizens between neighborhoods, lack of psychological and mental security among people, fluidity of the urban population (lack of permanent settlement), difficulty in achieving a sense of place or space due to internal city displacements, urban nomadism, separation of living and work areas: preventing active participation, lack of neighborhood stability, atomization of society, ethnic and religious heterogeneity in Tehran.
Self-interest of actors	Lack of local development concerns among the people, clerics' efforts to boost mosque activities until local issues are resolved, people's totalitarianism, people's focus on short-term, immediate, and tangible benefits, prioritization of individual interests over collective ones, representation of individual interests by individual actors, conflicts of interest among individual actors, following personal desires and interests of individual actors, lack of mental and intellectual agreement for achieving common benefits, self-interest of actors and local beneficiaries.
Weakening of neighborhood identity	Aligning neighborhoods with official and customary boundaries, inconsistency between modern urbanization and neighborhoods, existence of the neighborhood concept on paper but not in reality, lack of attention from citizens to local living components, lack of characteristics (mechanisms) of neighborhoods in all urban areas, loss of neighborhood identity in Tehran, lack of neighborhood hangouts, attention to neighborhood as a social unit only in words, urban planning based on streets and blocks, uniformity of physical institutions.
Strengthening the role of institutional	Involving the public in smaller issues, asking for participation during emergencies, considering citizens' perspectives in city management systems, considering people's perspectives in decision-making, continuous monitoring and evaluation, and applying changes

bodies responsible for capacity-building and creating the conditions for participation	at various levels, policy-making and implementation, transferring certain responsibilities to people and NGOs by the government, utilizing successful and skilled managers for capacity-building institutions, increasing the powers of small participatory institutions, local institutional capacity-building, establishing neighborhood management.

The analysis of the challenges to institutional capacity building in neighborhood communities in Tehran identified fourteen main challenges, which can be grouped into six categories: structural, cultural, managerial, legal, communicative, and content-related. According to the analysis of twenty-two in-depth interviews, 12.37% of the 598 extracted codes are related to challenges and obstacles in institutional capacity building. These challenges are systemic and interact continuously with each other. As highlighted by one of the interviewees: "In our cities, both socially and culturally, as well as in urban management, we are experiencing neighborhood deconstruction." This statement suggests that the existing social and managerial infrastructures are significant barriers to institutional capacity building.

Figure 1: Sub-categories related to the challenges and obstacles of institutional capacity building
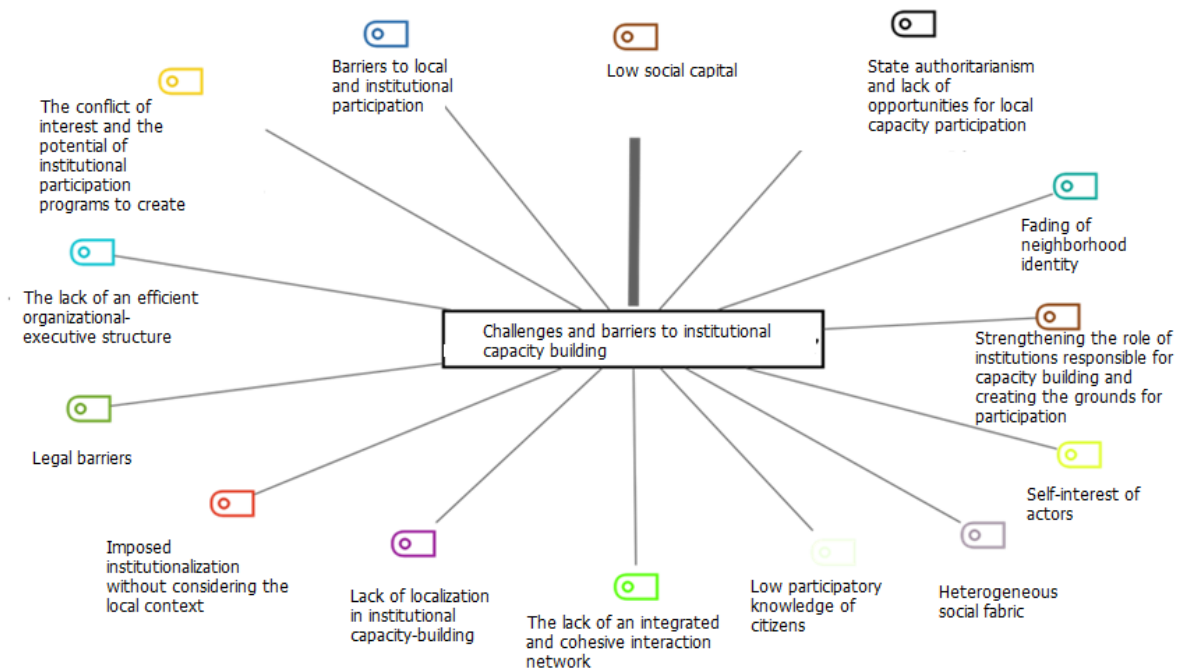
Structural Barriers

