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Public Service Quality in Morocco in Light of International Trajectories: A Theoretical Synthesis

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Aliouhaki@gmail.com**Abstract**

The modernization of public services has become a cross-cutting concern for administrations worldwide, whether in developed or developing countries. This article proposes a theoretical synthesis aimed at situating Morocco's administrative reform trajectory within the broader international debate on public service quality. By drawing on four major conceptual bodies of work — results-based management inherited from New Public Management, institutional governance quality, digital transformation of public action, and territorial decentralization — the article builds an integrative model capable of explaining the performance disparities observed across countries and regions. It shows that these four dimensions generate positive effects on user satisfaction only when they are articulated together and adapted to pre-existing institutional structures, rather than transplanted in an isomorphic manner from

Western models. The article concludes with a set of testable theoretical propositions and a research agenda for the Moroccan context.

Keywords: public service, institutional quality, digital governance, decentralization, New Public Management, Morocco, comparative administration.

1. Introduction

The question of public service quality has occupied a central place in administrative reform agendas since the spread, from the 1980s onward, of New Public Management (NPM) principles (Krasnykov, 2023; Pollitt, 2013). This movement promoted the idea that importing management tools from the private sector — results-based steering, internal contracting, customer-oriented service — would mechanically increase the efficiency of public administrations and the satisfaction of their users. Forty years on, the empirical record of this

hypothesis remains mixed: while some countries have achieved significant performance gains, others have experienced only superficial transformations, with no corresponding improvement in citizen-perceived quality (Andrews, 2008; Pollitt, 2013).

Morocco is part of this global dynamic of administrative modernization. Reforms undertaken since the early 2000s — the contractualization of public services, deconcentration and decentralization charters, successive digitalization strategies, and the recent creation of territorial groupings in the health sector — reflect a determination to align Moroccan administration with international performance standards (Nabaouia & Dounia, 2024; Baalla & Jellouli, 2025). Yet comparative literature consistently emphasizes that the effectiveness of such reforms depends not only on the technical instruments deployed, but very largely on the quality of the institutions that carry them out and on their capacity to adapt to the local context (Errami & Cargnello, 2018; Andrews, 2008).

This article aims to offer a theoretical — rather than empirical — reading of this issue. The objective is to build, from a critical synthesis of the international and Moroccan literature, an integrative conceptual framework capable of explaining why reforms that appear similar on paper produce such divergent results depending on national and subnational contexts. The approach adopted is therefore not one of hypothesis testing on primary data, but a conceptual reflection aiming to articulate frameworks that are usually mobilized separately: the theory of results-based management, the theory of institutional quality, the theory of digital governance, and the theory of fiscal and administrative decentralization.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical and conceptual framework mobilized. Section 3 offers a thematic review of the comparative literature on public service quality. Section 4 develops a critical discussion articulating these different bodies of work around the Moroccan case. Section 5 draws out the theoretical and practical implications. Section 6 identifies the limitations of the existing literature and proposes a research agenda. Section 7 concludes.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework proposed here rests on the articulation of four conceptual bodies of work that the literature shows are too often mobilized in isolation, even

though their effects on public service quality appear strongly interdependent.

2.1. Results-Based Management and the Legacy of New Public Management

The first body of work concerns New Public Management (NPM), whose original ambition was to transpose management tools borrowed from the private sector to public administrations: performance indicators, internal contracting, and a user orientation conceived of the citizen as a customer (Krasnykov, 2023; Torres & Pina, 2004). Results-based management (RBM), the operational offshoot of NPM, has spread widely across Moroccan administrations, as in many developing countries (Nabaouia & Dounia, 2024; Besley et al., 2003). However, the comparative literature stresses the contingent nature of its effectiveness: the adoption of managerial tools guarantees a genuine improvement in service delivery only if it is accompanied by adequate institutional capacity for implementation (Pollitt, 2013). Absent this, the documented risk is one of mimetic isomorphism — the adoption of managerial forms without any real transformation of underlying administrative practices (Errami & Cargnello, 2018; Andrews, 2008).

