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Presenting a Policy Implementation Model in the Field of Urban Management

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the aim of presenting a policy implementation model in the field of urban management. The data analysis method in the qualitative phase was based on the grounded theory approach and an exploratory–survey design. The statistical population consisted of 10 experts from the Semnan Province Municipality, who were selected through purposive sampling. The research instrument comprised semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was carried out using a three-stage coding process, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The data obtained from semi-structured interviews with 10 experts were analyzed line by line, and the main and subcategories were extracted. Based on the findings, “intra-organizational characteristics affecting urban management policy implementation” were identified as the core category. Contextual conditions included policy principles, values, and norms, as well as the development of behavioral patterns. Causal conditions encompassed factors such as the creation of job attachment, motivation enhancement, justice and delegation of authority, learning, and employee empowerment. Intervening conditions included environmental stimuli, laws and regulations, cultural and social factors, and the economic and political conditions of the environment, all of which influenced policy implementation. In response to these conditions, the organization pursued a set of key strategies, including the formulation of a policy charter, adoption of a systematic approach, structural reform, institutionalization of policy culture, meritocracy, and the development of specialized training programs. The outcomes of successful policy implementation included the enhancement of meritocracy, realization of organizational justice, reduction of administrative corruption, improvement of performance evaluation, enhancement of the quality of urban services, and strengthening of leadership and organizational interactions. The final model of the study demonstrated that urban management policy implementation is a multidimensional process dependent on the dynamic interaction among individual, organizational, and environmental factors.

Keywords: Policy implementation; grounded theory; three-stage coding; intra-organizational factors; implementation strategies; meritocracy

Introduction

Urban management has increasingly emerged as a central arena of public policy concern in response to accelerating urbanization, socio-economic complexity, environmental pressures, and heightened citizen expectations regarding service quality and accountability. Cities today are not merely administrative units but complex socio-technical systems in which policy decisions interact dynamically with institutional structures, organizational capacities, stakeholder interests, and contextual constraints. As a result, the effectiveness of urban governance depends not only on sound policy formulation but, critically, on the successful implementation of policies within multifaceted organizational and environmental settings [1, 2].

Policy implementation has long been recognized as a decisive yet problematic phase of the policy process. Early implementation scholars demonstrated that well-designed policies often fail to achieve intended outcomes due to

fragmentation, coordination failures, unclear responsibilities, and resistance within implementing organizations [3]. Subsequent research has emphasized that implementation outcomes are shaped by the interaction of ambiguity, conflict, institutional capacity, and contextual contingencies rather than by formal policy design alone [4]. In the domain of urban management, these challenges are amplified by the multiplicity of actors, overlapping jurisdictions, and the necessity for cross-sectoral and inter-organizational collaboration [5].

Contemporary urban governance increasingly departs from hierarchical, command-and-control models toward networked, participatory, and value-oriented approaches. The concept of public value governance highlights the importance of aligning policy implementation with societal values, collective goals, and stakeholder engagement rather than focusing solely on efficiency or managerial performance [6, 7]. In this context, urban policy implementation is understood as a negotiated, adaptive, and learning-oriented process that unfolds within and across organizations, requiring continuous alignment between strategic intentions and operational practices.

Recent studies emphasize that urban policy implementation is deeply embedded in organizational characteristics such as leadership behavior, organizational culture, human resource capabilities, decision-making structures, and internal coordination mechanisms. Fernandez and Rainey argue that successful implementation in the public sector depends on supportive leadership, clear communication, employee motivation, and the institutionalization of change-oriented values [8]. These organizational factors are particularly salient in urban management institutions, where bureaucratic inertia and fragmented responsibilities often impede coherent policy execution.

At the same time, urban policy implementation is strongly conditioned by external environmental factors, including legal frameworks, political dynamics, socio-cultural norms, and economic pressures. Hawkins and Krause demonstrate that institutional arrangements and policy arenas significantly shape collective action and coordination across urban departments, influencing implementation effectiveness [9]. Similarly, Galego et al. identify regulatory complexity, political instability, and socio-economic inequalities as persistent barriers to sustainable urban policy implementation [10]. These findings underscore the necessity of analytical frameworks that account for both internal organizational dynamics and broader contextual forces.

