

## UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC SERVICES THROUGH LITERATURE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND TRENDS

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### Abstract

Access to fundamental public services is a cornerstone of the European Pillar of Social Rights, particularly in social protection and inclusion. As a driving force behind effective governance in the global economy, public services play a crucial role in ensuring society's stability, promoting prosperity and fostering economic growth. This research aims to analyse and systematise theoretical frameworks and current trends in the scientific literature on public services in order to understand their role in the development of the state and society. Employing theoretical research methods including the monographic method, synthesis-analysis method and descriptive method – this study examines a range of studies, official documents and case studies on public services. The findings reveal that international research highlights a strong link between public services, public trust in governance and satisfaction with governance in general. Specifically, both the quality of public services and citizens' perception of these services are identified as key factors in increasing trust in public administrations and enhancing public participation in the co-design of services. In contrast, inadequate citizen participation is highlighted as one of the major contributors to poor service delivery in municipalities. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement and digital transformation, public administration shall adapt to address the evolving needs of citizens effectively. Digitalization emerges as a key solution to enable citizens to access the necessary public administration services more quickly and conveniently.

**Keywords:** public services, economics, digitalization, life satisfaction, trust.

### Introduction

D. K. Basyal and S. Nepal point out that the development of public administration began with the formation of human civilization, gradually evolving from early social structures to complex administrative and legal mechanisms (Basyal & Nepal, 2021). Public services have developed as the state response to citizens' needs for order, security, healthcare, education etc. Access to essential public services is a key element of the European Pillar of Social Rights, particularly in the context of social protection and inclusion (European Commission, 2021). It is closely linked to the active integration of marginalized individuals in the labour market by providing tailored and individualized services. This approach includes timely identifying needs and providing targeted support (European Commission, 2008). According to E. A. Jackson, public services are a driving force in ensuring effective governance in the global economy (Jackson, 2021). In scientific literature, the term 'public service' is often used in the sense of 'public utilities'; however, the meaning of public service is broader, encompassing also services provided by private companies for the public interest (such as electricity, water supply, telecommunications, etc.). The term 'public administration services' is also used, which is more specific and refers specifically to services provided by public administration institutions (such as issuing documents, tax administration, registration, etc.). In this study, the term 'public service' refers to services provided by the state, local government or state-funded institutions. It is also necessary to understand the term 'service' and its meaning, as its definition and interpretation vary depending on the perspective. For example, the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia explains service as a collaborative process between the service provider and the recipient, where the main

emphasis is placed on creating value and meeting the user's needs (Ministry of Smart Administration and..., 2024). In this context, the interaction between both parties is central, and the service is considered successful when it effectively addresses the specific requirements and expectations of the recipient, leading to a positive outcome or experience. This approach primarily emphasizes the client's perspective, which is essential in modern governance models, such as New Public Management (NPM). This framework encourages public institutions to adopt private sector principles, prioritizing efficiency and enhancing citizen satisfaction. In contrast, the European Union adopts a broader definition of public services as economic activities of general interest, which are determined, established and regulated by public authorities under a specific legal framework, irrespective of whether they are delivered by public or private entities. This approach emphasizes the legal-regulatory dimension while linking public services to their dual role in economic and social functions. Both approaches reveal a foundational tension in defining public services: whether they primarily serve as an instrument for addressing citizen needs, as emphasized by the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia, or function as legally and economically regulated state mechanisms, as defined by the European Commission. In practice, both perspectives are indispensable, as public services shall balance operational efficiency and user-centric responsiveness with national and international legal frameworks. However, it is significant to note that not all activities carried out by the public administration can be considered public services (Spicker, 2009), for example, the implementation of institutional support and administrative functions.

While public services primarily focus on addressing individual citizens' needs, they have evolved into a

cornerstone of societal well-being, improving quality of life and national economic development. Anderson et al. (2019) highlight that a positive citizen experience with public services strengthens public trust in government institutions and overall satisfaction with public administration. This, in turn, fosters greater civic engagement in the development and improvement of public services. This approach aligns with social capital theory, as the concept of social capital is linked to issues of human behaviour and motivation, primarily as a result of social interaction (Claridge, 2018), thus, trust in institutions can be considered a critical element for effective governance and democratic participation. In contrast, Wadesango et al. (2018) note that a lack of citizen participation can lead to lower service quality, particularly at the local government level. This means that the absence of direct feedback from citizens as service users increases the risk of inefficiency.

