Local Government Performance and Performance Leveling Policy:
A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Performance leveling policies are increasingly adopted in the public sector as tools to enhance accountability, effectiveness, and results-oriented approaches in local government implementation. However, empirical evidence on the extent to which these policies actually improve local government performance remains mixed and has not been thoroughly analyzed. This study aims to systematically review the scientific literature on performance leveling policies and their effects on local government performance by using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. Following PRISMA guidelines, the study identifies, filters, and analyzes relevant academic articles from reputable international databases. A thematic approach is used to identify conceptual patterns, success factors for policy implementation, and research gaps. The findings indicate that performance leveling policies can improve local government performance by strengthening accountability systems, clarifying performance indicators, and aligning organizational goals. Nevertheless, the success of these policies depends heavily on institutional capacity, bureaucratic leadership, and the quality of implementation at the organizational level. This research adds to the public sector performance management literature by providing a structured conceptual overview and offering policy recommendations for improving local governance in developing countries.

Keywords: Performance leveling; local government performance; public sector performance management; policy implementation; systematic literature review

Introduction

Improving the performance of local governments is a strategic issue in public-sector reform agendas across various countries, especially in developing countries. Local governments are required not only to carry out administrative functions but also to demonstrate measurable, accountable, and results-oriented performance (Alonso & Andrews, 2025; Lerusse & Van de Walle, 2022). In this context, performance management systems are an important instrument for ensuring that public policies, programs, and local government activities have a real impact on the community (García-Juan et al., 2019; Pudjono et al., 2025).

Along with the development of the New Public Management and Performance-based governance paradigms, various governments are adopting increasingly structured performance appraisal policies. One widely used approach is the performance leveling policy, which groups or classifies the performance of public organizations according to the achievement levels of specific indicators (Beeri, 2021; Garengo & Sardi, 2021). This policy is designed to encourage healthy competition between organizational units, increase accountability, and strengthen the orientation of results in the implementation of local government.Normatively, performance-leveling policies are seen as creating incentives for public organizations to improve the quality of program planning, implementation, and evaluation. Performance leveling is also expected to be the basis for managerial decision-making, including in resource allocation, organizational capacity strengthening, and apparatus performance assessment (Bracci et al., 2024; Cohen et al., 2019). Thus, this policy serves not only as an evaluation tool but also as a strategic mechanism to encourage continuous performance improvement.

However, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of performance-leveling policies in improving local government performance is mixed. Some studies report increased accountability and clarity in organizational goals, while others show that policies often get stuck in administrative and symbolic practices. This raises questions about how much performance leveling policies can actually produce substantive performance improvements rather than merely comply with formal indicators (Solomon & Rahmayanti, 2023; Zein & Septiani, 2025).The variation in findings shows that the relationship between performance leveling policies and local government performance is complex and shaped by many contextual factors. Factors such as institutional capacity, the quality of bureaucratic leadership, the clarity of performance indicators, and policy implementation mechanisms are key in determining whether policies succeed or fail. Therefore, a complete understanding of performance leveling policies must take into account the institutional context and local governance.Although the literature on public sector performance management has grown quickly, research that specifically synthesizes studies on performance leveling policies and their effects on local government performance remains scarce. Most research is context-specific and fragmented, making it hard to draw broad conclusions about the patterns, mechanisms, and factors that determine the success of these policies. This highlights the need for studies that systematically combine various research findings.In this context, the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method is relevant. SLRs enable researchers to identify, evaluate, and synthesize research findings in a clear and organized way. Using this approach, conceptual and empirical patterns related to performance leveling policies can be thoroughly analyzed, and research gaps can be identified for further investigation.Based on this description, this study aims to systematically review the scientific literature on performance leveling policies and their effects on local government performance. This research is expected to contribute to the theoretical development of the public sector performance management literature and provide relevant policy recommendations for strengthening local governance, especially in developing countries.

Research Methods

This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. This approach was chosen to systematically and transparently synthesize empirical and conceptual findings on the implementation of performance leveling policies and their impact on local government performance. SLR enables researchers to identify general patterns, research gaps, and directions for policy development and research in public sector performance management (Bastidas-Orrego et al., 2023; Carlo Torres et al., 2024).

