



# Public Trust in Local Government: Explaining the Role of Good Governance Practices

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## Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the role of good governance practices on public trust in local government. In this study, a conceptual model was developed and tested empirically in Ethiopia by selecting Bahir Dar City Administration. The data analyses yielded the following results. All independent variables were highly influential in describing the public's level of trust in their local government. In this case, participants who perceived the existence of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness had greater trust in the City Administration than their counterparts.

**Keywords** Public trust · Good governance · Local government, Ethiopia

## Introduction

In the contemporary world, one of the most important issues is the dynamic nature and role of government, and the process of governance (Farazmand 2004a, b). Without doubt, citizens demand their government to uphold their democratic and human rights and serve their interests. Citizens are also expecting their government to be responsible for all their works and for what they do and to ensure that citizens' needs are met. As a result, the traditional and historical role of state and government has changed (Farazmand 2004a, b:1). In this case, one of the most admirable goals in the democratic system is making decisions by taking the interests of the majority into account. That is why public trust in government is viewed as an integral part of the democratic system. Therefore, so as to implement policies and strategies effectively, it is important to improve citizens trust at all levels of government.

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Recently a number of diverse concepts have appeared that reflect different conceptual and ideological perspectives on governance and administration (Farazmand 2004a, b). According to Farazmand, some of the most commonly known and often used concepts of governance during the last two decades or so are the following:

Good governance, entrepreneurial government, competitive government, market-like governance, economic governance, social and political governance, enabling governance, participatory governance, regulatory governance, interventionist governance or government, steering government versus rowing government, and the like (Farazmand 2004a, b:3).

Specifically, the concept “good governance” evoked serious criticisms as well as praises worldwide. ‘Good governance for whom, and bad for whom’ became the sticky questions (Farazmand 2017, 2012). Besides, the concept of good governance only focuses on three components, namely the state, private and civil society. Farazmand (2004a, b) saw that the three components ignore a great power, namely international actors. Thus, it is this deficiency and other problems of the concept good governance, that have encouraged adoption of an alternative and more comprehensive concept, that is the concept of “sound governance” (Farazmand 2017, 2012, 2004a, b).

Sound governance is considered as an alternative to the term good governance with several reasons as clearly stated by Farazmand (2004a, b) first, it is more comprehensive than any other concept reviewed earlier, and contains elements of global or international governance. Second, it also includes the normative as well as technical and rational features of good governance. Third, the concept of sound governance has the characteristics of quality governance that is superior to good governance and is considered sound technically, professionally, organizationally, managerially, politically, democratically, and economically. Fourth, sound governance is in accord with the constitutional values and responsive to international norms, rules, and regimes.

Sound governance is; therefore, inclusive and promotes participation and interaction in an increasingly complex, diverse, and dynamic national and international environment (Farazmand 2017). However, in Ethiopia the concept of sound governance seems not yet so popular, with all its weaknesses good governance has been implemented as a solution to overcome the most important challenges that the existing government are facing.

Hence, though there is variation in usage, the obvious question that arises here is how to enhance public trust. In this regard, Diamond (2007) suggested that in order to build public trust, the government must be more vigilant, especially for law and the public interest. In confirmation to this, Cheema (2010) stated that building trust is both the result and the determinant of inclusive governance. He argues citizens are more likely to have trust in public officials, politicians, and political institutions when governance is more effective and democratic. It is in this context that many scholars (Cheema 2010, Salminen and Ikola-Norrbacka 2010) considered good governance as one of the most effective ways to meet the needs of the people and benefit the entire community. Therefore, by way of looking at the perceived practices of good governance, this study intended to examine the role of good governance practices on public trust in local government, focusing on Bahir Dar City Administration.