The structural barriers to institutional capacity building in Tehran's neighborhoods are deeply rooted in the centralized and bureaucratic structure of urban management. Research shows that 68.3% of experts view the government's authoritarianism as the most significant structural barrier to local participation. This centralization is reflected in various mechanisms, such as the monopolization of decision-making, restrictions on delegating authority to local institutions, and comprehensive control over participatory processes.

One interviewee highlight that without a fundamental shift in the broader attitude toward the role of citizens in decision-making, no real transformation will occur. This statement suggests that the main challenge lies beyond administrative mechanisms and is embedded in the prevailing paradigm of urban management.

Field studies have identified several key structural inhibitors: the government's bureaucratic dominance over institutional participation, officials' instrumental approach to citizen involvement, resistance to structural change,

lack of transparency regarding the role of local institutions, and the continuation of a centralized decision-making system. These factors directly create significant barriers to citizen participation.

The consequences of these structural challenges are clearly visible in the social fabric of neighborhoods. They include a decrease in citizens' motivation to participate, weakened public trust, limited local creativity, and the failure to establish sustainable civil institutions—some of the most critical outcomes of this non-participatory structure.

Ultimately, the centralized and vertical structure of urban management not only obstructs genuine participation but also severely weakens local potential. Overcoming this situation requires a fundamental shift from a control-based paradigm to one of empowerment, and from centralized governance to local governance, which calls for a reevaluation of management structures and attitudes.

Cultural Challenges

Low social capital and citizens' lack of participatory knowledge are fundamental to the cultural challenges in Tehran's neighborhoods. Research shows that 72.5% of the extracted cultural codes relate to issues such as social distrust, lack of a sense of belonging, and avoidance of participation. These challenges reflect a deeper issue within the social fabric of Tehran, stemming from existing cultural and social structures.

One interviewee poses a critical question: "Just living in a neighborhood and being a resident—are you truly satisfied with the urban management situation?" This question highlights how distrust and dissatisfaction can significantly impact citizen participation, becoming a major barrier to institutional capacity building.

The primary cultural challenges identified include deep social distrust, lack of attachment to the neighborhood, avoidance of collective participation, the self-interest of local actors, and Tehran's heterogeneous social makeup. Together, these factors create a complex social environment that hinders genuine citizen involvement.

The consequences of these cultural challenges are far-reaching. They include a decrease in social participation, weakening neighborhood solidarity, failure to establish institutional trust, and the limitation of neighborhoods' social capacities. This cycle of distrust and social passivity perpetuates the problem.

Ultimately, the dominant culture in Tehran's neighborhoods is individualistic and non-participatory, serving as a significant barrier to institutional capacity building. To address this, efforts must focus on rebuilding social trust, strengthening a sense of attachment to the neighborhood, and designing participatory mechanisms that are contextually appropriate for Tehran's social fabric.

Managerial Barriers

These barriers primarily arise from the lack of an effective organizational and executive structure. Research indicates that 45.6% of managerial challenges are related to weaknesses in organizational infrastructure, while 32.4% stem from a shortage of specialized human resources. Managerial issues in institutional capacity building within Tehran's neighborhoods reflect the complex, multifaceted nature of the urban management system. One interviewee state: "Many times, the municipality views participation as a source of income." This instrumental perspective reflects a shallow, non-specialized approach to citizen participation, which serves as a significant barrier to institutional capacity building.

The most prominent managerial challenges include organizational duplication, overlapping institutional responsibilities, incompetence among managers, lack of specialized training, an income-generating view of citizen participation, and the shortage of specialized human resources. These factors collectively create an inefficient and unresponsive system, hindering genuine participation.

The consequences of these managerial challenges are widespread and severe. They include inefficiency in urban management, reduced decision-making quality, failure to achieve true participation, and the waste of organizational resources. This situation perpetuates a cycle of inefficiency and ineffectiveness within the urban management system.

