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Multilevel governance and citizen participation: a literature review of the last 5 years

Gobernanza multinivel y participación ciudadana: una revisión de literatura de los últimos 5 años

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Abstract

The main objective of this systematic review was to examine the literature on multilevel governance in relation to mechanisms for citizen participation in Latin America. To this end, the methodological approach was qualitative, based on a literature review using the PRISMA method, which considered specific articles according to established criteria. The analysis began with 218 articles and, after the selection process, was reduced to 30. The main results show that citizen participation plays an important role in multilevel governance due to its contribution to strengthening policies aimed at democratic exercise. In conclusion, multilevel governance and citizen participation are complementary dimensions within a form of democratic government that endures over time, as their articulation allows for the creation of more coherent, transparent, and fair public policies, strengthening the relationship between the state and society.

Keywords: government, democracy, social participation

Resumen

El desarrollo del presente artículo de revisión sistemática tuvo como objetivo principal conocer la literatura acerca de la gobernanza multinivel en relación con los mecanismos de participación ciudadana en América Latina. Para ello, el desarrollo metodológico siguió un enfoque cualitativo, basado en una revisión bibliográfica mediante el método PRISMA, el cual consideró determinados artículos según los criterios establecidos. El análisis se inició con 218 artículos y, tras los procesos de selección, se redujo a 30. Los principales resultados evidencian que la participación ciudadana desempeña un rol importante dentro de la gobernanza multinivel debido a su contribución al fortalecimiento de las políticas orientadas al ejercicio democrático. En conclusión, la gobernanza multinivel y la participación ciudadana son dimensiones complementarias dentro de una forma de gobierno democrática que perdura en el tiempo, ya que su articulación permite la creación de políticas públicas más coherentes, transparentes y justas, reforzando la relación entre el Estado y la sociedad.

Palabras clave: gobierno, democracia, participación social

Introduction

Globally, multi-level governance has become essential for addressing the complexities of contemporary public policies, particularly regarding sustainability, integration, and civic engagement. However, significant challenges remain in connecting various governmental tiers and consolidating participation methods. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCDE, 2025) indicates that in Latin America and the Caribbean, citizen engagement faces structural limitations stemming from insufficient coordination among governments and a weak civic environment, which diminishes the effectiveness of collaborative governance.

Furthermore, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2024a) emphasizes the urgent need to enhance territorial and multi-level governance as a critical element for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting that institutional gaps between different levels of public administration constrain governments' capacity for coordinated planning. In this context, Leguía-Cruz et al. (2024) assert that participatory governance requires the joint creation of transdisciplinary and intergenerational knowledge that fosters coordinated action among governments, citizens, and organized civil society.

Complementarily, Weihmayer (2024) demonstrates in his study on Colombia that systems of co-responsibility between government tiers, although formally decentralized, tend to reproduce vertical hierarchies, complicating the involvement of local actors in public decision-making. These observations reveal that, internationally, the main issue lies in the tension between the multitude of stakeholders and the lack of effective coordination that would allow for the integration of citizen participation within a functional multi-level framework.

In the Peruvian context, the concept of governing across multiple tiers has been propelled by the decentralization process initiated in 2000; however, it has yet to function as a well-executed system where all parties coordinate and assume responsibilities. The OCDE (2023) warns that Peru faces various challenges in enabling different levels of government to work together and implement inclusive digital policies, thereby affecting transparency and accountability to citizens. In the same vein, Rizzo (2021) argues that in Latin America, citizen participation does not necessarily translate into increased trust in institutions, as rules and administrative organization remain heavily centralized at the national level.

Studies by Alarcón et al. (2024) conclude that while progress has been made in citizen participation in Peru, this progress is not apparent due to a lack of coordination among different levels of government. Additionally, CEPAL (2024b) underscores that if local governments are not institutionally robust, effective territorial governance becomes unattainable, as public planning and budgetary definitions involving citizens fail to influence national development policies.

In summary, the primary problem in the country is that different levels of government struggle to clearly define their competencies, lack the same institutional capacities to perform their functions, and citizens have limited participation in decision-making processes. All these factors hinder the construction of a robust and participatory multi-level governance system.

At the local level, the District Municipality of Chilca has incorporated participatory mechanisms such as participatory budgeting and public hearings, in compliance with the Organic Law of Municipalities. However, these instruments experience limitations regarding the sustainability of their application and effective alignment with regional and national levels. Similar cases can be observed in other municipalities in Lima, where citizen participation remains primarily consultative and administrative rather than decisional (Palomino Torres and Palomino Cáceres, 2024).