Regarding the development trends of public services, attention is given to various public administration reforms, such as the NPM reform, which aimed to enhance efficiency and outcomes by introducing private sector management methods into the public sector (Lapuenta & Van de Walle, 2020), and the Post-NPM reform, which focused on creating integrated governance and inter-institutional collaboration (Klenk & Reiter, 2019). Both reforms have significantly changed the way public services are organized and delivered. Meanwhile, current trends in technological development and the increasing economic, demographic and environmental challenges – such as an aging workforce, climate change and economic crises – are driving countries to seek sustainable and innovative solutions for public services delivery.

Despite the growing recognition that public services are a cornerstone of public well-being and a key component of effective public administration, there is still a lack of conceptual clarity and consistency in defining their nature, function and role in modern public administration. The duality between citizen-centred and regulated approaches confuses the public service discourse, while ongoing reforms and digital transformations further complicate the situation. This fragmentation hinders a comprehensive understanding and strategic development of public services that can respond effectively to the needs of modern society.

This research aims to analyse and systematise theoretical frameworks and current trends in scientific literature on public services in order to understand their role in state development and their impact on public trust in governance, citizen participation in service co-design, and overall quality of life in the context of the digital transformation of public services. To achieve this aim, the following tasks have been defined based on insights from research literature and development trends:

- 1) to identify the key characteristics of public services and their significance in the state and society development;
- 2) to analyse the theoretical approaches and conceptual interpretations of public services in scientific literature;
- 3) to provide an overview of historical and contemporary trends in the development of public services.

### **Materials and Methods**

This research examines a range of studies, official documents and case studies on public services using theoretical research methods, including the monographic, synthesis-analysis and descriptive methods.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### *Characteristics and importance of public services*

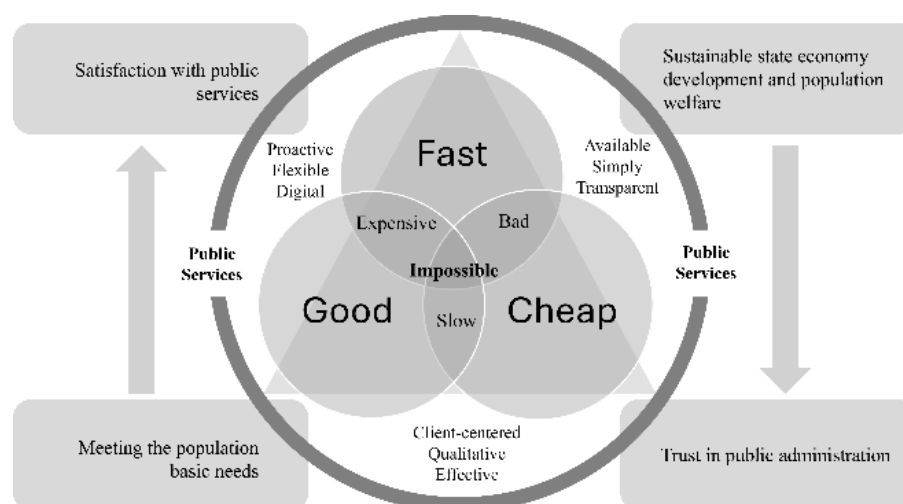
Public services are a primary channel of interaction between the state and its citizens, businesses and organizations (OECD, 2024a), and the state's ability to effectively deliver public services is crucial for society's and the economy's development. According to Jackson (2021), effective private business functioning often depends on the services provided by the state, which are more complex than those provided by the private sector because they relate to a broader range of service recipients. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure greater transparency of services (Osborne et al., 2013), meaning the justification for the use of public resources. As a result, public institutions face complex challenges in ensuring accessible services for all while maintaining high quality. The OECD (2022) notes that high-quality services are those that are delivered efficiently, providing users with a satisfactory experience and optimal outcomes, regardless of whether the service is mandatory (e.g., issuing building permits) or voluntary (e.g., registration for studies).

Public institutions create public value through the services they provide. One of the issues associated with the delivery of public services is the Trilemma – the challenge of balancing three objectives: delivering public services fast, good and cheap, of which only two can be achieved at the same time 'Figure 1'.

This Trilemma is significant because it highlights the trade-offs between service efficiency and quality. In this context, public institutions shall devise effective solutions to optimally allocate available resources and meet citizens' needs. It is also crucial to examine how these choices affect the quality and reliability of service delivery.

Research papers highlight various characteristics of public services, stating that they shall be accessible (Anderson et al., 2019), simple, client-centered (Scupola & Mergel, 2022), effective (Cuadrado-Ballesteros et al., 2013), proactive (Welby & Tan, 2022), agile and digital (Luna et al., 2024; Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

**Figure 1**  
*Public services characteristics and significance*



Source: authors' construction.

C.-T. Hsiao and L. J. Shin emphasize that ensuring high-quality public services requires integrating clients' needs from the early stages of service development (Hsiao & Shin, 2008). Client feedback mechanisms, collaborative teamwork and a structured problem-solving framework enable organizations to address client concerns in a timely and responsive manner.

