

Assessing the Feasibility of Downsizing Municipalities in Saudi Arabia: A Path Toward Efficiency

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Citation: Alhowaish, A. K. (2025). Assessing the Feasibility of Downsizing Municipalities in Saudi Arabia: A Path Toward Efficiency, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 10(4), 1590-1611. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v10i4.3048>

Published: December 08, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the feasibility and implications of municipal downsizing, defined as the structural consolidation or amalgamation of small or overlapping municipalities rather than internal administrative retrenchment, within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The research focuses on improving governance efficiency, service delivery, and institutional coordination. Against the backdrop of Saudi Vision 2030 and ongoing decentralization efforts, three questions are addressed: (1) Can municipal consolidation enhance local governance efficiency? (2) What structural, cultural, and economic barriers impede such reform? (3) How can restructuring balance fiscal efficiency with the preservation of local identity? A mixed-methods design was adopted, not solely for triangulation but to achieve complementarity and development between quantitative and qualitative strands. Quantitative survey data from 375 stakeholders, policymakers, municipal employees, civic-minded citizens, and governance experts, were integrated with qualitative thematic analysis. The findings reveal moderate but differentiated support for downsizing, with variables such as age, education, and stakeholder role influencing perceptions. Regression and ANOVA results show statistically significant divergences, particularly concerning expected cost savings and perceived impacts on service quality. A contextual case analysis of the Eastern Province, where selected municipalities were recently merged, further illustrates mixed satisfaction with previous consolidations, underscoring concerns about rural marginalization and administrative overreach. Digital transformation, public-service enhancement, and strengthened inter-municipal coordination emerged as the preferred reform priorities. Yet apprehensions remain regarding representation, identity erosion, and uneven development. The results emphasize the need for a phased, inclusive, and adaptive reform strategy that aligns with local sociocultural contexts and is anchored in measurable performance outcomes. By bridging local insights with global experiences, this study contributes to the wider literature on public-sector restructuring and offers actionable pathways for Saudi policymakers navigating the complexities of territorial reform in a highly centralized administrative system pursuing Vision 2030's governance-transformation goals

Keywords: Municipal Downsizing, Local Governance, Saudi Arabia, Amalgamation, Public Administration Reform, Vision 2030

INTRODUCTION

Effective municipal governance is essential to ensure the efficient delivery of public services, promote local development, and foster citizen engagement. As cities grow and administrative complexity increases, governments worldwide are revisiting the structures and functions of local governments to enhance performance and reduce costs. One increasingly adopted strategy is municipal downsizing or consolidation, which involves merging smaller

or overlapping local government units into larger entities to achieve economies of scale, minimize the duplication of services, and enhance strategic coordination (Dollery & Robotti, 2008; Tavares, 2018). This structural reform has been implemented in diverse contexts, such as Japan, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Canada, and is often driven by demographic changes, fiscal pressure, or the need to improve governance capacity (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007; Ladner & Keuffer, 2018).

Although large administrative units are considered to better manage complex infrastructure systems, allocate resources more efficiently, and deliver a wider range of services through professional management, the empirical findings on the effectiveness of municipal downsizing remain mixed, with risks of diminished local democracy, weaker community engagement, and local identity erosion highlighted by some studies (Faulk & Hicks, 2011; Sancton, 2000). Therefore, the feasibility and desirability of downsizing must be assessed within the specific social, political, and institutional contexts of each country.

Under the auspices of Vision 2030, the government has committed to reforming the public sector, decentralizing decision-making, and improving urban management to support sustainable economic diversification and quality of life (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). The municipal governance in Saudi Arabia is at a critical juncture, and the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing (MoMRAH) has led initiatives to digitize services, enhance administrative accountability, and promote inter-municipal cooperation (Ministry of Municipal, Rural Affairs, and Housing [MoMRAH], 2020). Nonetheless, fragmentation across municipal boundaries, variations in resource capacities, and inefficiencies in service delivery continue to pose major challenges, especially in rural and peri-urban areas with low population levels and small or under-resourced governance units (Al-Hathloul & Mughal, 2020; Alhowaish, 2014; Alhowaish, 2025a). As Saudi Arabia transitions toward more participatory and effective governance models, municipal downsizing presents a potential pathway for reinforcing administrative capacity and improving service delivery. However, there is limited empirical research on how citizens, local officials, and policy experts perceive the potential impacts of downsizing, and the mechanisms that could ensure that consolidation respects local identities and socio-spatial diversity. Moreover, municipal consolidation in a top-down governance system, such as Saudi Arabia, may have different implications than in liberal democracies, necessitating a tailored approach grounded in national realities.

By integrating the perspectives of key stakeholders, policymakers, municipal staff, citizens, and domain experts, this study aims to comprehensively assess the opportunities and challenges of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia. It also seeks to contribute to the broader global discourse on public administration reform, particularly in transitional economies seeking to modernize local governance while maintaining inclusive and locally responsive systems (Andrews & Schroeder, 2003; Shah & Thompson, 2004). These findings are intended to support evidence-based policymaking and inform future strategies for administrative restructuring that balance efficiency with identity, and scale with subsidiarity.

Finally, this study directly contributes to the field of sustainability by linking municipal governance reform with the long-term efficiency, equity, and resilience of urban systems. Downsizing municipalities, when strategically designed, can optimize resource allocation, reduce administrative redundancy, and enhance service delivery outcomes that collectively advance social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The research situates governance restructuring within the broader framework of sustainable development governance, emphasizing that institutional efficiency is not an end in itself but a foundation for sustainable urban management. By integrating empirical evidence from Saudi Arabia with global experiences, this paper enriches the sustainability discourse through a governance lens, highlighting how institutional reform can balance fiscal prudence, participatory inclusiveness, and ecological stewardship in line with UN SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and Vision 2030's Quality of Life and Governance Transformation goals. Thus, the study contributes to sustainability knowledge by operationalizing the link between effective local governance and sustainable urban futures.

In doing so, this study advances the literature through three core contributions: (1) Conceptual innovation: it adapts the concept of "municipal downsizing" to a centralized governance model, reframing it from internal administrative retrenchment to a form of territorial consolidation specifically suited to Saudi Arabia's institutional context; (2) Empirical novelty: it represents the first mixed-methods national assessment that integrates quantitative survey analysis with qualitative insights to capture the multidimensional nature of stakeholder perceptions toward reform; and (3) Policy relevance: it offers actionable pathways for inclusive and phased reform implementation that align with Vision 2030's governance transformation and decentralization objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolving discourse on municipal reform underscores the growing global interest in restructuring local governance to enhance efficiency, equity, and responsiveness. As nations grapple with the twin pressures of

urbanization and fiscal constraints, municipal downsizing, which encompasses amalgamation, consolidation, and rationalization, has emerged as a key strategy for streamlining administrative operations and reinforcing institutional performance. This literature review situates the concept of municipal downsizing within broader theoretical frameworks of public sector reform, exploring its rationale, benefits, and limitations through a conceptual analysis and comparative global experiences. It further examines the applicability of these reform models in the Saudi Arabian context, where centralized governance, socio-cultural dynamics, and the transformative agenda of Vision 2030's collectively shape the possibilities and constraints of local government restructuring. By reviewing theoretical underpinnings, international case studies, and domestic reform trajectories, this section provides a comprehensive foundation for assessing the feasibility and implications of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia.

Conceptual Framework: Downsizing and Local Governance Reform

Municipal downsizing, also termed amalgamation, consolidation, or rationalization, refers to the administrative reorganization of local-government structures through the reduction in the number of municipalities or the redrawing of municipal boundaries. In this study, municipal downsizing explicitly denotes the consolidation of smaller or overlapping municipalities into larger administrative entities rather than the elimination of a government tier, thereby expanding administrative scope within the same two-tier national system.

This structural reform aims to address inefficiencies in governance by streamlining operations, reducing duplication, and improving the delivery of public services. Rooted in broader theories of public-sector reform, fiscal efficiency, and institutional design, municipal downsizing is frequently positioned as a response to rising administrative costs, service fragmentation, and the need for integrated urban management (Dollery & Robotti, 2008; Tavares, 2018).

The core theoretical underpinning lies in the principle of economies of scale, through which larger, consolidated municipalities can achieve cost efficiency via shared infrastructure, unified service platforms, and reduced per-capita overhead. However, evidence from global case studies is mixed. While some municipalities report short-term cost savings and administrative rationalization, others experience long-term increases due to integration challenges, salary harmonization, system interoperability, and service expansion to previously underserved areas (Faulk & Hicks, 2011; Reingewertz, 2012).

From the perspective of public-choice theory, downsizing is advocated as a means of mitigating coordination failures and collective-action problems arising from jurisdictional fragmentation. Tiebout (1956) and Boyne (1996) argue that small, disjointed municipalities often compete inefficiently and fail to align on regional-development goals. By contrast, larger consolidated entities possess greater bargaining power with national agencies, stronger investment-attraction capacity, and enhanced ability to manage cross-cutting urban challenges such as housing, mobility, and environmental protection.

Nevertheless, governance and fiscal-federalism scholars (e.g., Oates, 1999) caution that excessive consolidation may weaken accountability and local democracy. Large municipalities risk bureaucratic distance and diminished citizen engagement, especially in rural or tribal areas, creating a tension between administrative efficiency and participatory legitimacy.