In conclusion, the existing managerial structure not only fails to facilitate participation but also acts as a significant obstacle to institutional capacity building. Overcoming this challenge requires a fundamental reevaluation of structures, approaches, and managerial attitudes. Strengthening educational mechanisms and professionalizing urban management are crucial steps.

This transformation necessitates a paradigm shift from an instrumental, income-generating perspective to a strategic, empowering approach that recognizes citizen participation as a key opportunity for sustainable urban development. Achieving such a shift will require political will, meticulous planning, and the comprehensive involvement of stakeholders in the urban management process.

Legal and Judicial Barriers

Research studies show that 63.2% of specialists and experts highlight the inefficiency of current laws, signaling a significant gap between legal foundations and the actual needs for citizen participation. One interviewee explicitly states: "The laws have no obligation for participation, so the responses are entirely discretionary." This statement underscores that the absence of a clear legal framework creates serious, unpredictable challenges for citizen participation.

The main legal and judicial challenges include substantial gaps in defining participation, instability of existing laws, unclear participatory requirements, administrative and security barriers, and a lack of focus on citizens' duties. These challenges present structural obstacles that hinder the possibility of meaningful citizen participation.

The consequences of these legal challenges are far-reaching. They include discretionary decision-making by managers, the absence of enforceable guarantees for participation, citizens' lack of motivation, and the inefficiency of participatory mechanisms. These factors perpetuate a cycle of distrust and disengagement within the urban management system.

Ultimately, the existing legal framework not only fails to support participation but has also become a significant barrier to institutional capacity building. Overcoming this situation requires a comprehensive reevaluation of laws, the creation of clear and effective legal frameworks, and the establishment of enforceable guarantees for citizen participation.

This transformation demands a paradigm shift from a traditional, bureaucratic perspective to a dynamic, participatory one that clearly defines the rights and duties of citizens. Achieving this change requires political will, the involvement of legal experts, and a focus on addressing the actual needs of citizens.

Communication Barriers

In the process of institutional capacity building in Tehran's neighborhoods, a significant issue lies in the absence of an integrated and cohesive network of interactions. Research indicates that 55.7% of communication-related codes highlight the lack of coordination among local actors and institutions, revealing a profound gap in the communication and interaction system within urban organizations.

One interviewee strategically points out: "The network should be designed in a way that prevents exploitation." This statement suggests that institutional communications require a fundamental redesign and the creation of transparent and efficient structures.

The primary communication challenges include the absence of an integrated interaction network, weak inter-institutional cooperation, limited interaction between organizations, unregulated relationships, and poor coordination among local actors. These challenges create a set of structural barriers that hinder effective and efficient communication between institutions.

The consequences of these communication challenges are far-reaching. They include fragmentation and duplication of efforts, reduced system efficiency, lack of experience-sharing, and missed participatory opportunities. These issues contribute to a cycle of inefficiency and a lack of coordination within the urban management system.

Ultimately, the existing communication structure not only fails to facilitate participation but has also become a serious barrier to institutional capacity building. Overcoming this situation requires a fundamental reevaluation of communication structures, the creation of integrated interaction networks, and the formulation of clear frameworks for inter-institutional cooperation.

This transformation demands a shift from a traditional, fragmented perspective to a systemic, network-based approach, where collaboration and interaction are central principles in urban management. Achieving this change will require political will, the involvement of all stakeholders, and the design of innovative communication mechanisms that can effectively strengthen institutional capacities.

Content Barriers

Content barriers arise from the imposition of institutionalization without considering local contexts. The primary issue is the use of a uniform approach that neglects local differences, resulting in the inefficiency of existing strategies. This approach fails to account for the cultural, social, and structural diversity within Tehran's neighborhoods, attempting to address varied challenges with a one-size-fits-all model.

One interviewee analytically emphasizes: "We must conduct a diagnostic of existing experiences and move toward breaking down and localizing the issues." This statement highlights the need for a fundamental reevaluation, shifting from a macro, centralized perspective to a micro, localized one.

The main content-related challenges include imposed institutionalization, the lack of localization in capacity-building efforts, weakening neighborhood identity, reliance on uniform models, and the disregard for local differences. These challenges create structural barriers that prevent the system from responding effectively to the diverse needs of neighborhoods.

