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Wise Leadership, Public Value and Smart Local Government: A SPAR-4-SLR Systematic Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract

Local governments are urged to become smart, yet research still treats their intelligence mainly as a matter of technology. This review examines what empirical studies say about the quality of public leaders' judgement, captured by the concept of wise leadership, and about its links with smart local government capabilities and public value. Following PRISMA 2020 and the SPAR-4-SLR protocol, four Scopus queries returned 524 records, from which 116 empirical studies published between 2008 and 2026 were retained. The studies were coded with a standard extraction grid, appraised for quality, mapped through keyword co-occurrence analysis and synthesised along six relationships, whose strength of evidence was graded. The field is young, with 57% of the studies published in 2024–2026, spread over 45 countries and dominated by cross-sectional, single-source surveys. Evidence is dense on the link between leadership and digital or organisational capabilities, which reaches a moderate to high level of confidence, but thin on the nature, measurement and antecedents of wise leadership. No study tests the effect of wise leadership on public value, only two use multi-source data, and research on wisdom forms a peripheral cluster, weakly connected to research on digital government and public value. The review proposes an integrative framework in which wise leadership contributes to public value directly, through the quality of trade-offs, and indirectly, through data, knowledge and participation capabilities, under institutional and territorial contingencies. Six propositions and a twelve-question agenda guide future research, and implications are drawn for the training and selection of local leaders.

Keywords: wise leadership; public value; smart local government; digital transformation; systematic literature review; MENA region

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, local governments have been urged to become smart. National strategies, donors and consultancies promote digital platforms, open data, dashboards and online participation as the way towards more efficient and responsive administrations. In Morocco, since the 2015 organic laws on regions, provinces and municipalities, territorial authorities have gained new competences while being required to digitise procedures and publish information. Similar reforms are under way across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Asia and Europe. Yet research on smart cities and smart government has repeatedly shown that technology alone does not create value for citizens: human and institutional factors weigh at least as much as infrastructure (Nam & Pardo, 2011; Meijer & Rodríguez Bolívar, 2016). Organisations may also adopt digital tools for legitimacy while keeping them decoupled from

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actual decisions. What makes the difference is then less the tool than the judgement of those who decide how, for whom and to what end it is used.

The concept of wise leadership seeks to capture this judgement. Drawing on the Aristotelian notion of phronesis and on psychological research, scholars describe wise leaders as those who understand complex situations, integrate divergent perspectives, balance competing interests in view of the common good, care for the people affected by their decisions and translate judgement into timely action (Sternberg, 1998; Ardelt, 2003; McKenna et al., 2009; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011). These qualities match the work that Moore (1995) assigns to public managers: defining what is valuable, building legitimacy and mobilising capabilities. Three research streams address parts of this argument but rarely meet: management research on wisdom and wise leadership (Rego et al., 2025), public administration research on value-oriented leadership and public values (Vandenabeele, 2014; Pandey et al., 2016), and digital government research on leadership in digital transformation and smart city initiatives (Sancino & Hudson, 2020; Gasco-Hernandez et al., 2022). Existing reviews have mapped public leadership styles (Vogel & Masal, 2015) and the measurement of public value (Faulkner & Kaufman, 2018). None examines wise leadership or focuses on the local level, where leaders are closest to citizens and digital capacities often weakest.

This article fills this gap with a systematic review of 116 empirical studies. It asks how this research has developed, what it says about the nature, antecedents and effects of wise leadership in public organisations, through which capabilities and under which conditions leadership contributes to public value, and which research agenda follows from the remaining gaps. The review provides the first systematic map of this intersection, grades the strength of evidence for each relationship, shows that the evidence is dense on digital leadership but thin on wise leadership, and proposes an integrative framework, six testable propositions and a research agenda adapted to MENA local governments. Section 2 presents the conceptual background, Section 3 the method and Section 4 the results and their discussion; Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. From wisdom to wise leadership

Aristotle distinguished phronesis, practical wisdom, from theoretical knowledge and technical skill: it is the capacity to deliberate well and act rightly in particular situations. Psychology defines wisdom as expertise in the fundamental pragmatics of life (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), as the balancing of intrapersonal, interpersonal and extrapersonal interests in view of the common good (Sternberg, 1998), or as a personality characteristic integrating cognitive, reflective and affective dimensions (Ardelt, 2003). Transposed to leadership, wisdom combines reason and observation, virtuous ends and practical action (McKenna et al., 2009), together with the ability to grasp the essence of situations and to exercise political power for the common good (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011).

Building on these works, this review defines wise leadership as a process of influence through which a leader understands complex situations with discernment, integrates divergent perspectives with humility, orients decisions towards the common good, shows care for those affected and translates judgement into timely action. Five dimensions follow: cognitive discernment, reflexivity and openness, orientation towards the common good, benevolence and

wisdom in action. The definition is conceptual and prescribes no measurement approach: ratings by collaborators, who witness the leader's decisions daily, are one possible operationalisation; self-ratings, observation and citizens' assessments are others. The construct overlaps with transformational, ethical and servant leadership, but its specificity lies in choosing well when values conflict and information is incomplete. This specificity must be shown empirically, since new leadership constructs are often redundant with transformational leadership (Banks et al., 2016).