The growing complexity of urban challenges—such as climate change, digital transformation, social inclusion, and infrastructure sustainability—has further intensified interest in systems thinking and integrated governance approaches. Habibi et al. argue that urban policy implementation requires a systems perspective capable of capturing interdependencies among actors, institutions, and policy domains [11]. This perspective aligns with emerging research on policy integration and multi-level governance, which highlights the need to coordinate policy instruments and actors across sectors and administrative levels to achieve coherent urban outcomes [12].

In the context of urban transitions toward sustainability and climate neutrality, implementation capacity becomes a decisive factor. Doci et al. demonstrate that European cities pursuing climate-neutral transitions rely heavily on adaptive governance mechanisms, organizational learning, and institutional coordination to translate strategic goals into operational actions [13]. These findings reinforce the view that implementation is not a linear process but an iterative and context-dependent endeavor shaped by organizational capabilities and stakeholder interactions.

Smart city initiatives further illustrate the centrality of implementation dynamics in urban management. Mora et al. argue that smart city governance should be understood not merely as a technological project but as an innovation-driven governance process requiring organizational readiness, skilled personnel, and collaborative decision-making structures [14].

Similarly, Sulistyaningsih et al. show that the success of smart urban governance initiatives depends on strategic alignment, institutional support, and the capacity of local governments to embed new practices within existing organizational frameworks [15].

Despite the richness of implementation scholarship, empirical research on urban policy implementation remains fragmented, particularly in non-Western and developing country contexts. Jiang's comparative analysis of urban waste classification policies highlights how differences in organizational capacity, local leadership, and citizen engagement lead to divergent implementation outcomes even under similar policy frameworks [16]. This suggests that context-specific, inductive approaches are necessary to capture the nuanced mechanisms through which urban policies are implemented in practice.

Grounded theory offers a powerful methodological approach for exploring complex social processes such as policy implementation. By systematically generating theory from empirical data, grounded theory enables researchers to identify core categories, causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening conditions, strategies, and outcomes as they emerge from the lived experiences of policy actors [1, 2]. This approach is particularly suitable for urban management studies, where formal models often fail to capture the informal practices, value systems, and organizational dynamics that shape implementation trajectories.

Within this framework, the ambiguity-conflict model proposed by Matland provides a useful analytical lens for understanding variation in implementation outcomes across different policy contexts [4]. When applied to urban management, this model suggests that implementation success depends on the interaction between policy clarity, stakeholder alignment, organizational capacity, and environmental constraints. However, there remains a need for empirically grounded models that integrate these dimensions into a coherent explanatory framework tailored to urban governance settings.

Moreover, contemporary governance theories emphasize the importance of institutional capacity and adaptive governance in managing complex urban systems. Healey highlights that institutional adaptation and learning are critical for sustaining governance capacity in complex societies [5]. This insight resonates with the public value governance paradigm, which underscores the role of leadership, collaboration, and shared values in guiding policy implementation toward socially desirable outcomes [6, 7].

Taken together, the literature indicates that urban management policy implementation is a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of individual, organizational, and environmental factors. While existing studies provide valuable theoretical insights, there remains a gap in empirically grounded models that systematically explain how these factors interact in specific urban governance contexts. In particular, there is limited qualitative research that captures the perspectives of municipal experts and practitioners who are directly involved in implementing urban management policies.

Addressing this gap requires an in-depth exploration of the conditions, strategies, and outcomes associated with urban policy implementation from the standpoint of organizational actors. Such an approach can contribute to both theory and practice by offering a context-sensitive implementation model that reflects real-world complexities and informs more effective urban governance interventions [10, 11].

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to develop a grounded theoretical model of urban management policy implementation by identifying its causal conditions, contextual and intervening factors, core organizational processes, strategic responses, and outcomes based on the lived experiences of municipal experts.

Methodology

This study is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in nature and method, employing a grounded theory approach. The statistical population in the qualitative phase consisted of 10 experts from the Semnan Province Municipality, who were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria such as managerial experience, familiarity with urban policymaking processes, and a background in policy planning and implementation. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences. The interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved, and all conversations were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed line by line.