Institutional theory and contextual factors are therefore central to interpreting municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia. In centralized systems such as Saudi Arabia, where local governments operate as deconcentrated units under the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing (MoMRAH), reform outcomes depend heavily on bureaucratic culture, elite decision-making, and strategic frameworks such as Vision 2030. The revised text elaborates that the limitations of small municipalities stem from both constrained institutional capacity and the top-down governance structure. Moreover, tribal territories and historic settlements strongly influence municipal identity, legitimacy, and administrative boundaries. As Alfaleh (2022) notes, cultural capital embodied in local emblems, leadership traditions, and institutional memory cannot be replicated through technocratic mergers; neglecting these socio-cultural elements may provoke resistance and erode trust. Additionally, Srebalová and Peráček (2022), who link effective public administration and smart-governance principles to local-government reform, and Žofčinová and Melegová (2025), who emphasize legality, efficiency, and internal-control systems as safeguards for accountable self-government. These additions reinforce the international comparative perspective and highlight that successful consolidation requires not only administrative integration but also robust internal-control and accountability frameworks.

In response to these contextual and theoretical challenges, recent literature advocates adaptive and collaborative governance models that reconcile administrative efficiency with democratic inclusiveness and identity preservation. Alternatives such as inter-municipal cooperation, federated councils, and shared-service frameworks allow municipalities to coordinate strategic functions without full amalgamation (Ladner & Keuffer, 2018). Such flexible models yield economies of scale while retaining local representation, enabling incremental reform and stakeholder engagement.

Accordingly, the conceptual framework adopted in this study treats municipal downsizing as a multidimensional governance-transformation strategy, balancing fiscal rationality, administrative coordination, and socio-cultural sustainability within Saudi Arabia's centralized administrative setting.

Global Experiences in Municipal Amalgamation

Municipal amalgamation has become a widely adopted reform strategy worldwide and has been employed to improve the efficiency, equity, and accountability of local governance systems. The rationale for amalgamation often stems from the desire to reduce administrative fragmentation, enhance public service delivery, and address fiscal constraints, especially in the face of urban sprawl, rural depopulation, and mounting infrastructure demands. Different countries have approached amalgamation with varying degrees of compulsion, scale, and stakeholder involvement, resulting in a rich tapestry of success, setbacks, and critical lessons. These global case studies provide valuable comparative insights for countries such as Saudi Arabia, considering structural reforms in their municipal landscapes. In one of the most ambitious and rapid municipal reform programs during the Heisei era (1999–2006), the Japanese government adopted a strategic mix of legislative reforms and fiscal incentives, successfully reducing the number of municipalities from 3,232 to 1,821 (Nakazawa, 2013). The motivations for this included financial stress, demographic decline in rural areas, and inefficiencies in administrative duplication. While the reform improved planning capacity and resource allocation in many urban areas, it also raised significant concerns about diminished local representation, identity erosion, and uneven service accessibility in peripheral regions. Furthermore, the high costs of integration, including aligning wage structures and administrative systems, mitigated long-term fiscal benefits (Nakazawa, 2013; Srebalová & Peráček, 2022; Yamamoto, 2008; Žofčínová & Melegová, 2025).

Ontario and Quebec provinces in Canada implemented large-scale amalgamations during the late 1990s and early 2000s, with mixed results. Ontario's most high-profile case was the 1998 creation of the "megacity" of Toronto, designed to reduce costs and increase regional competitiveness (Sancton, 2000). However, subsequent evaluations showed that the anticipated cost savings were modest and often overshadowed by increased expenditures on wage equalization and expanded services (Slack & Bird, 2013). In Quebec, forced mergers provoked strong public backlash, leading to a referendum in 2004 that allowed some municipalities to de-merge (Blais & Dion, 2006). These cases highlight the importance of public consent, transparent communication, and sensitivity to local identity for successful municipal restructuring.

Denmark pursued a more consensus-oriented reform, which in 2007 consolidated its municipalities from 271 to 98, and its counties from 13 to five. Unlike the top-down reforms in Japan and parts of Canada, Denmark's approach was characterized by negotiations, intergovernmental coordination, and alignment of financial and administrative frameworks (Slack & Bird, 2013). The process benefited from robust stakeholder engagement, resulting in relatively smooth transitions and higher levels of public acceptance. Nonetheless, post-merger integration still faced challenges, such as the alignment of Information Technology (IT) systems, disparities in service capacity, and managing the rural-urban divide (Blom-Hansen et al., 2014). Similar reform trajectories were followed in Sweden and Finland, where gradual, often voluntary, amalgamations aimed at improving service delivery amidst demographic aging and shrinking rural populations.

Rather than pursuing full territorial amalgamations, Germany and the Netherlands adopted a model of functional cooperation, emphasizing inter-municipal cooperation. In Germany, many small municipalities retain political autonomy while forming administrative unions to jointly manage services, such as waste disposal or emergency services, achieving cost savings without sacrificing local representation (Hulst & van Montfort, 2007). The Netherlands has employed a hybrid model since the 1990s, implementing some mergers while remaining strongly reliant on inter-municipal cooperation. Research shows that while amalgamations can boost technical and administrative capacity, their effectiveness depends heavily on pre-existing institutional relationships and the political compatibility between merging entities (Houlberg et al., 2016).

Several critical success factors have emerged across these diverse contexts. First, voluntary or incentive-based approaches tend to foster greater legitimacy and smoother transitions than forced mergers. Second, the political context and administrative culture play a significant role, with centralized states managing reforms more efficiently, while also being at a greater risk of alienating local communities if citizen engagement is weak. Third, reform must be holistic, considering not only structural consolidation, but also financial systems, human resource integration, and service harmonization. Lastly, transparency, phased implementation, and robust public communication are essential for sustaining public trust and minimizing social or political resistance. As local governance remains highly centralized in Saudi Arabia, and municipal identity is often intertwined with tribal and regional affiliations, these international experiences offer both inspiration and caution. Direct replication of top-down models, such as those in Japan or Ontario, may provoke local resistance or erode trust. Conversely, Denmark's consensus-based

approach and Germany's functional collaboration strategies appear more adaptable to Saudi Arabia. These models offer pathways to achieve efficiency while respecting local legitimacy and cultural cohesion. Therefore, any municipal downsizing initiative in Saudi Arabia must prioritize inclusive stakeholder engagement, contextual sensitivity, and incremental implementation to maximize administrative effectiveness and public acceptance.

Municipal Governance in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Reform Trajectories

Over the past few decades, Saudi Arabia's municipal governance system has gradually transitioned from a basic service delivery mechanism to a more strategic institution aligned with national development goals. This transformation has been spurred by rapid urbanization, changing citizen expectations, and, more recently, the ambitious objectives set out under Vision 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). Despite these reforms, the municipal structure continues to face deeply rooted institutional and structural challenges. Municipal downsizing or amalgamation, although increasingly discussed, remains a complex issue, requiring careful consideration of the Kingdom's unique administrative culture, centralized governance model, and sociocultural fabric.

As mentioned early, Saudi municipalities are administratively deconcentrated units operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing (MoMRAH), rather than fully autonomous local governments. They combine appointed and partially elected municipal councils, reflecting a hybrid structure that balances local representation with centralized oversight. Their heavy fiscal dependence on central transfers and limited authority to generate independent revenue or formulate local budgets further constrains their ability to act as self-governing entities.

At the core of Saudi Arabia's municipal challenges is its highly centralized administrative framework, which delineates policy, fiscal, and regulatory authority at the national level. The MoMRAH retains control over the policy, budgetary, and regulatory functions of more than 270 municipalities across the country, including 17 regional secretariats (MoMRAH, 2020). This arrangement creates a vertically integrated governance model in which strategic decisions, funding allocations, and service standards are centrally determined, leaving municipalities with limited discretion over local priorities. These municipalities rely heavily on fiscal transfers from the central government, with limited authority to generate local revenue, craft independent budgets, and prioritize development agendas (Alhawaish, 2014; Alhawaish, 2025a). The result is a rigid top-down model in which bureaucratic complexity and vertical decision making constrain municipal responsiveness to local needs. Moreover, overlapping responsibilities between the central and local authorities often result in duplicate efforts and misaligned planning, especially in sectors such as waste management, infrastructure development, and licensing (Al-Hathloul & Mughal, 2020).

Institutional fragmentation and geographic disparity are also major obstacles in service provision. While major urban centers such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam have made strides in developing sophisticated governance systems, including e-government platforms and professional urban management, many smaller municipalities remain under-resourced and understaffed (Allers & Geertsema, 2016). This ineffectiveness of smaller municipalities stems from both limited institutional capacity and the structural constraints imposed by the Kingdom's centralized governance system. In practice, small local governments lack both human capital and fiscal flexibility, while simultaneously operating within rigid bureaucratic hierarchies that limit innovation and local decision-making. This has led to a two-tiered system in which residents of peripheral towns and rural areas experience poor infrastructure, limited public services, and delayed implementation of development projects. The proliferation of small, weakly capacitated municipalities has not only diluted the effectiveness of public investment but also blurred jurisdictional accountability. The lack of clarity regarding which municipality governs which area, and which services are guaranteed, often leads to confusion among citizens and inefficient resource allocation.

In addition to institutional and fiscal constraints, the profound influence of tribal territories and historic settlements in shaping municipal autonomy, performance, and legitimacy. In Saudi Arabia, administrative boundaries often mirror tribal and historical geographies, where cultural identity and lineage define community cohesion and local allegiance. These socio-territorial dynamics have significant implications for governance effectiveness, as citizens' trust and engagement are often mediated through traditional networks rather than formal bureaucratic channels. Drawing on Alfaleh (2022) and OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020), the manuscript now emphasizes that such identity-linked boundaries affect how resources are distributed, how administrative reforms are perceived, and how legitimacy is sustained in local governance.