2.2. Institutional Quality as a Structural Determinant

The second body of work, drawn from institutional economics and comparative political science, places the quality of governance — understood as administrative impartiality, control of corruption, and the rule of law — at the heart of the explanation for gaps in public performance (Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2021; Charron, Dijkstra & Lapuente, 2014; Almuqsith & Almuqsith, 2025). This strand of research, largely structured around institutional-quality indices developed for European regions, shows that institutional quality is a more robust determinant of regional well-being and economic growth than the sheer volume of financial resources mobilized (Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015; Karataş, 2026). It also highlights that historical trajectories and institutional path dependencies durably shape administrations' capacity to reform themselves (Charron & Lapuente, 2013), which calls for caution regarding the transferability of governance models designed in institutional contexts very different from Morocco's (Andrews, 2008).

2.3. Digital Transformation of Public Action

The third body of work concerns digital governance and the measurement of e-government maturity, often operationalized

through the United Nations' E-Government Development Index (Ma & Zheng, 2019; Sadat & Lawelai, 2025). This strand of literature reveals a robust correlation between digital maturity and perceived administrative efficiency, while stressing the mediated nature of this relationship: digitalization improves governance only when it builds on already-functional 'analog' institutions (Durkiewicz & Janowski, 2018). A digital rollout decoupled from broader institutional reform tends to reproduce, or even amplify, pre-existing access inequalities across socio-economic groups and territories, particularly in rural areas with low digital literacy (Nabaouia & Dounia, 2024).

2.4. Decentralization and Territorial Autonomy

The fourth body of work addresses the relationship between administrative decentralization and the quality of local public services (Kyriacou & Roca-Sagalés, 2019; Muringani, Fitjar & Rodríguez-Pose, 2019). Contrary to the intuition that greater local autonomy would mechanically produce better proximity services, several studies using a dose-response approach reveal a non-linear, U-shaped relationship between the degree of regional autonomy and perceived service quality: configurations of either strong centralization or far-reaching decentralization, when coupled with robust local institutional capacity, tend to outperform intermediate situations where powers are transferred without corresponding resources or managerial capacities (Filippetti & Cerulli, 2018). This finding is particularly relevant for analyzing Morocco's 2009 Communal Charter and the advanced regionalization dynamics under way since 2015 (Clark, 2015; Nouha, Mohammed & Mohamed, 2021).

2.5. Toward an Integrative Model

The articulation of these four bodies of work allows us to formulate the central theoretical proposition of this article: perceived public service quality does not result from the isolated adoption of a single reform instrument — whether managerial, digital, or institutional — but from the interaction between the quality of pre-existing institutions, organizational implementation capacity, and the degree of contextual adaptation of imported models. A deficit along any one of these dimensions mechanically limits the gains expected on the others, which explains the frequency of 'trompe-l'œil' reforms, in which modernization indicators improve without a corresponding increase in users' actual satisfaction.

3. Thematic Review of the Comparative Literature

This section synthesizes, in a cross-cutting manner, the major trends emerging from the comparative literature on public service quality, situating them against the specificities identified for the Moroccan context.

3.1. Digital Maturity and Administrative Efficiency

A large share of the literature establishes a link between digital maturity and perceived administrative efficiency, while documenting a persistent gap between developed and developing regions (Sadat & Lawelai, 2025; Durkiewicz & Janowski, 2018). For Morocco, the available studies highlight the potential of digitalization as a lever for service access, while stressing that this potential remains heavily conditioned by effective user uptake and by a data-interoperability infrastructure that is still under construction (Nabaouia & Dounia, 2024).

3.2. User Satisfaction and Citizen Engagement

User satisfaction is treated as a key performance indicator in the vast majority of the studies reviewed, yet its measurement remains fragmented: self-reported surveys, composite indices, and anchoring vignettes are used in a poorly harmonized manner, which strongly limits international comparability (Jilke, Meuleman & Van de Walle, 2015). Studies nonetheless converge in showing that transparency and feedback mechanisms strengthen institutional trust, provided they are integrated into the public decision-making cycle rather than treated as a one-off communication exercise (Ma & Zheng, 2019).

3.3. Institutional Governance Quality

This is the densest body of literature reviewed. It establishes with relative consensus that administrative impartiality and control of corruption are robust determinants of public performance, independently of the level of economic development (Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2021; Charron, Dijkstra & Lapuente, 2014). Observed divergences concern less the existence of this relationship than its relative strength across administrative traditions — common law versus public law, Napoleonic, Scandinavian, or Anglo-Saxon bureaucratic traditions (Charron & Lapuente, 2013) — which calls for a cautious reading of any direct comparison between Morocco and European or North American benchmarks whose institutional histories differ significantly (Karataş, 2026).