In the MENA region, this notion has a vocabulary of its own. Hikma designates a wisdom inseparable from justice and measure in action; shura, consultation, is expected before important decisions; amana designates public office and resources as a trust held on behalf of others. Studies in Muslim contexts show that such values still guide inclusive and deliberative local leadership (Maulana et al., 2025; Riskawati et al., 2026), and they may shape how the dimensions of wise leadership are expressed: shura gives reflexivity and openness the form of collective consultation, amana gives the common-good orientation the form of stewardship of public resources, and hikma joins judgement to just action. Section 4.6 returns to how these values could be measured.

2.2. Public value and smart local government capabilities

Moore (1995) argued that public managers are responsible for creating public value, that is, what citizens collectively value and are willing to support. His strategic triangle states that an action creates value only when it pursues valuable purposes, enjoys legitimacy and is feasible with the available capabilities. Later work broadened the concept (Bryson et al., 2014) but also criticised its vagueness and the political role it grants to unelected managers (Rhodes & Wanna, 2007). Following Faulkner and Kaufman (2018), this review adopts a multidimensional view of public value at the local level, covering service quality, equity, trust and citizen participation. Definitions of smart government have moved from a technological to an organisational view (Gil-Garcia et al., 2015; Meijer & Rodríguez Bolívar, 2016). Drawing on dynamic capabilities theory (Teece, 2007), smart local government capabilities are defined here as the routines through which a local authority uses data for decisions, manages and shares knowledge, and organises citizen participation. These capabilities differ from the mere adoption of tools: a dashboard that nobody reads is an asset, not a capability.

2.3. Theoretical links between the concepts

Four theories connect these concepts. Upper echelons theory holds that organisations reflect the cognitive bases and values of their leaders, especially when leaders enjoy managerial discretion (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hambrick, 2007). Public value theory specifies which outcomes matter and why judgement is central to producing them. Dynamic capabilities theory explains how leaders' influence is transmitted, since managers' cognitive capabilities are microfoundations of the organisation's capacity to sense, seize and transform (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015). Neo-institutional theory brings in context: pressures for conformity may produce a symbolic adoption of smart tools, and leaders differ in their ability to give reforms real content (Oliver, 1991). Together, they suggest a chain in which antecedents shape wise leadership, which contributes to public value directly and through capabilities, under contextual contingencies. The review examines six relationships: the nature and measurement of wise

leadership, its antecedents, leadership and public value, leadership and capabilities, capabilities and public value, and context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Protocol and search strategy

The review follows the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and the SPAR-4-SLR protocol designed for management research (Paul et al., 2021). The protocol, defined before the search, is summarised in Table 1. Scopus was chosen for its broad coverage of management and public administration journals and its exportable metadata (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Four queries matched the parts of the chain: R1 combined wisdom terms ("wise leader*", "practical wisdom", "phronesis") with leadership terms, R2 "leader*" with "public value*" and public sector terms, R3 "leader*" with smart and digital government terms, and R4 "wisdom" with antecedent terms such as personality and life experience. The full search strings are reported in Supplementary Material S1. The search was run in November 2026; articles in press were excluded by the "final" publication-stage filter, so that 2026 is covered only partially. An open-access filter was applied to R1, R3 and R4, whose broad terms returned many records, so that every retained study could be read in full and checked by readers. It was not applied to R2, the query closest to the core link between leadership and public value, so that no study of this link would be lost. Re-run on 23 November 2026, the three queries returned 935 records without the filter and 413 with it, so that the filter removed 522 records (R1: 338; R3: 99; R4: 85); Section 4.1 reports a sensitivity check.

Table 1. Review protocol

Element	Choice
Reporting standards	PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021); SPAR-4-SLR (Paul et al., 2021)
Database	Scopus; four queries (R1 to R4) on titles, abstracts and keywords
Filters	English-language journal articles, final stage, 2000 to November 2026; business, management and social sciences; open access for R1, R3 and R4 (not R2)
Inclusion	Empirical study of at least one relationship of the chain in an organisational setting
Exclusion	Off-topic; no empirical data; outside organisations; literature review
Quality appraisal	Three-criterion index adapted from the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Hong et al., 2018)
Analysis	Extraction grid; keyword co-occurrence network; thematic synthesis; grading of the strength of evidence
Reliability	Independent double coding of a random 20% subsample by a second author

