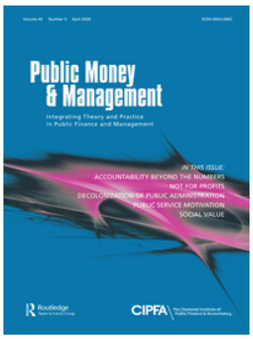

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Public management for a sustainable future: Insights from a systematic literature review

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IMPACT

Public managers have a critical role in advancing sustainable development. Managing sustainability in public administration requires fostering shared visions, building coalitions, and adapting strategies to evolving challenges. Public managers balance global and local objectives to ensure that localized actions reinforce broader sustainability goals. This literature review underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder governance networks that enable co-design, trust-building, and dialogue across sectors. Also, institutional frameworks and ethical safeguards are important to harness sustainability data responsibly, ensuring inclusivity, transparency, and alignment with democratic values. Furthermore, integrated sustainability accounting and reporting systems should extend beyond financial metrics to ecological and social indicators, embedding accountability mechanisms that uphold ecological and social priorities. Collectively, these insights call for adaptive, collaborative, and data-informed approaches that strengthen legitimacy, trust, and impact in sustainability governance. By reinforcing co-operation, openness, and continuous learning, sustainability can become an integral part of everyday management and decision-making in the public sector.

Julkisjohtajilla on keskeinen rooli kestävän kehityksen edistämisessä. Kestävyyden johtaminen julkishallinnossa edellyttää yhteisiä visioita, yhteistyöverkostoja ja muuttuviin kestävyyshaasteisiin mukautuvia strategioita. Julkisjohtajat tasapainottavat globaaleja ja paikallisia tavoitteita varmistaakseen, että paikallinen toiminta tukee laajempia kestävyystavoitteita. Kestävyyden johtamisessa tarvitaan monitoimijaisia hallintaverkostoja, jotka mahdollistavat yhteissuunnittelun, luottamuksen rakentamisen ja vuoropuhelun eri sektoreiden toimijoiden välillä. Lisäksi tarvitaan institutionaalisia puitteita ja eettisiä varmentamismekanismeja, jotta kestävyysdataa hyödynnetään vastuullisesti, osallistavasti, läpinäkyvästi ja demokraattisten arvojen mukaisesti. Integroitujen kestävyyden laskenta- ja raportointijärjestelmien tulisi kattaa taloudellisten mittareiden ohella ekologiset ja sosiaaliset indikaattorit sekä sisältää tilivelvollisuusmekanismeja, jotka tukevat ekologisia ja sosiaalisia tavoitteita. Kestävyyden johtaminen edellyttää mukautuvia, yhteistyöhön perustuvia ja tietoon pohjautuvia lähestymistapoja, jotka vahvistavat legitimiteettiä, luottamusta ja vaikuttavuutta. Vahvistamalla yhteistyötä, avoimuutta ja jatkuvaa oppimista kestävyydestä voi tulla olennainen osa julkisen sektorin jokapäiväistä johtamista ja päätöksentekoa.

ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviews how sustainability is integrated into six core areas of public management: strategic management, financial management, operational management, public procurement and contract management, human resource and capacity management, and performance management and public sector accounting. Addressing the fragmented nature of existing research, this review offers a novel contribution by identifying five interrelated development trajectories: localization, datafication, strategization, hybridization, and accountingization—that reflect institutional responses to growing sustainability challenges and the limitations of siloed governance structures. These trajectories illustrate how public management practices are evolving to accommodate complexity and interdependence. This study concludes by examining how these developments are reshaping public management and suggests critical directions for future research.

KEYWORDS

Accountingization; financial management; hybridization; performance management; public management; strategic management; sustainability; systematic literature review

Introduction

Sustainability—the long-term viability of the natural environment, society, and the economy—has become a defining principle and strategic imperative for public management (for example Bisogno et al., 2024a; Fiorino, 2010; Meadowcroft, 2000; 2013). Public organizations are uniquely positioned to address interconnected global crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pandemics, economic volatility, and geopolitical instability. They manage critical infrastructure, deliver essential services, and shape societal and economic behaviour (Adams et al., 2014; Ball et al., 2014; Glemarec & Puppim de Oliveira, 2012). Consequently, embedding sustainability into public management is not a peripheral concern but, rather, it is fundamental to ensuring institutional resilience and safeguarding long-term environmental, societal, and economic well-being.

A central question for contemporary public management scholarship is how sustainability can be meaningfully embedded in public organizations' management. This

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requires supporting sustainability-oriented decision-making, fostering long-term thinking, and enabling systemic co-ordination (Meadowcroft, 2022). However, existing research remains fragmented and is often limited to isolated case studies in diverse contexts, with insights dispersed across domains. While some literature reviews exist, they typically focus on specific aspects, such as accounting or reporting (for example Bisogno et al., 2025; Mol et al., 2025), leaving limited cumulative knowledge on how sustainability can be operationalized in strategic, financial, and operational management, or how human resource and performance management can support alignment with sustainability agendas and enhance organizational resilience. Without a holistic understanding of how sustainability can be embedded in everyday public management practices, responses to global challenges risk being superficial, fragmented, or short-lived.

To address this gap, we conducted a systematic review of public management literature following Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Xiao & Watson, 2019; George et al., 2023). The guiding research question is how sustainability is managed in public administration. This review synthesises insights from 96 articles published in top-ranked public management and public administration journals, as classified by the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR), and organises the findings around six core thematic areas:

- Strategic management.
- Financial management.
- Operational management.
- Public procurement and contract management.
- Human resource and capacity management.
- Performance management and public sector accounting.

From this body of work, key themes and patterns in the integration of sustainability into public management were systematically identified and synthesized. Recognizing that prior research on sustainability and public management is frequently fragmented and dispersed, this review makes a distinctive contribution by delineating five interrelated development trajectories for public management to foster sustainability: localization, datafication, strategization, hybridization, and accountingization.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: the next section outlines the review methodology, including search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the procedures used to analyse and synthesize the literature. The third section presents the thematic synthesis, highlighting key insights across six areas of public management, while the fourth identifies five cross-cutting developments emerging from the literature. The final section concludes with a discussion of the implications for public management and proposes directions for future research.

Research methods

Review approach

This study uses a qualitative literature review with a thematic focus to explore how sustainability is integrated into the management of public sector organizations (Xiao & Watson, 2019; George et al., 2023). The aim is to identify key themes, recurring patterns, and knowledge gaps in the existing literature, thereby advancing academic understanding and supporting the practical application of sustainability in public management practices (Duriau et al., 2007). The review follows the PRISMA framework to ensure rigour and transparency (Moher et al., 2009). Although PRISMA was originally designed for meta-analyses of randomized trials, its principles were adapted to fit this study's qualitative nature and objective. Its framework guided both the development of the search protocol and the reporting of methodological decisions.

The review process began by defining the research question and selecting relevant journals and search terms. A systematic literature search was then conducted, and the retrieved articles were screened for eligibility using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selected studies were categorized into six functional areas of public management identified in the literature: strategic management, financial management, operational management, public procurement and contract management, human resource and capacity management, and performance management and public sector accounting. Finally, a qualitative analysis examined how sustainability was addressed in each area. The following sections describe in detail the methods used to compile and analyse the literature.

Search strategy

To ensure that the synthesis was based on high-quality, peer-reviewed research and reflected the most current insights relevant to both scholars and practitioners, the search for eligible studies was limited to top-tier journals in the field of public management and administration. Recognizing the inherent subjectivity in defining what constitutes a top journal, the 2024 SJR, a widely recognized metric that evaluates journal quality based on citation data and the prestige of citing sources, drawing from the Scopus database, was used to identify leading journals within the public administration category.