Data analysis was carried out using the three-stage coding process proposed by Strauss and Corbin, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding stage, initial concepts were extracted directly from the data. In the axial coding stage, these concepts were organized into subcategories and main categories. In the selective coding stage, the core category of the theory—namely, “intra-organizational characteristics affecting urban management policy implementation”—was identified, and other categories were systematically related to it as causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and outcomes. Data credibility was ensured through participant validation (member checking), peer review, and the use of multiple sources of documentation, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness and rigor of the analysis.

Findings and Results

The results indicate that all respondents were male; accordingly, all 10 participants (100%) in the sample were men, and none of the respondents were women. Among the 10 respondents, 1 individual (10%) was in the 25–30 age range. Five individuals (50%) were between 30–40 years of age, constituting the largest group. In addition, 3 individuals (30%) were in the 40–50 age range, and 1 individual (10%) was over 50 years old. Regarding educational status, all respondents held doctoral degrees.

Table 1

Extracted Concepts Based on Grounded Theory Coding

Initial Codes (Basic Themes)	Selective Code (Category)	Theoretical Code (Condition)
Policy principles; policy values; individual values; urban management policy; promotion of urban management policy; policy deviations and improper behaviors; norm internalization	Adherence to values	Contextual conditions
Behavioral principles; ethical traits; behavioral patterns and policy charter; conduct and behavior; development of behavioral patterns	Development of behavioral principles	
Sense of satisfaction; strengthening job attachment; providing appropriate human contexts; interpersonal relations; decision-making; irresponsibility	Creating infrastructures for job attachment	Causal conditions
Justice and fairness; individual growth orientation; employee capabilities; motivation; delegation of authority; encouragement and punishment; commitment	Individual internal dimensions for growth	
Learning; skills and knowledge; continuous training; use of actual and potential capacities; experience and skill gaps; empowerment	Improving skill levels through continuous training	Organizational strategies
Trustworthiness; responsibility; work discipline; compassion; patience; equity; internal locus of control; perseverance; professional interest	Characteristics of policy formulators	
Policy virtues; trust; equality; commitment to learning; collectivism; accountability	Positive policy attributes	Organizational strategies
Policy charter formulation; value system; commitment to organizational values; policy codes; emphasis on compliance	Formulation of a policy charter	
Systematic approach; process implementation; organizational mechanisms; systems thinking	Implementation of managerial processes	Organizational strategies
Organizational legitimacy; stakeholder rights; service orientation; recognition of weaknesses	Policy control mechanisms	
Decision-making processes; alignment of programs and decisions; planning; conflict resolution	Policy-centered decision-making	Organizational strategies
Participation; institutional support; teamwork; collective spirit	Institutional participation and support	

Self-control culture; institutionalization of values; learning organization culture	Institutionalization of organizational culture	
Administrative reform; organizational agility; structural coherence	Organizational structure	
Professional training; continuous education; socialization processes	Employee skills and knowledge	Outcomes
Recruitment reform; behavioral competencies; merit-based promotion	Progress orientation and meritocracy	
Workload equity; justice orientation; organizational justice	Organizational justice and equality	
Financial transparency; process clarity; reduction of misconduct	Reduction of organizational corruption	
Quality service delivery; performance monitoring; evaluation systems	Performance evaluation system	
Leadership behavior; incentive systems; labor rights compliance	Improvement of urban management leadership behavior	
Interpersonal relations; customer-oriented mechanisms	Social interaction and relationships	Intervening conditions
External environment; competition; technology growth	Environmental stimuli	
Laws and regulations; bureaucratic requirements	Legal factors	
Societal culture; norms and customs	Cultural factors	
Social context; governance integrity	Social factors	
Strategy formulation; political decision-making	Political factors	
Economic incentives; productivity; resource allocation	Economic factors	
Organizational culture; job quality of life; performance evaluation; transparency; conflict of interest management	Intra-organizational characteristics	Core phenomenon

Contextual conditions refer to the underlying normative and value-based environment within which urban management policy implementation takes place. These conditions encompass policy principles, ethical values, individual and collective norms, and the development of acceptable behavioral patterns within the organization. They shape the shared understanding of policy legitimacy, guide acceptable conduct, and provide a cultural and normative framework that supports or constrains policy implementation. The internalization of values, promotion of policy-oriented norms, and alignment of individual beliefs with organizational principles constitute the foundational context that enables coherent and value-consistent policy execution.