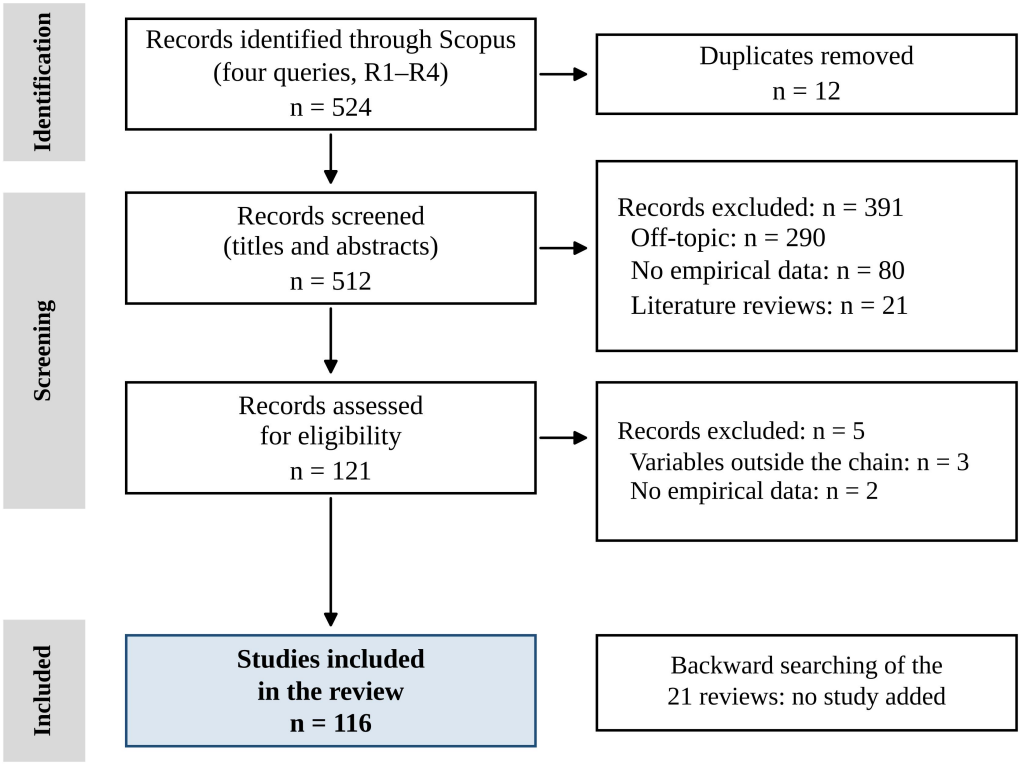
Source: Authors.

3.2. Study selection

The queries returned 524 records (Figure 1). After the removal of 12 duplicates, 512 titles and abstracts were screened and 391 records were excluded: 290 were off-topic, often because of the polysemy of "wisdom" ("wisdom of the crowd", "local wisdom"), 80 contained no empirical

data and 21 were literature reviews. The reviews informed the conceptual background; backward searching of their reference lists did not add any study to the corpus. Of the 121 records assessed for eligibility on their full text, five were excluded: three because their variables fell outside the chain defined in the protocol and two because they contained no empirical data. Supplementary Material S2 gives the decision and reason for each screened record.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection



Source: Authors, adapted from Page et al. (2021).

3.3. Quality appraisal, extraction and synthesis

The first author screened and coded all records; a generative-AI tool proposed preliminary screening decisions and pre-filled the extraction grid (see Declarations), and each decision was checked. A second author independently screened a random 20% of the records (n = 103) on titles, abstracts and keywords, and appraised the quality of a random 20% of the included studies (n = 23). Agreement reached Cohen's $\kappa = 0.87$ for screening (Landis & Koch, 1977) and 79% for quality levels; disagreements were resolved by discussion. A re-verification of the setting, sector and country codes of all studies led to 37 corrections (Supplementary Material S3).

Quality was appraised with a three-criterion index adapted from the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT's design-specific criteria require information that many studies, especially short articles, do not report, and the corpus mixes seven designs; a common index kept scores comparable across designs, at the cost of detail. Each criterion scored 0 or 1: design (the design and data collection method are stated), sample (population,

setting and size are reported) and analysis (validated multi-item measures and multivariate methods for quantitative studies; an explicit coding procedure with evidence from the data for qualitative studies; both for mixed studies). The detailed rules are given in Supplementary Material S4. Forty studies scored 3 (high quality), 62 scored 2 (medium) and 14 scored 1 or 0 (low). Low-quality studies were never the sole basis of a conclusion, and the synthesis was repeated on high-quality studies (Section 4.4). A standard grid recorded bibliographic data, setting, design, sample, variables, main finding, quality and relationships addressed (Supplementary Material S3). Author keywords were harmonised, and a co-occurrence network of the 35 most frequent keywords was built with Python (networkx), with communities detected by modularity optimisation. Findings were then synthesised by relationship. Finally, the strength of evidence was graded with rules adapted from GRADE-CERQual (Lewin et al., 2018), designed for qualitative syntheses but preferred to GRADE for effectiveness reviews (Guyatt et al., 2008) because it does not require comparable effect sizes, which the heterogeneous measures of the corpus do not provide. Five criteria were used: volume, share of high-quality studies, presence of both quantitative and qualitative designs, share of studies in local or regional government, and coherence of findings. Confidence was high with at least 30 studies, 40% of high quality, both types of design, 40% at the local level and no contradictory finding; moderate with at least 15 studies, 20% of high quality, 20% at the local level and findings consistent in direction; and low otherwise, or whenever findings were contradictory or too context-specific to be compared. An intermediate level was assigned when a relationship met all criteria of one level and all but one of the next. A meta-analysis was not attempted, since too few studies used comparable instruments.