## Conceptual Framework

In this conceptual framework, the researchers intended to summarize the idea to bring out the contributions for the current study. Though there is some controversy, there is a relationship between practices of good governance and public trust in local government. As Farazmand<sup>a</sup> rightly put it, local governments are the key implementers of policy decisions and produce the outcomes of those decisions in the governance process (2004). It is at this level that all actions take place. In addition, local governments are closer to citizens and stakeholders; and they must be accessible and responsive to citizens. Therefore, local governance is extremely important because it is the central arena for public participation and the democratic exercise of citizens' rights (Farazmand 2004a:89). Therefore, in this study good, governance practices could be evaluated with the use of three good governance principles and its practices at the local level Figure 1.

## Review of Related Literature

As many scholars clearly stated, trust is a multifaceted, complex, and rather ambiguous concept, regarded by many as difficult to define and so to investigate (Cheema 2010; Van der Meer 2010). As a consequence, the concept of trust can have many different shades of meaning (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that so many people, scholars, journalists, funding agencies and governments alike have diversified views on trust. Despite such diverse views of trust, scholars assumed that trust is a psychological state that involves a willingness to take risks based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of a trustee (Yang 2006). This view is a very important and basic foundation for looking the issue of trust, and all others are just its derivatives.

Trust in government, therefore; refers to citizens' expectations on the type, operation, and interaction of government with the citizenry and the behavior of political leaders, civil servants and citizens themselves (Cheema 2010). Thomas (1998) on the contrary claims that trust is based on beliefs rather than expectations. According to him,

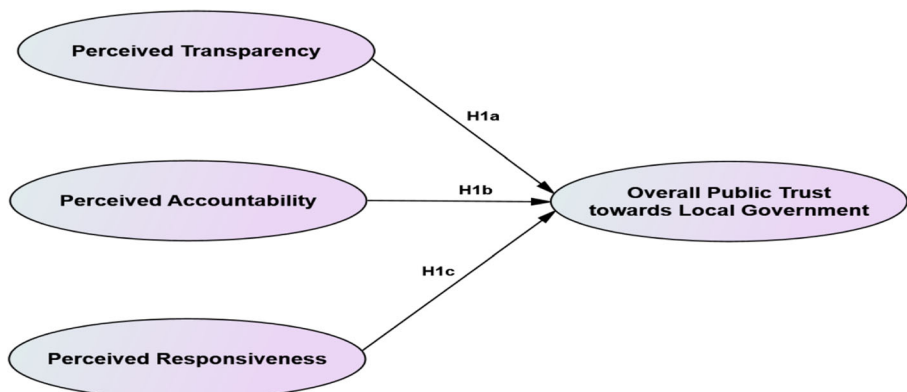


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of the study

expectations imply that we are calculating the probabilities individuals will pursue particular courses of action. So, believing that others do good things is considered to be the weakest form of trust. More considerably, trust in government refers to the level of confidence citizens have in their government to 'do the right thing', to act appropriately and honestly on behalf of the public (Barnes and Gill 2000). In general, trust refers to a willingness to rely on others to act on our behalf based on the belief that they possess the capacity to make effective decisions and take our interests into account (Houston and Harding 2014:55).

Trust in government is considered as an indispensable for the effective functioning of democratic government. Trust in government is also necessary for the fair and effective functioning of public institutions (Jung and Sea 2012; Parker et al. 2008; Gordon 2000). According to Jung and Sea (2012), public trust in government is one of the key factors that determine the government's competitiveness. Broadly speaking, public trust in government is important as it speaks to the quality of the relationship that exists between citizens and their government (Porumbescu 2015). Further, one comes across a strong view that, trust in government functions as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the policy machine (Van der Meer 2010).

A number of theorists view improved performance in public services as potential precursors to trust in government while linking distrust mostly to the poor performance of public institution (Yang and Holzer 2006; Christensen and Laegreid 2005; Uslander 2002). People often demand the government to provide services, such as health, education, security, law enforcement, electricity, transportation, water, and waste management. In fact, citizens view government performance not only from the perspective of service delivery, but, also from the efficacy and fairness of government policy and government ethics (Yang and Holzer 2006).

