

Technology and Peacebuilding: Can Digital Governance Tools Strengthen Trust between Citizens and Institutions?

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Abstract

Trust between citizens and public institutions is a fundamental requirement for peacebuilding, social cohesion, and sustainable governance. In societies affected by conflict, inequality, or institutional fragility, weak trust often undermines reconciliation efforts and fuels social fragmentation. With the rapid expansion of digital technologies, governments across the world have increasingly adopted digital governance tools such as e-government platforms, online service delivery systems, digital feedback mechanisms, and participatory governance technologies. This review paper examines whether and how digital governance tools can contribute to strengthening trust between citizens and institutions within the broader context of peacebuilding. Using a narrative literature review approach, the study synthesizes theoretical perspectives on trust, governance, and peacebuilding alongside empirical findings from global and developing-country contexts, with relevance to post-conflict and plural societies. The review highlights key mechanisms through which digital governance tools may enhance transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and citizen participation, thereby fostering institutional trust. At the same time, it identifies critical challenges, such as the digital divide, limited digital literacy, data privacy concerns, and unequal access, that may undermine trust-building efforts. The paper concludes that while digital governance tools are not a standalone solution for peacebuilding, they can play a significant supportive role when embedded within inclusive, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded governance frameworks. The study contributes to the growing interdisciplinary discourse on technology, governance, and reconciliation by offering a structured understanding of the opportunities and limitations associated with digital governance in trust-building processes.

Keywords: Digital Governance, Institutional Trust, Peacebuilding, Social Cohesion, Technology

Introduction

Peace building and reconciliation processes depend on the establishment of trust between citizens and their governmental institutions. People who live in regions with social divisions and post-conflict recovery and poor governance systems usually exhibit distrust toward their institutions which results in them abandoning political activities, creating public disturbances, and opposing government programs. Trust functions as a fundamental requirement which enables societies to achieve lasting peace through effective administration. The digital governance system has developed into an essential element of contemporary public administration because technological

progress has changed how citizens interact with their governments during the last thirty years. Digital governance uses information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve government operations and service delivery and citizen participation and policy execution. The implementation of e-government portals and digital identity systems and online grievance redress mechanisms and participatory platforms aim to enhance transparency and efficiency and accountability within governmental operations. The elements of these systems contribute to peace building because transparent governmental structures together with inclusive governance systems establish fundamental elements which support reconciliation efforts and social stability.



The increasing belief in technology-based governmental reforms still needs to prove its effectiveness at building trust in vulnerable and divided communities. Digital tools can enhance service delivery, but they also create two problems because they maintain current service disparities and they introduce fresh dangers which involve service denial and monitoring and improper use of information. The paper intends to analyze existing studies through critical examination to determine whether digital governance tools operate as trust-building mechanisms between citizens and institutions and to identify their most effective operational conditions. The study establishes digital governance as an element of Peace building and reconciliation frameworks to deliver insights which benefit policymakers and scholars and practitioners. The modern digital era which brings rapid technological change and people demand accountable government shows increasing importance for digital governance as it relates to social harmony and reconciliation. The government provides digital interfaces which allow citizens to interact with state institutions, and these digital interfaces determine how citizens view government authority and procedural justice and accessibility. Digital governance tools in post-conflict societies which contain multiple groups face the danger of becoming either tools that build international understanding or instruments that increase social separation when their design fails. The research needs to identify the specific conditions which help digital governance systems create trust because this knowledge will help build Peace and social harmony between diverse communities through technological advancement.