Moreover, recent reports from other municipalities, such as the Municipalidad Distrital de Lurigancho (2024), indicate that although participatory spaces are promoted, they lack follow-up and evaluation mechanisms to ensure their continuity. This situation is mirrored in districts undergoing urban growth, like Chilca, where economic and demographic expansion requires more effective multi-level coordination to manage public infrastructure projects with a participatory approach.

Consequently, the local issue lies in the existence of formal participation mechanisms lacking institutional support within a multi-level system, creating a gap between participatory planning and the coordinated execution of public policies.

In this context, the primary aim of this article is to analyze the literature on multi-level governance and citizen participation mechanisms in Latin America. The specific objectives include (1) determining the predominant theoretical approaches to multi-level governance over the past five years and (2) identifying the key concepts and definitions of citizen participation during the 2021–2025 period.

The theoretical justification for the study is based on the existing gaps regarding the effective articulation between multi-level governance and citizen participation, given that much of the literature focuses on institutional design rather than the actual mechanisms of social interaction among the involved actors. Limitations persist in understanding how different levels of government integrate citizens' voices into public policy design. In this sense, the article seeks to deepen existing studies by reflecting on the collaborative dynamics between various actors, thereby identifying decision-making flows among governmental actors and citizens, as well as evidence that recognizes the factors influencing the strengthening of democratic governance and public co-responsibility.

Additionally, the practical justification addresses the issues of institutional coordination and low social participation that limit local public management. The analysis of recent literature provides tools for identifying cooperation strategies, improving territorial planning processes, and fostering more inclusive and sustainable governance. Thus, the article contributes to both the conceptual development and the practical application of policies aimed at strengthening public management from a participatory and multi-level perspective.

Methodology

The methodological development followed a qualitative approach, grounded in a bibliographic review. This research facilitated the collection, analysis, and synthesis of recent scientific studies on multi-level governance

and citizen participation, aiming to identify key trends, theoretical perspectives, and challenges present in the academic literature from the past five years.

The information search occurred between June and October 2025 across international academic databases, both open-access and restricted, including Scopus, SciELO, RedALyC, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories. Various combinations of keywords in Spanish and English were utilized, such as: *multi-level governance, governance, citizen participation, public governance, intergovernmental coordination, and citizen engagement*.

Inclusion criteria:

- Scientific articles, institutional reports, and technical documents published between 2020 and 2025.
- Articles written in Spanish or English.
- Articles that directly address the relationship between multi-level governance and citizen participation in public management or territorial development.

Exclusion criteria:

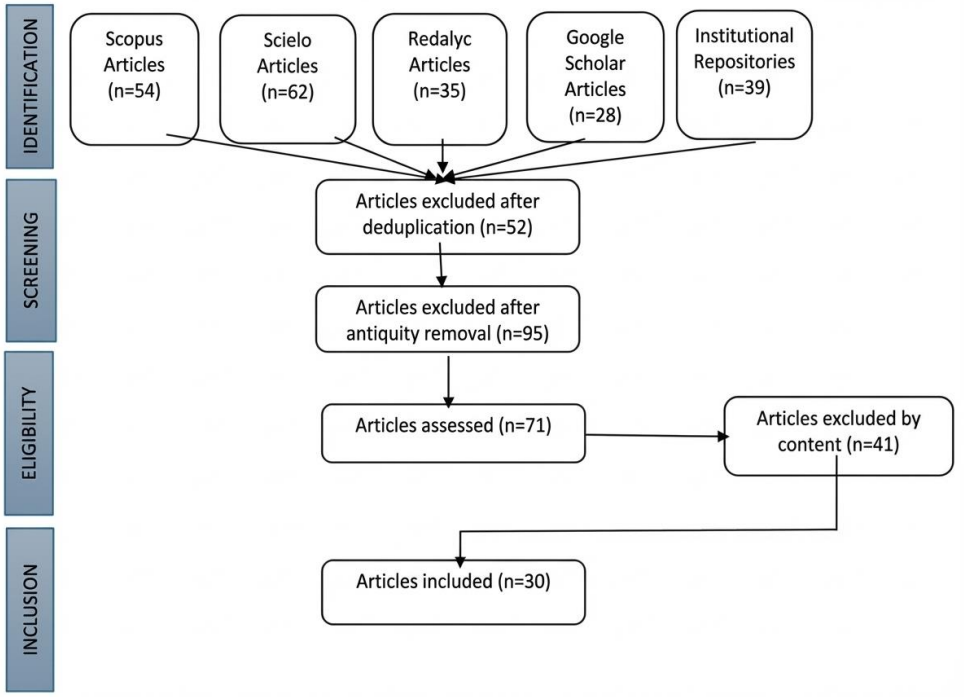
- Repeated studies were excluded.
- Articles of purely political nature were disregarded.
- Articles lacking significant empirical or theoretical evidence were omitted.

