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(IJLGC)**www.gaexcellence.com/ijlgc**INTEGRITY-BASED COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AS A
GOVERNANCE INSTRUMENT: A CONCEPTUAL
FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE LOCAL IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract:

This paper aims to develop an integrity-based conceptual framework that positions community leadership as a governance instrument within Malaysia's local development landscape while community participation has long been recognized in development discourse, community leadership remains largely framed as a grassroots phenomenon rather than as a structural mechanism embedded in governance design. At the same time, integrity scholar continues to focus predominantly on formal institutions and bureaucratic accountability, with limited attention given to integrity practices operating at the community level. This conceptual gap limits the theoretical integration between leadership studies, governance theory and integrity frameworks. Drawing on

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transformational leadership with collaborative governance theory, institutional trust perspectives and integrity-based governance principle. Therefore, this paper is reconceptualizing community leadership as a normative and structural governance mechanisms that can strengthens institutional trust, collaborative governance capacity, and sustainable local development outcomes. The study proposes an integrity-based conceptual framework to the Malaysian governance context and contributes to governance scholarship by bridging fragmented theoretical domains. The framework provides a basic for designing local governance ecosystems through integrity-oriented community leadership.

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Community Leadership, Conceptual Framework, Governance, Integrity, Local Government, Malaysia



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Introduction

Contemporary governance paradigms increasingly emphasize participation, collaboration and shared responsibility in addressing complex development challenges. Development is therefore no longer viewed solely as the responsibility of government institutions, instead it increases involve communities, civil society organizations and other local actors in planning, decision making and implementation (Ansel & Gash, 2008; Emerson et.al., 2012). This is a shift that reflects broader perception that sustainable governance depends not only on institutional capacity, but it is also on participation, trust and collaborative engagement between institutions and communities. In the context of developing countries like Malaysia, government have increased the importance of community participation in local governance and development process. Based on policy initiatives that have been implement in Malaysia such as *Dasar Komuniti Negara* (National Community Policy), the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK12), and the Malaysia MADANI framework was emphasize inclusivity, social cohesion, community empowerment and bottom-up participation as important elements in strengthening sustainable local development. These policy directions indicate the growing recognition that local communities should be regarded not merely as development beneficial but also as active governance partners. According to Vento (2024), this perspectives by emphasizing that meaningful citizen involvement requires not only formal opportunities for participation but also trust and collaborative relationship between public institutions and communities. For examples, the demonstrates that trust and collaborative orientations are closely associated with how public administrates perceive and support citizen involvement in governance. This is suggested that the effective participatory governance depends not merely on institutional

mechanisms for participation but also on relational conditions that enable communities and governance actors to cooperate effectively. So trust should be understood not only as a potential outcome of effective governance but also as an enabling the condition for meaningful participation, collaboration and the collective action.

Despite this increasingly policy emphasis, community leadership remains relatively underexplored within governance leadership scholar. Existing studies frequently conceptualize community leadership from sociological and developmental perspectives and emphasizing volunteerism, grassroots mobilization and social participation (Putnam, 1993; Flora & Flora, 2013). While such perspectives contribute towards understanding community participation and social cohesion, community leadership as a governance mechanism embedded within institutional an development process. Consequently, the governance role of community leadership remains insufficiently theorized, particularly regarding governance coordination, institutional trust, sustainable development. More specifically, community leadership and integrity-based governance have been integrated within a integrated conceptual framework that can explains how community leaders need to connect to the public institutions, local communities and development processes. At the same time, integrity has emerged as a central principle within the contemporary governance reform discourse. The governance systems are increasingly expected to uphold transparency, accountability, ethical conduct and public trust as a important foundations of institutional legitimacy and the governance effectiveness (Huberts, 2018; OECD, 2020). Based on OECD (2024), demonstrates that integrity, fairness, openness, responsiveness and reliability constitute important drivers of public trust in governance institution. This reinforces the argument that integrity should not be treated merely as an institutional compliance mechanism but as an important governance foundation.