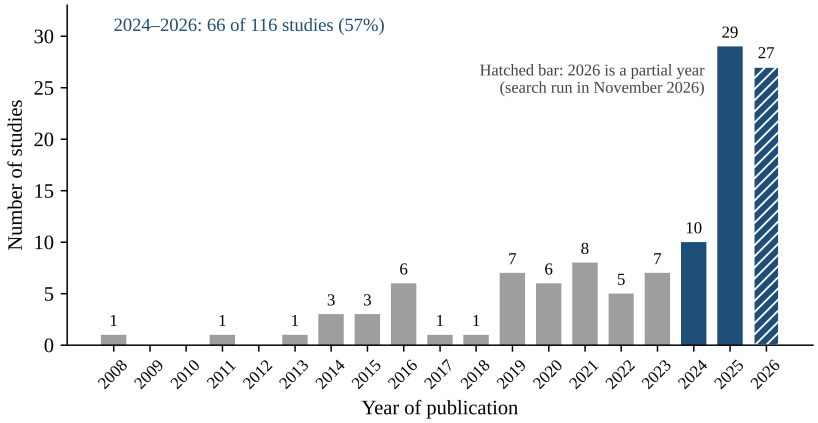
4. Results and discussion

4.1. Profile of the field

The field is recent and growing fast (Figure 2). Nine studies appeared between 2008 and 2015 and 41 between 2016 and 2023, whereas 66, or 57% of the corpus, were published between 2024 and November 2026. As the search ended in November 2026 and excluded articles in press, the 2026 count (27 studies) is incomplete and this share is an order of magnitude. Growth is driven mainly by digital transformation research: 33 of the 66 recent studies address the link between leadership and capabilities, against 14 of the 50 earlier ones. The studies were conducted in 45 countries (four cover several, one does not report its setting), led by Indonesia (15 studies), the United States (8), the United Kingdom and China (6 each) and South Korea (5); 38 countries contribute three studies or fewer.

Sixteen studies concern the MENA region, in nine countries, including two in Morocco, on information technology in territorial authorities (Amrani et al., 2022) and on civil servants' readiness for artificial intelligence (Barodi & Lalaoui, 2025). One hundred studies concern the public sector, 47 of them local or regional governments. The corpus is spread across 87 journals.Quantitative surveys dominate (69 studies, 59%), mostly analysed with structural equation modelling, ahead of qualitative case studies (42) and mixed designs (5). Two features weaken the evidence. Cross-sectional, single-source designs prevail: only two studies use multi-source or multilevel data and at most seven are longitudinal, so that the same respondent usually rates leadership, capabilities and outcomes, which exposes findings to common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

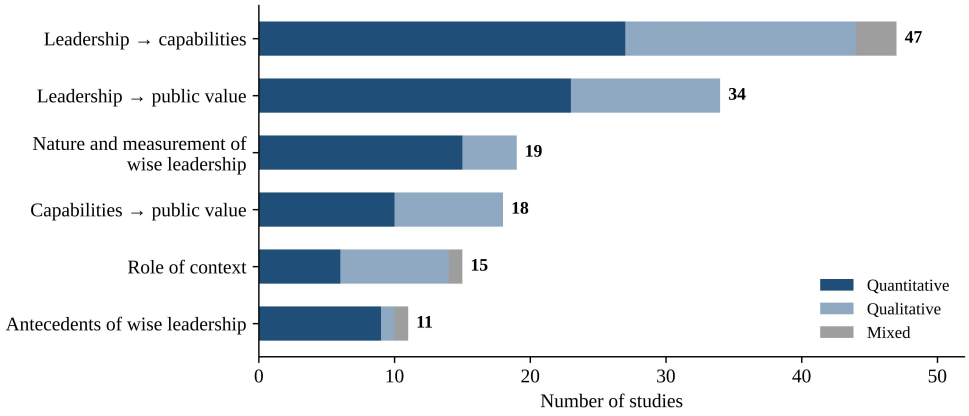
Figure 2. Number of included studies per year of publication, 2008–2026



Source: Authors, based on the 116 included studies.

Public value and performance are, moreover, almost always measured through perceptions rather than objective indicators. Since R2 was not filtered, its records allow a check of the open-access bias. Of its 116 records, 54 were closed access; 19 of these were included, against 29 of the 62 open-access records. The included closed-access studies were older (median year 2021, against 2025) and less often of high quality (3 of 19, against 11 of 29), with a similar mix of designs. The filter is thus more likely to have under-represented older studies than stronger evidence, and it may have amplified the apparent growth of the field. Coverage of the chain is uneven (Figure 3). The link between leadership and capabilities is by far the most studied (47 studies), followed by the link between leadership and public value (34). The nature and measurement of wise leadership (19), the link between capabilities and public value (18), the role of context (15) and, above all, the antecedents of wise leadership (11) are much less documented. The field knows a good deal about digital leadership and little about wise leadership.