Luna et al. (2024) highlight the significance of digital public services and their potential to generate substantial public value by ensuring service availability anytime and anywhere, thereby saving citizens' time and reducing administrative burdens. While digital services offer significant advantages, it is crucial to ensure the availability of adequate digital infrastructure that supports 24/7 service delivery and protect these services from cyberattacks to maintain citizens' trust in digital services. In addition, greater attention should be given to the availability of digital services for various groups of citizens who have insufficient digital skills, such as seniors (Anderson et al., 2019). Therefore, targeted training programmes may be necessary, which, for example, could be provided by various non-governmental organizations as strategic partners (Luna et al., 2024). To fully harness the potential of digital services, a comprehensive approach is needed, integrating digital infrastructure, cybersecurity and citizen digital skills. Only by addressing these factors can digital services effectively contribute to the long-term development of the state and society.

An integral part of public service delivery is the effective and user-centred selection of service delivery channels. The choice of the appropriate delivery channel affects not only the service quality and the cost-effectiveness of the public institution but also the administrative burden on citizens. In the context of digital transformation, the multi-channel approach is becoming increasingly important. This approach combines traditional (in-person, phone-based) and digital (online portals, mobile applications, artificial intelligence solutions) forms of service delivery, adapting to the needs of various societal groups.

Cuadrado-Ballesteros et al. (2012) note that the most commonly used factors for measuring the quality of life of citizens are related to public services, thus establishing a link between the form of public service delivery (outsourcing, state-owned enterprises, public funds, etc.) and the quality of life of citizens. The results of the mentioned study indicate that the involvement of the private sector in the delivery of public services through outsourcing does not improve the efficiency level of Spanish municipalities. However, state-owned enterprises and mixed capital companies can enhance public administration efficiency although these forms of public service provision are rarely used in Spain (Cuadrado-Ballesteros et al., 2013). Meanwhile, Shareef et al. (2016) confirmed that citizens in the USA, India and Bangladesh are generally satisfied with the service delivery model via mobile phone SMS, provided that government agencies offer clear, accessible and useful information. When these conditions are met, citizens perceive the channel as effective (Shareef et al., 2016). In Latvia, the results of the State Chancellery's annual Public Administration Client Satisfaction Survey for 2024 shows that one-fifth of respondents prefer in-person communication with state institutions. Respondents believe that handling matters online is problematic, too complicated and unclear, admitting that they did not know how to properly handle specific issues electronically (The State Chancellery, 2024). Overall, a balanced approach is needed, which includes both an optimal service delivery model and appropriate communication channels. Furthermore, as evidenced by Latvia's experience, the development of digitalization should not overlook the segment of the population that requires additional support and explanations in using digital services.

#### *Trends of public services development*

The OECD highlights several future trends in the public service sector that reflect global changes and the needs of modern society:

- 1) future-oriented and co-created public services;

- 2) digital and innovative foundation for efficient public services;
- 3) personalized and proactive public services;
- 4) data-driven public services for better decision-making;
- 5) public services as opportunities for societal participation (OECD, 2024a).

These trends indicate a shift towards more progressive and inclusive public services, which will be agile and responsive to societal and technological changes. The development of technology plays the most significant role in ensuring efficiency. Hilhorst et al. (2022), analysing the efficiency of public services provided by Dutch municipalities from 2014 to 2018, found that investments in information technology (IT) had a positive impact on cost efficiency – each additional euro invested leads to a net cost efficiency gain of 1.08 euros. This means that digitalization and the application of technology can improve the efficiency of public service delivery. However, there is a threshold beyond which additional IT investments no longer enhance the efficiency of local governments, thus highlighting the need for a strategic approach to IT development. Moreover, the successful implementation of public service innovations is closely tied to the ability of public institutions to adapt to change. Almazrouei et al. (2024) study suggests that institutions open to change and innovation generally exhibit higher efficiency and a greater capacity to successfully adopt new technological solutions designed to meet societal needs. In general, these studies highlight that enhancing the quality of public services necessitates an integrated approach, which combines understanding clients' needs, leveraging digital solutions and fostering the ability of institutions to adapt to change and implement innovations. In addition, Hammerschmid et al. (2019) research contributes to the discussion on the impact of the NPM reform by analysing the perceptions of senior public sector officials regarding changes in public service delivery across 20 European countries. The study findings suggest that a client-centred approach and flexible employment practices are directly linked to improved service quality, more effective policy coordination, greater equity in access to services and an overall enhancement of public administration performance (Hammerschmid et al., 2019). Therefore, despite ongoing global changes, the need to understand clients and identify their needs remains both essential and constant (OECD, 2022a). A good practice is the approach to develop service management systems that are based on identifying the needs of citizens and businesses, and designing public services based on specific life situations. This approach enables citizens and businesses to more easily locate and access the necessary public services.