In Malaysia, the government have taken action for integrity-related reforms have been reinforced through initiatives such as the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS), both of which emphasize ethical leadership and institutional accountability. But in the context of discussions of integrity continue to focus primarily on formal political and bureaucratic institutions, with comparatively little attention to integrity practices at the community level. Therefore, as a result the limited attention has been given to how integrity principles are related into leadership practices and trust based on relationships among community leaders, public institutions and local communities. This limitation is significant because the local governance effectiveness often depends on trust-based relationships, social legitimacy, and collective responsibility within communities. In the context of local, community leaders function as intermediaries between institutions and communities by facilitating communication, mobilizing participation, coordinating local initiatives, and encouraging collective action. Their influence often extends beyond informal social engagement and directly contributes to the effectiveness of governance coordination and the implementation of local development. Despite this practical importance, theoretical discussions explaining how community leadership functions as an integrity-based governance instrument remain limited, particularly within the Malaysian context. The transformational leadership theory explains how value-driven leaders may inspire collective action and community empowerment, while integrity-based governance principles provide the normative foundation of transparency, accountability, fairness, trustworthiness and ethical conduct. Institutional trust perspectives explain how credible leadership may foster community confidence, whereas collaborative governance theory provides the institutional pathway through which the public institutions, community leaders and other stakeholders may engage in joint decision making and collective action. However, theses theoretical perspectives remain

insufficiently integrated in explain the governance role of community leadership within local development systems. Existing studies remain theoretically fragmented because community leadership is frequently examined either through sociological participation perspectives or developmental approaches, with limited integration into governance institutionalism and integrity scholarship. Consequently, there remains limited theoretical explanation regarding how integrity-oriented community leadership may strengthen governance legitimacy, institutional trust, and collaborative governance capacity within local development systems. Therefore, this paper aims to develop an integrity-based conceptual framework that positions community leadership as a governance instrument within Malaysia local development systems.

Problem Statement

Despite extensive discussions on participatory governance and local development, community leadership remains theoretically underdeveloped as a governance construct. Existing studies commonly frame community leadership within sociological, developmental, or participatory perspectives, emphasizing social cohesion, volunteerism, and grassroots mobilization (Putnam, 1993; Flora & Flora, 2013). Although these perspectives explain the contribution of community participation and local engagement, they provide limited theoretical explanation of community leadership as a structural and relational governance mechanism connecting public institutions with local communities. At the same time, governance scholarship has evolved toward collaborative, participatory, and network-oriented governance models that recognize the importance of non-state actors in governance processes (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). However, within this literature, community actors are often discussed broadly as stakeholders or civil society participants without sufficient theoretical articulation regarding the governance role of community leadership itself. Consequently, existing scholarship does not adequately classify the governance role of community leaders from the broader participation of communities, civil society organizations and other non-state stakeholders.

This conceptual are limitation becomes increasingly significant within the context of integrity-based governance reform. Integrity has become a central component of governance discourse, particularly in addressing public trust deficits, institutional legitimacy challenges, governance inefficiency, and accountability concerns (Huberts, 2018; OECD, 2020). Nevertheless, integrity scholarship continues to focus predominantly on formal institutions, anti-corruption systems, bureaucratic accountability, and political leadership, with limited attention given to integrity-oriented governance practices operating at the community level. This gap is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where national policy framework increase emphasizes participatory governance, community empowerment, integrity and sustainable local development. Although community leaders frequently act as mediator between public institutions and local communities, so their role has not been adequately incorporated into the conceptual design of local governance systems.

Consequently, the relationship among community leadership, integrity, institutional trust and collaborative governance remains theoretically fragmented. Transformational leadership theory explains value-driven influence and collective empowerment while integrity-based governance principles establish the normative standards guiding responsible leadership conduct. Institutional trust perspectives explain the relational conditions that foster legitimacy and community confidence, whereas collaborative governance theory describes the institutional arrangements through which state and non-state actors engage in collective decision-making. However, these perspectives have rarely been integrated to explain how

integrity-oriented community leadership may operate as a bridging governance mechanism within local development systems. Therefore, this paper addresses the need for an integrated conceptual framework that positions integrity-oriented community leadership as a relational governance mechanism connecting institutions and communities within Malaysia's local development system.

Literature Review

The community leadership has become an important element in discussion related to participatory development and local governance. In general, the definition of community leadership refers to the ability of individuals or groups within a community to influence collective action, mobilize local participation, and facilitate community-based initiatives aimed at achieving shared goals (Flora & Flora, 2013). Unlike formal political leadership, community leadership generally derives its influence from social relationships, community trust, local legitimacy, and sustained engagement rather than institutional authority alone. This relational foundation enables community leaders to operate across both informal community networks and formal governance arrangements. In the context of development studies, the community leadership is closely associated with participatory and bottom-up development approaches. The scholar has long argued that sustainable development outcomes are more likely to be achieved when local communities are actively involved in identifying problems, planning activities, and implementing development programs (Chambers, 1997). In this context, the community leaders often serve as facilitators who encourage participation, strengthen local networks, and support collective decision making. Based on previous studies, it has also highlighted the role of community leadership in strengthening social cohesion and local empowerment. According to Putnam (1993), it emphasized the importance of social capital in encouraging cooperation and collective engagement within communities. Community leadership has often been linked to the development of trust, shared norms, and community resilience, particularly in addressing local socio-economic and environmental challenges. Despite these contributions, existing literature tends to position community leadership primarily within sociological and developmental discussions rather than governance.