In any case, if there is any mismatch between public's expectation and the actual performance of government institutions, the public may be forced to consider public employees as incompetent, wasteful, dishonest, and untrustworthy (Kim 2005). On the contrary, citizens' perceptions of public sector performance can influence citizens' perceptions of the ability, benevolence and integrity dimension of trustworthiness by demonstrating that the public sector possesses a set of skills and resources needed to guide society in a desirable direction (Porumbescu 2013). Therefore, a more positive perception with governmental services is seen as a way of restoring trust in government, in contrast; the opposite is true when the public develops a negative perception.

As stated above, trust in government is a key element of good governance and may be built up with sound policies that promote people's safety and security (Popovski 2010). Yousaf and his colleagues (Yousaf et al. 2016) strongly argue that trust is a consequence or result of good governance. Similarly, different scholars confirmed that good governance improves the citizens' trust towards government and its administration and enhance the legitimacy of the politico-administrative system (Yousaf et al. 2016; Salminen and Ikola-Norrbacka 2010). Therefore, public trust is considered as both a precondition for, and a result of, good governance (Popovski 2010).

On the contrary, there are also scholars like Bouckaert and Van de Steven (2003) who argued that the relation between trust and good governance is ambiguous. According to them, trust indicators are a result of citizens' perceptions, while good governance indicators are based on a measurement that is more objective. As a response to this objection, Blind (2010) asserted that public trust in both its social

and its political forms is the sine qua non of democratic governance. According to him, the relationship between trust and good governance is circular. While trust in government promotes good governance practices, good governance in turn stimulates and strengthens trust in all of its variants (Blind 2010). Thus, when the government decides to implement good governance principles into practice, they can address not only the needs of the people, but also increase public trust towards government (Yousaf et al. 2016). However, if the government and its administration are far behind the expectations of the public and ineffective in its administration, trust can be diminished (Salminen and Ikola-Norrbacka 2010).

To be specific, as a basis of good governance, transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in public administrations are a prerequisite to strengthen public trust (Cheema 2010; Armstrong 2005). For instance, transparency is now proposed as the solution to one of the most intangible problems of democratic governance: citizens' increasing mistrust of government (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013:575). Efforts to establish transparency in the administration process generally hailed by many as the key to trust in government (da Cruz et al. 2015; Porumbescu 2015; Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; Veal et al. 2011; Welch et al. 2004). Due to these concerns, government and citizens globally situate the issue of transparency at the forefront as being a medium to put an end to secrecy in government, improving public trust, and moving towards a good government (Veal et al. 2011). Simply put, if the government provides more information on its actions and inactions to its citizens, levels of trust would increase (Bannister 2011). By considering perceived practices of transparency as factor that influence levels of public trust in local government, we developed the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Perceived practices of transparency will significantly affect public trust in local government.

Government accountability also can play a key role in the creation of public trust in government (Yousaf et al. 2016; Cheema 2010; Gordon 2000). Lack of accountability has either resulted in the removal of many governments or citizens losing trust in their government (Minja 2013). Public information can thus be used to make government and its administration transparent, which in turn enhances the public's trust towards the government (Gordon 2000). By considering perceived practices of accountability as factor that influence levels of public trust in local government, we developed the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1b:** Perceived practices of accountability will significantly affect public trust in local government.

Further, scholars argued responsiveness of government is directly related to public trust towards government (Yousaf et al. 2016). Responsive governance is a key to the restoration of trust in government (Brillantes and Fernandez 2011:56). Besides, strong stakeholder consensus and responsive administration may improve public trust in government (Wang 2002). However, public mismanagement and distrust can occur if the government and its officials are not responding to the needs of citizens (Cheema 2010). Thus, considering perceived practices of responsiveness as a factor, that influence levels of public trust in local government, we developed the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1c:** Perceived practices of responsiveness will significantly affect public trust in local government.