Causal conditions include the key drivers that directly influence the emergence and effectiveness of urban management policy implementation. These conditions are primarily related to human and individual-level factors such as job attachment, motivation, justice and fairness, delegation of authority, learning, and employee empowerment. The presence of supportive interpersonal relationships, opportunities for skill development, continuous training, and the strengthening of intrinsic motivation creates favorable conditions that trigger commitment to policy goals. In essence, causal conditions explain why and how policy-oriented behaviors and actions are initiated within the organization.

The core phenomenon centers on intra-organizational characteristics affecting urban management policy implementation. This includes organizational culture, structural features, quality of work life, performance evaluation systems, transparency, knowledge management, conflict of interest management, and the overall organizational climate. These characteristics represent the central process through which policies are translated into practice, reflecting the interaction between individuals, organizational systems, and managerial practices. The effectiveness of policy implementation is largely determined by how these internal organizational features are configured and aligned with policy objectives.

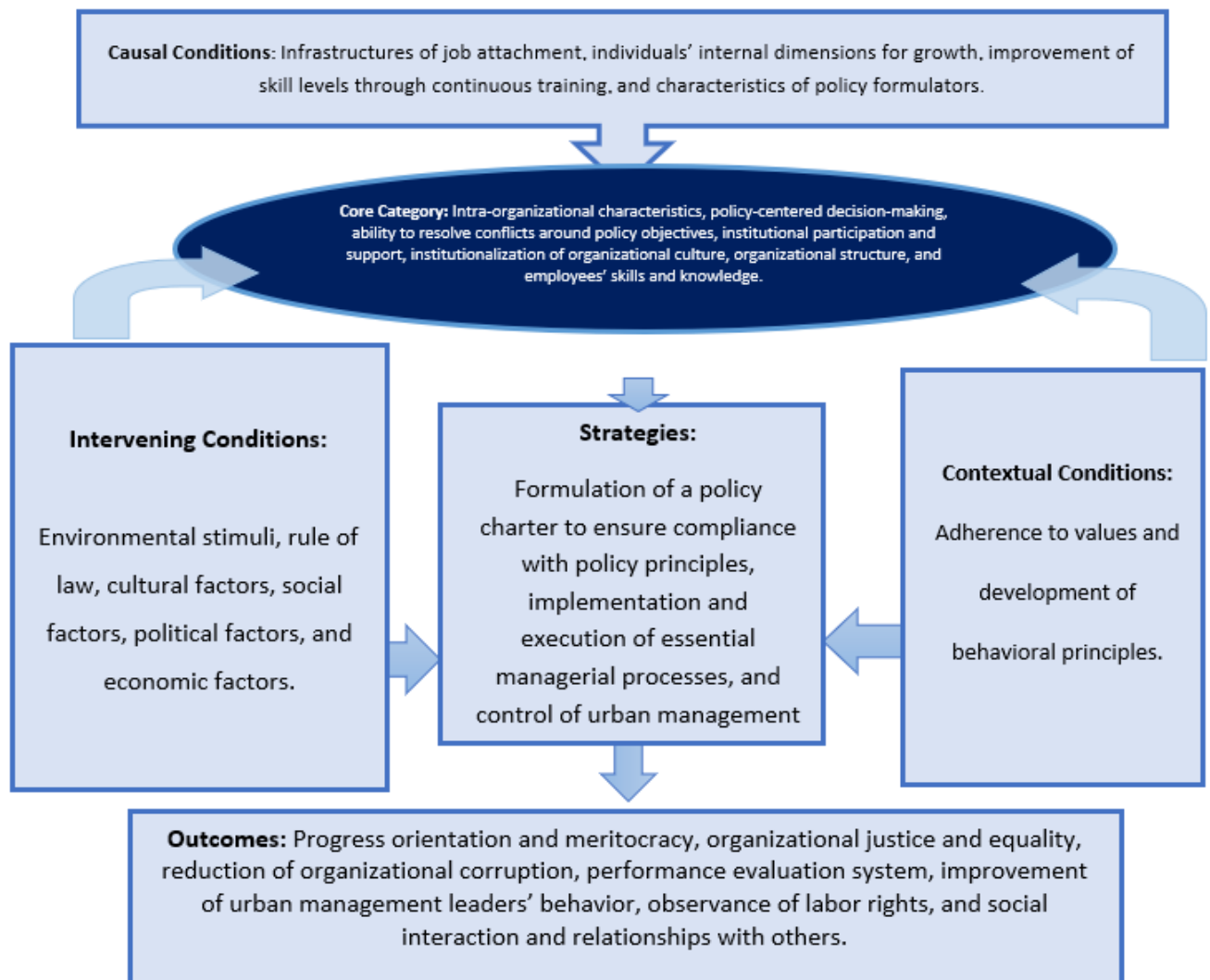
Organizational strategies represent the deliberate actions and responses adopted by organizations to manage contextual and causal conditions and to operationalize policy implementation. These strategies include formulating a policy charter, adopting a systematic and process-oriented approach, reforming administrative structures, institutionalizing policy culture, promoting participation and institutional support, developing employee competencies, and strengthening decision-making around policy objectives. Through these strategies, organizations seek to create coherence, enhance coordination, and ensure that policy principles are embedded in daily practices and managerial processes.