The consequences of these content-related challenges are widespread. They include the loss of local capacities, decreased motivation for participation, misalignment of solutions with local needs, and the failure of integrated organizational models. This situation perpetuates a cycle of inefficiency and ineffectiveness within the urban management system.

Ultimately, the current approach to institutionalization overlooks the essential and contextual differences between neighborhoods, making this a primary barrier to institutional capacity-building. To overcome this situation, a fundamental reevaluation of strategies is needed, with a focus on local studies, accurate understanding of contexts, and the design of neighborhood-specific strategies.

This transformation requires a paradigm shift from a uniform and centralized approach to a pluralistic, place-based perspective that views diversity as an opportunity for sustainable development. Achieving this change will necessitate the participation of local actors, the empowerment of social institutions, and the creation of flexible mechanisms that can strengthen institutional capacities tailored to each neighborhood's context.

Summary of Findings and Introduction of the Analytical Framework for Citizen Participation Challenges:

The analysis of the research data reveals that the challenges of citizen participation in urban management in Tehran are multidimensional and complex, stemming from the intricate interaction of structural, cultural, managerial, legal, communicative, and content-related factors. The table of the analytical framework for these challenges is the result of an in-depth analysis of interviews, documents, and field observations, which systematically identifies and categorizes the barriers to participation.

The proposed solutions in this table have been selected and designed based on three key criteria:

1. Alignment of the solution with the nature of the challenge

2. Feasibility of implementation within Tehran's urban management context

3. Potential for creating structural and cultural change

Each proposed solution is the outcome of a thorough analysis of the existing instances and sub-elements of each challenge, rather than just a superficial solution. This approach indicates that overcoming the barriers to citizen

participation requires multi-layered and targeted interventions that simultaneously focus on restructuring systems and implementing software and cultural changes.

The table provided, beyond being a descriptive framework, is an analytical model that illustrates the complexities of citizen participation across all layers of urban management. This systemic approach facilitates the understanding of causal relationships among challenges and shows that citizen participation is a multidimensional concept that requires comprehensive and intelligent interventions.

Table 4: Analytical Framework of Challenges

Main Component	Subcomponents	Example	Suggested Solutions
Structural Challenges	Administrative Centralization	Lack of authority of councils and administrative complexities	Delegation of delegated authorities
	Lack of Flexible Structures		Reengineering of organizational structures
	Weak Monitoring System		Designing a monitoring and evaluation system
Cultural Challenges	Traditional Management Culture	Resistance to change	Participatory training programs
	Weak Social Capital	Decline in participation	Rebuilding social trust
	De-neighborhoodization	Weakening of neighborhood identity	Strengthening local identity
Managerial Challenges	Lack of Financial and Human Resources	Implementation limitations	Participatory budgeting
	Weak Empowerment	Lack of specialized training	Empowerment of human resources
	Managerial Instability	Frequent managerial changes	Stability in management
Legal Challenges	Legal Gaps	Overlapping responsibilities	Clarification of laws
	Inefficiency of Laws	Legal ambiguities	Revision of regulations
Communication Challenges	Weak Inter-organizational Coordination	Organizational duplication	Establishment of a coordination network

	Lack of Actor Networks	Communication breakdown	Restoration of institutional communication
Content Challenges	Centralized Institutionalization	Imposition of uniform models	Localization of models
	Lack of Localism	Ignoring talents	Identification of local capacities

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of institutional capacity-building challenges in neighborhood communities of Tehran indicates that this process is faced with multidimensional complexities, which can be categorized into six main areas:

Structural challenges, rooted in severe administrative centralization, are manifested in instances such as the lack of authority for local councils and bureaucratic complexities. These challenges require solutions such as the delegation of delegated authorities, reengineering of structures, and the design of an efficient monitoring system.

Cultural challenges, identified through three subcomponents—traditional management culture, weak social capital, and the erosion of neighborhood identity—require strategies such as participatory training, rebuilding social trust, and strengthening local identity.

Managerial challenges, including resource shortages, weak empowerment, and managerial instability, call for solutions such as participatory budgeting, human resource empowerment, and establishing managerial stability.

Legal challenges, characterized by two subcomponents—legal voids and inefficiencies in existing laws—necessitate clarification of laws and revision of regulations.

Communicational challenges, manifested in poor organizational coordination and the absence of a network of actors, require the establishment of a coordination network and the restoration of institutional communications.

And finally, content-related challenges, characterized by centralized institution-building and lack of localization, require the localization of models and the identification of local capacities.