Although alternative metrics, such as Journal Citation Reports (JCR), Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP), and CiteScore, were considered, consultation with an informatics specialist confirmed that SJR offered the most reliable and up-to-date classification for this review's purposes. The 2024 SJR list for public administration included over 200 journals. However, only English-language journals with a clear focus on administrative and management practices were considered. From this pool, 70 high-ranking journals were initially reviewed (see Table 1).

To ensure academic rigour and relevance, the final selection was narrowed to the top 20 journals (SJR Quartiles Q1 and Q2) with a primary emphasis on public management and its core subfields. Journals primarily concerned with public policy, politics, international relations, or thematic areas outside the scope of public management were excluded. This approach was designed to capture the most influential and widely cited research in the discipline, ensuring that the synthesis rests on a robust scientific foundation and contributes meaningfully to ongoing academic discourse.

The journals included in the review are listed in Table 2, along with the number of articles selected from each

Table 1. List of journals included in and excluded from the study, and their SJR rank.

SJR Rank	Title	SJR quartile	Inclusion/exclusion
1	***Administrative Science Quarterly***	**Q1**	**Included**
2	***Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory***	**Q1**	**Included**
3	***Public Administration Review***	**Q1**	**Included**
4	*Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
5	***Public Administration***	**Q1**	**Included**
6	***Public Management Review***	**Q1**	**Included**
7	*Government and Opposition*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
8	*Policy Studies Journal*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
9	*Journal of European Public Policy*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
10	*Criminology and Public Policy*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus, thematic journal]
11	*Educational Administration Quarterly*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
12	***Review of Public Personnel Administration***	**Q1**	**Included**
13	*Human Resources for Health*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
14	*Policy and Society*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
15	*Policy & Internet*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
16	*Information Technology for Development*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus, thematic journal]
17	*Governance*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
18	*Policy & Politics*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
19	*Regulation & Governance*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
20	*Journal of Public Relations Research*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
21	*Journal of Information Technology & Politics*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus, thematic journal]
22	*Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus, thematic journal]
23	*Journal of Race, Ethnicity and the City*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
24	*Policy Sciences*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
25	***International Public Management Journal***	**Q1**	**Included**
26	***Perspectives on Public Management and Governance***	**Q1**	**Included**
27	*Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus, thematic journal]
28	*Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
29	*Research & Politics*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
30	***International Review of Administrative Sciences***	**Q1**	**Included**
31	*Social Policy & Administration*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
32	***American Review of Public Administration***	**Q1**	**Included**
33	***Administration & Society***	**Q1**	**Included**
34	*Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
35	*Journal of Urban Management*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
36	*Public Policy and Administration*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
37	*Journal of Social Policy*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus, thematic journal]
38	*Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
39	***Public Performance & Management Review***	**Q1**	**Included**
40	*Journal of Public Policy*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
41	*Asia Pacific Journal of Business Administration*	Q1	Excluded [business administration focus]
42	*Policy Design and Practice*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
43	***Public Personnel Management***	**Q1**	**Included**
44	*Project Leadership and Society*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
45	*Science and Public Policy*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
46	*Voluntas*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
47	*European Policy Analysis*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
48	*Globalizations*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
49	*Publius: The Journal of Federalism*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
50	*Journal of Educational Administration*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
51	*Journal of Chinese Governance*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
52	*Politics and Governance*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
53	*Frontiers in Sustainable Cities*	Q1	Excluded [thematic journal]
54	*Policing*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
55	*Frontiers in Political Science*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
56	*Review of Policy Research*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
57	*Critical Policy Studies*	Q1	Excluded [policy focus]
58	***Australian Journal of Public Administration***	**Q2**	**Included**
59	*Bulletin of the Chinese Academy of Sciences*	Q2	Excluded
60	*Education Sciences*	Q2	Excluded [thematic journal]
61	***International Journal of Public Administration***	**Q2**	**Included**
62	***Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management***	**Q2**	**Included**
63	*Area Development and Policy*	Q2	Excluded [policy focus, thematic journal]
64	***Public Administration and Development***	**Q2**	**Included**
65	*Education Inquiry*	Q2	Excluded [thematic journal]
66	***International Journal of Public Sector Management***	**Q2**	**Included**
67	*Journal of Education and Work*	Q2	Excluded [thematic journal]
68	***Public Money & Management***	**Q2**	**Included**
69	*Data & Policy*	Q2	Excluded [policy focus, thematic journal]
70	***Administrative Theory & Praxis***	**Q2**	**Included**

journal. No individual quality assessment was conducted for each article, as they were all published in high-quality, peer-reviewed journals recognized for their contributions to the field.

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database, targeting the selected journals via their ISSN identifiers. Scopus, which indexes titles from over 4,000 publishers, provides extensive global coverage and advanced search capabilities, and was recommended by the university library's informatician. Additionally, the SJR ranking used to identify top journals is also based on Scopus data, ensuring consistency in source selection.

Table 2. Journals included in the review and number of articles per journal.

Rank	Title	No. of articles included
1	*Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ)*	0
2	*Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory (JPART)*	1
3	*Public Administration Review (PAR)*	5
5	*Public Administration (PA)*	4
6	*Public Management Review (PMR)*	22
12	*Review of Public Personnel Administration (RPPA)*	0
25	*International Public Management Journal (IPMJ)*	0
26	*Perspectives on Public Management and Governance (PPMG)*	1
30	*International Review of Administrative Sciences (IRAS)*	3
32	*American Review of Public Administration (ARPA)*	0
33	*Administration & Society (AS)*	2
39	*Public Performance & Management Review (PPMR)*	3
43	*Public Personnel Management (PPM)*	1
58	*Australian Journal of Public Administration (AJPA)*	2
61	*International Journal of Public Administration (IJPA)*	0
62	*Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management (JPBAFM)*	9
64	*Public Administration and Development (PAD)*	9
66	*International Journal of Public Sector Management (IJPSM)*	9
68	*Public Money & Management (PMM)*	25
70	*Administrative Theory & Praxis (ATP)*	0

For each journal, the search term TITLE-ABS-KEY (sustainab*) was used to capture all articles containing the term sustainability in any form within the title, abstract, or keywords. The search included all relevant articles published up to the end of 2024. No restrictions were placed on specific themes, sectors, or time periods, allowing for a comprehensive and inclusive review. The search was further limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English to ensure academic rigour and relevance.

Screening of the studies

The initial search yielded 836 records (Figure 1). These articles were first screened by title and abstract to identify studies addressing sustainability management practices within the context of public administration. Records were assessed for eligibility, and non-relevant studies were excluded based on predefined criteria.

The first exclusion criterion was topical relevance: articles that did not address public management, public administration, or closely related public sector activities were excluded, such as studies focused on business or non-profit management. The second criterion concerned the conceptualization of sustainability. Articles were excluded if they did not address sustainability as a social, ecological, and economic phenomenon. For example studies that referred to sustainability in terms of organizational longevity, durability of service models, or sustainability of the research process were excluded. Additionally, studies focusing solely on financial sustainability—defined as the adequacy of financial resources—were excluded. The third exclusion criterion was directly related to the research question. Articles were excluded if they did not examine sustainability from a management perspective. While topics such as sustainable urban development, infrastructure, smart cities, and education and health policy can be relevant to public management, studies were excluded if they did not explicitly engage with sustainability as a managerial concern.