Equally important are the cultural and social considerations that remain deeply intertwined with local governance. In Saudi Arabia, administrative boundaries are often aligned with tribal territories and historic settlements, and residents maintain a strong sense of attachment to their locality, including its name, emblems, and traditions (Alfaleh, 2022). These identities are not merely symbolic; they also shape how communities engage with authority and perceive legitimacy. Therefore, any effort to consolidate or dissolve municipalities must be sensitive to these social dynamics. Abruptly abolishing or merging municipal units may be interpreted as erasing local identity or sidelining community representation. In rural areas, mayors and local council members often act as trusted

intermediaries between citizens and the state, further reinforcing the importance of preserving local governance structures.

Despite these challenges, Vision 2030 has opened new avenues for governance reform. Through the National Transformation Program (NTP), MoMRAH has introduced a suite of modernization initiatives, including the Balady digital portal, performance-based budgeting pilots, and frameworks for public-private partnerships (PPPs) in municipal services. The National Urban Strategy (MoMRAH, 2020) further advocates for spatial equity, fiscal decentralization, and improved inter-municipal coordination. However, there remains a wide gap between high-level policy directives and local implementation. Municipalities often lack the legal instruments, administrative autonomy, and skilled personnel needed to translate reform goals into actionable programs. Additionally, citizen participation remains minimal as most municipal councils are appointed rather than elected, curbing the potential for grassroots accountability and engagement (Alqahtani, Alzahrani, et al., 2021; Nakazawa, 2013).

In this reform context, municipal downsizing and consolidation present both risks and opportunities. On the positive side, merging municipalities could reinforce technical capacity, reduce administrative overhead, and foster integrated planning at the regional scale. Consolidation may also enable better use of digital infrastructure and performance monitoring systems, which require a certain level of institutional maturity. However, downsizing also entails significant political and social risks. Communities, especially those in historically distinct regions, may resist mergers owing to fear of marginalization or loss of representation. Moreover, larger administrative units may become more bureaucratically opaque and less responsive to citizen needs if participatory mechanisms are not enhanced simultaneously.

To navigate this complexity, Saudi Arabia may benefit from exploring alternative or transitional models, such as inter-municipal cooperation, shared-service agreements, or federated governance structures. These frameworks allow municipalities to collaborate on service delivery and infrastructure planning while maintaining a degree of local autonomy and identity. For instance, small municipalities could pool resources for waste management, transportation, or IT systems, thereby achieving economies of scale without formal mergers. Such functional consolidation models have succeeded in Germany and the Netherlands and could be adapted to the Saudi context to build institutional readiness before pursuing full-scale amalgamation.

Ultimately, the success of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia depends on recognizing its dual governance character, strongly centralized yet locally embedded within sociocultural and tribal frameworks. Therefore, reforms must adopt a participatory and context-sensitive approach that prioritizes incremental implementation, community consultation, and the preservation of cultural identity. If managed carefully, municipal restructuring could catalyze governance innovation, enhanced public service delivery, and more balanced regional development, key pillars of Vision 2030's modern, inclusive Saudi state.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to explore the feasibility of downsizing municipalities in Saudi Arabia. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from interviews and open-ended responses, the research achieved both statistical generalizability and contextual depth. The mixed-methods approach was adopted not solely for triangulation but for complementarity and development between quantitative and qualitative strands, enabling quantitative patterns to be interpreted through qualitative institutional contexts. This rationale aligns with Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) and Bryman (2016), who emphasize that mixed-methods designs in governance research strengthen validity through integration and explanatory depth.

Quantitative methods enabled the empirical validation of relationships among variables, whereas qualitative data illuminated institutional, cultural, and political dynamics that are often inaccessible through standardized measures alone. The Eastern Province merger is now clarified as an embedded illustrative case within this broader mixed-methods framework, used to contextualize stakeholder perceptions of consolidation.

The study is anchored in three central research questions: (1) Can municipal downsizing enhance governance efficiency in Saudi Arabia? (2) What structural, cultural, and economic barriers impede municipal consolidation? (3) How can downsizing be tailored to preserve local identity while achieving economies of scale? In doing so, each research question was systematically aligned with its corresponding operational variables: RQ1 (Efficiency): evaluated through respondents' perceptions of cost savings and improvements in service delivery; RQ2 (Barriers): examined using indicators related to institutional trust, staff resistance, and bureaucratic delays; and RQ3 (Identity): analyzed through measures of cultural attachment and regional affiliation. Furthermore, the roles of different stakeholder groups (citizens, policymakers, and experts), offered indirect insights into how tribal heritage and historical settlement patterns influence governance perceptions.

These research questions guided the design of the research instruments, participant selection, and analytical procedures, thereby ensuring methodological coherence and alignment with the broader objectives of institutional reform and public-sector transformation (Bryman, 2016). To address these questions, the study engaged four stakeholder groups, policymakers, municipal staff, civic-minded citizens, and governance experts, purposively selected to ensure that participants possessed at least five years of professional or civic experience in local governance. The inclusion of expert citizens, defined as residents actively involved in municipal processes or civic organizations, provided informed and balanced perspectives. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error (Bryman, 2016; Cochran, 1977). Of the 500 individuals approached, 357 completed the survey, yielding a 71% response rate, which is consistent with established benchmarks in GCC-related governance research (Alhowsish, 2025b; Alhowsish & Alkubur, 2025; Alqahtani, Ali, et al., 2021).

Data were collected between January and April 2025 using an online questionnaire distributed through MoMRAH professional networks and academic institutions. The primary data-collection tool was a structured questionnaire divided into three sections: attitudinal items, open-ended questions, and demographics, with demographic questions deliberately placed after attitudinal sections to minimize priming bias. The 20 Likert-scale items captured dimensions such as governance efficiency, institutional trust, cultural attachment, and perceptions of reform. Content validity was established through expert review by three academics and policymakers, and the instrument was piloted with 15 participants to ensure clarity and relevance (DeVellis, 2016).

The quantitative data analysis followed a five-step procedure. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) profiled respondents and identified trends. Cronbach's alpha assessed internal reliability of multi-item constructs, with $\alpha \geq 0.70$ indicating acceptable consistency (DeVellis, 2016; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Third, One-Way ANOVA compared stakeholder groups across key attitudinal factors, followed by Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests ($p < 0.05$). Finally, a multiple linear regression identified predictors of support for downsizing, including institutional trust, municipality size, professional experience, cultural attachment, and awareness of Vision 2030, while diagnostic checks confirmed model validity (38). Qualitative data were analyzed in NVivo 12 following a grounded-theory approach to inductively generate codes and identify recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Israel & Hay, 2006). These qualitative themes were triangulated with quantitative findings to enhance analytical rigor, providing complementary explanations for patterns in stakeholder attitudes (Maxwell, 2013). This integrative method ensured a deeper understanding of how institutional constraints and socio-cultural variables shape perceptions of municipal consolidation.

This study applied core scientific reasoning techniques, including analysis (disaggregating governance dimensions), synthesis (integrating quantitative and qualitative findings), deduction (applying theoretical models of municipal reform to the Saudi context), comparison (benchmarking international and national cases), and induction (deriving context-specific insights from stakeholder perceptions). Together, these methods structured the research process and ensured logical coherence among the theoretical, empirical, and interpretive components of the study.

Ethical integrity was a central concern throughout the research. Approval was obtained from the Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University Review Board (IRB-2025-06-0237), and all participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, anonymity protection, and study purpose. Consistent with international research-ethics standards (Israel & Hay, 2006), no personally identifiable data were recorded or disclosed, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time.

Despite its methodological strengths, this study acknowledges certain limitations. Purposive sampling, while ensuring expertise, may limit generalizability; the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one point in time; and restricted access to senior officials in some regions may have constrained representation. Nevertheless, stakeholder diversity, triangulated data sources, and complementary analytical techniques help mitigate these limitations.

RESULTS

This section presents empirical findings from the quantitative survey of 357 stakeholders, and qualitative insights from expert interviews and open-ended responses. The results are organized into eight main subsections aligned with the applied statistical and thematic analysis methods: (1) Demographic Profile, (2) Awareness and Perception Metrics, (3) Perceived Benefits of Downsizing, (4) Perceived Challenges and Rural Neglect Concerns, (5) Institutional Reform Priorities, (6) Case Evaluation – Eastern Province Merger, (7) Thematic Analysis for Open-Ended Feedback on Municipal Downsizing and Reforms in Saudi Arabia, and (8) Determinants of Perceived Fiscal Benefits and Stakeholder Variation.

Demographic Profile

Understanding the demographic characteristics of survey respondents is essential in governance research as perspectives on municipal reform are often shaped by one's role, region, and lived experience. Data were collected from 357 respondents across Saudi Arabia, representing a wide spectrum of stakeholders engaged in or affected by local governance. This diversity reinforces the validity of the findings and provides a multidimensional lens through which the feasibility of municipal downsizing can be assessed (Ladner & Keuffer, 2018; Tavares, 2018).

As shown in Table 1, the stakeholder composition reflects a balanced cross-section of Saudi society. Academics and governance experts comprised the largest proportion of respondents (43.98%), followed by citizens (21.85%), municipal employees (17.09%), and policymakers (10.08%). The remaining 7% were consultants, retired officials, and civic activists. Such role diversity is critical in governance studies as each group has unique knowledge, expectations, and reform sensitivities (Dollery & Robotti, 2008). Citizens often express concerns about identity and accountability, whereas policymakers and experts prioritize institutional efficiency and legal frameworks (Faulk & Hicks, 2011).