Figure 3. Number of studies per relationship of the conceptual chain, by research design

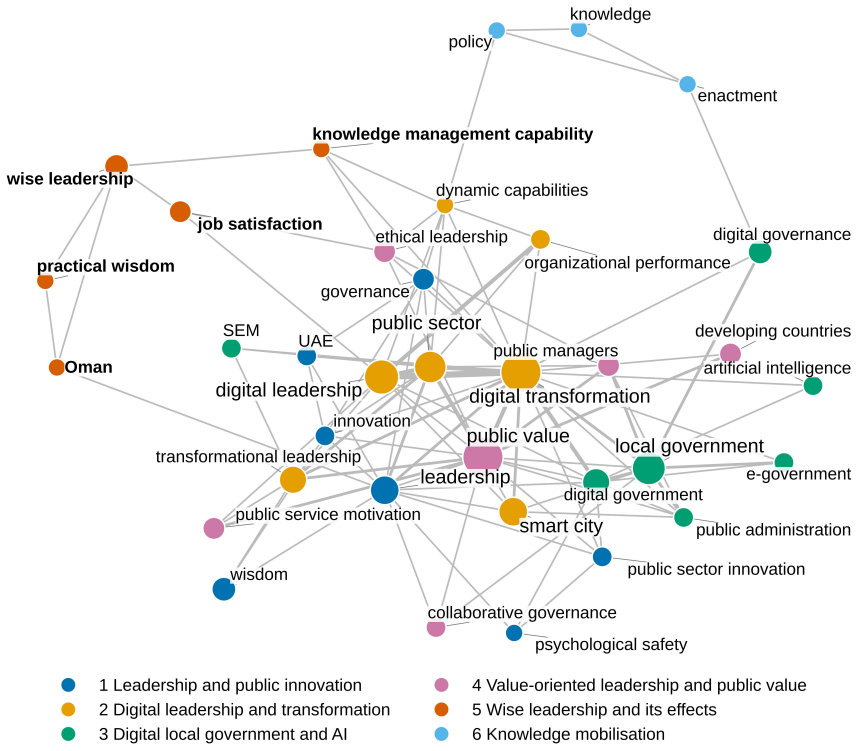


Source: Authors. A study may address several relationships.

4.2. Thematic structure

Four author keywords dominate the corpus: "public value" (19 occurrences), "digital transformation" (17), "digital leadership" (12) and "public sector" (11). The co-occurrence network reveals six clusters (Figure 4): leadership and public innovation; digital leadership and transformation; digital local government and artificial intelligence; value-oriented leadership and public value; wise leadership and its effects; and knowledge mobilisation in public action. The wise leadership cluster is peripheral, connected to the centre of the network only through ethical leadership and knowledge management capability: research on wisdom and on smart public value have developed side by side.

Figure 4. Keyword co-occurrence network of the 35 most frequent author keywords



Source: Authors. Node size reflects keyword frequency, edge width the number of co-occurrences and colour the cluster.

4.3. Synthesis by relationship

Nature and measurement. Nineteen studies examine wisdom directly (Table 2). They agree that wise leadership is multidimensional but differ on its dimensions. Rego et al. (2025) validate the first scale of leader-expressed practical wisdom (inquiring, judging and acting with emotional regulation) and show that it fosters employee voice. Gulf studies rely on a framework of intellectual acumen, drive for action, moral conduct and humility (Awashreh & Hamid, 2024), and Intezari et al. (2026) identify fourteen characteristics of executive wisdom through grounded theory. These conceptualisations converge with the five dimensions used here, although benevolence is less explicit in recent scales. Only seven of these studies concern public

organisations and one concerns a local authority (Bynner & Terje, 2021); measures are heterogeneous, and no scale has yet been validated in local government or in Arabic. The "nature and measurement" row of Table 3 counts a slightly different set of 19 studies, which adds three validated measures of related leadership constructs and leaves out wisdom studies coded under other relationships (e.g., Greaves et al., 2014; Ding et al., 2019); one of them is set in local government.