After applying these criteria, 210 records were deemed eligible based on their titles and abstracts. Full-text screening was then conducted by all authors to confirm eligibility, resulting in the exclusion of an additional 114 articles. The final set of studies included in the review is illustrated in Figure 1.

Data analysis

Following the exclusion process, a total of 96 articles were included in the final review. Table 3 lists the final articles, as they are not included in the reference list. The selected literature was grouped and categorized according to the distinct domain areas and functional dimensions of public management, and the categorization process was iterative and collaborative as it was cross-checked and refined

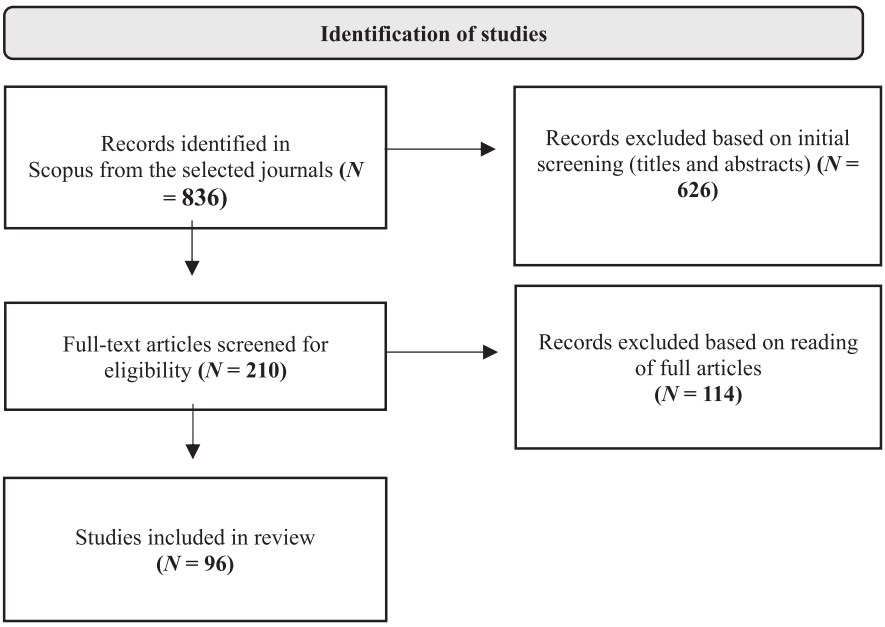

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

Table 3. List of articles included in the review.

No.	Authors	Title	Journal	Year
Strategic management				
1	Arda, L., Pichault, F., Esposito, G., & Crutzen, N.	Setting sustainability agenda at the local level: a process of compromise making	IRAS	2024
2	Ball, A., Mason, I., Grubnik, S., & Hughes, P.	The carbon neutral public sector: Early developments and an urgent agenda for research	PMR	2009
3	Bhatia, R., Pihlajamaa, M., Hyytinen, K., & Jäntti, A.	Capabilities for transformative sustainability management in cities	PMR	2024
4	Bosco, F., Di Gerio, C., Fiorani, G., & Stola, G.	How to manage sustainability in healthcare organizations? A processing map to include the ESG strategy	JPBAFM	2024
5	Chen, Y., Xiang, T., & Wang, Y.	Citizen participation through different mechanisms: does social media impact adoption and design of local sustainability plans?	PMR	2024
6	Deslatte, A., & Swann, W. L.	Context matters: a Bayesian analysis of how organizational environments shape the strategic management of sustainable development	PA	2017
7	George, B., Worth, M. J., Pandey, S., & Pandey, S. K.	Strategic management of social responsibilities: a mixed methods study of US universities	PMM	2024
8	Guarini, E., Mori, E., & Zuffada, E.	New development: Embedding the SDGs in city strategic planning and management	PMM	2021
9	Guthrie, J., Ball, A., & Farneti, F.	Advancing sustainable management of public and not for profit organizations	PMR	2010b
10	Ji, H., & Darnall, N.	All are not created equal: assessing local governments' strategic approaches towards sustainability	PMR	2018
11	Karppi, I., & Vakkuri, J.	Becoming smart? Pursuit of sustainability in urban policy design	PMR	2020
12	Lee, H.	Strategic types, implementation, and capabilities: sustainability policies of local governments	PA	2024
13	Li, W., Lee, H., Liu, Y., Tang, T., & Zheng, G.	Reward exploitation or exploration? The effects of local government sustainability strategies and performance information on citizen evaluation	PMR	2024
14	Nunan, F., Campbell, A., & Foster, E.	Environmental mainstreaming: The organisational challenges of policy integration	PAD	2012
15	Rodriguez, R., Svensson, G., & Eriksson, D.	Organizational positioning and planning of sustainability initiatives: logic and differentiators	IJPSM	2018
16	Sangiorgi, D., Mazzara, L., & Siboni, B.	Do European recommendations impact on sustainability policies by Italian local governments?	PMM	2017
17	Trischler, J., Svensson, P. O., Williams, H., & Wikström, F.	Citizens as an innovation source in sustainability transitions–linking the directionality of innovations with the locus of the problem in transformative innovation policy	PMR	2023
18	Zeemering, E. S.	Sustainability management, strategy and reform in local government	PMR	2018
Financial management				
19	Bisogno, M., Cuadrado-Ballesteros, B., Manes Rossi, F., & Peña-Miguel, N.	Financial sustainability and sustainable development in local governments: empirical insights	PPMR	2024b
20	Cohen, S., Manes Rossi, F., & Brusca, I.	Are SDGs being translated into accounting terms? Evidence from European cities	PMM	2023
21	Demuynck, S., & Van Dooren, W.	At a cost: a review of the public accountability risks of social impact bonds	AJPA	2024
22	Falanga, R.	Youth participation in environmental sustainability: insights from the Lisbon participatory budget	JPBAFM	2024
23	Faguet, J. P., & Wietzke, F. B.	Social funds and decentralisation: optimal institutional design	PAD	2006
24	Gelderman, C., Semeijn, J., & Vluggen, R.	Development of sustainability in public sector procurement	PMM	2017
25	Ho, A. T.-K., Shen, C., & Xu, Y.	In search of public values in performance budgeting studies	PAR	2023
26	Kasperskaya, Y., & Xifré, R.	New development: Income and gender equality, Spanish spending reviews and public values	PMM	2024
27	Kukučková, S., Bakoš, E., & Samsonová, G.	Intensity and fragility of Czech participatory budgeting during the Covid 19 crisis	PMM	2024
28	Merritt, A., & Stubbs, T.	Complementing the local and global: promoting sustainability action through linked local-level and formal sustainability funding mechanisms	PAD	2012
29	Pulkkinen, M., Sinervo, L.-M., & Kurkela, K.	Premises for sustainability—participatory budgeting as a way to construct collaborative innovation capacity in local government	JPBAFM	2024
30	Sinervo, L.-M., & Laihonen, H.	New development: Public managers between a rock and a hard place—social-financial sustainability in local government	PMM	2024
31	Sinervo, L.-M., Bartocci, L., Lehtonen, P., & Ebdon, C.	Toward sustainable governance with participatory budgeting	JPBAFM	2024a
Operational management				
32	Bifulco, F., Tregua, M., Amitrano, C. C., & D'Auria, A.	ICT and sustainability in smart cities management	IJPSM	2016
33	Broccardo, L., Culasso, F., & Mauro, S. G.	Smart city governance: exploring the institutional work of multiple actors towards collaboration	IJPSM	2019
34	Brorström, S.	Implementing innovative ideas in a city: good solutions on paper but not in practice?	IJPSM	2015
35	Christopoulos, S., Horvath, B., & Kull, M.	Advancing the governance of cross-sectoral policies for sustainable development: a metagovernance perspective	PAD	2012
36	Chowns, E.	Is community management an efficient and effective model of public service delivery? Lessons from the rural water supply sector in Malawi	PAD	2015
37	Deslatte, A., & Stokan, E.	Sustainability synergies or silos? The opportunity costs of local government organizational capabilities	PAR	2020