Literature searches are systematically conducted across several internationally reputable scientific databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, to ensure breadth and quality of library sources. The search keywords were compiled using a combination of terms relevant to the research topic, including performance tiering, performance management, policy implementation, local government performance, and public sector governance. The search process accounts for variations in terms and synonyms to reduce search bias.To ensure the relevance and quality of the literature analyzed, this study clearly establishes inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria include articles from internationally reputable journals that discuss the implementation of performance policies, performance assessment systems, or performance management in the public sector, especially in local government. The selected article is a publication from a certain period of time and is written in English.In contrast, exclusion criteria include articles that are not substantively relevant to the research topic, non-scientific publications, duplicate articles, and studies that do not provide adequate methodological information. The selection process is carried out in stages to ensure objectivity and consistency.

The literature selection process follows the PRISMA flow, which consists of identification, screening, feasibility, and inclusion stages. At the identification stage, all articles obtained from the database are compiled, and duplicates are removed. The screening stage involves examining the title and abstract to assess the suitability of the topic. Furthermore, the articles that passed were selected in full-text review to determine final eligibility. Only articles that meet all inclusion criteria are included in the final analysis (Mengiste et al., 2023; Pérez-Gañán et al., 2023; Yaohong et al., 2025).Data analysis used thematic analysis to group and synthesize the main findings of the selected studies. Each article is analyzed to identify the research focus, policy context, methodological approach, and key findings related to the implementation of performance leveling policies and their impact on the performance of public organizations. This process yields several key themes that capture conceptual and empirical patterns in the literature.The synthesis integrates the results of the thematic analysis into a conceptual framework that explains the relationships among performance-leveling policy design, the implementation process, and local government performance outcomes. The interpretation of the findings is focused on identifying the key factors that Influence the success or failure of policies, as well as their implications for strengthening public sector governance and performance management.

To maintain legitimacy and transparency, this study systematically documented all stages of SLR, including search strategies, selection criteria, and analysis processes. The PRISMA approach serves as the primary reference to ensure the review process can be replicated and accounted for scientifically (Guo et al., 2025; Igalla et al., 2019).
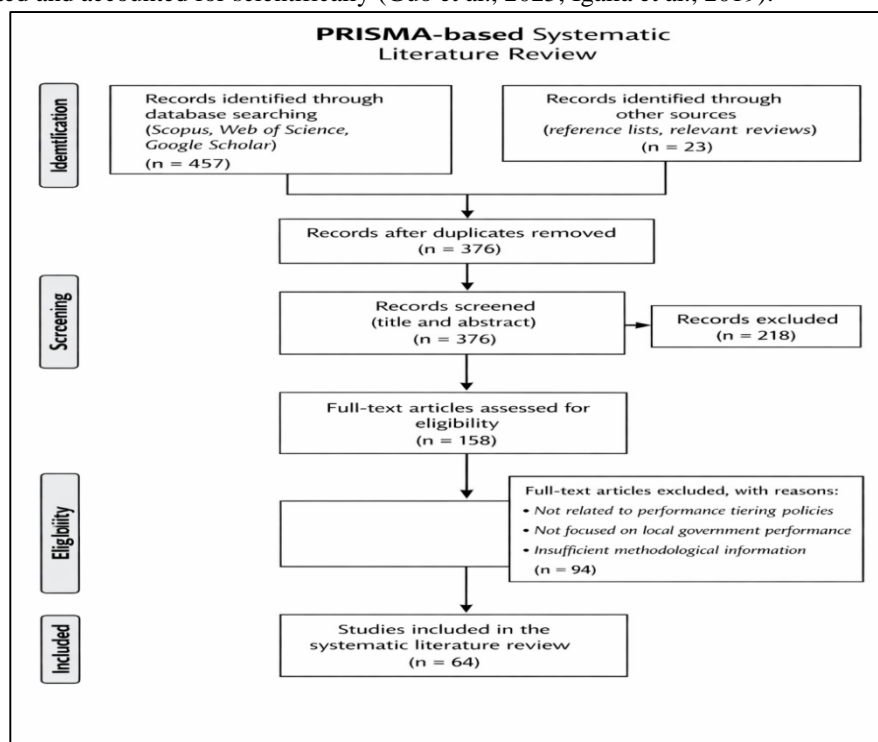

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of the systematic literature review process.