## Research Methodology

To test the proposed hypotheses, a quantitative methodology was applied through conducting a survey among the public of Bahir Dar City Administration. The city has a total population of 270,662 of which 128,562 are men and 142,100 are women. The urban residents of the city are 214,098, while the rest of the population is rural residents. In this study, the researcher used a convenience sampling method in selecting the sample population, because the researcher has not been able to obtain the official data of all the details of the study population. However, to overcome the weaknesses of this sampling strategy, the researcher devised a mechanism by sending 10 data collectors to distribute and collect the survey data in different *Kebeles* (the lowest administrative unit) and several public locations of the city. As a result, the survey data were collected by meeting residents randomly and asking them to complete the survey. In this way, a variety of respondents who were not conveniently located have been included in this study. Consequently, 440 questionnaires were distributed to the participants.

Before the actual field data collection, a pilot study was undertaken to test the reliability and validity of the instrument and to assess respondent feedback from completing surveys. In this study, 120 participants were included in the pilot study. After collecting the pilot data, basic statistical analysis was made using SPSS version 22. Further, in order to condense a large number of variables to a more manageable number, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the collected data of the pilot study.

After making the necessary adjustment in the questionnaire the final field survey data collection process commenced on the 1st of January 2018. The whole distribution process took approximately seven weeks (from the 1st of January to the end of February 2018). After excluding participants in the pilot study, a total of 440 questionnaires was distributed to sample respondents. Thus, 398 questionnaires were returned, which represented a response rate of 90.5 percent of the original sample. However, among those returned questionnaires, 36 responses were discarded because of the unengaged response (the respondents had put the same answers on all the Likert scale items) and questionnaires were partially answered (some questions were left blank). Further, seven cases were deleted based on the Mahalanobis distance. Therefore, the remaining 357 questionnaires were used for further data analysis. Accordingly, the final usable response rate in this study was 81.1 percent. Table 1 shows the dimensions and indicators of the independent and dependent variables. Accordingly, perceived transparency and accountability, each has been tested by four questions, and perceived responsiveness checked by five questions. Whereas, the dependent variable, that is overall public trust in local government, was examined by five questions. Table 1 shows the dimensions and the indicators of the dependent variable.

The measurements of the independent and dependent variables were adapted with modification from Park and Blenkinsopp (2011), Said et al. (2015), Vigoda and Yuval (2003) and Grimmelikhuisen (2012). The respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement based on 5-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

**Table 1** Dimensions and indicators of independent and dependent variables

Concept	Dimensions	Code	Indicators	
Practices of good governance (independent variable)	Perceived transparency	PT1	The city administration plan and program are implemented transparently.	
		PT2	The entire process of the city administration is transparently disclosed.	
		PT3	The residents can clearly see into the progress and situations of the city administration.	
		PT5	The city administration discloses sufficient information to the residents about its performance.	
		Perceived accountability	PA1	The city administration has a regular reporting system on the achievements and results of the program against its objectives.
	PA2		The city administration recognizes its responsibility toward the community.	
	PA3		The city administration follows treasury rules and regulations in all circumstances.	
	PA7		The city administration ensures proper usage of its budget in an authorized manner.	
	Perceived responsiveness	PR1	The city administration is sensitive to public opinions.	
		PR2	The city administration responds to public requests quickly.	
		PR3	The city administration is making a sincere effort to support those residents who need help.	
		PR4	The city administration is efficient in providing quality solutions for public needs.	
		PR5	Citizen's appeals to the city administration are treated properly within a reasonable period of time.	
	Overall public trust (dependent variable)		OPT2	Public authorities in the city administration are acting in the interest of the public.
			OPT4	Public authorities in the city administration are capable.
		OPT5	Public authorities in the city administration carry out their duties effectively.	
		OPT8	Public authorities in the city administration are sincere.	
		OPT9	Public authorities in the city administration are honest.	