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

No.	Authors	Title	Journal	Year
Strategic management				
38	Eckersley, P., England, K., & Ferry, L.	Sustainable development in cities: collaborating to improve urban climate resilience and develop the business case for adaptation	PMM	2018
39	Øjvind Nielsen, R., Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J.	Drivers of collaborative governance for the green transition	PMR	2024
40	Newnham, L., & McMurray, A. J.	Land management innovation and sustainability in Victoria, Australia—a longitudinal view	PMM	2023
41	Meijer, A.	Datapolis: a public governance perspective on 'smart cities'	PPMG	2018
42	Roberts, M., & Milman, A.	The relationship between how agencies work together and coordinated outcomes: A configurational analysis	JPART	2024
43	Sharma, S., & Nayak, S.	Public-private community partnerships: an isodynamic model in water management	IJPSM	2013
44	Shepherd, A.	Participatory environmental management: contradiction of process, project and bureaucracy in the Himalayan foothills	PAD	1995
45	Suchitwarasan, C., Cinar, E., Simms, C., & Kim, J.-Y.	Public sector innovation for sustainable development goals: a comparative study of innovation types in Thailand and Korea	AJPA	2023
46	Van Dijck, C., & Steen, T.	Failed cases of collaborative innovation: when a castle turns into a tent	PMR	2024
Contract and procurement management				
47	De Matteis, F., Striani, F., Notaristefano, G., & Caferra, R.	Public-private partnerships in the healthcare sector and sustainability: managerial insights from a systematic literature review	AS	2024
48	Grandia, J.	The role of change agents in sustainable public procurement projects	PMM	2015
49	Hsueh, L., Bretschneider, S., Stritch, J. M., & Darnall, N.	Implementation of sustainable public procurement in local governments: a measurement approach	IJPSM	2020
50	Idemudia, U., Cragg, W., & Best, B.	The challenges and opportunities of implementing the integrity pact as a strategy for combating corruption in Nigeria's oil rich Niger Delta region	PAD	2010
51	Li, J., Liu, B., Wang, D., & Casady, C. B.	The effects of contractual and relational governance on public-private partnership sustainability.	PA	2024
52	Nijaki, L. K., & Worrel, G.	Procurement for sustainable local economic development	IJPSM	2012
53	Patrucco, A. S., Dimand, A.-M., Neshkova, M. I., & Cevallos, M. M.	How can procurement create (sustainable) public value under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal?	PAR	2023
54	Patrucco, A. S., Kauppi, K., Di Mauro, C., & Schotanus, F.	Enhancing strategic public procurement: a public service logic perspective	PMR	2024
55	Patrucco, A. S., Luzzini, D., Ronchi, S., & Walker, H.	From compliance to strategy: embedding public service logic in sustainable procurement	PMR	2024
56	Rosell, J., Plaček, M., Ochrana, F., & Šumpíková, M.	Hiding when you're not green: An empirical analysis on green public procurement	PMM	2024
Human resource and capacity management				
57	Deslatte, A., Siciliano, M. D., & Krause, R. M.	Local government managers are on the frontlines of climate change: are they ready?	PAR	2023
58	Fowler, A., & Biekart, K.	Multi-stakeholder initiatives for sustainable development goals: the importance of interlocutors	PAD	2017
59	Hawkins, C. V., Krause, R. M., & Deslatte, A.	Staff support and administrative capacity in strategic planning for local sustainability	PMR	2021
60	Hofstad, H., Sørensen, E., Torfing, J., & Vedeld, T.	Leading co-creation for the green shift	PMM	2023
61	Hulme, D.	Enhancing organizational effectiveness in developing countries: the training and visit system revisited	PAD	1992
62	MacDonald, A., Clarke, A., Ordonez-Ponce, E., Chai, Z., & Andreasen, J.	Sustainability managers: the job roles and competencies of building sustainable cities and communities	PPMR	2020
63	Preuss, L., & Walker, H.	Psychological barriers in the road to sustainable development: evidence from public sector procurement	PA	2011
64	Wang, X., Van Wart, M., & Lebredo, N.	Sustainability leadership in a local government context: the administrator's role in the process	PPMR	2014
65	Wang, X. H., Hawkins, C. V., Lebredo, N., & Berman, E. M.	Capacity to sustain sustainability: a study of U.S. cities	PAR	2012
66	Yu, Z., Zong, Z., Zheng, W., & Ma, C.	Greening the workplace: examining the relationship between green talent management and pro-environmental behaviours in Chinese public sectors	PPM	2024
67	Yuriev, A., Boiral, O., & Talbot, D.	Is there a place for employee-driven pro-environmental innovations? The case of public organizations	PMR	2021
Performance management and accounting				
68	Alcaraz-Quiles, F. J., Navarro-Galera, A., & Ortiz-Rodríguez, D.	Factors determining online sustainability reporting by local governments	IRAS	2015
69	Bisogno, M., Di Carlo, A., Iuliano, G., & Matonti, G.	Assurance of the sustainability report of municipally-owned entities	PMM	2024c
70	Brorström, S., Argento, D., Grossi, G., Thomasson, A., & Almqvist, R.	Translating sustainable and smart city strategies into performance measurement systems	PMM	2018
71	Brusca, I., Bisogno, M., Cohen, S., & Manes Rossi, F.	New development: Assurance on public sector sustainability reporting—time to be proactive	PMM	2024
72	Dinica, V.	Public engagement in governance for sustainability: a two-tier assessment approach and illustrations from New Zealand	PMR	2018
73	Dumay, J., Guthrie, J., & Farneti, F.	GRI sustainability reporting guidelines for public and third sector organizations	PMR	2010