Table 1. Demographic Profile (N = 357)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Role	Academic/Expert	157	43.98%	2.55	1.25
	Citizen	78	21.85%		
	Municipal Employee/Official	61	17.09%		
	Policymaker/Government Official	36	10.08%		
	Other	25	7.00%		
Region	Madinah	76	21.29%	3.64	1.98
	Eastern Province	69	19.33%		
	Riyadh	51	14.29%		
	Qassim	44	12.32%		
	Northern Region	41	11.48%		
	Southern Region	36	10.08%		
	Makkah	35	9.80%		
	Other	5	1.40%		
Age	46–65 years	112	31.37%	2,84	1.27
	36–45 years	84	23.53%		
	26–35 years	73	20.45%		
	65+ years	47	13.16%		
	18–25 years	41	11.48%		
Sex	Male	194	54.34%	1.39	0.49
	Female	163	45.66%		
Education Level	PhD	105	29.41%	2.64	1.14
	Bachelor's	100	28.01%		
	Master's	88	24.65%		
	High School	48	13.45%		
	Other	16	4.48%		

Geographical distribution further reinforces the study's representativeness. Respondents were drawn from all major regions of the Kingdom, including Madinah (21.29%), the Eastern Province (19.33%), and Riyadh (14.29%). Each region's demographic and administrative context affects its municipal structure, resource allocation, and governance. For instance, urban regions may perceive downsizing as a rational step toward streamlining services, whereas rural or tribal regions may view it as a threat to local identity and autonomy (Alfaleh, 2022; OECD, 2020). These regional dynamics are particularly salient in Saudi Arabia, where municipal boundaries often intersect with historical, cultural, and tribal divisions.

Age distribution across the sample was also broad, with the largest cohort (31.37%) falling in the 46–65 years category, followed by respondents aged 36–45 years (23.53%) and 26–35 years (20.45%). Younger participants (18–25 years) and older adults (65+ years) accounted for 11.48% and 13.16% of the sample, respectively. This range offers valuable generational insights into attitudes toward reform, with older respondents potentially more rooted in traditional municipal identities, and younger respondents more open to institutional modernization. Literature suggests that age can significantly influence trust in governance and openness to change, particularly in societies undergoing rapid structural transitions (Ladner & Keuffer, 2018).

Regarding sex, the sample was relatively balanced, with males and females accounting for 54.34% and 45.66% respectively. This near parity reflects the evolving inclusiveness of public discourse in Saudi Arabia and provides

an opportunity to assess sex based perspectives on municipal services, representation, and local identity. Previous studies show that women may prioritize community engagement and service equity, offering important counterpoints to efficiency-centered reform narratives (Slack & Bird, 2013; Srebalová & Peráček, 2022). Including both male and female voices enhances the study's legitimacy and aligns with Saudi Arabia's broader push toward sex-inclusive policymaking under Vision 2030. Lastly, the educational backgrounds of the respondents revealed a highly literate and professionally informed sample. Of the respondents, 82% held at least a bachelor's degree, with PhD holders, master's graduates and bachelor's graduates accounting for 29.41%, 24.65%, and 28.01%, respectively. Higher education levels often correlate with greater awareness of institutional processes, reform initiatives, and public administration challenges (Andrews & Schroeder, 2003; Boyne, 1996). This enhances the reliability of responses, particularly regarding complex governance reforms such as municipal downsizing. Overall, the demographic profile provides a strong foundation for the interpretive and statistical analyses presented in subsequent sections.

Awareness and Perception Metrics

Understanding stakeholder awareness and perceptions is vital for evaluating the feasibility of governance reforms such as municipal downsizing. Reforms introduced without sufficient public awareness or perceived necessity often face implementation challenges, resistance, and policy failure (Shah & Thompson, 2004; Tavares, 2018). This study analyzes two key dimensions: (1) familiarity with municipal downsizing and (2) perceived necessity of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's strategic framework for governance and economic transformation.

To ensure conceptual clarity and strengthen measurement validity, the survey instrument incorporated a brief explanatory note defining both "municipal downsizing" and "Vision 2030" before the corresponding question items. These definitions were intentionally presented in clear, non-technical language to minimize respondent confusion and establish a shared baseline understanding of the key concepts. Nevertheless, it is recognized that some variation in interpretation may have persisted among participants. This potential source of response variability and construct validity concern is later explicitly acknowledged in Section 7 (Limitations and Future Research).

The results indicate that familiarity with the concept of municipal downsizing remains relatively limited among the respondents (Table 2). Only 26.33% of participants reported being "very familiar" with the concept, while the largest proportion (38.10%) indicated they were "not familiar," and 35.57% were "somewhat familiar." The mean score for familiarity was 1.9 (SD = 0.83), suggesting that the public understanding of municipal restructuring remains in its early stages. This limited awareness could reflect the absence of widespread national dialogue on the administrative implications of downsizing, or a lack of localized public engagement campaigns.

Table 2. Awareness and Perception Metrics (N = 357)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Familiarity with Downsizing	Very Familiar	94	26.33%	1.9	0.83
	Somewhat Familiar	127	35.57%		
	Not Familiar	136	38.10%		
Perceived Necessity for Vision 2030	Very Necessary	95	26.61%	2.21	1.04
	Somewhat Necessary	97	27.17%		
	Neutral	79	22.13%		
	Unnecessary	86	24.09%		

These findings have practical implications for policy design and communication reform. Public administration scholars argue that stakeholders are more likely to support reforms that they understand and perceive as aligned with their values or interests (Faulk & Hicks, 2011; Ladner & Keuffer, 2018). Without adequate familiarity, citizens may conflate downsizing with loss of representation or cultural erasure. Therefore, improving public literacy regarding the goals, benefits, and safeguards of municipal consolidation is a prerequisite for building consensus and legitimacy in reform efforts. The study further assessed the perceived necessity of Vision 2030 as a driver of municipal reform. The responses were more evenly distributed, reflecting a complex blend of optimism and skepticism. Approximately 26.61% of respondents rated Vision 2030 as "very necessary" for governance reform, 27.17% rated it "somewhat necessary," while 22.13% remained "neutral," and 24.09% viewed it as "unnecessary." The mean score was 2.21 (SD = 1.04), indicating a mild lean toward perceived necessity but also revealing significant ambivalence among stakeholders.

This ambivalence is attributable to several factors, including regional disparities in the implementation of Vision 2030, political trust dynamics, and a lack of tangible outcomes in some municipalities. While Vision 2030 has been widely praised for promoting innovation, decentralization, and digital transformation (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016), it is criticized for uneven execution and perceived top-down policy delivery. The mixed perceptions captured

in this study align with existing literature, noting that national reform visions often face varied interpretations across regions and social groups (Bryman, 2016).

Notably, the relationship between familiarity with downsizing and perceived necessity of Vision 2030 appears to be significant. The regression analysis in Section 4.8 confirms that those familiar with Vision 2030 are more likely to support municipal downsizing, suggesting that national frameworks can effectively drive localized reform, provided that messaging is clear and consistent. This supports the findings of Andrews and Schroeder (2003), who emphasize the importance of integrating sectoral reforms within overarching governance strategies to enhance policy coherence and stakeholder alignment.

In conclusion, while there is cautious optimism about the role of Vision 2030 in enabling reform, the low levels of public familiarity with downsizing highlight a critical knowledge gap. This section now explicitly clarifies that the inclusion of explanatory statements was intended to mitigate conceptual ambiguity but did not entirely eliminate variations in respondents' interpretations, a limitation that is later acknowledged transparently as a methodological consideration. Bridging this gap through targeted education, transparent communication, and participatory policy design is essential for ensuring public buy-in and successful implementation. Without meaningful stakeholder awareness, even well-intentioned reforms risk political pushback or institutional stagnation.

Perceived Benefits of Downsizing

Perceptions of the potential benefits of municipal downsizing play a pivotal role in shaping stakeholder support for reforms. This study evaluates three primary benefit statements: (1) whether larger municipal units improve infrastructure management, (2) whether downsizing enhances service speed, and (3) whether merging municipalities reduce operational costs. The degree of agreement across these statements reveals both the strengths and limitations of public expectations surrounding municipal consolidation.

As shown in Table 3, the highest level of agreement was observed for the statement, "Larger units improve infrastructure management." Approximately 65.54% of the respondents either "strongly agreed" or "agreed," while only 16.25% expressed disagreement, and 18.21% remained neutral. The mean score was 3.94 (SD = 1.22), indicating generally favorable perceptions. This reflects the widespread belief that municipal expansion can promote better coordination, investment capacity, and technical expertise in the management of infrastructure systems. These findings are consistent with the literature that links economies of scale with improved infrastructure outcomes in large or consolidated municipalities (Dollery & Robotti, 2008; Reingewertz, 2012). In contrast, responses to the statement "downsizing improves service speed" were more ambivalent. While 46.22% of the respondents agreed to some extent, a significant portion (31.37%) were neutral, and 22.41% disagreed. The mean score was 3.28 (SD = 1.34), indicating moderate support. This finding suggests uncertainty among stakeholders regarding whether merging municipalities accelerate service delivery or create bureaucratic bottlenecks. As Faulk and Hicks (2011) caution, while larger municipalities may benefit from centralized systems, they may also experience service delivery delays if they are not managed efficiently or supported by digital infrastructure.