The world is increasingly using digital governance tools but their impact on building institutional trust within peacebuilding frameworks remains unclear to researchers. Existing studies often examine e-government effectiveness or digital transparency independently, but fewer studies integrate these discussions within a structured peacebuilding and reconciliation framework. The study investigates how digital governance systems create trust relationships between people and government authorities in societies that have multiple cultural groups and vulnerable conditions. The central research problem that this study investigates focuses on how digital governance

tools can create trust between citizens and institutions in peace-building contexts. The study addresses this problem because it provides insights which will help design governance reforms that promote social harmony and lasting

Literature Review

Trust, Governance, and Peacebuilding: Citizens trust government institutions when they believe that officials perform their duties competently, impartially, and in the public interest. Social contract theory suggests that government bodies gain legitimate authority when they respond to public needs with accountability and responsiveness. Peacebuilding literature considers trust a vital social resource that enables groups to cooperate, reduce conflict, and support reconciliation. Weak institutional trust can contribute to governance breakdowns, corruption, and long-lasting social divisions in post-conflict societies (Fukuyama, 1995; Lederach, 1997; Tyler, 2006). Peacebuilding scholars emphasize that recovery after violent conflict requires inclusive governance systems that practice transparent decision making and empower citizen participation to rebuild public confidence. Institutions that fail to engage citizens meaningfully risk reinforcing perceptions of marginalization and injustice. Trust-building governance reforms therefore require both structural institutional change and practical methods for improving interaction between citizens and the state (Fung, 2015; Paffenholz, 2014).

Digital Governance and Institutional Trust: Recent research links digital governance reforms to improved institutional trust, particularly in contexts where government stability is challenged (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013; OECD, 2020). Digital platforms can help government agencies improve operational performance by making internal processes more transparent, which may strengthen public perceptions of institutional competence. Users are more likely to trust digital services when they function reliably, provide clear information, and offer user-friendly interfaces (Grimmelikhuisen, Piotrowski, & Van Ryzin, 2017). Digital government initiatives, especially open government programs, have also been associated with stronger accountability and reduced corruption risks (Bertot, Jaeger, &

Grimes, 2010).

However, empirical findings do not show consistently positive results. Digitalization appears more likely to improve trust in institutions that already possess basic credibility. In fragile or polarized societies, digital systems may create greater distrust when they lack transparency, inclusion, and accountability mechanisms (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; United Nations, 2022). Digital governance should therefore be understood as a relational mechanism embedded within broader institutional reform rather than as a purely technical solution. **Digital Governance in Fragile and Post-Conflict Contexts:** Digital governance tools can support reconciliation and state-building processes in fragile and post-conflict environments. Digital identity systems may improve access to social services, while online platforms can enable governments to engage in dialogue with marginalized communities. Nevertheless, the digital divide remains a major obstacle. Unequal access to technology and digital skills can prevent vulnerable groups from benefiting from digital services and can widen existing social disparities. Data privacy concerns, surveillance, and misuse of digital systems can also reduce trust, especially in societies with histories of political oppression. Without ethical frameworks, legal protections, and inclusive design, digital governance projects may obstruct rather than support peacebuilding efforts (Lyon, 2018; Norris, 2001; Selwyn, 2004).

Digital Participation, Accountability, and Trust: The literature demonstrates that digital participation can strengthen institutional trust. Digital governance tools, including online consultations, e-participation platforms, and crowdsourced policy feedback mechanisms, enable citizens to participate directly in decision-making processes (Macintosh, 2004; United Nations, 2020). Participatory governance scholars argue that these mechanisms build trust by making governance processes more transparent, inclusive, and procedurally fair (Tyler, 2006). Studies show that when citizens perceive decision-making processes as open and participatory, they are more likely to accept outcomes even when those outcomes do not match their individual preferences (Fung, 2015). In peacebuilding contexts, non-violent digital participation enables people to express grievances, reduce tensions, and support

reconciliation efforts (Paffenholz, 2014).

Transparency, Accountability, and Anti-Corruption: Governance research has examined how digital systems improve transparency and reduce corruption. E-procurement systems, digital financial management platforms, and open government data initiatives can reduce discretionary authority and limit opportunities for corrupt activity (Bertot et al., 2010; Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2009). Digitalization can increase transparency and help institutions gain legitimacy by giving the public greater access to information about government operations (Grimmelikhuisen & Meijer, 2014). Research shows that when governments use digital methods to share information and demonstrate responsibility, citizens may develop higher trust in public institutions (OECD, 2020). However, transparency alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by enforcement, responsiveness, and ethical behavior (Heald, 2006).