Intervening conditions consist of external and environmental factors that moderate or influence the relationship between organizational strategies and policy implementation outcomes. These include environmental stimuli, legal and regulatory frameworks, cultural and social contexts, political dynamics, and economic conditions. Factors such as bureaucratic constraints, societal norms, technological change, competition, political interference, and economic incentives can either facilitate or hinder effective policy implementation. These conditions operate beyond direct organizational control but significantly shape implementation pathways and outcomes.

Outcomes refer to the results and consequences of effective urban management policy implementation. Key outcomes include the promotion of meritocracy, enhancement of organizational justice and equality, reduction of administrative and financial corruption, improvement of performance evaluation systems, delivery of higher-quality urban services, strengthening of leadership behaviors, and improvement of social interactions and stakeholder relations. Collectively, these outcomes reflect improved organizational effectiveness, increased public trust, and the alignment of individual, organizational, and societal interests with the overarching goals of urban management policy.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide a comprehensive, empirically grounded explanation of how urban management policies are implemented through the dynamic interaction of organizational, individual, and environmental factors. The extracted grounded theory model demonstrates that policy implementation in urban management is not a linear or purely technical process, but rather a multidimensional and socially embedded phenomenon shaped by causal, contextual, intervening, strategic, and outcome-related conditions. This finding is consistent with long-standing implementation research, which emphasizes that implementation outcomes emerge from complex interactions rather than from policy design alone [2, 3].

At the core of the model, intra-organizational characteristics were identified as the central phenomenon influencing urban management policy implementation. These characteristics included organizational culture, decision-making processes, conflict-resolution capacity, institutional participation and support, structural arrangements, and the skills and knowledge of employees. This result aligns strongly with the implementation literature, which highlights organizational capacity and internal alignment as decisive determinants of policy success [1]. In particular, the emphasis on organizational culture and shared values resonates with the public value governance perspective, which argues that effective governance requires embedding policy goals within organizational norms and collective commitments rather than relying solely on formal rules [6, 7].

The study's findings regarding causal conditions underscore the central role of human and motivational factors in policy implementation. Job attachment, individuals' internal orientation toward growth, continuous skill development, and the ethical and professional characteristics of policy formulators emerged as key drivers of effective implementation. These results are consistent with Fernandez and Rainey's argument that employee motivation, commitment, and competence are essential for managing change and implementing public policies successfully [8]. In the urban management context, where frontline employees and middle managers play a critical role in translating policy into action, these human-centered factors become particularly salient.

The identified contextual conditions—namely adherence to values and the development of behavioral principles—highlight the importance of normative foundations in urban policy implementation. Policies are more likely to be implemented effectively when they are perceived as legitimate and aligned with shared ethical standards. This finding supports Healey's argument that institutional capacity in urban governance depends on normative coherence and the ability of institutions to adapt shared meanings and practices in complex societies [5]. It also reflects the broader shift in governance theory from instrumental rationality toward value-oriented and deliberative approaches.

Intervening conditions, including environmental stimuli, legal frameworks, cultural norms, social dynamics, political influences, and economic factors, were found to significantly shape implementation trajectories. These conditions often operate beyond the direct control of urban management organizations, yet they can either facilitate or constrain policy implementation. This finding is consistent with the ambiguity–conflict model of implementation, which posits that external context and stakeholder conflict significantly affect implementation outcomes [4]. Moreover, Galego et al.'s scoping review of sustainable urban development highlights regulatory complexity, political instability, and socio-economic constraints as persistent barriers to effective urban policy implementation [10].