Besides that, integrity is recognized as one of the fundamental principles of effective governance. In the context of governance literature, integrity generally refers to ethical conduct, accountability, transparency, trustworthiness, and adherence to moral and institutional values within the governance process (Huberts, 2018). In this context of this paper, integrity is represented through five interrelated dimensions: transparency, accountability, ethical conduct, trustworthiness, and fairness. Existing integrity literature, however, tends to focus predominantly on formal institutions, political leadership, and bureaucratic accountability systems. While these dimensions are important, such perspectives often overlook the role of integrity within the community-level governance process. This limitation is significant because local governance effectiveness is often shaped by informal relationships, social trust, and collective responsibility within communities. Community leaders who demonstrate integrity through ethical conduct, accountability, and trustworthiness are often better able to mobilize participation and strengthen collaborative relationships among local actors. Integrating integrity into the discussion of community leadership provides an important foundation for understanding how to strengthen governance effectiveness beyond formal institutional structures.

The collaborative governance has emerged as an important approach within contemporary governance theory particularly in addressing complex social, economic and environmental challenges. The collaborative refers to governance arrangement in which public institutions engage with non-state actors including communities, civil society organizations and private stakeholders for collective decision making and policy implementation process (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Institutional trust refers to the level of confidence that individual and communities place in institutions, governance actors and decision-making process (Fukuyama, 1995). According to Vento (2024), trust plays an important role in facilitating cooperation, reducing conflict and strengthening the interconnected relationship between trust, collaborative and citizen participation. The trust represents an important factor shaping public administrators' orientation towards citizen involvement and collaborative governance. This finding suggests that trust is not merely an outcome of effective governance but may also function as an enabling condition for meaningful participation and collaboration. Within local governance environments, this relationship becomes particularly important because sustained cooperation between institutions and communities often depends on mutual confidence, credible leadership, and repeated interaction among governance actors.

In the context of local governance, the institutional trust is often influenced not only by formal policies and regulations, but also by interactions between institutions and communities. Community leaders play a significant role to strengthening collaborative governance and institutional trust. Community leaders are often serving as bridging actors, facilitating communication between local institutions and communities, encouraging participation, and be coordinate collective action. In many cases, the effectiveness of collaborative governance depends on community leaders' ability to build trust, maintain legitimacy, and encourage cooperation among stakeholders. However, the effectiveness of these leadership roles is closely associated with integrity-related values such as transparency, accountability, fairness, and ethical conduct. Therefore, without integrity the collaborative governance processes may experience distrust, weak participation, and governance fragmentation. The integrity-based community leadership may serve as an important mechanism for strengthening collaborative governance capacity and enhancing sustainable local development outcomes.

The previous literature shows that a theoretical fragmentation across community leadership, integrity-based governance, institutional trust and collaborative governance. Community leadership scholarship predominantly explains grassroots mobilization, social capital and participation whereas integrity scholarship concentrates on ethical standards, anti-corruption mechanisms and accountability within formal institutions. Institutional trust literature examines confidence and legitimacy in governance actors, while collaborative governance theory focuses on institutional arrangements for stakeholder participation and collective decision-making. Although each perspective explains an important component of local governance, their interrelationships remain insufficiently theorized. In particular, existing literature does not adequately explain how integrity values may be translated through community leadership practices into institutional trust and collaborative governance arrangements.

This theoretical gap is particularly relevant to Malaysia, where policy framework emphasizes community participation, integrity, public trust and collaborative approaches to local development but do not clearly articulate how these elements operate as an integrated governance mechanism. A conceptual framework is therefore needed to explain the position of integrity-oriented community leadership within the relationship connecting public institutions,

local communities and collaborative development processes. More specifically, the existing literature does not sufficiently explain the sequential governance mechanisms through which integrity-oriented community leadership may influence local development outcomes. Although previous studies have examined leadership, integrity, trust, participation, and collaborative governance, the relationships among these constructs remain fragmented across different theoretical traditions. This paper addresses the gap by proposing that integrity orientation provide the governance role of community leadership, which subsequently enhances institutional trust and collaborative governance capacity, ultimately contributing to sustainable local development. This theoretical integration represents the central conceptual contribution of the proposed framework. Based on the discussion, this study proposed a conceptual framework in Figure 1.