Table 2. Empirical studies of wisdom in the corpus

Study	Country	Setting and design	Main finding
Ahmad et al. (2013)	Malaysia	Schools; survey, n = 417	Principals' wisdom perceived as high and effective
Greaves et al. (2014)	Australia	Organisations; survey, n = 77	Some wisdom facets favour, others hinder, transformational leadership
Zacher et al. (2015)	United States	Military; survey, n = 74	Only self-reported wisdom relates to personality
Elbaz and Haddoud (2017)	Egypt	Travel agencies; survey, n = 505	Wise leadership improves satisfaction and performance
Dubois (2018)	Belgium	Prisons; 40 interviews	Phronetic practices settle ethical dilemmas
Ding et al. (2019)	Japan	Firms; survey, n = 144	Wise leadership fosters innovation via knowledge management
Aagaard and Eberhard Trykker (2020)	Denmark	NGO partnership; case study	Practical wisdom supports capacity development
Al-Amiri and Al-Uqabi (2021)	Iraq	Company; mixed, n = 87	Wise leadership relates to the business model
Ardelt and Sharma (2021)	United States	Organisations; survey, n = 821	Wise organisations foster wise leadership and well-being
Bynner and Terje (2021)	United Kingdom	Local authority; 16 interviews	Practical wisdom complements technical knowledge
Solansky et al. (2023)	United States	Leaders; survey, n = 249	Fear of failure fosters wisdom via empowerment
Al Khazraje and Sideeq (2024)	Iraq	Ministry; survey, n = 125	Wise leadership helps manage strategic ignorance
Awashreh and Hamid (2024)	Oman	Government; survey, n = 300	Perceptions of wisdom vary with employee profile
Awashreh and Mohamed (2024)	UAE, Oman	Government, education; survey	Wise leadership perceived in both sectors
Rego et al. (2025)	Portugal and others	Organisations; field studies, experiment	Validated scale; wisdom fosters employee voice
Pierścieniak (2025)	Poland	Museums; survey, n = 200	Organisational wisdom fosters innovation
Amani (2025)	Tanzania	Hospitality; survey, n = 394	Wisdom fosters perspective-taking via emotional intelligence
Intezari et al. (2026)	Iran	Executives; grounded theory	Fourteen characteristics of executive wisdom
Macêdo and Bispo (2026)	Brazil	University council; qualitative	Collective phronesis emerges from plural deliberation

Source: Authors, based on the extraction grid.

Antecedents. The link between personality and wisdom depends on measurement: self-reported wisdom is related to openness, extraversion and agreeableness, whereas objectively measured wisdom is related to none of the Big Five (Zacher et al., 2015). Fear of failure fosters wisdom when it is accompanied by psychological empowerment (Solansky et al., 2023), and ethical virtues, including wisdom, are formed through education, organisational culture and role models (Chan & Ananthram, 2019). Organisational antecedents are the least studied: "wise" organisations that offer training and flexibility foster wise and supportive leadership (Ardelt & Sharma, 2021). No study examines individual and organisational antecedents jointly.

Leadership and public value. Wise leadership improves employees' satisfaction and performance (Elbaz & Haddoud, 2017), well-being (Ardelt & Sharma, 2021) and voice (Rego et al., 2025), although not all its facets act in the same direction (Greaves et al., 2014). No study, however, tests its effect on public value. Value-oriented styles have favourable effects: transformational leadership increases employees' use of normative public values (Pandey et al., 2016), leadership that promotes public values develops public service motivation (Vandenabeele, 2014), and transformational leadership fosters citizenship behaviour among Swiss local managers (Ritz et al., 2014). Qualitative studies describe public value creation in terms that echo wisdom: convening divergent publics with political astuteness (Hartley et al., 2019) or favouring procedural fairness against the resistance of elected officials (Humphrey et al., 2024).

Leadership and capabilities. Quantitative studies converge: digital or transformational leadership fosters digital transformation, which improves performance or innovation in Uganda, Indonesia and Cambodia (Namatovu & Kyambade, 2025; Kurniyanta et al., 2026; Ly, 2025). Leaders' involvement drives online services and data sharing in Chinese local governments (Jin & Dong, 2023; Mao et al., 2023), and knowledge management capability partially mediates the effect of wise leadership on innovation (Ding et al., 2019). Case studies show that successful smart cities strengthened their strategy, leadership and dedicated units (Gasco-Hernandez et al., 2022), and that municipal leaders need a values-based vision and an awareness of the ethical dilemmas of digitalisation (Branderhorst & Ruijer, 2025). Two high-quality studies add nuance: e-leadership both empowers and overloads civil servants (Chen et al., 2026), and transformational leadership can be negatively related to digital transformation once culture is controlled for (Mmakau & Sethibe, 2026).

Capabilities and public value. In Moroccan regions, provinces and municipalities, information technology improves efficiency, transparency and participation (Amrani et al., 2022); in Dubai, smart government characteristics influence organisational performance and user satisfaction (Alshamsi et al., 2019a, 2019b). Effects are conditional, however. Public value management practices improve outcomes when fully applied but worsen them when only partially applied (Douglas, 2016), and citizen satisfaction is related to community engagement in rural but not in urban Australian municipalities (Waheduzzaman et al., 2025). Context. Institutional inertia and leadership discontinuity produce a superficial digital transformation in Indonesia (Rohayati & Dzauharoh, 2026), and political will and economic crisis weigh more than technology in Lebanon (Harb, 2026). Leadership continuity explains urban–rural differences in digital maturity (Astuti et al., 2026), and mayors' lack of interest is a main barrier to smart projects in small Czech municipalities (Ševčík et al., 2022). Culture also conditions the effects of leadership, as Confucian values do in Korea and China (Lee et al., 2022).

4.4. Strength of evidence

Only the relationship from leadership to capabilities reaches a moderate to high level of confidence (Table 3). The antecedents of wise leadership and the role of context rest on few and partly contradictory studies, and the relationship that matters most for this review, from wise leadership to public value, cannot be graded at all. Restricting the corpus to the 40 high-quality studies leaves these conclusions unchanged.