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

No. Strategic management	Authors	Title	Journal	Year
74	Goswami, K., & Lodhia, S.	Sustainability disclosure patterns of South Australian local councils: a case study	PMM	2014
75	Greco, G., Sciulli, N., & D'Onza, G.	The influence of stakeholder engagement on sustainability reporting: evidence from Italian local councils	PMR	2015
76	Greiling, D., Traxler, A. A., & Stötzer, S.	Sustainability reporting in the Austrian, German and Swiss public sector	IJPSM	2015
77	Guthrie, J., & Farneti, F.	GRI sustainability reporting by Australian public sector organizations	PMM	2008
78	Fusco, F., & Ricci, P.	What is the stock of the situation? A bibliometric analysis on social and environmental accounting research in public sector	IJPSM	2019
79	Hancu-Budui, A., & Zorio-Grima, A.	Supreme audit institutions in Europe: synergies, institutional transparency, gender equality and sustainability engagement	JPBAFM	2023
80	Larrinaga, C., Luque-Vilchez, M., & Fernández, R.	Sustainability accounting regulation in Spanish public sector organizations	PMM	2018
81	Larrinaga-González, C., & Pérez-Chamorro, V.	Sustainability accounting and accountability in public water companies	PMM	2008
82	Lodhia, S., Jacobs, K., & Park, Y. J.	Driving public sector environmental reporting	PMR	2012
83	Lubinger, M., Frei, J., & Greiling, D.	Assessing the materiality of university G4-sustainability reports	JPBAFM	2019
84	Luhtala, M., Welinder, O., & Vikstedt, E.	Glocalizing sustainability: how accounting begins for sustainable development goals in city administration	JPBAFM	2024
85	Marcuccio, M., & Steccolini, I.	Social and environmental reporting in local authorities: a new Italian fashion?	PMR	2005
86	Martin-Sardesai, A., Canestrini, P., Siboni, B., & Hassan, A.	Accounting for knowledge-intensive public organizations: challenges represented by COVID-19 to achieve sustainable development goals	JPBAFM	2024
87	Montecalvo, M., Farneti, F., & de Villiers, C.	The potential of integrated reporting to enhance sustainability reporting in the public sector	PMM	2018
88	Nicolò, G., L'Abate, V., Raimo, N., & Vitolla, F.	Substantive versus symbolic paths in SDG disclosure via social media: evidence from Italian local governments	PMM	2024
89	Niemann, L., & Hoppe, T.	Sustainability reporting by local governments: a magic tool? Lessons on use and usefulness from European pioneers	PMR	2018
90	Ortiz-Rodríguez, D., Navarro-Galera, A., & Alcaraz-Quiles, F. J.	The influence of administrative culture on sustainability transparency in European local governments	AS	2018
91	Ríos, A.-M., Guillamón, M.-D., & Benito, B.	The influence of local government transparency on the implementation of the sustainable development goals in municipalities	JPBAFM	2024
92	Russell, S. L., & Thompson, I.	Accounting for a sustainable Scotland	PMM	2008
93	Talbot, D., & Boiral, O.	Integrating recommendations from sustainability performance audits: moving from words to action	PMR	2023
94	Torres, L., Ripoll, L., Pina, V., & Bachiller, P.	Sustainability reporting from the preparers' perspective in locally-owned public enterprises	PMM	2024
95	Vikstedt, E., Luhtala, M., Welinder, O., Sinervo, L.-M., & Laihonen, H.	Different sustainability endgames: institutional logics in the performance management of local governments	PMM	2024
96	Wanckel, C.	Introducing a digital tool for sustainability impact assessments within the German federal government: a neo-institutional perspective	IRAS	2023

multiple times by the authors before finalizing the categorization of the articles.

Each article was analysed using thematic coding, through which key concepts, findings, and insights were extracted and organized into overarching themes (see Table 4). The aim of this process was to construct a thematic synthesis revealing dominant patterns and conceptual developments across the literature (see Duriau et al., 2007). Coding was conducted inductively and separately within each category, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being imposed *a priori* (see Williams & Moser, 2019). The final synthesis was structured around the following six functional categories: (1) strategic management, (2) financial management, (3) operational management, (4) contract and procurement management, (5) human resource and capacity management, and (6) performance management and accounting.

Limitations

This review has some limitations. First, the categorization of articles could have been approached differently. The six functional categories may not fully capture the diversity of management practices and processes across the wide range of public organizations.

Second, the selection of journals limited the scope of the review. This decision followed extensive trial-and-error testing with broader database searches, which yielded thousands of articles, many of which were only tangentially related to sustainability management. To ensure relevance and manageability, the scope was narrowed to top-ranked journals in public management and administration. However, sustainability management in the public sector is also likely addressed in journals in other categories, such as accounting, environmental policy, or interdisciplinary management journals. These were not included, which may have excluded relevant perspectives.

Finally, despite the use of clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria and cross-checking of decisions by the authors, some degree of subjective bias may have influenced the selection process. This is an inherent limitation of qualitative reviews, particularly when interpreting the relevance and framing of complex interdisciplinary topics, such as sustainability.

Results

Bibliographic description of reviewed studies

Most of the reviewed studies were published in a concentration of academic journals, the most prominent sources being *Public Money & Management* (25 articles), *Public Management Review* (22 articles), *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management* (nine

Table 4. Thematic coding within the functional domain categories.

Domain category	Themes identified in the literature	Examples
Strategic management	Strategic integration	Guarini et al., 2021; Guthrie et al., 2010; Zeemering, 2018
	Comprehensive approach	Ji & Darnall, 2018; Lee, 2021; Li et al., 2024a
	Proactiveness	Rodríguez et al., 2018
	Strategic capacity	Deslatte & Swann, 2017
	Co-design of strategies and joint goals	Trischler et al., 2023; Bhatia et al., 2024; Arda et al., 2024
	Monitoring and oversight	Bhatia et al., 2024
Financial management	Financial resourcefulness	Bisogno et al., 2024b
	Innovative funding mechanisms	Demuynck & Van Dooren, 2023; Merritt & Stubbs, 2012
	Green budgeting	Cohen et al., 2023; Gelderman et al., 2017; Ho et al., 2023; Sinervo & Laihonen, 2024
	Participatory budgeting	Falanga, 2024; Sinervo et al., 2024a; Pulkkinen et al., 2024
Operational management	Cross-sectoral collaboration and networks	Broccardo et al., 2019; Eckersley et al., 2018; Karppi & Vakkuri, 2020; Øjvind Nielsen et al., 2024
	Community-based management	Chowns, 2015; Sharma & Nayak, 2013; Shepherd, 1995
	Inter-agency collaboration	Deslatte & Stokan, 2020; Roberts & Milman, 2024; Christopoulos et al., 2012
	Smartness and digital technologies	Bifulco et al., 2016; Broccardo et al., 2019; Meijer, 2018
	Innovativeness	Brorström, 2015; Newnham & McMurray, 2023; Suchitwarasan et al., 2023; Van Dijck & Steen, 2024
Contract and procurement management	Green procurement	Hsueh et al., 2020; Rosell et al., 2024
	Strategic procurement	Nijaki & Worrel, 2012; Patrucco et al., 2023
	Performance management of public-private partnerships (PPPs)	De Matteis et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024b
Human resource and capacity management	Organizational culture	Hawkins et al., 2021
	The role of sustainability managers/specialists	MacDonald et al., 2020
	Upper and middle management capabilities	Wang et al., 2014
	Grassroot activists and innovators	Yuriev et al., 2021
	Collaborative capacity	Fowler & Biekart, 2017; Deslatte & Stokan, 2020
Performance management and accounting	Performance management	Brorström et al., 2018; Luhtala et al., 2024
	Performance management and accounting practices	Nicolò et al., 2024; Marcuccio & Steccolini, 2003; Montecalvo et al., 2018; Vikstedt et al., 2024
	Sustainability and responsibility reporting	Guthrie & Farneti, 2008; Dumay et al., 2010; Marcuccio & Steccolini, 2005; Greco et al., 2015; Larrinaga et al., 2018
	Standardization of sustainability reporting and international reporting frameworks	Larrinaga-González & Pérez-Chamorro, 2008; Goswami & Lodhia, 2014; Lodhia et al., 2012; Alcaraz-Quiles et al., 2015; Montecalvo et al., 2018
	Transparency and accountability	Ortiz-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Wanckel, 2023
	Audit and assurance	Bisogno et al., 2024c; Hancu-Budui & Zorio-Grima, 2023

articles), *International Journal of Public Sector Management* (nine articles), and *Public Administration and Development* (nine articles).

In terms of thematic distribution, the most represented category was *Performance Management and Accounting* (29 articles), followed by *Strategic Management* (18 articles), *Operational Management* (15 articles), *Financial Management* (13 articles), *Human Resource and Capacity Management* (11 articles) and *Contract and Procurement Management* (10 articles) (see Table 3).

The oldest study included in the review was published in *Public Administration and Development* in 1992. Since the early 2000s, the volume of publications has shown a steady upward trend, with a notable surge between 2021 and 2024, particularly in the areas of financial management, performance management, and accounting (see Figure 2). Additionally, research on strategic management and contract and procurement management has also demonstrated consistent growth over time.