Successfully overcoming these challenges requires a comprehensive, systemic approach that considers all dimensions simultaneously, applying solutions interactively and in an integrated manner.

The study highlights that, at least at the neighborhood scale, the structural, cultural, managerial, legal, and communicational dimensions are so interconnected that they collectively hinder effective institutional capacity-building. These dimensions will be further explored in the following section.

Structural Challenges Arising from Severe Centralization

The most significant obstacle to local participation is the severe centralization within Tehran's urban management system, which acts as a fundamental barrier to community involvement. In practice, this means that all key decisions regarding neighborhoods are made at higher managerial levels without citizen engagement. For example, in urban regeneration plans, despite the emphasis on participatory approaches, citizens effectively play no role beyond that of implementers.

One clear manifestation of this centralization is the way neighborhood budgets are allocated. Typically, development and service budgets are determined by senior managers without regard for the actual needs of the neighborhood. This practice leads to local development plans that are misaligned with environmental and social realities.

In the realm of urban governance, local councils essentially lack real authority. For instance, in matters such as street improvement, organization of public spaces, or even minor neighborhood decisions, centralized city managers make the final calls. This approach not only reduces citizen participation but also weakens the sense of place attachment.

Cumbersome and complex administrative mechanisms are another expression of centralization. For example, to implement a small local project, citizens must navigate multiple bureaucratic stages, which significantly hinders participation. This lengthy and exhausting process greatly diminishes citizens' motivation to get involved.

Ultimately, this centralization leads to reduced innovation, loss of local capacities, and citizen disengagement. The key solution to overcoming this situation lies in granting real authority to local institutions, strengthening city and neighborhood councils, and establishing meaningful participatory mechanisms.

Culture

The dominant culture in Tehran's neighborhoods is individualistic and non-participatory, which undermines social capital. This prevailing culture is deeply individualistic and discourages collective engagement, severely weakening the foundations of social capital. This situation stems from social transformations and cultural shifts over the past few decades, which have led to a breakdown in social relationships and a decline in neighborhood-level interactions.

In the social fabric of Tehran's neighborhoods, neighborly relations have significantly diminished, and individuals show less willingness to participate in collective affairs. For instance, in older neighborhoods that once had high levels of social cohesion, we now witness the rise of apartment living and more superficial relationships. This transformation in social structure has resulted in decreased mutual trust and weakened social solidarity.

Tangible examples of this individualism can be seen in everyday behavior. For example, when local crises occur—such as infrastructure or service-related problems—residents are less inclined to engage in collective problem-solving and tend to wait for intervention from higher-level authorities.

Various factors contribute to the emergence of this non-participatory culture. Economic pressures, rapid social changes, internal migration, and the spread of individualism in metropolitan areas are among the key factors. These conditions have significantly eroded social trust and the spirit of community participation.

The primary solution to address this situation is to invest in social education, strengthen local institutions, and rebuild social relationships. The culture of participation must be revived through educational, media, and community-based programs in order to rebuild social capital in Tehran's neighborhoods.

Existing Management System

The current management system in Tehran's metropolis has a superficial and instrumental view of citizen participation. It reduces citizen participation to symbolic and ceremonial events that lack depth and substantive content. This instrumental approach turns participation into a mere formality, where citizens play no role beyond that of spectators.

A clear example of this approach can be seen in large urban projects. For instance, in neighborhood regeneration plans, participatory meetings are held; however, key decisions are made before these meetings, with little regard for the actual opinions of residents. In the Siros neighborhood of Tehran, the regeneration plan for the deteriorated urban fabric is a prime example of this approach. Despite several meetings, the main demands of the residents were not met.

A similar situation exists in local budgeting. Municipalities usually allocate neighborhood budgets without proper consultation with local councils and residents. For example, in the Herandi neighborhood, despite the need for public space improvements, the budget was spent on projects that did not address the primary needs of the neighborhood.

The mechanisms for selecting local managers are also entirely centralized and top-down. Local councils, which were supposed to represent the people, have effectively become tools for implementing pre-determined policies.

The selection of council members is often done with a security or political agenda, rather than with the goal of true representation.

The consequences of this approach are very serious. Reduced public trust, citizen disengagement, and growing distance between the people and urban institutions are among the most important outcomes. Over time, citizens have come to believe that their participation has little impact on urban decision-making.