Digital Divide and Exclusion Risks: Despite its potential benefits, digital governance may also produce unintended negative consequences. Numerous studies highlight the digital divide as a significant barrier to inclusive governance (van Dijk, 2020). Inequalities in access to internet connectivity, digital devices, and digital literacy disproportionately affect rural populations, ethnic minorities, older citizens, and economically marginalized groups (Norris, 2001). In post-conflict and developing-country contexts, these inequalities may reinforce existing patterns of exclusion and deepen distrust in institutions perceived as favoring digitally privileged groups (Heeks & Bailur, 2007). Scholars argue that without targeted inclusion strategies, digital governance initiatives risk undermining social cohesion rather than promoting harmony (Selwyn, 2004).

Surveillance, Data Privacy, and Trust Erosion: Another critical theme in the literature concerns surveillance, data protection, and privacy. While digital governance tools often rely on extensive data collection to function effectively, inadequate legal safeguards and weak regulatory frameworks can lead to misuse of personal data (Zuboff, 2019). In societies with histories of political repression or conflict, fears of surveillance can significantly erode trust in digital systems and state institutions (Lyon, 2018). Research suggests that trust in digital governance is closely linked to citizens' perceptions of data

security, transparency in data use, and strong accountability mechanisms (Acquisti, Brandimarte, & Loewenstein, 2015). Ethical governance and robust legal frameworks are therefore essential for ensuring that digital technologies contribute positively to peacebuilding (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

Digital Governance and Social Cohesion: Interdisciplinary studies link digital governance to broader outcomes of social cohesion and reconciliation. Digital platforms that facilitate intercultural dialogue, access to public services, and community-level engagement can strengthen social bonds and reduce perceptions of marginalization (Castells, 2010; Putnam, 2000). However, the literature also notes that technology reflects existing power structures and social relations (Feenberg, 2010). Without deliberate efforts to design inclusive and culturally sensitive digital systems, technological interventions may fail to address deeper structural drivers of conflict and mistrust (PeaceTech Lab, 2019). Consequently, scholars emphasize the need for context-aware digital governance models that align technological innovation with peacebuilding objectives (OECD, 2020).

Methodology

This study employs a structured narrative literature review design appropriate for interdisciplinary research that integrates governance, digital transformation, and peacebuilding scholarship (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Given the conceptual nature of the research problem and the absence of a unified framework linking digital governance and trust within reconciliation contexts, a literature review approach enables theoretical consolidation and cross-contextual comparison rather than context-bound empirical testing.

A thematic analysis approach was used to synthesize the selected literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and institutional reports were identified through academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using keywords such as “digital governance,” “institutional trust,” “peacebuilding,” and “social cohesion.” Inclusion criteria prioritized publications addressing gover-

nance transparency, participation, digital inclusion, and trust outcomes in both developed and developing contexts.

The selected studies were coded inductively to identify recurring themes. Five analytical categories emerged: transparency and accountability, digital participation, service efficiency, digital exclusion, and privacy concerns. This thematic coding ensured that the findings were derived directly from the analyzed literature rather than from general narrative summarization, thereby enhancing methodological rigor and analytical transparency.

Results and Discussion

The findings presented in this section are derived from the thematic analysis of the reviewed literature. Through systematic coding and categorization, five dominant themes were identified: (1) transparency and accountability, (2) digital participation and voice, (3) service efficiency and institutional competence, (4) digital exclusion and inequality, and (5) privacy and surveillance concerns.