3.4. Results-Based Management and the Risk of Isomorphism

The literature widely recommends adopting performance indicators to steer sectoral reforms, while repeatedly warning that this adoption may remain purely formal if it is not accompanied by strengthened local managerial capacities (Pollitt, 2013; Besley et al., 2003). The Moroccan health sector, studied through the lens of NPM, illustrates this risk: the importation of management devices without sufficient adaptation to existing organizational structures has, in some cases, generated internal tensions without a matching performance gain (Errami & Cargnello, 2018; MENZHI, 2025).

3.5. Decentralization and Territorial Disparities

Decentralization is identified as a strategic lever for bringing administration closer to local needs, but its effect on service quality is neither automatic nor linear (Kyriacou & Roca-Sagalés, 2019; Filippetti & Cerulli, 2018). For Morocco, the literature highlights the promise of recent mechanisms such as territorial health groupings, while regretting the absence of rigorous impact evaluations capable of establishing their actual contribution to reducing regional disparities in access to care (Baalla & Jellouli, 2025; Clark, 2015).

4. Theoretical Discussion: Toward a Contextualized Reading of the Moroccan Case

Juxtaposing these four bodies of work with Morocco's institutional specificities leads to several theoretical propositions.

Proposition 1 — Institutional Isomorphism as a Limiting Factor

Moroccan administrative reforms, like many reforms undertaken in developing countries, are frequently inspired by Western models of good governance without sufficient adaptation to local socio-cultural structures (Errami & Cargnello, 2018). This tendency toward institutional isomorphism — that is, the reproduction of internationally legitimized organizational forms rather than context-adapted ones — constitutes, according to the literature mobilized here, a structural factor limiting the real effectiveness of reforms, even when they produce favorable modernization indicators (Andrews, 2008).

Proposition 2 — Digitalization as a Necessary but Insufficient Condition

The digital transformation of Moroccan public services cannot, on its own, compensate for pre-existing weaknesses in institutional governance (Durkiewicz & Janowski, 2018). It is a necessary condition for improving accessibility and transparency (Sadat & Lawelai, 2025), but its effectiveness remains conditioned by the quality of the 'analog' institutions on which it builds, as well as by digital-inclusion policies targeting rural populations and those with low digital literacy (Nabaouia & Dounia, 2024).

Proposition 3 — Effective Decentralization Requires Autonomy Coupled with Local Capacity

In line with the U-shaped relationship identified in the European literature (Filippetti & Cerulli, 2018), the theoretical hypothesis proposed here is that Morocco's advanced regionalization will yield service-quality gains only if the transfer of powers is accompanied by an effective strengthening of territorial collectivities' managerial and financial capacities (Nouha, Mohammed & Mohamed, 2021); failing that, it risks widening the regional disparities already documented (Muringani, Fitjar & Rodríguez-Pose, 2019; Clark, 2015).

Proposition 4 — Traditional Institutions as an Underexploited Resource

A specific contribution of the Morocco-focused literature lies in highlighting the role of traditional forms of governance — such as the *zawāyā* — in the co-production of social services alongside the central administration (Chafik & Drechsler, 2022). This avenue, still underexplored empirically, suggests that theoretical frameworks imported from New Public Management would benefit from incorporating a reflection on functional indigenous forms of governance, rather than treating them as pre-modern residues destined to disappear (Chafik & Drechsler, 2022; Andrews, 2008).

4.1. Comparative Synthesis of the Four Theoretical Dimensions

Theoretical Dimension	Expected Isolated Effect	Condition for Success	Documented Risk
Results-based management	Improved budgetary efficiency and accountability	Adequate local managerial capacity	Formal adoption without changed practices

Theoretical Dimension	Expected Isolated Effect	Condition for Success	Documented Risk
Institutional quality	Higher citizen trust and well-being	Impartiality and effective corruption control	Path dependency limiting reformability
Digital transformation	Gains in accessibility and transparency	Functional analog institutions + digital inclusion	Widening of territorial digital divide
Decentralization	Closer fit between administration and local needs	Autonomy coupled with robust local capacity	Widening territorial disparities

5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

5.1. Theoretical Implications

- The findings of this synthesis call into question the idea of a universal model of 'good governance' (Andrews, 2008), in favor of a contingent reading that articulates institutional quality, implementation capacity, and contextual adaptation.
- The relationship between decentralization and service quality should be theorized as non-linear (Filipetti & Cerulli, 2018), which calls for moving beyond theoretical models that assume a strictly positive and monotonic effect of local autonomy.
- The digitalization of administration should be repositioned within a systemic theory of reform (Durkiewicz & Janowski, 2018), rather than treated as a variable independent of pre-existing governance structures.
- Measurement equivalence in international comparisons of citizen satisfaction remains a major theoretical and methodological challenge (Jilke, Meuleman & Van de Walle, 2015), requiring frameworks capable of neutralizing cultural perception biases.