The following section presents a thematic synthesis of the literature in each of the six functional domains following the PRISMA framework (Moher et al., 2009).

Sustainability in public sector strategic management

Strategic management in the public sector is not merely a technical exercise of setting goals and allocating resources but a normative and political process that determines which objectives are prioritized, why they matter, and how they are pursued (Bryson, 2012; Bryson et al., 2018). The integration of sustainability into this process represents a fundamental shift in strategic logic, from efficiency-driven planning toward value-based governance that addresses long-term societal challenges. This shift is widely acknowledged in the public management literature (for example Guarini et al., 2021; Guthrie et al., 2010), yet its practical realization remains uneven and contested.

A recurring theme in the literature is the tension between global sustainability frameworks and local strategic realities. Guarini et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of embedding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into local government strategies to align local actions with global objectives and enhance the communication of strategic priorities. Similarly, Bhatia et al. (2024) emphasized that sustainability strategies must be supported by monitoring mechanisms and adaptive feedback loops, suggesting that strategic management is not a static plan but a dynamic governance mechanism.

The literature reveals significant heterogeneity in strategic orientations among public organizations. Ji and Darnall (2018) distinguished between broad, exploratory strategies —better suited for addressing complex, interconnected sustainability issues—and narrow, compliance-driven approaches that often fail to generate transformative outcomes. Lee (2024) extended this analysis by categorizing US cities as 'defenders' focused on regulatory compliance, and 'prospectors' actively investing in innovative sustainability solutions. This typology underscores a critical insight: proactive strategies not only enhance environmental performance but also resonate with citizen preferences (Li et al., 2024a), reinforcing the political dimension of strategic choice. Sectoral differences further

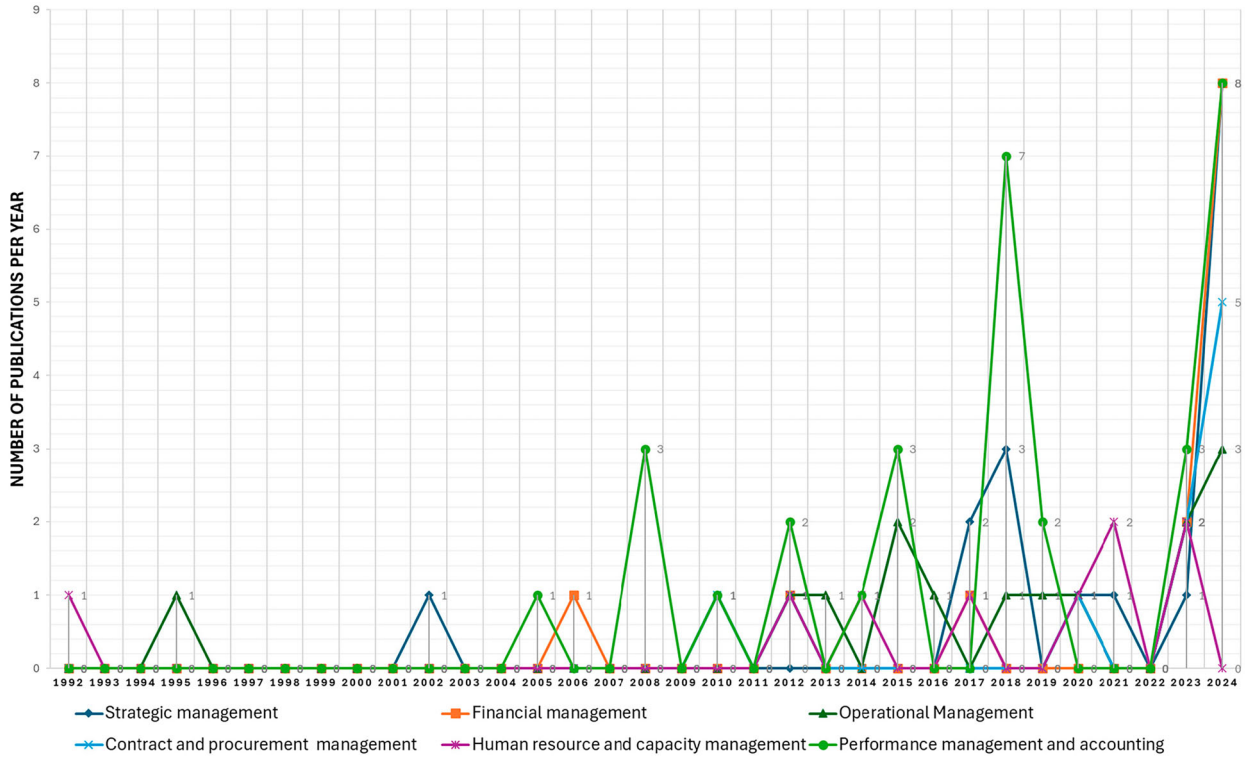

Figure 2. Publication trends per domain area.

complicate this picture, for example Rodríguez et al. (2018) showed that public healthcare providers tend to institutionalize sustainability through top-down planning, whereas private actors rely on bottom-up, socially driven initiatives, thereby highlighting the interplay between organizational form and strategic logic.

Barriers to strategic sustainability management are multifaceted and deeply contextual. Deslatte and Swann (2017) demonstrated that environmental complexity, resource constraints, and institutional capacity shape not only the feasibility but also the ambition of sustainability strategies. Hawkins et al. (2021) added that internal administrative capacity, including skilled personnel, adequate resources, and robust organizational structures, functions as a critical enabler, suggesting that sustainability is as much an organizational capabilities issue as a policy commitment.

Finally, strategic planning is not only instrumental but also deliberative, serving as a forum for negotiating competing values and interests. Studies have consistently emphasized the democratic potential of participatory planning and decision-making processes (for example Zeemering, 2018; Ji & Darnall, 2018). Karppi and Vakkuri (2020) highlighted the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including citizens, businesses, and government agencies, in implementing smart city strategies, while Arda et al. (2024) noted that multi-actor processes are inherently complex and potentially conflictual. These multi-actor processes involve divergent logics and priorities, making consensus elusive and implementation uncertain. This underscores the need for institutionalized participatory designs and professional competencies capable of managing ambiguity and conflict—conditions that are essential for embedding sustainability into strategic governance rather than relegating it to symbolic rhetoric.

Sustainability in the public sector financial management

Financial management in public organizations extends beyond technical functions such as budgeting and auditing, as it is also a strategic instrument for shaping policy outcomes and aligning resource allocation with societal priorities, including sustainability (Gelderman et al., 2017). This dual role—operational and strategic—positions financial management as a critical lever for embedding sustainability into governance systems. Yet, the literature suggests that this potential remains largely unrealized.

Empirical evidence underscores the interdependence between financial stability and sustainability performance. Bisogno et al. (2024b), analysing municipalities in Italy and Spain, demonstrated that financially robust local governments are more effective in advancing SDGs related to environmental protection, social equity, and economic development, highlighting a structural constraint: sustainability ambitions are contingent on fiscal capacity, making financial viability a prerequisite for transformative governance. Similarly, Gelderman et al. (2017) revealed that it is budget owners rather than procurement professionals that hold decisive influence over sustainability initiatives, illustrating how internal power dynamics and resource control shape strategic priorities.