## Statistical Results

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS and structural equation modeling (SEM) through the analysis of moment structures (AMOS) software version 21. The demographic statistics of respondents showed that there were more males 56.3% than females 43.7%. Participants in the study were predominantly young, 60.5% aged 18–35 years old. The highest educational level reported for approximately half of the participants, 48.7% was university graduates. As for the economic status of participants, nearly half, 48.7% of respondents were categorized under low income category. Finally, the highest number of respondents, 59.7% reported as being neutral regarding political affiliation. This indicates that the selected sample for this research is highly representative.

**Table 2** Convergent, discriminate and nomological validity

	PT	PA	PR	OPT
AVE	0.558	0.587	0.528	0.569
CR	0.834	0.850	0.848	0.866

AVE, average variance extracted; CR, Composite reliability

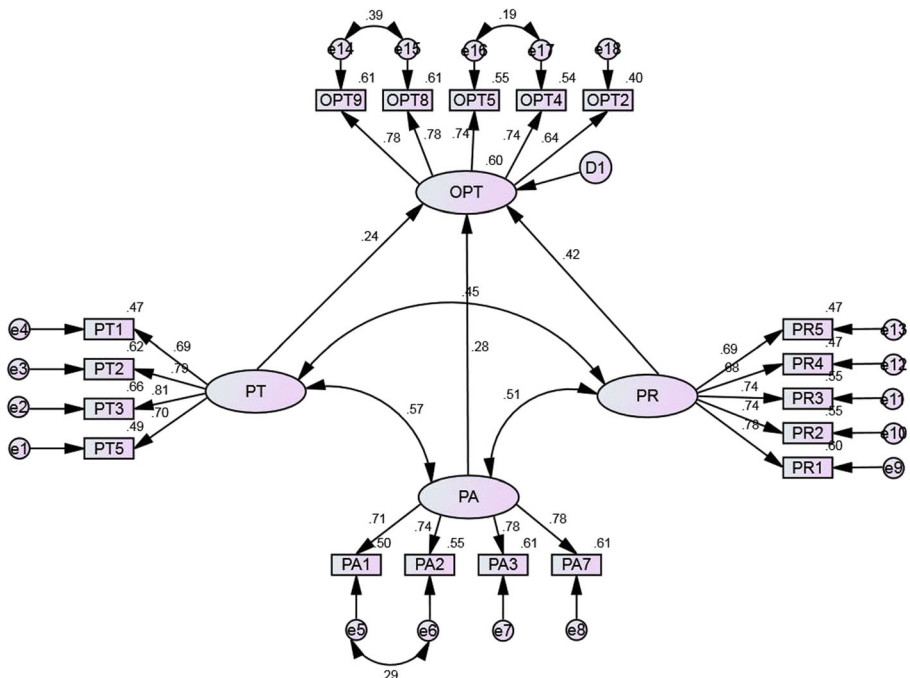
The descriptive statistics of the research variable illustrated that the public fairly disagree on how the government is practicing good governance and the extent to which they trust the City Administration since the average mean is below 3 for all variables (PT: 2.46; PA: 2.41; PR: 2.26; OPT: 2.29).

Before running SEM, the data were carefully screened for several characteristics. In the current study, data were examined in terms of multivariate normality, multicollinearity, positive definiteness, and homoscedasticity. That indicates no violation of assumptions.

As indicated in Table 2 the convergent, discriminate and nomological validity of items was confirmed by EFA where measured items had above the suggested thresholds.

Since, we do not have any violation of assumptions with convergent or discriminant validity, we assume that there is no violation of nomological validity. The individual constructs reliability was also above 0.8 which is good internal reliability.