Discussion

Trends and Characteristics of the Literature on Local Government Performance Management

A bibliometric analysis of the Scopus database shows that the study of local government performance management and policies has developed significantly and is multidisciplinary. The distribution by field of science shows the dominance of the social sciences, confirming that local government performance is better understood within the framework of governance, institutions, and public administration. This shows that performance appraisal and leveling policies are not only treated as technocratic instruments but also as part of institutional dynamics and public-sector reforms.

Visualization of the distribution of science fields shows that studies related to management and local government performance policies are the most dominant in the Social Sciences cluster, with a proportion of around 35.7%, followed by Environmental Sciences at 22.2% and Economics, Econometrics, and Finance at around 5.8%. The dominance of social science indicates that the issue of local government performance and performance-based policies is understood more as a phenomenon of governance, institutions, and public administration than as a purely technical problem.

The significant involvement of the environmental and energy sectors indicates an expansion in the literature's focus, with the performance of local governments increasingly associated with sustainability issues, resource management, and environmental policies. This indicates that the performance assessment and leveling system is no longer only oriented towards administrative efficiency, but also towards achieving sustainable development goals. Meanwhile, the contributions of economics and business management reflect quantitative, performance-based approaches that are increasingly used to evaluate the effectiveness of public sector policies.
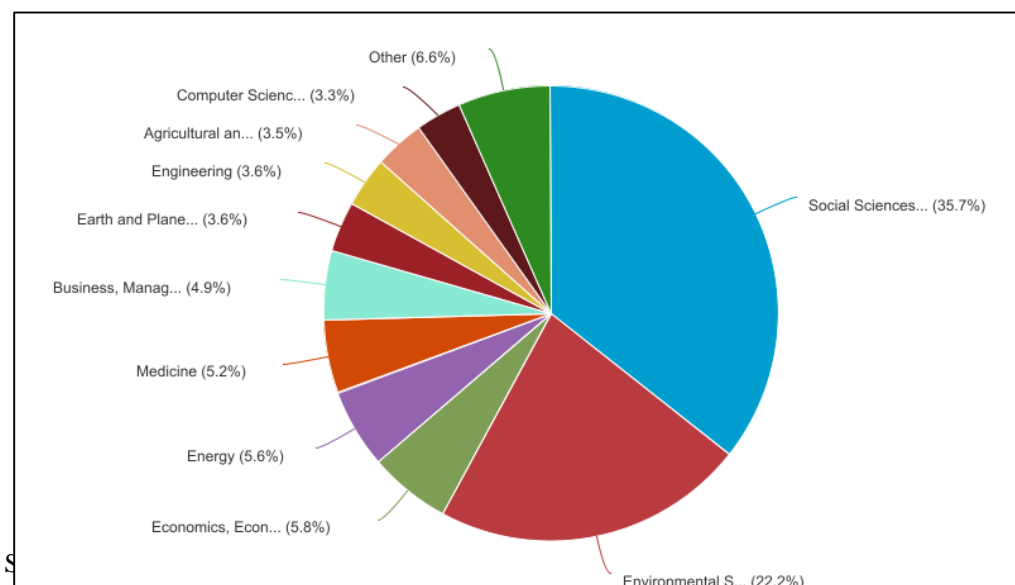

Figure 2. Distribution of Literature by Field of Science

Based on the visualization of the publication's country of origin, **China** and **the United States** emerged as major contributors to the literature on performance management and local government. The high number of publications from the two countries reflects a strong public-sector reform agenda, the development of performance evaluation systems, and well-established research capacity. Countries such as **the United Kingdom** and **Australia** have also made significant contributions, in line with their long tradition of performance-based governance reforms.