The fundamental solution is to change the paradigm of urban management from a control-oriented approach to a participatory one. This requires a complete redefinition of the role of citizens, from being mere recipients to key actors in decision-making processes. Until participation is viewed as a citizen's right, rather than a granted privilege, no fundamental transformation will take place.

Legal Gaps and Lack of Transparency in Defining Participation

Legal gaps and lack of transparency in defining participation are considered among the most significant structural barriers in the urban management system of Tehran. This situation arises from the widespread ambiguities in laws and regulations related to citizen participation, which practically challenge the possibility of genuine participation.

In the current legal system, the concept of participation is not precisely and clearly defined. For example, in the laws governing municipalities and councils, there are no clear boundaries or frameworks set for citizen participation. This ambiguity allows urban managers to have subjective and varying interpretations of what participation entails.

A clear example of this legal gap can be seen in the process of approving urban development plans. Despite the emphasis on citizen participation, there is no binding legal mechanism to obtain the opinions of neighborhood residents. For example, in urban regeneration plans, citizens' opinions are advisory, and managers can easily disregard them.

Additionally, the lack of enforceable guarantees in the existing laws is the primary obstacle to achieving genuine participation. Even in cases where the laws mention participation, there are no punitive mechanisms for managers who ignore it. This results in participation being reduced to a voluntary and non-binding matter.

The fundamental solution to overcome this situation is a comprehensive revision of laws and regulations and the development of clear legal frameworks. Laws must be passed that explicitly define the scope of participation, operational mechanisms, and legal guarantees to ensure transparency and effectiveness.

Lack of Integrated and Cohesive Interaction Networks

It has disrupted institutional communications. The lack of integrated and cohesive interaction networks is one of the fundamental challenges in the urban management system of Tehran, severely disrupting institutional communications. This situation has led to a communication breakdown between various urban institutions, governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as local actors.

In practice, this lack of cohesion has caused each institution and organization to operate in isolation, without the necessary coordination to achieve common goals. For example, in neighborhood development projects, the municipality, city council, local institutions, and non-governmental organizations each act with a different approach and without coordination.

The manifestations of this breakdown can be observed in several areas:

- **In urban planning**: Local development plans are drafted without coordination between different institutions.

- **In resource management**: Budget allocation and resources are distributed without regard to the actual needs of neighborhoods and without coordination between organizations.

- **At the executive level**: The implementation of infrastructure and service projects is carried out without coordination between different agencies.

The consequences of this lack of cohesion are extensive. From resource wastage to inefficiencies in project execution and reduced effectiveness of urban interventions. This situation not only reduces the quality of life for citizens but also weakens public trust in urban institutions.

The main solution to overcome this situation is to create coordination mechanisms, develop common collaboration frameworks, and strengthen the participatory discourse among various institutions. Only by creating a cohesive and integrated network can efficient urban management be hoped for.

Ultimately, it should be concluded that the analysis of citizen participation challenges in the urban management system of Tehran reveals deep structural complexities rooted in entrenched management patterns. Comparative studies show that excessive centralization is the primary deterrent to achieving real citizen participation, which also exacerbates other structural challenges.

Proposed Strategies

The findings of the research suggest three main strategies for overcoming the current situation. First, the re-engineering of urban management structures with a decentralization approach, which requires the delegation of strategic powers to local institutions and the enhancement of managerial capacities at the micro level. This approach can lead to the empowerment of local institutions and improve the efficiency of urban decision-making processes.

The second strategy is to review legal frameworks and develop clear and binding laws for citizen participation. Legal mechanisms need to be designed in a way that transforms participation from a voluntary act into a citizens' right. This requires the creation of precise executive and supervisory guarantees.

The third strategy is to invest in social education and the cultivation of a participatory culture. This approach requires long-term, multifaceted planning, including formal, informal, and media-based education. The primary goal is to shift the paradigm from individualism to a focus on participation.

The potential outcomes of implementing these strategies will include improved urban decision-making quality, strengthened social capital, increased citizen satisfaction, and enhanced urban management efficiency. This requires a fundamental transformation in the attitude of the management system and organizational culture.

The limitations of this research are the existing structural and cultural complexities, which present challenges to fully implementing the recommendations. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers conduct broader comparative studies with an interdisciplinary approach.

A key final point is that the transition from traditional management to urban governance requires political, managerial, and social will, which can lead to a profound transformation in the urban management system. This will only be possible with the active and informed participation of all stakeholders.

Author Contributions

First author (60%), second author (20%), third author (20%).

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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