The methodology consisted of four stages: (1) Identification, wherein documents were selected according to the defined criteria; (2) Selection, categorizing texts by focus, language, objectives, and results, while discarding duplicates or outdated ones; (3) Eligibility, organizing the most relevant findings around three themes: conceptual foundations, institutional factors, and experiences of participatory governance; and (4) Inclusion, where all articles deemed suitable for the research were examined in detail.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the process, an interpretative content analysis was conducted, comparing similarities and differences among the consulted sources. The information was cross-referenced with documents from international organizations such as the OECD, ECLAC, and the IDB, which helped contextualize the results within the current framework of governance and public management in Latin America.

Figure 1

PRISMA model



Results and discussion

Thus, the literature on multi-level governance is revealed. According to Hernández Velandia and Guzmán Zamora (2024), multi-level governance has established itself as a key tool for understanding how public affairs are managed and collective decisions are made in complex contexts. In a world where interdependence is paramount and power is not concentrated, governance no longer solely involves the state issuing commands; it emerges from collaboration among various levels of power—ranging from international to local—working together with governmental entities, businesses, and citizen organizations (Dimitriadis et al., 2021; Pedraz-Marcos, 2025).

As León and Vásconez (2024) explain, this idea transforms our understanding of political and administrative power, illustrating that norms are created and applied in spaces where various interests and capacities converge. Consequently, multi-level governance encompasses a network of relationships that are both vertical (among levels of government) and horizontal (among different domains and social groups), in which decisions are made through agreements rather than impositions. This approach helps elucidate how local decisions can be influenced by global norms and how citizen demands can reach national or international levels (Andres et al., 2021; Dos Santos, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, Hütt and Hernández (2023) argue that multi-level governance not only describes a structure but also reflects a new mode of governance grounded in cooperation, trust, and adaptability. They contend that this style of management necessitates mechanisms that integrate various interests while maintaining a public focus. Additionally, Córdova (2024) proposes a post-functionalist theory of multi-level governance, asserting that political decisions are shaped by a balance between administrative functionality and collective identity. Thus, governance cannot simply be viewed as a technical issue of distributing responsibilities; it also involves managing values, feelings of belonging, and territorial conflicts (Stuhldreher, 2021).

According to Intriago and Zambrano (2024), for multi-level governance to function effectively, it is crucial to establish clear institutional rules and ensure fluid coordination across various governmental tiers. This includes improving intergovernmental communication, aligning regulations and budgets, and guaranteeing that citizen participation remains a permanent aspect of policy formulation. Furthermore, Castillo et al. (2025) emphasize that to strengthen territorial governance, it is essential to create dialogue spaces involving local governments, businesses, and citizens, as this is the only path to achieving sustainable and equitable development for all (Burgos, 2022).

On the other hand, citizen participation is what lends democratic meaning and legitimacy to current governance. It is not merely about consulting or voting; it involves active participation throughout the entire policy formulation and implementation process—from identifying problems to deciding, executing, and evaluating. Martínez (2025) asserts that participation serves as a governance tool that fosters a sense of shared responsibility and enhances the transparency, efficiency, and responsiveness of administration to citizens' needs. Similarly, Macías et al. (2025) demonstrate that when citizens engage, public management improves, trust in institutions rises, and accountability is demanded more vigorously (Montecinos, 2021).

In the context of collaborative governance, Roncancio et al. (2025) underscore that citizen participation transforms processes when conducted in a debate-friendly environment, where government officials and society share information, build trust, and achieve consensus. These authors highlight that for collaboration to succeed, essential elements include leadership and facilitation, inclusion of all sectors, fairness in the process, and sufficient resources. Practically, these factors determine whether participation is genuine or merely symbolic, a distinction that is critically relevant for analyzing multi-level governance (Barquet et al., 2024; Martins, 2024).