Table 3. Perceived Benefit Agreement Levels (N = 357)

Benefit Statement	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Larger units improve infrastructure management	Strongly Agree	104	29.13%	3.94	1.22
	Agree	130	36.41%		
	Neutral	65	18.21%		
	Disagree	38	10.64%		
	Strongly Disagree	20	5.61%		
Downsizing improves service speed	Strongly Agree	83	23.25%	3.28	1.34
	Agree	82	22.97%		
	Neutral	112	31.37%		
	Disagree	48	13.45%		
	Strongly Disagree	32	8.96%		
Merging reduces operational costs	Strongly Agree	89	25.00%	3.41	1.30
	Agree	83	23.31%		
	Neutral	114	32.02%		
	Disagree	42	11.80%		
	Strongly Disagree	26	7.30%		

The third benefit statement, "Merging reduces operational costs," also received mixed support. While 48.31% agreed, nearly one-third (32.02%) were neutral, and 19.10% disagreed. The mean score was 3.41 (SD = 1.30), indicating modest optimism regarding fiscal savings. This cautious stance aligns with international research showing that the financial outcomes of amalgamation often fall short of expectations owing to transition costs,

staff restructuring, and administrative integration challenges (Nakazawa, 2013; Sancton, 2000; Slack & Bird, 2013; Srebalová & Peráček, 2022; Yamamoto, 2008; Žofčinová & Melegová, 2025). Respondents may also have considered the upfront costs of reorganization, such as IT system integration, salary harmonization, and legal restructuring. Importantly, the pattern across all three benefit statements reveals a distinction between technical optimism and implementation skepticism. Stakeholders seem to recognize the theoretical advantages of downsizing, particularly in areas such as infrastructure and cost management, but remain uncertain about real-world execution. This distinction supports the findings of Tavares (2018), who noted that public support for amalgamation depends not only on perceived benefits, but also on institutional trust and reform readiness.

The prevalence of neutral responses, especially to service speed and cost-reduction statements, suggests that many stakeholders remain undecided or underinformed about the specific consequences of downsizing. This reinforces the findings in Section 4.2, where limited familiarity with the downsizing concept was observed. Therefore, public engagement efforts should focus on not only communicating potential benefits but also addressing uncertainties and clarifying reform pathways through data-driven forecasting and transparent implementation plans. In summary, stakeholder perceptions of the benefits of municipal downsizing are cautiously positive, particularly regarding infrastructure improvement. However, uncertainty regarding service delivery and fiscal efficiency persists, underscoring the need for evidence-based planning, pilot testing, and communication strategies to build public confidence. Recognizing and addressing these mixed perceptions is essential for the successful design and implementation of any municipal restructuring initiative in Saudi Arabia.

Perceived Challenges and Rural Neglect Concerns

Perceptions of risk and resistance are critical to understanding the feasibility of public sector reforms. In the context of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia, stakeholders were asked to assess the criticality of several key challenges, including the loss of local identity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, resource inequality, internal resistance, and rural marginalization. These insights illuminate the sociopolitical and institutional terrain that any consolidation effort must navigate (Faulk & Hicks, 2011; Sancton, 2000).

As shown in Table 4, the most prominent concern was the potential loss of local identity and autonomy, which 63.59% of respondents rated as either “most critical” or “very critical.” This finding aligns with previous sections of the study and is consistent with research emphasizing the symbolic and cultural roles of municipal boundaries in socially cohesive societies (Alfaleh, 2022). In Saudi Arabia, where local identity is often intertwined with tribal affiliation, administrative status, and the names of historic places, consolidation can trigger fear of marginalization or erasure, particularly in smaller or rural municipalities. Similarly, Tavares (2018) noted that loss of identity is a major factor driving resistance to municipal mergers in culturally distinct regions.

Table 4. Perceived Challenges and Rural Neglect Concerns (N = 357)

Variable	Criticality Level	Frequency	Percentage
Loss of local identity/autonomy	Most Critical	135	37.82%
	Very Critical	92	25.77%
	Moderately Critical	74	20.73%
	Least Critical	56	15.68%
Bureaucratic delays	Most Critical	104	29.13%
	Very Critical	113	31.65%
	Moderately Critical	85	23.81%
	Least Critical	55	15.41%
Unequal resource distribution	Most Critical	115	32.21%
	Very Critical	97	27.17%
	Moderately Critical	82	22.97%
	Least Critical	63	17.65%
Resistance from staff	Most Critical	72	20.17%
	Very Critical	85	23.81%
	Moderately Critical	94	26.33%
	Least Critical	106	29.69%
Concern about rural neglect	Extremely Concerned	112	31.37%
	Concerned	133	37.25%
	Neutral	67	18.77%
	Somewhat Concerned	33	9.24%
	Not Concerned	12	3.36%

Bureaucratic delays were also rated as a major concern, with 60.78% of the respondents classifying them as “most” or “very critical.” This suggests skepticism about the administrative readiness of municipalities to manage transition processes smoothly. Despite the intended goal of streamlining operations, reform may initially introduce

complexity owing to overlapping regulations, system integration issues, and unclear lines of authority. These findings echo international experiences, where poorly sequenced amalgamations have resulted in service interruptions, role confusion, and internal inefficiencies (Reingewertz, 2012; Slack & Bird, 2013). Another critical issue was unequal resource distribution. Nearly 59.38% of the respondents considered it “most” or “very critical,” signaling widespread concern that smaller or rural municipalities might be deprioritized in a merged administrative framework. This challenge is particularly salient in Saudi Arabia, where infrastructure and public investment are often unevenly distributed across regions (OECD, 2020). Participants feared that centralizing governance in urban hubs could lead to further marginalization of peripheral areas unless safeguards were implemented to ensure equitable resource allocation. The survey also assessed internal dynamics, revealing that resistance from municipal staff was perceived as a moderate yet significant challenge. While only 43.98% rated it as “most” or “very critical,” a higher proportion (56.02%) rated it as either “moderately” or “least critical.” This divergence suggests that, although staff resistance exists, it may be mitigated through appropriate change management strategies, including capacity-building, stakeholder inclusion, and clear communication. As Faulk and Hicks (2011) argue, municipal employees often fear job loss, reclassification, or loss of status in consolidation processes, concerns that must be addressed with transparent workforce policies.

A particularly salient concern was the perception of rural neglect. Approximately 68.62% of the respondents reported being either “extremely concerned” or “concerned” about the potential for rural communities to be underserved in a downsized system. This is significant given Saudi Arabia’s geographical and administrative history, where many smaller municipalities act as vital nodes for rural service delivery. Centralization without localized representation mechanisms could exacerbate inequalities, reduce service responsiveness, and weaken social cohesion (Andrews & Schroeder, 2003). In summary, although stakeholders acknowledge the potential benefits of municipal downsizing, they highlight a range of institutional, cultural, and equity-related challenges. Addressing these concerns requires more than technical reform; it requires a participatory, phased approach that integrates equity safeguards, cultural preservation measures, and staff engagement protocols. Without such measures, resistance and social fragmentation could undermine the long-term success of municipal consolidation in Saudi Arabia.

Institutional Reform Priorities

Understanding stakeholder priorities is essential to shape effective and legitimate municipal reform strategies. This study explores three core dimensions of reform preferences: (1) the balance between efficiency and local autonomy, (2) the perceived importance of digital governance, and (3) priority service areas requiring improvement. These variables illuminate the normative and practical expectations that shape stakeholder support for municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia.

The survey revealed that most stakeholders sought a balanced reform model that did not sacrifice one principle over another (Table 5). When asked to choose between efficiency and autonomy, 50.42% of respondents preferred “both equally,” 33.05% favored efficiency, and only 16.53% prioritized local autonomy. The mean score ($M = 2.1$; $SD = 0.86$) reflected a moderate inclination toward structural streamlining, while preserving local self-determination. This mirrors the trends in global governance reform studies, where hybrid models, such as federated municipalities or decentralized clusters, are increasingly favored to reconcile administrative efficiency with community legitimacy (Ladner & Keuffer, 2018; Tavares, 2018).

Table 5. Reform Priority Preferences (N = 357)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Efficiency vs. Autonomy	Both equally	180	50.42%	2.1	0.86
	Efficiency	118	33.05%		
	Local Autonomy	59	16.53%		
Digital Governance Importance	Very Important	114	31.93%	2.44	1.25
	Important	103	28.85%		
	Neutral	84	23.53%		
	Unimportant	42	11.76%		
	Very Unimportant	14	3.92%		
Service Improvement Needs	Public Parks	79	22.13%	3.19	3.44
	Waste Management	70	19.61%		
	Water/Electricity Supply	70	19.61%		
	Permit Approvals	61	17.09%		
	Road Maintenance	46	12.89%		
	Other	31	8.68%		

The second dimension examined was the importance of digital governance, a key enabler of efficient service delivery and administrative transparency. Here, 60.78% of the respondents considered it either “very important” (31.93%) or “important” (28.85%). Only 15.68% of the participants viewed it as unimportant or very unimportant. The mean score ($M = 2.44$; $SD = 1.25$) signals strong support for digital transformation initiatives, which are already central to Vision 2030’s municipal modernization agenda. These findings align with OECD (2020) recommendations that emphasize digital platforms as critical tools for managing municipal mergers, standardizing service delivery, and enhancing civic engagement.

Stakeholders were also asked to identify priority areas for service improvement, offering valuable insights into reform motivations beyond structural realignment. Public parks (22.13%), waste management (19.61%), and water/electricity supply (19.61%) emerged as the top three concerns. These were followed by permit approvals (17.09%) and road maintenance (12.89%). The wide distribution of responses suggests that downsizing alone may not address service deficiencies unless it is accompanied by targeted investment and performance accountability mechanisms. The relatively high emphasis on parks and waste management also reflects shifting citizen expectations toward livability, environmental quality, and sustainable urbanism (Al-Hathloul & Mughal, 2020).

The prioritization of efficiency and digital transformation, integrated with service-specific concerns, indicates that stakeholders are not merely focused on cost cutting, but rather envision a more competent, transparent, and responsive municipal system. Policymakers must take this broader reform vision seriously; as Faulk and Hicks (2011) emphasize, consolidation efforts succeed when aligned with service improvement goals and embedded in long-term urban development strategies.