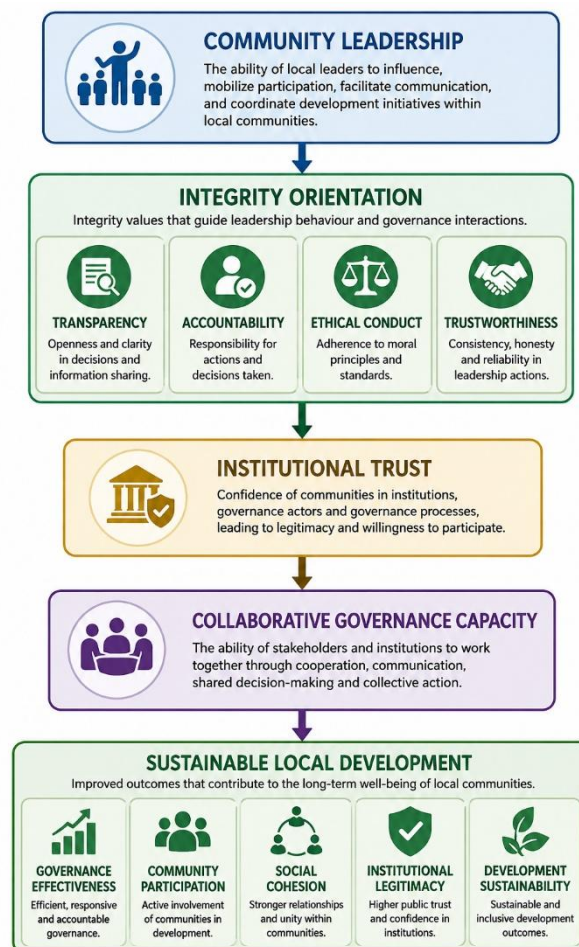


Figure 1: Integrity-Based Community Leadership Framework for Local Development Governance.

Methodology

The method of this study is based on conceptual approach supported by an integrative review of the literature. This approach was used to develop an integrity-based community leadership framework within the context of local development governance in Malaysia. The study brings together relevant ideas and theoretical perspectives to explain the connections between community leadership, integrity, institutional trust and collaborative governance and sustainable local development (Jaakola, 2020; Torraco, 2005). The proposed framework is

based on transformational leadership theory, collaborative governance theory, institutional trust perspectives and integrity-based governance principles. The selected Malaysian policy documents including the *Dasar Komuniti Negara* and National Anti-Corruption Strategy were also reviewed to reflect Malaysia governance context. These theoretical and policy insights were synthesized to explain how integrity-based community leadership can strengthen institutional trust, collaborative governance and sustainable local development. As a conceptual study, the framework is intended to provide a foundation for future empirical research.

Discussion

The proposed framework contributes to contemporary governance discourse by repositioning community leadership as an integrity-based governance instrument rather than a social or participatory phenomenon. Based on previous studies commonly discuss community leadership within the context of grassroots participation, volunteerism, and social mobilization (Putnam, 1993; Flora & Flora, 2013). These discussions are important because the governance significance of community leadership in strengthening institutional trust, governance coordination, and collaborative development processes. The framework further proposes that integrity plays a critical role in strengthening the governance capacity of community leadership. In the context of local governance development effectiveness depends not only on institutional structures and policy implementation, but also on trust-based relationships, legitimacy, and ethical leadership practices. Community leaders who demonstrate accountability, transparency, and trustworthiness are generally more capable of mobilizing participation, encouraging collaboration, and sustaining governance legitimacy within local communities. The framework also highlights the importance of institutional trust within collaborative governance systems. Collaborative governance processes require sustained interaction and cooperation among institutions, communities, and multiple stakeholders (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Therefore, without trust governance processes may experience weak participation, governance fragmentation, and declining legitimacy. This argument is consistent with recent evidence demonstrating that trust and collaborative orientations are closely connected to citizen involvement in governance (Vento, 2024). It is also consistent with the OECD (2024) perspective that integrity, fairness, openness, reliability, and responsiveness constitute important foundations of public trust. However, the present framework extends these discussions by locating community leadership between integrity and collaborative governance. In other words, the framework proposes that community leaders may serve as relational governance actors through whom integrity principles are translated into trust-building practices and, subsequently, stronger collaborative governance relationships at the local level.