The role of legal and regulatory frameworks, captured under the principle of rule of law, further reinforces the importance of institutional clarity and enforcement mechanisms in urban governance. Hawkins and Krause emphasize that decision-making institutions and policy arenas structure inter-departmental coordination and collective action, thereby shaping implementation effectiveness [9]. The present study extends this insight by showing that legal compliance must be complemented by cultural acceptance and organizational readiness to produce meaningful implementation outcomes.

The strategic responses identified in the model—such as formulating a policy charter, implementing essential managerial processes, and controlling urban management policy—represent deliberate organizational efforts to manage complexity and uncertainty. These strategies reflect a systems-oriented approach to governance, consistent with Habibi et al.'s argument that inclusive and effective governance requires systems thinking capable of integrating multiple actors and policy domains [11]. The emphasis on systematic processes and policy control mechanisms also aligns with Jiang's findings that implementation models vary significantly depending on how local governments structure administrative processes and monitoring systems [16].

Notably, the formulation of a policy charter as a central strategy highlights the importance of codifying values, principles, and behavioral expectations in urban management organizations. This finding supports the policy integration perspective advanced by Dorado-Rubín et al., who argue that coherent urban policies require alignment across policy instruments, governance levels, and organizational practices [12]. By institutionalizing policy principles through formal charters and processes, organizations can reduce ambiguity and enhance consistency in implementation.

The outcomes identified in this study—progress orientation and meritocracy, organizational justice and equality, reduction of organizational corruption, improved performance evaluation, enhanced leadership behavior, protection of labor rights, and strengthened social interactions—reflect both organizational and societal benefits of effective policy implementation. These outcomes are closely aligned with the goals of public value governance, which emphasizes creating value not only for organizations but also for citizens and society at large [6, 7]. In particular, the reduction of corruption and enhancement of justice resonate with broader concerns in urban governance regarding transparency, accountability, and public trust.

The improvement of leadership behavior in urban management, as identified in the findings, further underscores the role of leadership as a mediating force between policy intent and organizational action. Mora et al. argue that smart city governance and innovation-driven urban development depend heavily on leadership capacity to coordinate, motivate, and align diverse actors [14]. Similarly, Sulistyaningsih et al. demonstrate that strategic leadership and institutional support are essential for translating smart city policies into effective urban governance practices [15]. The present study reinforces these conclusions by empirically linking leadership behavior to successful policy implementation outcomes.

Overall, the grounded theory model developed in this study integrates and extends existing implementation theories by offering a context-sensitive, empirically derived explanation of urban management policy implementation. It confirms that implementation is shaped by the interaction of human motivations, organizational structures, value systems, and external conditions, while also highlighting the strategic role of organizational responses in managing these complexities. In doing so, the study contributes to the urban governance literature by bridging classic implementation theory with contemporary perspectives on public value, systems thinking, and integrated governance [1, 2, 11].

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative nature of the research and the relatively small number of participants limit the generalizability of the findings

beyond the specific urban management context examined. Second, the study relies on self-reported data from municipal experts, which may be influenced by subjective perceptions or social desirability bias. Third, the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in policy implementation dynamics over time, which may be particularly relevant in rapidly evolving urban governance environments.

Future studies could build on the findings of this research by employing mixed-methods or quantitative designs to test and validate the proposed model across different cities and governance contexts. Longitudinal research could provide valuable insights into how policy implementation processes evolve over time and how organizational learning and adaptation influence outcomes. Comparative studies across countries or administrative systems may also help identify contextual factors that shape variations in urban management policy implementation.

From a practical perspective, urban management organizations should prioritize strengthening internal organizational capacities, particularly in the areas of human resource development, leadership training, and organizational culture. Policymakers and managers are encouraged to institutionalize policy principles through clear charters and systematic processes, while also fostering participatory and value-driven organizational environments. Attention to external conditions—such as legal, cultural, and economic factors—should be integrated into implementation planning to enhance resilience and effectiveness in achieving urban policy goals.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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