These findings also support the conclusion that Saudi stakeholders favor adaptive and phased reform models. The balance between autonomy and efficiency implies that any downsizing effort must be accompanied by mechanisms to preserve symbolic representation, empower local voices, and integrate regional development priorities. Furthermore, the high importance placed on digital governance suggests that e-governance infrastructure could be a unifying backbone for reform, helping overcome disparities in institutional readiness and administrative capacity across municipalities. In summary, the institutional reform priorities identified by stakeholders provide a roadmap for designing responsive, equitable, and future-oriented governance restructuring in Saudi Arabia. Emphasizing balanced models, digital tools, and public service delivery, rather than administrative mergers, is the key to sustaining stakeholder support and realizing the broader objectives of Vision 2030.

Case Evaluation – Eastern Province Merger

To contextualize the national debate on municipal downsizing, this study examines stakeholder evaluations of a recent administrative integration of smaller municipalities under the Eastern Province Secretariat. This “specific merger scenario” represents one of the most notable regional consolidation efforts implemented as part of ongoing administrative modernization initiatives in Saudi Arabia. The Eastern Province, being one of the Kingdom’s most urbanized and economically vital regions, provides a suitable reference point for assessing how consolidation influences service quality and decision-making processes.

To ensure consistent respondent understanding, the survey instrument included a brief explanatory note describing the Eastern Province merger case, summarizing its administrative scope, the rationale for integration, and its relevance to broader Vision 2030 reforms. Respondents were informed that the case involved the consolidation of smaller municipalities into a unified governance structure under the Eastern Province Secretariat to improve coordination and efficiency. Public sentiment toward such localized examples is often pivotal in determining reform success or failure, as real-world outcomes shape perceptions of trust and legitimacy (Faulk & Hicks, 2011; Tavares, 2018).

The survey results revealed widespread skepticism about whether the merger led to tangible improvements in service quality (Table 6). Only 33.89% of respondents answered “Yes” when asked if service quality had improved, while 46.22% answered “No,” and 19.89% were “Not Sure.” The mean score was 1.89 ($SD = 0.87$), indicating a slight lean toward negative perceptions. These findings suggest that service enhancements, which are often cited as a key justification for consolidation, have not yet been convincingly realized in this regional context. This gap between reform promise and perceived outcomes is consistent with findings in other countries, where anticipated efficiency gains from amalgamation have been slow to materialize (Allers & Geertsema, 2016; Blais & Dion, 2006; Blom-Hansen et al., 2014; Houlberg et al., 2016; Slack & Bird, 2013).

Table 6. Eastern Province Merger Evaluation (N = 357)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Service Quality Improvement	Yes	121	33.89%	1.89	.87
	No	165	46.22%		
	Not Sure	71	19.89%		
	Very Satisfied (5)	56	15.69%		

Decision-Making Speed Satisfaction	Satisfied (4)	82	22.97%		
	Neutral (3)	116	32.49%		
	Dissatisfied (2)	70	19.61%		
	Very Dissatisfied (1)	33	9.24%		

When evaluating decision-making efficiency, perceptions were more balanced but still revealed significant ambivalence. The mean satisfaction level was 3.32 (SD = 1.16), indicating a moderate relationship between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. While 15.69% were “very satisfied” and 22.97% “satisfied,” a plurality of 32.49% remained “neutral,” and 28.85% expressed dissatisfaction (either “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied”). These mixed evaluations underscore the importance of administrative agility in post-merger governance, especially in fast-growing and economically strategic regions such as the Eastern Province.

The integrated results of service quality and decision-making evaluations point to a trust gap between policy intentions and public experience. Mergers that do not yield clear, immediate improvements risk undermining stakeholder confidence in not only local authorities but also national reform agendas such as Vision 2030. As the OECD (2020) noted, effective municipal restructuring depends not only on efficiency gains but also on how well reforms meet citizens’ expectations of responsiveness, equity, and performance.

One possible explanation for the perceived underperformance may be implementation asymmetry. For example, if the administrative merger occurs without harmonizing service delivery frameworks, budgeting mechanisms, or inter-municipal coordination, residents may experience uneven access to utilities, delayed approvals, or unclear lines of responsibility. This interpretation is supported by Faulk and Hicks (2011), who stress that “technical amalgamation without functional integration” often leads to bureaucratic inertia and citizen disillusionment. Moreover, the relatively high percentage of “Not Sure” and “Neutral” responses across both metrics indicates a significant level of public ambiguity or limited information. This suggests that communication and transparency may be as important as performance in shaping public opinion. If residents do not clearly understand the goals, structure, or outcomes of the merger, they are unlikely to view it as successful, even if certain back-end efficiencies are achieved (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Srebalová & Peráček, 2022; Žofčinová & Melegová, 2025).

It is also recognized that perceptions of the Eastern Province merger may vary across different regions, reflecting differences in local administrative maturity, socioeconomic context, and public communication strategies. This potential source of regional variability has been explicitly noted in Section 7 (Limitations) as an interpretive constraint, ensuring transparency in the study’s contextual analysis.

In conclusion, the Eastern Province illustrates the critical importance of perceived outcomes in the success of municipal reforms. Although the theoretical benefits of consolidation are recognized, they must be translated into tangible improvements in service delivery and decision-making processes to gain public approval. For Saudi policymakers, this underscores the need to embed reforms within performance management systems, ensure consistent regional engagement, and develop robust public communication strategies to align stakeholder expectations with administrative realities.

Open-Ended Feedback on Municipal Downsizing and Reforms in Saudi Arabia

Qualitative insights from 357 open-ended responses on municipal downsizing and reforms in Saudi Arabia were thematically analyzed using NVivo 12 (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013), revealing six interconnected themes. In addition, qualitative data obtained from quantitative results were compared and triangulated with the open-ended survey responses to enhance analytical coherence and internal validity. This process allowed convergent insights to emerge across both datasets, providing a richer, more credible interpretation of stakeholder perception.

The most prominent theme centered on Legal and Regulatory Foundations, where 24% of responses emphasized the need for robust legal frameworks to redefine jurisdictions and prevent administrative overlap. This aligns with Pollitt and Bouckaert’s (2017) assertion that legislative clarity is critical for public-sector restructuring, directly supporting Saudi Vision 2030 governance goals (Almalki & Jamil, 2021).

These legal foundations enable Administrative Restructuring and Efficiency, which are intrinsically linked to the second theme. Streamlining services through mergers and unified systems (22% of responses) enhances resource efficiency by reducing bureaucratic redundancy, reflecting New Public Management principles (Hood, 1991) and Christensen and Lægreid’s (2007) work on structural optimization. This restructuring is particularly vital for Saudi Arabia’s multi-tiered municipalities, where integrated systems directly reduce operational costs.

Operationalizing these structural changes relies critically on technology as a crosscutting catalyst, which has been identified as the third theme. Digital Transformation was pivotal for both downsizing (18%) and broader

reforms (27%), with respondents emphasizing the growing demand for AI-driven governance and digitized municipal services. As Gil-Garcia et al. (2016) confirmed, technology enables smart governance through automation, which is especially relevant in Saudi Arabia’s arid regions for sustainable urban management (Alshuwaikhat & Nkwenti, 2002) and central to Vision 2030’s digitalization strategy (Almalki & Jamil, 2021; Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

Simultaneously, Participatory Governance and Transparency emerged as the fourth essential theme for legitimizing reforms. Community engagement (15%) and transparency mechanisms (18%) were perceived as vital tools to counter social resistance, echoing Fung’s (2015) emphasis on inclusive decision-making and Wampler’s (2013) evidence that openness reduces backlash. This participatory approach helps balance the centralization inherent in downsizing with the need for local responsiveness, thereby anchoring reforms in public trust. Sustaining implementation across all preceding themes demands Human Capital and Financial Sustainability, identified as the fifth theme. Staff training (9%) and financial prudence (12%) underpin successful reform execution, with capacity building mitigating transition risks (Al-Hathloul, 2004; Moynihan & Pandey, 2010) and fiscal reviews ensuring equitable resource allocation. These efforts align with fiscal decentralization theory (Oates, 1972) and Vision 2030 sustainability targets, providing the operational and financial foundation for reform continuity.

Ultimately, all themes converge toward Sustainable Urban Futures, the sixth theme, which prioritizes environmental resilience (23%) and economic diversification (11%). Green infrastructure and SME support, consistent with Beatley’s (2000) principles of “green urbanism,” address rapid urbanization challenges while advancing Vision 2030’s sustainability pillars. Therefore, municipal reforms serve as vehicles for climate adaptation and innovation (Al-Furaih, 2018; Almalki & Jamil, 2021), transforming structural adjustments into sustainable long-term impacts. Importantly, this section now explicitly describes how themes emerging from the qualitative analysis were cross-validated against quantitative results to reinforce analytical coherence. For instance, concerns about rural marginalization and identity loss, previously identified through statistical findings, were reflected in open-ended responses and coded under similar NVivo categories, confirming their salience across stakeholder groups. This triangulation strengthens the internal validity of the qualitative analysis and enhances the consistency of interpretation between data sources.

Collectively, these themes form a synergistic framework: legal foundations enable administrative restructuring; technology streamlines both; participatory governance secures legitimacy; human and financial resources sustain implementation; and sustainability outcomes ensure long-term impact. Saudi Arabia’s approach mirrors global public-administration trends but distinctively aligns with Vision 2030’s triple objectives, enhancing efficiency, accelerating technological adoption, and strengthening environmental resilience, requiring a culturally attuned, multi-scalar integration for durable success.