The literature indicates that digital governance tools can foster trust-building through transparency-enhancing technologies that improve fairness and accountability by reducing information asymmetries between citizens and institutions. Digital platforms that facilitate participation and feedback can also strengthen relational trust through two-way communication. However, these tools have limitations. They cannot compensate for weak institutional capacity or limited political will, and in contexts marked by corruption and exclusion, they may be perceived as superficial. Furthermore, limited internet access and low digital literacy can exacerbate distrust among marginalized groups.

The findings indicate that digital governance enhances trust-building when it is aligned with broader governance reforms, ethical safeguards, and inclusive strategies. It should complement, rather than replace, traditional peacebuilding methods. The literature suggests that digital tools can reshape citizen–institution interactions by fostering transparency and responsiveness. Effective digital service delivery enhances perceptions of institutional competence, while par-

ticipatory mechanisms promote procedural fairness, which is crucial for addressing grievances in peacebuilding contexts. However, trust derived from digital governance remains fragile without offline reforms. These tools are more effective in legitimate institutions and may exacerbate distrust in corrupt environments. Disparities in technology access and digital literacy also create uneven experiences of governance, highlighting the need for integrated strategies that prioritize social inclusion and accountability for meaningful reconciliation.

Conclusion

This review paper establishes that digital governance tools can enhance trust between citizens and institutions, thereby supporting peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts through improved transparency, accountability, and participation. The study integrates literature from governance, technology, and reconciliation, offering insights into how digital tools can support social harmony. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these tools varies by context and is influenced by factors such as inclusive access, ethical governance, and institutional commitment. The review also notes that while digital governance can strengthen institutional trust and social cohesion, it faces challenges such as structural inequality, limited access, and data privacy concerns. Therefore, digital governance must be integrated into broader governance frameworks to effectively promote peace and inclusion.

The study integrates literature from governance, technology, and peacebuilding to understand the intersection of digital governance tools with trust and reconciliation. It presents a balanced view of both opportunities and limitations, informing policy design in fragile societies. By positioning digital governance as supportive of peacebuilding, the findings provide insights for inclusive, trust-sensitive strategies aimed at promoting harmony and strengthening institutional legitimacy for sustainable peace.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to trust and peacebuilding literature by integrating digital governance

into reconciliation frameworks. It extends existing governance theories by emphasizing relational and technological dimensions of institutional legitimacy.

Practical and Policy Implications

Policymakers should design digital governance reforms that prioritize inclusion, digital literacy, and data protection safeguards. Peacebuilding initiatives should integrate digital participation tools as complementary mechanisms rather than standalone solutions. Governments operating in fragile contexts must ensure equitable access to digital services to prevent further marginalization.

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Table 1: Key digital governance tools and their potential contributions to institutional trust and peacebuilding processes.

Digital Governance Tool	Key Features	Potential Impact on Institutional Trust	Relevance to Peacebuilding and Reconciliation	Key Literature Sources
E-government service portals	Online service delivery, reduced bureaucracy, standardized procedures	Enhances perceptions of efficiency, reliability, and institutional competence	Improves access to public services and reduces grievances linked to exclusion	Heeks (2018); OECD (2020)
E-participation platforms	Online consultations, policy feedback, citizen engagement tools	Strengthens procedural fairness and citizen voice	Facilitates inclusive dialogue and non-violent expression of concerns	Macintosh (2004); Fung (2015)
Open government data systems	Public access to government data and transparency initiatives	Increases perceptions of openness and accountability	Supports oversight, reduces suspicion, and promotes institutional legitimacy	Bertot et al. (2010); Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer (2014)
Digital grievance redress mechanisms	Online complaint submission and tracking	Builds trust through responsiveness and problem resolution	Addresses local-level conflicts and enhances state-citizen relationships	UNDP (2021); OECD (2020)
Digital identity systems	Secure identification and access to welfare and services	Improves trust through inclusion and recognition	Reduces marginalization and supports equitable service distribution	United Nations (2020); van Dijk (2020)

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