Despite these opportunities, the literature identifies persistent gaps between sustainability rhetoric and financial practice. Cohen et al. (2023) reported that SDGs are rarely embedded in financial accounting systems across European cities, creating a disconnect between strategic aspirations and operational mechanisms. Sinervo and Laihonen (2024) further exposed the trade-offs inherent in budgeting for sustainability, in which competing priorities—economic, social, and environmental—are negotiated without

systematic frameworks. This fragmentation suggests that sustainability-oriented financial management remains in an emergent stage, lacking institutionalized processes and standardized tools.

Overall, while the potential for integrating sustainability into financial management exists, current practices remain underdeveloped and fragmented, suggesting that integration is still in its early stages. Emerging approaches, such as green, SDG, and gender budgeting (for example Manes Rossi et al., 2024; Manes Rossi, 2024), signal a shift toward more integrated approaches, yet their adoption is sporadic and under-theorized. Moreover, the literature offers limited exploration of innovative funding mechanisms—such as climate finance instruments or impact bonds—that could accelerate sustainability transitions. This omission reflects a broader research gap: the financial architecture of sustainable governance remains underdeveloped.

Participatory budgeting emerges as a promising avenue for democratizing financial decisions and embedding sustainability into resource allocation. Sinervo et al. (2024a) and Pulkkinen et al. (2024) highlighted its potential to foster collaborative innovation within local governments, contingent on adequate resources and supportive administrative environments. Falanga (2024) added a social dimension, showing how participatory budgeting in Lisbon cultivates youth engagement and ownership of sustainability agendas. These findings suggest that participatory mechanisms can enhance legitimacy and inclusivity, but their effectiveness depends on institutional capacity and alignment with broader strategic frameworks.

Finally, grassroots financial instruments, such as time banking, community currencies, and peer-to-peer lending, offer alternative pathways for mobilizing resources at the local level (Merritt & Stubbs, 2012). While these tools remain peripheral in mainstream public finance discourse, they illustrate the potential for community-driven funding models to bridge the gap between local priorities and global sustainability goals. However, their limited uptake underscores the need for research on scaling and institutional integration.

Sustainability in public sector operational management

Operational management in the public sector is the arena in which strategic ambitions are translated into everyday practices, and encompasses the organizational structures, processes, and routines through which public agencies deliver services and implement policy objectives. In the context of sustainability, operational management is not merely about efficiency but also about reconfiguring institutional arrangements and operational logics to address complex, cross-cutting challenges. The reviewed literature identifies several recurring themes: structural integration, inter- and intra-organizational co-ordination, cross-sectoral collaboration, and the role of innovation and digital transformation.

A persistent challenge is the fragmentation of public sector structures, which undermines the capacity to pursue integrated sustainability goals. Deslatte and Stokan (2020) and Christopoulos et al. (2012) argued that siloed governance systems—characterized by compartmentalized decision-making and conflicting mandates—are ill-suited for addressing the complexity of sustainability challenges. This structural rigidity limits resource allocation and accountability, reinforcing short-termism. To overcome these barriers, studies have advocated for policy integration mechanisms and collaborative governance arrangements (for example Deslatte & Stokan, 2020, Christopoulos et al., 2012). Roberts and Milman (2024), in their study of California Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), demonstrated that agencies adopting joint governance structures and shared decision-making achieved more coherent and planned sustainability outcomes, suggesting that institutional design—rather than only technical capacity—is a critical determinant of operational success.

Innovation and 'smartness' emerge as prominent themes in local public management discourse. Bifulco et al. (2016) and Meijer (2018) highlighted how data-driven governance and ICT integration can enhance public sector efficiency, citizen engagement, and environmental responsibility in smart city initiatives. Brorström (2015) reinforced the democratic dimension, emphasizing dialogue and co-creation as drivers of urban sustainability. Yet, the literature cautions against technological determinism. Van Dijck and Steen (2024) noted that collaborative innovation projects often falter due to insufficient institutional commitment, revealing a gap between experimental enthusiasm and structural embedding. This underscores a broader insight: innovation without governance capacity risks producing symbolic rather than substantive change.

Decentralization and participatory models represent another contested terrain. While local ownership is widely endorsed as a normative ideal, empirical evidence has revealed its limitations. Shepherd (1995), examining environmental management in the Himalayan foothills, found that participatory models often resulted in tokenism, with real authority retained by external agencies. Similarly, Chowns (2015) warned that transferring operational responsibilities to resource-constrained communities, such as rural water services in Malawi, can exacerbate inequities and undermine sustainability. These findings challenge the assumption that decentralization inherently fosters sustainability, suggesting instead that institutional scaffolding and capacity-building are prerequisites for meaningful local empowerment.

Overall, the literature converges on a critical insight: operational management for sustainability is not a technical exercise but a complex governance challenge requiring structural integration, institutionalized collaboration, and adaptive capacity. While innovation and participatory models offer promise, their effectiveness depends on sustained institutional support and alignment with broader strategic frameworks. Without these conditions, operational reforms risk becoming fragmented, symbolic, or even counterproductive.

Sustainability in procurement and contract management

Public procurement and contract management have evolved from peripheral administrative functions to strategic levers of governance, particularly following the outsourcing trend driven by New Public Management reforms. As public services have increasingly come to rely on private

operators, these functions have gained prominence in shaping policy outcomes and advancing sustainability objectives (Nijaki & Worrel, 2012). The literature positions procurement not merely as a compliance mechanism but as a strategic governance tool capable of embedding sustainability into service delivery systems.

Recent studies have advocated for a paradigmatic shift toward strategic procurement practices. Patrucco et al. (2024a; 2024b) argued for integrating public service logic into procurement, reframing it as a vehicle for societal value creation rather than cost minimization. This reconceptualization aligns procurement with broader sustainability agendas, enabling governments to leverage purchasing power for transformative impact. Patrucco et al. (2023) further demonstrated how targeted government programmes can institutionalize sustainability-oriented procurement practices. These findings underscore the importance of organizational context and decision-making routines (Hsueh et al., 2020), suggesting that sustainability integration depends as much on internal governance as on external mandates.

Public–private partnerships (PPPs) represent another critical domain where contractual governance intersects with sustainability. Li et al. (2024b) provided empirical evidence that both contractual and relational governance mechanisms positively influence sustainability outcomes in PPPs, particularly when performance targets are explicitly embedded in contracts. De Matteis et al. (2024) reinforced this insight in the health sector, advocating for sustainability-oriented key performance indicators and continuous monitoring throughout the partnership lifecycle. However, these studies also reveal a tension between risk aversion and innovation. Overly rigid contractual structures driven by public actors' fear of uncertainty can stifle adaptive capacity and limit sustainability gains. Sharma and Nayak (2013) extended this discussion to public–private–community partnerships, emphasizing accountability mechanisms as essential for ensuring equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Despite these advances, the literature identifies persistent risks and barriers. Rosell et al. (2024), examining greenwashing in public procurement practices, exposed vulnerabilities in enforcement and transparency systems. Their findings suggest that sustainability commitments in procurement are often symbolic, undermined by a lack of experience, fear of reputational damage, and weak institutional authority. These barriers point to the broader governance challenge of reconciling sustainability ambitions with accountability, capacity, and risk management in complex contracting environments.

Overall, procurement and contract management emerge as critical but underutilized instruments for sustainability governance. While strategic frameworks and innovative practices are gaining traction, their effectiveness depends on institutional capacity, accountability mechanisms, and the ability to balance flexibility with control. Without these conditions, sustainability risks being reduced to contractual rhetoric rather than operational reality.

Sustainability in public human resource and capacity management

Human resource management (HRM) in the public sector is a critical enabler of sustainability, shaping the skills and organizational behaviours necessary for implementing sustainability strategies. While traditional HRM focuses on recruitment, training, and performance evaluation, sustainability-oriented HRM extends these functions to develop systemic competencies and foster cultural change that embed sustainability into everyday practices (MacDonald et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2014). The literature has consistently underscored the centrality of human capacity as a determinant of sustainability integration, yet empirical evidence reveals persistent capability gaps.