In the context of Malaysia, the framework is providing conceptual lens to increase policy emphasis on participatory governance, integrity reform, and sustainable local development. National initiatives such as the *Dasar Komuniti Negara (DKN)*, RMK-12, and integrity-related governance reforms reflect growing recognition of community participation and ethical governance practices. However, existing governance reforms continue to focus primarily on formal institutional structures, with relatively limited emphasis on community leadership as part of governance design. Accordingly, this study suggests that community leadership should be institutionalized within local governance systems rather than treated merely as an informal support mechanism. Institutionalizing community leadership may strengthen governance coordination, improve community participation, and enhance trust relationships between

institutions and communities. More importantly, integrity-oriented community leadership may contribute toward more sustainable and inclusive local governance outcomes.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to governance scholarship in several important ways. First, the study extends governance theory by conceptualizing community leadership as a governance instrument embedded within local development governance systems. Existing governance literature frequently emphasizes stakeholder participation and collaborative governance without adequately theorizing the governance role of community leadership itself. Second, the study contributes to leadership literature by integrating transformational leadership perspectives with integrity-based governance principles. While transformational leadership theory emphasizes moral influence, shared vision, and collective empowerment (Bass & Riggio, 2006), limited studies have connected these dimensions to governance effectiveness within community settings. This framework therefore expands leadership discussions beyond organizational contexts toward governance-oriented community leadership. Third, the study contributes to integrity scholarship by extending integrity discussions beyond formal bureaucratic and political institutions. Existing integrity literature largely focuses on anti-corruption systems, compliance mechanisms, and institutional accountability (Huberts, 2018). In contrast, this study emphasizes integrity as a relational and normative governance value operating within community governance environments. Finally, the study contributes to collaborative governance literature by highlighting the importance of institutional trust and integrity-oriented leadership in strengthening collaborative governance capacity. The framework demonstrates that effective collaborative governance depends not only on stakeholder participation, but also on ethical leadership, legitimacy, and trust-based relationships within governance systems.

Policy Implementation

The proposed framework offers a conceptual guide for policymaker, local authorities and community development practitioners seeking to incorporate integrity-oriented community leadership into Malaysia local governance. As the framework has not yet been empirically validated, the following implications represent potential applications that require adaptation and evaluation with specific local contexts. Policymakers could use the proposed framework in four practical areas. The first is designing local governance arrangements that the framework could guide the formal inclusion of community leaders in local planning committees, programme implementation and development monitoring. It could also support the establishment of structure two-way communication channels through which institution communicate policies and communities convey their priorities, concerns and feedback. Second, in leadership development, the integrity dimensions identified in the framework that is transparency, accountability, ethical conduct, trustworthiness and fairness could inform leadership competency standards, codes of conduct, training modules, mentoring programmes and periodic assessment for community leaders. Third is the framework could guide the development of community-level accountability mechanisms including transparent decision records, public reporting of programs and regular community feedback sessions. Fourth is designing community engagement mechanisms, policymakers could establish multi-stakeholders' platforms that involve public officials, community leaders, residents, civil society organizations and relevant privates' actors in problem identification, decision making, implementation and evaluation. Institutional trust could also be assessed through periodic

feedback on perceived integrity, fairness, responsiveness and confidence in leadership and participatory processes. In this way, the framework provides policymakers with a structured basis for connecting integrity-oriented leadership with accountable, participatory and collaborative local governance. However, these applications should be piloted and empirically evaluated before wider implementation.

Conclusion

This study has developed an integrity-based conceptual framework that positions community leadership as a governance instrument within local development governance systems in Malaysia. Based on previous study show the frequently discusses community leadership from sociological and participatory perspectives, while integrity scholarship largely focuses on formal political and bureaucratic institutions. Consequently, limited theoretical attention has been given to understanding how integrity-oriented community leadership contributes to governance effectiveness and sustainable local development. Through integrating transformational leadership theory, collaborative governance theory, institutional trust perspectives, and integrity-based governance principles, this study addresses an important conceptual gap within governance scholarship. The proposed framework demonstrates that integrity-oriented community leadership may strengthen institutional trust, collaborative governance capacity, governance effectiveness, and sustainable local development outcomes. This study also contributes theoretically by integrating fragmented discussions across leadership, governance, and integrity literature into an integrated conceptual framework. But in the context of practically, the framework provides insights for policymakers and governance institutions seeking to strengthen participatory governance, integrity-oriented leadership, and local governance effectiveness within Malaysia. As this study is conceptual in nature, future research may empirically examine the proposed framework within different local governance settings to evaluate the relationships between community leadership, integrity orientation, institutional trust, collaborative governance, and sustainable local development outcomes.

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