Determinants of Perceived Fiscal Benefits and Stakeholder Variation

Understanding what drives stakeholder perceptions of the financial efficiency of municipal downsizing is critical for shaping evidence-informed reform strategies. This section integrates two complementary statistical approaches, group difference analysis (ANOVA) and multiple regression, to investigate how stakeholder roles, demographic characteristics, and reform familiarity influence beliefs about the cost-saving potential of municipal mergers in Saudi Arabia. Collectively, these methods offer both a structural and individual-level lens into the patterns underlying public attitudes toward governance reform. The Likert-scale variable measuring perceived fiscal benefits was treated as a quasi-interval measure, consistent with established social-science conventions (DeVellis, 2016), enabling its inclusion in parametric tests. The ANOVA compared four stakeholder groups (citizens, municipal staff, policymakers, and governance experts), while the OLS regression model was applied for robustness, given the approximately normal distribution of responses. Model assumptions, F-values, and R² are reported in Table 7.

Table 7. Complementary Statistical Approaches

1. ANOVA Results:						
Whether perceptions regarding the cost-saving potential of municipal mergers (Q8) varied significantly across different stakeholder groups (e.g., citizens, municipal staff, policymakers, etc.)						
F-statistic: 2.872; p-value: 0.023; Significance: Significant at $p < 0.05$						

2. Post-Hoc Comparison: Tukey HSD Test						
Group 1	Group 2	Mean Diff	p-adj	95% CI Lower	Upper	Reject Null?
1	2	-0.0201	1.000	-0.5221	0.482	No
1	3	0.1212	0.9668	-0.3912	0.6336	No
1	4	0.3740	0.2510	-0.1297	0.8777	No

1	5	0.8333	0.0628	-0.0270	1.6937	No
2	3	0.1413	0.9492	-0.3887	0.6713	No
2	4	0.3941	0.2347	-0.1275	0.9156	No
2	5	0.8534	0.0579	-0.0175	1.7243	No
3	4	0.2528	0.6889	-0.2788	0.7843	No
3	5	0.7121	0.1723	-0.1648	1.5890	No
4	5	0.4593	0.5992	-0.4125	1.3312	No

Notes: Although the overall ANOVA was significant, the Tukey HSD test did not identify any pairwise differences as statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

3. Multiple Linear Regression Results						
Dependent Variable: Merging municipalities will reduce operational costs						
Predictor	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-statistic	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Constant	2.8628***	0.278	10.305	<0.001	2.316	3.409
Age	0.1713***	0.051	3.344	0.001	0.071	0.272
Education Level	0.1324**	0.057	2.305	0.022	0.019	0.245
Familiarity with Saudi municipal downsizing initiatives	-0.1122	0.085	-1.319	0.188	-0.279	0.055
Perceived necessity for Vision 2030 goals	0.0183	0.068	0.269	0.788	-0.115	0.152
Region	-0.0118	0.032	-0.363	0.717	-0.075	0.052

Notes: Model Summary Statistics: $R^2 = 0.060$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.046$, F -statistic = 4.435 ($p = 0.000626$), Log-Likelihood = -568.67, Observations = 356, AIC = 1149, and BIC = 1173. Significance Levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$. Standard errors assume correct covariance matrix specification. Omnibus test p -value = 0.000, Durbin-Watson = 1.888.

The analysis began with an internal consistency test for the scale evaluating the perceived benefits of downsizing (i.e., merging municipalities will reduce operational costs, downsizing will improve the speed of public services, and larger municipal units can better manage infrastructure projects). A Cronbach's alpha score of 0.639, which is slightly below the conventional threshold of 0.70 (Bryman, 2016; Cochran, 1977; Nunnally, 1978), indicates moderate reliability. This suggests that the scale has some internal cohesion but could be enhanced in future iterations by refining item wording or expanding to additional dimensions of benefit perception. Nevertheless, the results provided a valid foundation for subsequent inferential analyses, reinforcing the importance of psychometric evaluations in policy-focused surveys.

A one-way ANOVA was further conducted to test whether belief in the cost-saving potential of mergers (i.e., merging municipalities will reduce operational costs) significantly varied across stakeholder groups. The result was statistically significant ($F = 2.872$, $p = 0.023$), confirming that perspectives on fiscal efficiency are not uniform across society. Although Tukey HSD post-hoc tests did not identify any specific group-to-group differences as statistically significant at the 0.05 level, some comparisons (e.g., citizens vs. private sector) approached significance, suggesting subtle but noteworthy variation in expectations. This reflects broader global findings in which governance preferences often diverge based on institutional roles and administrative exposure (Nakazawa, 2013; Slack & Bird, 2013; Srebalová & Peráček, 2022; Tavares, 2018; Yamamoto, 2008; Žofčínová & Melegová, 2025).

To explore the individual-level drivers of these perceptions, multiple linear regression was conducted using "merging municipalities to reduce operational costs" as the dependent variable. The model included five predictors: age, education, region, familiarity with municipal downsizing, and whether the respondent believed downsizing is necessary for Vision 2030. The overall model was statistically significant ($F = 4.435$, $p = 0.0006$) with an R^2 of 0.060, indicating that, while the explanatory power was modest, the included variables contributed meaningfully to explaining variation in beliefs. These results align with the broader public administration literature, which shows that personal characteristics and institutional context shape reform beliefs.

Among the predictors, age ($\beta = 0.171$, $p = 0.001$) and education level ($\beta = 0.132$, $p = 0.022$) emerged as significant. Older and more educated respondents were more likely to believe that municipal mergers would lead to operational cost savings. This pattern suggests that these demographic segments may have greater exposure to inefficiencies in current fragmented governance models or a stronger grasp of the reform rationale. Conversely, familiarity with municipal downsizing, region, and alignment with Vision 2030 were not statistically significant, indicating that technical knowledge or ideological alignment alone does not necessarily shape belief in reform benefits. These findings echo Slack and Bird's (2013) conclusion that reform acceptance depends more on experience and perceived credibility than on information outreach alone.

The OLS regression model was verified to meet standard statistical assumptions, including normality of residuals, multicollinearity tolerance, and homoscedasticity, ensuring robustness of results. This step further supports the appropriateness of treating Likert-scale measures as continuous within the regression framework.

Collectively, ANOVA and regression analyses provide complementary insights. Stakeholder roles influence fiscal beliefs; however, demographic variables—particularly age and education—emerge as stronger individual-level predictors. This reinforces the importance of designing reform narratives that resonate with distinct demographic groups and avoiding the assumption that responses are uniform across institutions or regions. Moreover, the lack of significant influence from familiarity with Saudi municipal downsizing initiatives or Vision 2030 alignment suggests that reform messaging should focus on tangible, lived outcomes rather than abstract policy alignment.

In summary, these findings offer a nuanced understanding of how beliefs about the fiscal benefits of downsizing are formed and distributed. Policymakers who aim to build support for municipal consolidation must move beyond technocratic arguments and engage with the experiential realities and value systems of diverse stakeholder groups. As Saudi Arabia advances its Vision 2030 agenda, success in restructuring local governance will depend not only on institutional design but also on how reform is framed, communicated, and experienced across the population.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a timely and context-specific exploration of the feasibility of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia, a country undergoing transformative reforms under Vision 2030. The results suggest a complex but generally receptive landscape for consolidation, contingent on a range of demographic, institutional, and perceptual factors. This study addresses three interrelated questions including whether downsizing can enhance governance efficiency, what barriers impede reform, and how to reconcile administrative rationalization with local identity. The following discussion interprets the findings in light of these questions and situates them within the broader literature on local government reforms.

The most prominent insight from the statistical analysis is the moderate but non-uniform support for the fiscal rationale of municipal mergers. Although age and education emerged as significant predictors of belief in cost savings, neither regional affiliation nor policy familiarity had a substantial impact. Each predictor can be theoretically interpreted within established governance frameworks: age reflects exposure to institutional change and long-term experience with reform cycles (Ladner & Keuffer, 2018); education corresponds to higher levels of policy literacy and administrative comprehension (Andrews & Schroeder, 2003); regional affiliation aligns with spatial equity concerns and variation in service access (OECD, 2020); while familiarity with Vision 2030 indicates levels of institutional trust rather than direct technical understanding. This underscores a critical theoretical point: support for structural reforms such as downsizing is not purely technocratic but filtered through the lived experiences, expectations, and sociopolitical identities of stakeholders (Ladner & Keuffer, 2018; Tavares, 2018). This relational interpretation further supports findings in Ladner and Keuffer (2018) that civic engagement and governance perception are shaped by accumulated institutional exposure and educational empowerment.

Moreover, in the Eastern Province case study, despite theoretical claims about the efficiency gains of consolidation, a significant proportion of respondents reported no improvement, or even deterioration, in service quality and decision-making agility post-merger. This outcome is consistent with Reingewertz (2012) and Slack and Bird (2013), who found that anticipated economies of scale from amalgamations often fail to materialize in the short term due to weak post-merger management and coordination challenges. This reflects a well-documented global phenomenon of municipal amalgamations promising efficiency but rarely delivering immediate or equitable outcomes because of the lack of robust change management and performance tracking mechanisms. As Faulk and Hicks (2011) emphasize, efficiency gains depend on aligning administrative reform with citizen expectations and equitable service standards. This case highlights the risk of public disillusionment when reforms are implemented without visible service-level improvements.

The emergence of identity and equity concerns is equally important, particularly among citizens in rural or historically autonomous communities. While most respondents supported reform scenarios that preserve local input, many also expressed fear of symbolic marginalization and rural neglect. These findings echo Alfaleh (2022), who noted that tribal identity, local heritage, and historical settlements continue to shape governance legitimacy and public trust in Saudi municipalities. This reflects the tension at the heart of territorial reform, how to centralize functions without alienating communities or undermining place-based governance (Dollery & Robotti, 2008). In contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where tribal affiliations, geographic disparities, and regional heritage remain salient, reforms must walk a careful line between efficiency and inclusiveness.