5.2. Practical Implications for the Moroccan Context

- Adopt balanced benchmarking strategies that combine digital indicators with institutional governance measures (Sadat & Lawelai, 2025), rather than relying solely on international rankings based on technological maturity.
- Couple any transfer of powers to territorial collectivities with an effective strengthening of local

managerial and budgetary capacities (Nouha, Mohammed & Mohamed, 2021).

- Develop standardized citizen-satisfaction measurement tools adapted to the Moroccan administrative context, including participatory and iterative feedback mechanisms (Ma & Zheng, 2019).
- Integrate explicit digital-inclusion strategies for rural populations, to prevent digital transformation from exacerbating existing access inequalities (Nabaouia & Dounia, 2024).
- Explore complementarities between central administration and traditional forms of governance in the co-production of local social services (Chafik & Drechsler, 2022).

6. Limitations of the Literature and Research Agenda

Several cross-cutting limitations affect the literature mobilized in this synthesis. First, a deficit of subnational data limits the ability to finely document Moroccan regional disparities, as most studies focus on national-level comparisons (Charron, Dijkstra & Lapuente, 2014; Clark, 2015). Second, the heterogeneity of methodologies employed — the absence of standardized evaluation frameworks — complicates any attempt at rigorous quantitative synthesis (Jilke, Meuleman & Van de Walle, 2015). Third, frequent reliance on self-reported data introduces cultural perception biases that weaken the international comparability of satisfaction indices (Jilke, Meuleman & Van de Walle, 2015). Fourth, most of the studies reviewed rely on correlational analyses, without robustly identifying causal mechanisms linking digital or managerial reforms to an actual improvement in service quality (Durkiewicz & Janowski, 2018).

These limitations outline a research agenda for the Moroccan context, structured around six priorities: (1) a longitudinal comparative study of public service performance across Moroccan regions based on standardized indicators (MENZHI, 2025; Clark, 2015); (2) an econometric analysis using instrumental variables to isolate the causal effect of digitalization on administrative efficiency (Durkiewicz & Janowski, 2018); (3) the development of a composite citizen-satisfaction index adapted to the Moroccan context and validated through field surveys (Ma & Zheng, 2019); (4) a qualitative study on the contextual adaptation of New Public Management principles to local administrative structures (Errami & Cargnello, 2018); (5) a quasi-experimental impact

evaluation of the pilot territorial health groupings scheme in the Tangier-Tétouan-Al Hoceïma region (Baalla & Jellouli, 2025); and (6) ethnographic research on the role of traditional institutions such as the *zawāyā* in the co-production of public services (Chafik & Drechsler, 2022).

7. Conclusion

This article has proposed an integrative theoretical reading of public service quality in Morocco, situated in relation to international trajectories of administrative reform. By articulating four conceptual bodies of work usually treated separately — results-based management (Krasnykov, 2023; Pollitt, 2013), institutional quality (Charron & Lapuente, 2013; Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2021), digital transformation (Durkiewicz & Janowski, 2018; Sadat & Lawelai, 2025), and decentralization (Filipetti & Cerulli, 2018; Kyriacou & Roca-Sagalés, 2019) — it has shown that public service performance does not result from the isolated adoption of reform instruments, but from their coherent articulation with local institutional capacities and socio-cultural specificities. The risk of institutional isomorphism, identified as central in the literature mobilized here (Andrews, 2008; Errami & Cargnello, 2018), calls for a critical and contextualized transposition of international good-governance models rather than their literal importation.

Theoretically, this synthesis argues for moving beyond one-dimensional approaches to administrative reform, in favor of a systemic framework articulating institutional quality, organizational capacity, and contextual adaptation. Practically, it invites Moroccan decision-makers to favor sequenced reforms, in which the strengthening of local capacities systematically precedes or accompanies the transfer of powers and the rollout of digital tools. Future research, by addressing the empirical gaps identified — particularly at the subnational level — will make it possible to more rigorously test the theoretical propositions advanced in this article.

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