Interestingly, **Indonesia** is increasingly seen as a contributor to literature, although it still lags behind developed countries. These findings indicate an increase in academic attention to local government performance in developing countries, particularly in the context of decentralization and bureaucratic reform. However, the low proportion of publications from developing countries more generally also indicates a gap in the literature, especially in empirical evidence and conceptual studies rooted in local contexts.
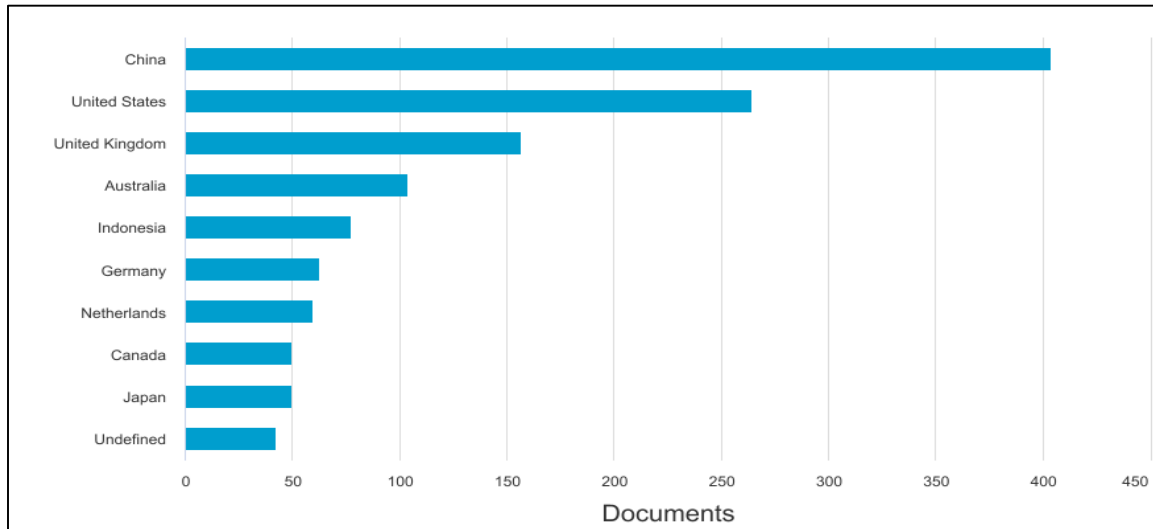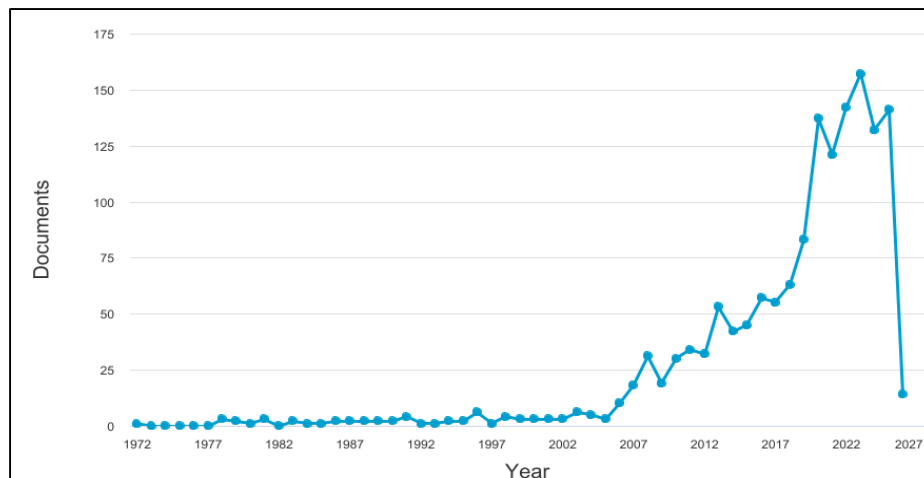
Source: Scopus Database, 2026

Figure 3. Distribution of Publications by Country

Analysis of temporal trends shows that publications related to local government management and performance policies were relatively limited before the mid-2000s. Significant increases began around 2007 and reached a sharp spike after **2015**. This trend indicates increasing academic attention to public-sector performance issues as accountability, transparency, and results-based governance are strengthened across various countries.