Table 3. Strength of evidence by relationship of the conceptual chain

Relationship	Studies	High quality	Local level	MENA	Confidence
Nature and measurement of wise leadership	19	5	1	7	Low to moderate
Antecedents of wise leadership	11	7	3	0	Low
Value-oriented leadership → public value	34	8	10	2	Moderate
Leadership → smart capabilities	47	22	22	5	Moderate to high
Smart capabilities → public value	18	7	12	3	Moderate
Role of context	15	4	7	2	Low

Source: Authors. A study may address several relationships; no study tests the effect of wise leadership itself on public value. Local level: local or regional government (codes re-verified; Supplementary Material S3). Confidence rules: Section 3.3.

4.5. Discussion

Three findings stand out. First, two literatures have developed separately: wisdom research has focused on leaders' effects on employees, smart government research on capabilities and on digital or transformational leadership. Yet qualitative studies of public value creation describe, without naming it, what wisdom research calls wisdom, so that bridging the two means measuring a quality that public value research already observes. Second, the mechanism may differ from that of digital leadership, whose effect runs mainly through capabilities (Kurniyanta et al., 2026). A wise leader also acts through the quality of trade-offs, the fairness of allocations and the relationship with employees, which suggests a substantial direct effect, particularly on equity. Third, paths may vary with resources: capabilities may be the main channel in well-equipped municipalities, and leaders' judgement may weigh directly in small and rural ones, where every allocation is visible.

These findings extend the four theories. For upper echelons theory, they suggest a shift from demographic proxies to leader qualities observed by others. For public value theory, wise leadership offers a microfoundation of the strategic triangle: the common-good orientation underpins valuable purposes, reflexivity and consultation underpin legitimacy, and wisdom in action mobilises capabilities; its emphasis on consultation also tempers the democratic objection of Rhodes and Wanna (2007). For dynamic capabilities theory, it adds a normative component, since judging what is worth seizing matters as much as the capacity to seize it. For neo-institutional theory, leaders' judgement may separate substantive from symbolic adoption. Four cautions apply. Wise leadership may describe an ideal more than a reality (Alvesson & Einola, 2019); collaborators may judge a leader wise because the organisation succeeds (Meindl et al., 1985); the construct still has to prove distinct from transformational leadership (Banks et al., 2016); and dimensions derived from Western thought may not exhaust what local actors

recognise as wise (Grossmann et al., 2020). These risks call for behavioural definitions, multi-source designs, tests of discriminant validity and qualitative grounding before measurement.

4.6. Integrative framework and research agenda

Figure 5 brings these elements together. Individual and organisational antecedents shape wise leadership, which contributes to public value directly, through the quality of trade-offs, and indirectly, through smart local government capabilities, while context conditions both paths. Six propositions follow. They differ in how directly they rest on the reviewed evidence. P2, P3 and P4 are evidence-based extensions: they extend to wise leadership relationships that reach a moderate or moderate-to-high level of confidence for value-oriented and digital leadership (Table 3). P1, P5 and P6 are exploratory: each rests on one to three studies and is offered as a hypothesis to be tested rather than as a finding.

P1 (exploratory; Zacher et al., 2015; Ardelt & Sharma, 2021). Organisational antecedents, in particular a culture of collaboration and learning, predict collaborator-rated wise leadership more strongly than personality traits.

P2 (evidence-based extension). Wise leadership is positively related to public value, beyond the effect of transformational leadership.

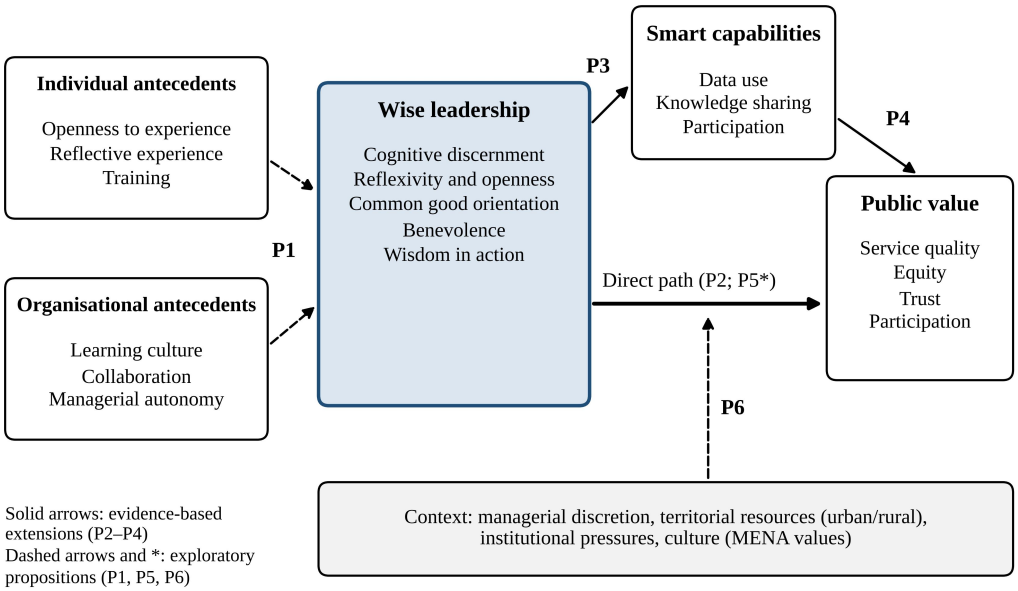
P3 (evidence-based extension). Wise leadership is positively related to data, knowledge and participation capabilities.