The interaction between multi-level governance and citizen participation is, in reality, a reciprocal and complementary process. On one side, governance provides the structural and regulatory framework that distributes competencies and defines spheres of action; on the other, citizen participation confers legitimacy, social control, and pluralism to that institutional framework. According to Sánchez (2025), citizen participation in multi-level contexts cannot be understood in isolation, as its impact relies on the existence of coordination mechanisms among different levels. If citizens' voices are only heard at the local level and fail to connect with national or regional instances, participation loses effectiveness and influence (Llanez et al., 2024; Pérez et al., 2024).

In recent years, government digitalization and e-participation tools have opened new avenues for interaction between citizens and the state. Franco et al. (2025) note that open government digital platforms expand access to information and facilitate consultations, participatory budgets, and electronic requests. However, they also caution that the digital divide and lack of trust in institutions may limit their effectiveness. Therefore, it is crucial to design strategies that integrate digital participation with in-person mechanisms to ensure the representation of the most vulnerable groups (Juste and Rubiolo, 2023; Martí, 2022).

In Latin America, González (2025) agrees that the most successful experiences of multi-level governance arise when citizen participation is institutionalized within local and regional frameworks. Programs such as

participatory budgeting in Brazil and citizen assemblies in Chile demonstrate that when participation processes are articulated across different levels of government, public spending efficiency improves, and trust in institutions is strengthened (Muniz, 2023).

Broadly speaking, multi-level governance could be considered the link between expertise and democratic governance. It is technical, requiring effective coordination, planning, and a smoothly functioning administrative apparatus; at the same time, it is democratic, grounded in the exchange of ideas, integration, and shared responsibility towards society. This perspective aligns with the views of Mabillard et al. (2025), who conceive of citizen engagement not only as a civic right but also as a strategy to enhance governmental capacity in complex situations (Bichir et al., 2024; Gurza et al., 2024).

Overall, Osorno (2025) asserts that recognizing the mutual dependency between multi-level governance and citizen intervention entails acknowledging that both are inseparable elements of contemporary democratic governance. The former organizes the decision-making system, while the latter confers legitimacy and social sustainability. Their integration enables citizens to transition from being mere recipients to becoming co-authors of public policies, thereby creating a more open, transparent administration connected to local realities. Ultimately, the current challenge is to build governance systems that can coordinate the diverse actors and levels without losing the participatory and deliberative essence that grants legitimacy to public power (Sevillano et al., 2023).

Conclusions

The literature review indicates that multi-level governance in Latin America constitutes a complex process in the quest to articulate various levels of government through cooperative and horizontal relationships, yet it still faces challenges in including citizens in decision-making processes. In terms of the most relevant theoretical approaches in the past five years, there is a discernible trend towards collaborative and decentralized governance models aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability. During the review of studies on citizen participation from 2021 to 2025, a phenomenological expansion was observed, understanding this participation not merely as consultation or deliberation, but as co-responsibility in public management. Collectively, the findings reveal an emerging articulation between these notions and concepts, presenting an opportunity for further research and the development of theoretical frameworks that can enhance participatory democracy in the region.

Additionally, the advancement of both multi-level governance and citizen engagement signifies that contemporary public administration must be more adaptable and cooperative. Therefore, it is vital for various governmental levels and members of society to assume joint responsibilities, as multi-level governance emerges as a framework that transcends the traditional state hierarchy, promoting collaborative efforts among institutions and territories in increasingly complex environments. Concurrently, citizen participation establishes itself as the democratic foundation that lends validity to this structure, providing meaning and clarity to government decisions.

Thus, the connection between governance and participation illustrates that the effectiveness of public policies depends not only on clear rules but also on the number of individuals involved in their creation and implementation. Recent data indicate that dialogue spaces, intergovernmental articulation, and the use of digital media for participation enhance institutional trust and improve state responsiveness. However, the challenge remains to ensure that participation mechanisms become standard practice, guaranteeing that all sectors and territories are included to prevent divisions or inequities in decision-making. In conclusion, multi-level governance and citizen participation should not be viewed as separate paths but as complementary dimensions of a democratic and sustainable governance model. Integrating them is essential for designing more coherent, transparent, and equitable public policies that strengthen the relationship between the state and society in pursuit of legitimate development free of inequalities.

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