The surge in publications in the last period can also be attributed to the increasing complexity of public demands on local governments, including in terms of service quality, sustainability, and policy responsiveness. However, the decline in publications over the last year is likely due to the limited data for the current year in the Scopus database, so it does not reflect a substantial decline in research interest.

Source: Scopus Database, 2026

Figure 3. Country Publication Trends

Based on these three visualizations, it can be concluded that the literature on local government performance policies and management is developing rapidly but is still fragmented across disciplines and state contexts. The dominance of developed countries and macro approaches opens up space for this research to systematically synthesize existing findings, especially by linking performance-leveling policies to local government performance outcomes.

Using the *Systematic Literature Review* approach, this research is strategically positioned to bridge the literature gap,

integrate governance, economic, and sustainability perspectives, and provide a more comprehensive conceptual framework for the development of local government performance policies, especially in developing countries.

Main Theme in the Literature on Local Government Performance Leveling Policy

The results of the literature synthesis show that performance leveling policies in local government are generally positioned as an integral part of the public sector performance management system. Most studies emphasize that performance grading serves as a mechanism for classifying organizational achievements based on specific indicators, thereby facilitating evaluation, comparison, and managerial decision-making. In this context, performance leveling policies are understood not only as an assessment tool but also as a strategic instrument to encourage results-oriented, accountable public organizations.

Another dominant theme in the literature is the relationship between performance leveling and strengthening local government accountability. Many studies show that a clear performance classification system can increase transparency and clarify public organizations' responsibilities to stakeholders. Performance leveling allows local governments to communicate their performance achievements in a more structured manner, both to the central government and to the community. However, the literature also warns that indicative accountability can drive formal compliance behavior if it is not accompanied by adequate oversight and evaluation.

The literature also consistently highlights institutional capacity as a key determinant of the effectiveness of performance leveling policies. Previous studies have shown that local governments with strong human resource capacity, adaptive bureaucratic leadership, and a good internal coordination system tend to be able to utilize performance leveling as a tool to improve performance. On the other hand, limited institutional capacity often leads to performance grading being understood solely as an administrative obligation, thereby limiting its impact on substantive performance.

The next important theme is the gap between policy design and implementation at the organizational level. Several studies show that although performance leveling policy frameworks are well-designed, their implementation often faces obstacles, such as bureaucratic resistance, unclear indicators, and limited institutional support. This gap means the performance results achieved do not always reflect the policy's original objectives. The findings confirm that the success of performance policies is highly dependent on the implementation process and the context of the implementing organization.

Overall, the literature shows that performance leveling policies have great potential to improve local government performance, but their effectiveness is very contextual. Mechanically and uniformly applied performance leveling risks symbolic performance, while an adaptive, institutional capacity-based approach tends to yield more sustained performance improvements. Therefore, this thematic synthesis emphasizes the importance of viewing performance leveling as part of a broader governance ecosystem rather than a stand-alone policy instrument.

Table 1. Synthesis of Key Themes in the Performance Leveling Policy Literature Local Government

Main Themes	Focus of Discussion in Literature	Conceptual Implications	Source
Performance leveling as a management instrument	Classification and comparison of organizational performance achievements	Strengthening of results orientation and performance evaluation	(Consciência Silvestre et al., 2019; Garengo & Sardi, 2021; Pacheco & Fernandez, 2022)
Accountability and transparency	Performance reporting and public accountability	Increased public trust and control	(Cooper & Nimer, 2024; Jones, 2019; Perry, 2019)
Institutional capacity	HR, leadership, and internal coordination	Policy effectiveness is contextual	(Azhar & Yang, 2019; Gofen & Gassner, 2022; Overman, 2021)
Design–implementation gap	Bureaucratic obstacles and unclear indicators	Symbolic performance risk	(Fazekas et al., 2022; Goodman & Carroll, 2024; Jiang & Tang, 2023)
Policy adaptive approach	Customization with local context	Sustainability performance improvement	(Bell, 2021; Kislov et al., 2019; Nathan, 2022)

Source: Scopus Database, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, 2026

Research Gaps and Development Directions for Performance Leveling Policy Studies

Although the literature on local government performance management and policies has developed rapidly, the synthesis reveals several significant research gaps. Most studies still focus on performance measurement in general, such as the effectiveness of performance management systems or indicator-based policy evaluations, without explicitly addressing performance leveling mechanisms as stand-alone policy instruments. As a result, the conceptual understanding of how performance leveling works and affects the behavior of public organizations remains limited.