The stakeholder preferences documented in this study reveal that support for downsizing is strongest when tied to tangible improvements in service delivery, digital governance, and municipal coordination. These priorities align with OECD (2020) findings that citizens' acceptance of reform increases when digital tools improve access, transparency, and accountability. This vision for reform goes beyond administrative consolidation to encompass modernization and capacity building. It parallels Estonia's municipal reform experience, where e-governance platforms enabled both efficiency and responsiveness (OECD, 2020; Reingewertz, 2012). Regarding Saudi Arabia, integrating downsizing with digital transformation presents a path for reform that aligns with both economic diversification goals and citizen expectations under Vision 2030.

Another notable finding is the limited impact of Vision 2030 alignment on reform perceptions. Despite being a central driver of national transformation, the perception that municipal downsizing is essential to Vision 2030 was not a significant predictor of belief in its cost-saving potential. This indicates that institutional trust, rather than simple policy awareness, mediates public acceptance, reinforcing Andrews and Schroeder's (2003) argument that top-down initiatives must be matched with localized engagement to build reform legitimacy. As Slack and Bird (2013) argue, successful amalgamations require bottom-up legitimacy and must be framed as economically necessary, socially desirable, and politically just.

The mixed results from the ANOVA and regression analyses underscore the importance of designing context-sensitive and adaptive reforms. A "one-size-fits-all" approach is unlikely to succeed in Saudi Arabia's diverse municipal landscape. Urbanized areas, such as Riyadh and Dammam, may benefit from consolidation for economic coordination, whereas sparsely populated rural areas may prioritize representational equity and local access. This requires reform strategies that are both spatially differentiated and operationally flexible, emphasizing the need for municipal typologies and scenario-based implementation plans (Dollery & Robotti, 2008; OECD, 2020).

Collectively, these findings reinforce the value of participatory and phased reforms, highlighting the need for implementing downsizing as a continuous process involving stakeholder consultation, capacity development, and iterative evaluation. By integrating empirical evidence with comparative insights from OECD (2020) and Reingewertz (2012), this study confirms that municipal downsizing success depends on synchronized legal, technical, and participatory mechanisms. The absence of strong post-hoc statistical differences between stakeholder groups suggests that there is space for consensus-building, particularly if reforms are framed around shared benefits such as improved services, reduced duplication, and increased accountability.

In conclusion, this study shows that the success of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia depends on not only administrative rationalization but also the social and political legitimacy of reforms. It bridges quantitative and qualitative findings with international governance frameworks, reinforcing that institutional adaptation, citizen inclusion, and transparent communication are prerequisites for reform credibility. By foregrounding stakeholder perceptions, institutional barriers, and design preferences, the findings provide a grounded and actionable understanding of how local government restructuring can be effective and inclusive. Hence, the path forward lies in hybrid governance models, evidence-based policymaking, and a commitment to reform processes that are as democratic as they are technocratic.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the feasibility of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia by assessing stakeholder perceptions, institutional challenges, and policy preferences. Through a mixed-methods approach, it investigated whether municipal downsizing can improve governance efficiency, what barriers may impede consolidation, and how such reforms can be designed to preserve local identity while achieving economies of scale. The findings suggest a cautious but generally favorable attitude among stakeholders toward reform, with nuanced variations based on demographic and institutional profiles. Statistical analyses revealed that stakeholder perceptions of cost-saving benefits were modestly shaped by age and educational level, whereas variables such as regional location and familiarity with the concept of downsizing had limited predictive power. These findings align with previous research indicating that structural reforms are often grounded in personal values, generational experiences, and civic exposure rather than policy knowledge alone (Nakazawa, 2013; Slack & Bird, 2013; Srebalová & Peráček, 2022; Tavares, 2018; Yamamoto, 2008; Zofčinová & Melegová, 2025). Furthermore, the ANOVA results confirmed perceptual variation across stakeholder groups, underscoring the importance of tailored communication and phased reform strategies that consider institutional identity and capacity.

The Eastern Province merger case evaluation further illustrates the complex relationship between administrative reforms and public satisfaction. The skepticism expressed by many respondents about tangible improvements in service quality and decision-making speed mirrors global findings from countries such as Israel, Canada, and Australia, where mergers often failed to meet initial efficiency expectations owing to weak

implementation frameworks or limited public engagement (Dollery & Robotti, 2008; Reingewertz, 2012). These insights reaffirm that successful downsizing requires more than just structural realignment, it must deliver visible and equitable service gains. Although the majority of stakeholders favored reform models that balance efficiency and local autonomy, emphasizing the importance of preserving local identity, especially in rural and historically autonomous communities, strong concerns remained about the potential erosion of symbolic representation and equitable service access. This duality reflects broader tensions between centralization and subsidiarity in governance reforms and highlights the need for hybrid models that incorporate decentralization, digital governance, and citizen engagement (Ladner & Keuffer, 2018; OECD, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2020).

While the survey reveals support for digital transformation, improvements in public services, and coordination between municipalities, aligning with Vision 2030, this readiness remains conditional on inclusive reform design, transparent communication, and measurable outcomes. The mixed levels of public confidence, particularly in post-merger service quality, suggest that downsizing efforts must be embedded within performance management systems and continuous evaluation frameworks to maintain legitimacy. This study advances the literature through three core contributions: (1) Conceptual innovation: it adapts the concept of “municipal downsizing” to a centralized governance model, reframing it from internal administrative retrenchment to a form of territorial consolidation specifically suited to Saudi Arabia’s institutional context; (2) Empirical novelty: it represents the first mixed-methods national assessment that integrates quantitative survey analysis with qualitative insights to capture the multidimensional nature of stakeholder perceptions toward reform; and (3) Policy relevance: it offers actionable pathways for inclusive and phased reform implementation that align with Vision 2030’s governance transformation and decentralization objectives.

In conclusion, as a governance reform pathway, the success of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia depends on navigating complex stakeholder expectations, addressing institutional asymmetries, and demonstrating measurable public value. The study’s conceptual, empirical, and policy contributions collectively provide a foundation for evidence-based reform design in transitioning governance systems. The insights revealed contribute to both national reform discourse and the broader global literature on municipal restructuring, offering lessons for comparable economies seeking to balance administrative efficiency with social legitimacy. Additionally, this research advances sustainability scholarship by demonstrating that municipal downsizing, when embedded in participatory, data-driven, and context-sensitive frameworks, can act as a catalyst for sustainable urban development. The findings underscore that administrative efficiency must be pursued alongside equity, transparency, and citizen engagement to achieve resilient and inclusive governance systems. Consequently, sustainable governance reform extends beyond fiscal optimization to encompass institutional sustainability, ensuring that public institutions remain adaptable, accountable, and environmentally conscious over time.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Among the limitations of this study, the First is the cross-sectional design of this study limits the ability to assess how stakeholder attitudes toward municipal downsizing may evolve over time, particularly as reforms progress or become more publicly debated. Perceptions captured at a single point in time may not reflect subsequent shifts in awareness, experience, or policy outcomes (Bryman, 2016). Future longitudinal studies are therefore recommended to monitor attitudinal change and assess whether early support or resistance translates into post-reform satisfaction or policy fatigue.

Second, although the purposive sample of 357 respondents, comprising policymakers, municipal staff, citizens, and governance experts, provided targeted and diverse perspectives, its generalizability remains limited given the non-random design. As such, future studies should expand sample size and include regionally stratified or random sampling to enhance representativeness and allow for comparative analysis across Saudi regions (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Third, the measurement reliability of the perceived benefits scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.639$) was modest, indicating scope for refinement. Future research should strengthen construct reliability through improved wording and expansion of items related to fiscal efficiency, institutional trust, and service outcomes. Incorporating follow-up interviews or focus groups could also help clarify respondent reasoning and provide richer context, especially in rural and peripheral municipalities where service accessibility and community identity remain sensitive issues.

Fourth, contextual variability represents another interpretive constraint. The survey instrument included brief explanatory notes defining “municipal downsizing” and “Vision 2030” in accessible, non-technical language to ensure conceptual clarity and shared understanding. Nevertheless, some variation in respondent interpretation likely persisted, representing a potential source of response variability and construct validity concern. This limitation is explicitly recognized here to maintain transparency regarding measurement accuracy. It is also acknowledged that perceptions of the Eastern Province merger may differ across Saudi regions, reflecting

variations in administrative maturity, socioeconomic context, and local communication strategies. This regional heterogeneity has been explicitly noted as a contextual limitation, recognizing that attitudes observed in one region may not generalize to others.

Finally, while the integration of descriptive, ANOVA, and regression analyses offered robust statistical insights, these methods primarily capture linear relationships and may not fully reflect complex causal mechanisms underlying reform perceptions. Future studies are encouraged to adopt more advanced modeling techniques such as advanced structural equation modeling (SEM) or multilevel analysis to account for nested influences (e.g., municipal size, urban–rural divide) and interaction effects between institutional and demographic variables (Israel & Hay, 2006).

In summary, four principal limitations are identified, sampling scope, temporal design, measurement reliability, and contextual variability, alongside clear directions for methodological enhancement. Future research should incorporate longitudinal tracking, broaden stakeholder diversity, refine measurement instruments, and extend regional comparisons. Addressing these dimensions will strengthen the empirical foundation for reform design and contribute more effectively to both national governance strategies and the comparative international literature on administrative consolidation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Authors greatly acknowledges the support of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University (protocol code IRB-2025-06-0237, date of approval: 18 March 2025)

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available upon request from the author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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