The standardized value of the hypothesized model of this study is shown in Fig. 2. The goodness of fit indices indicated in Table 3 was above the thresholds that were suggested by Hair et al. (2014) Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2** Standardized values of the hypothesized measurement and structural model



**Table 3** Goodness of fit statistics for hypothesized measurement and structural model

	Absolute fit measures				IncrementalFit measures		ParsimonyFit measure
	$\chi^2$	CMIN/DF	GFI	RMSEA	NFI	CFI	AGFI
Criteria	>.05	<5	$\geq 0.90$	<0.05	$\geq 0.90$	$\geq 0.95$	$\geq 0.90$
Obtained	.044	1.225	.954	.025	.952	.991	.938

$\chi^2$ , Chi-square; *df*, degree of freedom; *GFI*, Goodness of fit index; *RMSEA*, Root mean square error of approximation; *NFI*, Normated fit index; *CFI*, Comparative fit index; *AGFI*, Adjusted goodness of fit index

The fit indices shown in Table 3 indicate that the hypothesized structural model provided the good fit to the data. Although the likelihood ratio chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 154.298$ ; *df* = 126;  $p = .044$ ) was significant ( $p < .05$ ); other fit measures showed that model adequately fit to the observed data. The absolute fit measures, i.e. GFI and RMSEA were 0.954 and 0.025 respectively, indicating a good fit to the model. The incremental fit measures, i.e. NFI and CFI, were 0.952 and 0.991 respectively, which were above the minimum requirement showing adequate fit and the parsimony fit measure i.e. AGFI was 0.938, which also was above the cutoff point of >0.9). In addition to these indices, the  $\chi^2 / df = 1.225$  was within the threshold level, i.e.  $1.0 < \chi^2 / df < 3.0$ ) supporting these findings Table 3.

## Hypotheses Testing

The examination of the structural model involves the significance tests for the estimated coefficients (paths), which offer the basis for either accepting or rejecting the proposed relationships between the latent variables. The final estimates results for the practices of good governance showed that all paths were statistically significant.

It was predicted that perceived practices of transparency will significantly affect public trust towards local government. As shown in Figs. 1 the path coefficient between perceived practices of transparency and public trust towards local government is positive and significant ( $\beta = .232$   $p < .001$ ), therefore; this hypothesis was supported concluding that perceived practices of transparency did have an effect on public trust towards local government.

Furthermore, it was predicted that perceived practices of accountability will significantly affect public trust towards local government. The results found that public trust towards local government is significantly affected by the perceived practices of accountability ( $\beta = .305$   $p < .001$ ). Therefore, this hypothesis was also supported concluding that perceived practices of accountability did have an effect on public trust towards local government.

Moreover, it was predicted that perceived practices of responsiveness will significantly affect public trust towards local government. The results found that public trust towards local government is significantly affected by the perceived practices of responsiveness ( $\beta = .395$   $p < .001$ ). Therefore, this hypothesis was also supported concluding that perceived practices of responsiveness did have an effect on public trust towards local government.

**Table 4** Regression estimates of latent constructs

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
OPT	<---	PT	.232	.062	3.769	***
OPT	<---	PA	.305	.076	4.027	***
OPT	<---	PR	.395	.060	6.555	***

*Estimate*, regression weight; *S.E.*, standard error; *C.R.*, critical ratio, *P* = significance value

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

The above structural model results showed that practices of good governance on public trust had the strongest effect from perceived practices of responsiveness ( $\beta = .395$ ) followed by perceived practices of accountability ( $\beta = .305$ ) and perceived practices of transparency ( $\beta = .232$ ). Moreover, the above results revealed that the predictors, or exogenous variables of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness predicted at least 60% of the variance on public trust with squared multiple correlations ( $R^2$ ) of .603.

In general, Tables 4 and 5 provides the regression estimates of latent constructs and a summary of the hypothesis testing results based on the measurement and structural model analyses respectively.

## Discussions and Conclusion

Many researchers have argued that increasing performance is seen as a way of restoring trust in government (Porumbescu 2013; Van de Walle et al. 2008; Yang and Holzer 2006; Christensen and Laegreid 2005). In line with this argument, as one of the performance indicators of a democratic government three practices of good governance were selected to examine their level of effect on public trust in local government. Based on the structural analysis of the SEM results, this section summarizes the findings from the statistical estimations and discusses the interpretations of the findings.