Another prominent gap is the dominance of quantitative approaches that focus on the statistical relationship between the performance system and organizational achievements. Although this approach provides strong empirical evidence, many studies fail to explore the process and implementation dimensions of policy. The literature remains relatively limited in explaining how bureaucratic actors interpret, respond to, and adjust to the performance leveling system in the daily practice of local government.

In terms of geographical context, the literature shows a fairly clear inequality between developed and developing countries. Studies from developed countries dominate the discourse on public sector performance management, while those from developing countries remain limited. This condition leads to generalizations that often fail to fully account for the typical challenges of developing countries, such as diverse institutional capacities, local political dynamics, and limited resources.

In addition, the existing literature tends to treat performance policy as a neutral and technocratic instrument. Relatively few studies have examined the implications of performance leveling on power dynamics, organizational strategic behavior, or potential performance distortions, such as indicator manipulation and the achievement of pseudo-targets. This gap shows the need for a more critical and reflective approach in reviewing local government performance leveling policies.

Based on these gaps, further research is needed to develop a more comprehensive conceptual framework to explain the relationships among performance leveling policy design, implementation processes, and local government performance outcomes. Cross-method and cross-contextual approaches are important for enriching the understanding of variation in policy impacts. Thus, the study of performance leveling policies not only contributes to the development of public-sector performance management Theory but also provides practical guidance for improving local governance.

Table 2. Research Gaps and Study Development Directions
Performance Tiering Policy

Literary Aspects	Key Findings	Research Gaps	Further Research Direction	Source
Policy focus	Dominant in general performance management	Performance grading has not been specifically studied	Strengthening the concept of performance tiering	(Ananda et al., 2022; Michener, 2019; Wenzelburger et al., 2024)
Methodological approach	Dominated by quantitative	Minimal exploration of the implementation process	Qualitative and mixed-methods approach	(Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2023; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021; Shoub et al., 2021)
Geographical context	Developed countries dominate	Underrepresented developing countries	Contextual studies of developing countries	(Bruns et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2024)
Analytical perspective	Technical and normative	Lack of a critical approach	Institutional and political analysis	(Blake, 2019; Thiel & Steen, 2022; Voorn et al., 2019)
Policy impact	Focus on formal outcomes	Symbolic performance risks have not been explored yet	Study of distortions and unintended effects	(Boonstra et al., 2023; Headley et al., 2021; Peters, 2021)

Source: Scopus Database, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, 2026

Policy and Conceptual Implications of Regional Government Performance Leveling Policies

The literature synthesis shows that performance leveling policies have important implications for strengthening local governance, especially in encouraging results orientation and public accountability. Performance tiering can be a strategic tool for simplifying performance appraisal by grouping organizational achievements into categories easily understood by policymakers and stakeholders. Thus, this policy can increase transparency while strengthening the legitimacy of local government performance.

From a public policy perspective, the literature confirms that the effectiveness of performance leveling depends heavily on the clarity of policy design. Well-defined, relevant to strategic objectives, and consistent performance indicators are the main prerequisites for ensuring that the performance leveling system does not function solely as an administrative tool. Without a robust indicator design, performance tiering risks biased performance classifications that less accurately reflect actual performance conditions.The next policy implication concerns integrating performance leveling into the broader local government management system. The literature shows that performance leveling will be more effective when it is directly linked to strategic planning, performance-based budgeting, and human resource management systems. This integration allows performance leveling results to be used as a basis for decision-making, not just as an annual evaluation report.

From an institutional perspective, previous studies have emphasized the importance of organizational capacity in determining the success of performance leveling policies. Local governments with adequate human resource capacity and adaptive bureaucratic leadership tend to use performance leveling to foster organizational learning. Conversely, capacity constraints often lead these policies to be perceived as an additional administrative burden, limiting their impact on substantive performance.The literature also highlights the behavioral implications of performance leveling. Performance classification systems can affect organizational behavior, either positively through increased motivation and healthy competition, or negatively through opportunistic manipulation of indicators or adjustment of targets. Therefore, performance leveling policies need to be accompanied by a monitoring and evaluation mechanism that can minimize performance distortions.