P4 (evidence-based extension). These capabilities partially mediate the relationship between wise leadership and public value; the direct effect remains substantial.

P5 (exploratory; Douglas, 2016; Humphrey et al., 2024). The effect of wise leadership is strongest on the equity dimension of public value.

P6 (exploratory; Waheduzzaman et al., 2025; Astuti et al., 2026). The indirect path dominates in well-equipped urban authorities and the direct path in rural ones.

Figure 5. Integrative framework of wise leadership, smart local government capabilities and public value



Source: Authors. P1 to P6 refer to the propositions above; solid arrows show evidence-based extensions and dashed arrows exploratory propositions.

Table 4 translates the gaps into a research agenda. Methodologically, it calls for three shifts: from single-source to multi-source designs in which leaders, collaborators or citizens rate antecedents, leadership and outcomes separately; from self-reported to other-rated wisdom; and towards complementary analyses, such as structural equation modelling for explanatory and predictive models, necessary condition analysis to test whether wise leadership is a precondition of public value, and qualitative work to ground instruments in local contexts. In MENA local governments, this grounding should draw on the values discussed in Section 2.1. Rather than forming a separate dimension, they could be expressed within the five dimensions through items such as "consults the people concerned before important decisions" (shura), "manages public resources as a trust held for citizens" (amana) or "applies rules with fairness and measure" (hikma). Agenda question 12 asks whether local actors recognise such items, whether they behave as facets of one construct and whether they remain equivalent in Arabic and French.

Table 4. Research agenda

Area	Research questions
Theory	(1) Does wise leadership predict public value beyond transformational, ethical and authentic leadership? (2) Which dimensions of wisdom matter for which dimensions of public value? (3) Is integrity a dimension of wise leadership or a precondition of all its dimensions? (4) Through which mechanisms, such as trust or public service motivation, does wise leadership affect public value?
Method	(5) Can a wise leadership scale be validated in local government and in Arabic, with invariance across languages? (6) Do findings hold with multi-source designs? (7) Do longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs confirm the direction of effects? (8) Do relationships hold with citizens' perceptions and objective indicators?

Area	Research questions
Context	(9) How do organisational and individual antecedents combine? (10) Does managerial discretion moderate the effect of wise leadership or act as a resource? (11) Do paths differ between urban and rural authorities, and between elected and appointed leaders? (12) How do hikma, shura and amana shape wisdom in MENA administrations, and can they be captured by culturally adapted items that remain equivalent across Arabic and French?

Source: Authors, derived from the synthesis.

For practitioners, smart government strategies should not be reduced to equipment: platforms without judgement risk symbolic adoption. Training for local leaders could include situated judgement based on real trade-offs; recruitment of senior managers could assess their capacity to arbitrate between competing interests; and authorities could foster wisdom through a culture that tolerates error and values dissent.

5. Conclusion

This review shows that the human side of smart local government has been studied mainly through digital and transformational leadership, while the quality of leaders' judgement remains peripheral. Value-oriented leadership favours public value, and leadership shapes capabilities that create value when used rather than displayed. Yet the link from wise leadership to public value has never been tested, its antecedents are barely known, and the evidence rests largely on single-source designs conducted far from MENA local governments. The review has limitations. It relies on Scopus alone, which leaves out regional journals in French and Arabic. Three queries were limited to open-access articles; the sensitivity check suggests that this filter under-represents older studies rather than stronger ones. Quality was appraised with a simplified index rather than the full MMAT. Screening and coding were performed by the first author with AI-assisted pre-coding, and double coding was limited to a 20% subsample. Country was coded from the study setting when it was reported and otherwise from the authors' affiliation. Future reviews could add the Web of Science and regional databases, include closed-access studies and double-code the full corpus. Above all, empirical research should test whether wise leadership contributes to public value, directly and through capabilities, with multi-source designs and instruments validated in local government. Beyond platforms, what makes a local administration intelligent is, in part, the judgement of those who lead it.

Declarations

Author contributions: Younes El Khouildi: conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, visualisation, writing – original draft. Mohamed Mansouri: methodology, validation (double coding), writing – review and editing, correspondence. Malainine Cheklekbire: conceptualisation, supervision, writing – review and editing. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability: The search strings (S1), the screening log (S2), the extraction grid with coding corrections (S3) and the appraisal rules (S4) are provided as supplementary material.

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