### Perceived Transparency

Transparency and open government initiatives have become vehicles to increase legitimacy and trust in government (da Cruz et al. 2015). Transparency more broadly depends upon the idea that the more the state shows the public, the more the public will

**Table 5** Hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses	$\beta$	<i>P</i>	Supported
H1a: Perceived Transparency → Public Trust	0.232	$P < .001$	YES
H1b: Perceived Accountability → Public Trust	0.305	$P < .001$	YES
H1c: Perceived Responsiveness → Public Trust	0.395	$P < .001$	YES

$\beta$  = Standardized regression weight,  $p$  = Significant level (Two Tailed)

trust the state (Moore 2017). In this study, it was predicted that perceived practices of transparency will significantly affect public trust towards local government. As clearly shown in this study, the path coefficient between perceived practices of transparency and public trust towards local government is positive and significant ( $\beta = .232$   $p < .001$ ), therefore; this hypothesis was supported concluding that perceived practices of transparency did have an effect on public trust in local government. This finding is also supported by many researchers (Porumbescu 2015; Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; Bannister 2011; Park and Blenkinsopp 2011; Veal et al. 2011; Armstrong 2005; Welch et al. 2004; Gordon 2000).

The finding of the current study shows that the practices of transparency in the local government are of paramount importance. Because, to evaluate and oversee the performance of the government, and to know what is happening and what will happen, citizens need to have explicit information. Especially, as one can understand, if the government does not make it clear what the government really does, it does nothing to the public. After all, citizens' positive or negative views towards their government are directly or indirectly influenced by the information they receive about the government. It is because of these concerns that democratic leaders worldwide is putting the issue of transparency at the forefront not only to end secrecy in government, but also to improve public trust towards government (Veal et al. 2011).

### **Perceived Accountability**

As one of the pillars of good governance, accountability obliged the state the private sector and civil society to focus on developing clear objectives, effective policy implementation strategies, and monitoring and reporting mechanisms (Cheema 2010). In this study, it was predicted that perceived practices of accountability will significantly affect public trust in local government. The results found that public trust towards local government is significantly affected by the perceived practices of accountability ( $\beta = .305$   $p < .001$ ). This result relates to the findings of Yousaf et al. (2016) and Armstrong (2005). In their study, they indicated that accountability plays its own role in promoting public trust in government.

The finding of this study points out the significance and necessity of accountability mechanism in local government administration. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that citizens would place their trust in the government when they feel that government officials are irresponsible in their work or their decisions. When government practice accountability in the process of decision making and implementation, it tends to give citizens the feeling that government is responsible for their deed. This impression of citizens further contributes in promoting citizens' trust in local government. That is why accountability is considered as the main influential factor to determine citizens' trust in local government.

### **Perceived Responsiveness**

As an aggregate measure responsiveness is an important criterion for evaluating government performance (Yang and Pandey 2007). In this study, it was predicted that perceived practices of responsiveness will significantly affect public trust in local government. The results found that public trust in local government is significantly

affected by the perceived practices of responsiveness ( $\beta = .395$   $p < .001$ ). This result is consistent with the study conducted by Yousaf et al. (2016) who found that responsiveness is crucial in building public trust.

Of course, one of the things that people expect from the government that governs them is responsiveness. Citizens need to be governed in a fair manner and seek the appropriate answer to their questions. Responding to this, thus, is assumed to be an integral part of the practice of good governance. The findings of this study clearly indicated that responsiveness play a crucial role in affecting public trust in local government. Thus, in order to regulate its credibility and competitiveness and most importantly to uphold the public trust, the government should play its part in properly managing the demands of its citizens.

In conclusion, this paper recognizes the important contributions of practices of good governance in restoring public trust in local government. What we must realize, however, is that all parties should work together to create a transparent, accountable and a responsive local governance.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interests** The authors has not declared any conflict of interests.

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