The ability of public services to meet citizens' needs is a critical factor influencing not only their satisfaction with these services but also their overall trust in public administration. Pribadi (2013), by studying the relationship between an institution's organizational structure and satisfaction with public services in the Licensing Department of Indonesia, found that a well-

organized institutional structure improves the quality of public services. In particular, physical aspects (clean and comfortable environments, well-equipped rooms and infrastructure) and employee courtesy (politeness, respectful attitude and responsibility) increase citizens' satisfaction with the provided public services (Pribadi, 2013). According to the OECD data, on average, 65.7% of citizens in OECD countries are satisfied with public services. However, it is important to note that satisfaction with healthcare and education systems, which are key elements of citizens' well-being, has declined over the past two years. Daily interaction through public services between citizens and public institutions is crucial, as it not only fosters trust in public administration but also in local governments (OECD, 2024b).

Trust in public administration is important not only at the national level but also on a broader scale. In OECD countries, the average level of citizen trust in public institutions in 2023 was only 39.3% (OECD, 2024b). Trust in public institutions is a relevant research topic and a significant indicator for evaluating the effectiveness and legitimacy of public sector performance. For example, Palmisano and Sacchi (2024), analysing 28 European Union countries from 2003 to 2019, confirm a negative correlation between income inequality and trust in national governments – if income inequality rises, citizens' trust in public administration diminishes. The study also highlights digital interaction between citizens and the public sector as a potential mechanism to alleviate the negative impact of inequality on trust in public institutions (Palmisano & Sacchi, 2024). Effective and transparent public services can drive a country's economic development by providing essential infrastructure, fostering human capital development and creating a stable business environment, ultimately enhancing citizens' quality of life while stimulating national economic growth. Given that public services are delivered through complex bureaucratic systems (Mansoor & Williams, 2024), many countries prioritize enhancing public service efficiency and reducing administrative burdens for citizens.

C. Pawlowski and H. Scholta (2023) indicate that proactive services are the next level of development for digital services, meaning that customer involvement is not required for the service to be provided. This implies that the customer does not need to submit an application to receive the service (Pawlowski & Scholta, 2023).

Regarding other public service development trends, Hodgkinson et al. (2017) highlight the Public Service-Dominant Logic (PSDL), which states that public administration shall operate as a value co-creation ecosystem, where citizens, the private sector and other stakeholders actively participate in the development and improvement of services. This approach also aligns with one of the future development trends of services outlined by the OECD – forward-looking and co-created public services. Similarly, Scupola and Mergel (2022), in their research on the digital transformation of

the Danish public sector, indicate that public administration institutions invest in citizen-centred services and the digital transformation of internal administrative processes while involving various stakeholders in the co-creation process. The results of the study show that co-creation was a key element in the success of digital transformation, from strategy and policy formulation at the national government level to implementation at the decentralized public administration level (Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

Drawing from public administration theory and research on the role of IT in the public sector, countries and municipalities should adopt targeted strategies to generate public value by effectively integrating IT solutions. Central to the concept of public value is the capacity of public administration to deliver high-quality, accessible services, the effectiveness and utility of which can be significantly enhanced through the use of digital technologies.

### Conclusions

1. Public services serve as a fundamental pillar for the functioning of any state, ensuring societal well-being, economic growth, social justice and the overall quality of life for its citizens. Their effectiveness, accessibility and quality are intricately tied to governance models and strategies for resource allocation.

2. Empirical studies confirm that high-quality and efficient public services have a significant impact on

citizens' satisfaction and trust in government. This can be further enhanced through increased citizen participation in service design and improvement as well as closer collaboration between citizens and government agencies.

3. The advancement of digital technologies requires a transformation of public administration principles to deliver solutions that address the evolving needs of citizens. Digitalization of public services provides the opportunity to ensure 24/7 accessibility, accelerate service delivery and streamline administrative processes, ultimately fostering more efficient governance and optimized resource allocation.

4. Current trends in public service development are reshaping the traditional public administration model, prioritizing collaboration and innovation as essential drivers of value creation. This approach aids in modernizing public governance, enhances citizens' trust in state institutions and fosters more transparent, efficient, inclusive and sustainable public service delivery.

5. Although various theoretical and practical solutions have been developed to improve the quality of public services, challenges related to the Trilemma – 'fast-good-cheap' in governance persist. Consequently, future research could explore the role of digital technologies and innovations in improving service delivery efficiency and speed, while maintaining high-quality standards and fostering public welfare growth.

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