In developing countries, the implications of performance-leveling policies are becoming increasingly complex. The literature shows that variations in capacity between local governments, local political dynamics, and resource constraints often affect the consistency of policy implementation. This condition confirms that a uniform policy approach tends to be less effective, so flexibility is needed in implementing performance leveling based on local characteristics.On the conceptual side, the results of the literature review enrich the understanding of performance leveling as a connecting mechanism between policy design and local government performance outcomes. Performance leveling cannot be understood solely as a technical instrument, but rather as an institutional process influenced by organizational context, policy actors, and governance dynamics. This perspective opens the door to developing a more holistic analytical framework for the study of public sector performance management.Overall, the policy and conceptual implications identified in the literature suggest that a combination of strong policy design, institutional capacity, and quality of implementation largely determines the success of performance leveling policies. This research emphasizes that performance leveling should be positioned as part of a sustainable local governance reform strategy rather than as a stand-alone evaluation instrument.

Table 3. Policy and Conceptual Implications of Performance Leveling Policy
Local Government

Dimensions	Key Findings of the Literature	Policy Implications	Source
Policy design	Performance indicators determine the quality of leveling	Need for relevant and consistent indicators	(Howlett & Rayner, 2020; Kroll & Moynihan, 2021; Schulze-Gabrechten, 2019)
System integration	Tiering is effective when connected to planning and budgeting	Synchronization with performance management systems	(Cheng et al., 2020; Hansen, 2024; Moe, 2019)
Institutional capacity	HR and leadership Influence effectiveness	Strengthening organizational capacity	(Domorenok et al., 2021; Left & Turn, 2023; Vince et al., 2024)
Organizational behavior	Risk of distortion and symbolic performance	Continuous monitoring and evaluation	(Biesbroek & Candel, 2020; McConnell et al., 2020)
Local context	Variation in capacity between regions	Adaptive policy approach	(Maggetti & Trein, 2022; Mewhirter & Berardo, 2019)
Conceptual contribution	Tiering as an institutional process	A more holistic analytical framework	(De Filippi et al., 2022; Quah, 2020)

Source: Scopus Database, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, 2026

Conclusion

This study aims to systematically review the scientific literature on performance leveling policies and their implications for local government performance. Using a PRISMA-based Systematic Literature Review, this study synthesized empirical and conceptual findings across disciplines and geographical contexts. The results of the review show that the performance leveling policy is an important instrument in the public sector performance management system, oriented towards accountability and results.

In general, the literature indicates that performance leveling policies can improve local government performance by strengthening the evaluation system, clarifying indicators, and increasing transparency and accountability within public organizations. However, the effectiveness of such policies is not universal and depends heavily on policy design, institutional capacity, and the quality of implementation at the organizational level. These findings confirm that performance leveling cannot be understood as a purely technical instrument, but rather as a complex institutional process.

The synthesis also reveals a significant research gap in the existing literature. The study of performance grading is still often implicitly integrated into the broader study of performance management, without a specific discussion of the mechanisms of performance classification and their impact on organizational behavior. In addition, the dominance of studies from developed countries underscores the need to expand research that departs from the context of developing countries to enrich the understanding of the variation in the impact of performance leveling policies.From a policy perspective, the findings of this study have important implications for policy formulation and for local government practitioners. Performance leveling needs to be designed adaptively, integrated with planning and budgeting systems, and supported by institutional capacity building. Without such support, performance leveling policies risk producing symbolic performance that does not reflect substantive performance improvements.In closing, this study contributes to the development of public sector performance management literature by providing a structured conceptual synthesis of local government performance leveling policies. In the future, follow-up research is expected to combine conceptual and empirical approaches to examine more deeply the relationship between policy design, implementation processes, and performance outcomes. Thus, performance leveling policies can be developed as an integral part of a sustainable local governance reform strategy.

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