Leadership commitment emerges as a foundational driver. Preuss and Walker (2011) highlighted the role senior managers play as champions of sustainability, suggesting that leadership signals set the tone for organizational priorities. However, the literature also points to the underdeveloped role of dedicated sustainability professionals within public organizations. MacDonald et al. (2020) identified—through interviews with Canadian municipal sustainability officers—11 core competencies necessary for effective sustainability management, including strategic and systemic thinking, sustainability science knowledge, collaborative and analytical skills, and political acumen. However, Yuriev et al. (2021) revealed structural constraints: sustainability experts often operate with limited authority and insufficient organizational support, making their influence contingent on the presence of 'green culture' that legitimizes environmental concerns. Hawkins et al. (2021) reinforced this finding, noting that staff buy-in significantly shapes sustainability initiatives' success.

The literature also emphasizes the role of internal change agents in driving cultural transformation. Grandia (2015) illustrated how individuals in project teams can act as catalysts for sustainable procurement, while Yu et al. (2024) demonstrated that green talent management, recruitment, and training focused on environmental values enhance employee engagement in pro-environmental behaviours. These insights suggest that sustainability integration is not only a matter of technical competence but also of organizational psychology and cultural alignment.

Psychological and cognitive barriers further complicate this landscape. Preuss and Walker (2011) identified biases, organizational culture, and group dynamics that interact with technical and regulatory challenges, creating a complex web of obstacles to sustainability adoption. Deslatte et al. (2023) extended this analysis to capacity deficits, showing that local government managers, particularly in smaller and rural municipalities, often lack the technical expertise needed to access climate funding or engage in collaborative governance. These findings underscore a structural vulnerability: resource-constrained contexts amplify capability gaps, limiting the operationalization of sustainability strategies.

In response to these constraints, collaborative capacity-building emerges as a compensatory mechanism. Hawkins et al. (2021) observed that municipal officials frequently offset resource reductions through inter-organizational collaboration, while Deslatte et al. (2023) described this dynamic as characteristic of a 'hollowed-out state' in which networks substitute internal capacity. This reliance on collaboration reframes HRM as a networked function, requiring skills in negotiation, trust-building, and stakeholder engagement.

Reviewed research calls for new professional roles and competencies tailored to sustainability governance. Hofstad

et al. (2023) identified 15 tasks for public managers facilitating co-creation, including fostering innovation and bridging stakeholder differences. Fowler and Biekart (2017) introduced the concept of 'interlocutors'—skilled facilitators who navigate diverse interests and ensure inclusive participation in multi-stakeholder SDG initiatives. These findings signal a paradigm shift: sustainability governance demands hybrid skillsets combining technical expertise, relational capacity, and political acumen, thereby challenging traditional HRM models.

Sustainability in public sector performance management and accounting

Performance management and accounting constitute the backbone of public governance, providing mechanisms for measuring efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability (Van Dooren et al., 2015; Bouckaert & Halligan, 2006). In the context of sustainability, these functions acquire a transformative role: they not only track resource use but also signal organizational priorities and shape behavioural norms. However, the literature reveals a persistent gap between strategic sustainability ambitions and their operationalization through performance systems and accounting practices.

A small but growing body of research addresses the integration of sustainability into performance measurement frameworks. Brorström et al. (2018), using Gothenburg as a case study, illustrated the complexity of translating sustainability strategies, such as smart city initiatives, into actionable metrics. Similarly, Luhtala et al. (2024) documented efforts by Finnish cities to develop SDG-oriented performance systems, highlighting the technical and conceptual challenges of aligning global goals with local indicators. These studies underscore a critical insight: sustainability measurement is not merely a technical exercise but a normative process involving contested interpretations of value and impact.

Despite these innovations, the literature consistently portrays the public sector as a laggard in sustainability reporting compared to private organizations (Guthrie & Farneti, 2008; Dumay et al., 2010). Research on social and environmental reporting (Marcuccio & Steccolini, 2005; Greco et al., 2015) reveals that both the quantity and quality of sustainability disclosures remain low (Larrinaga-González & Pérez-Chamorro, 2008; Larrinaga et al., 2018; Alcaraz-Quiles et al., 2015; Montecalvo et al., 2018). Reporting practices are typically voluntary, fragmented, and guided by multiple overlapping frameworks, and are often adapted from private-sector standards. This plurality of frameworks produces inconsistencies, limiting comparability and undermining accountability (Goswami & Lodhia, 2014; Lodhia et al., 2012).

Determinants of reporting quality extend beyond technical capacity to include institutional and political factors. Ortiz-Rodríguez et al. (2018) showed that administrative traditions shape transparency levels. Wanckel (2023) added a micro-level perspective, demonstrating how internal champions and workflow alignment facilitated the adoption of a digital environmental impact assessment tool in Germany. These findings suggest that sustainability accounting is deeply embedded in organizational and political contexts, challenging the notion of purely rational implementation.

A recurring concern in the literature is the symbolic versus substantive use of sustainability reporting. Nicolò et al. (2024) and Marcuccio & Steccolini (2003) argued that reporting often serves legitimacy-seeking purposes rather than drive performance improvement. Vikstedt et al. (2024) reinforced this critique, noting that SDG-related accounts in Finnish municipalities frequently function as branding tools. Montecalvo et al. (2018) highlighted accountability gaps, particularly regarding intergenerational equity, a core principle of sustainability that remains underrepresented in public sector accounts. These findings raise fundamental questions about the interplay between instrumental rationality of performance systems and their political and symbolic functions.

Emerging research on audit and assurance mechanisms signals a potential shift toward greater rigour. Talbot and Boiral (2023), Brusca et al. (2024), and Bisogno et al. (2024b) examined how audit and assurance practices are evolving, particularly in local governments and municipally-owned entities. These studies suggest that, while assurance practices are still developing (Bisogno et al., 2024c), implementation gaps persist between strategic aspirations and actual outcomes (Talbot & Boiral, 2023). Audit institutions are increasingly engaging with sustainability (Hancu-Budui & Zorio-Grima, 2023), yet assurance remains nascent and uneven, reflecting broader challenges in institutionalizing sustainability in public accountability systems.

Discussion

Public sector capacities and responses to sustainability challenges

The analysis indicates that public management functions are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Adopting a comprehensive, proactive approach to sustainability challenges enhances public organizations' resilience and overall effectiveness (for example Eckersley et al., 2018). The literature identifies several enabling factors that facilitate the integration of sustainability into everyday public management practices. These include political commitment and leadership, adequate technical capabilities and up-to-date knowledge among public sector professionals (for example MacDonald et al., 2020), robust institutional mechanisms and administrative structures (for example Van Dijck & Steen, 2024), a supportive organizational culture (for example Hawkins et al., 2021), financial resourcefulness (for example Bisogno et al., 2024b), the use of digital technologies and smart systems (for example Bifulco et al., 2016; Meijer, 2018), and effective public outreach and collaboration (for example Bhatia et al., 2024).

At the same time, efforts to embed sustainability in public management are often hindered by bureaucratic inertia, complex and siloed administrative structures, a lack of political will, and public managers' tendency to avoid unpopular decisions (for example Christopoulos et al., 2012; Roberts & Milman, 2024). Additional barriers include inadequate financing and limited capacity to leverage alternative funding sources (for example Bisogno et al., 2024a; Hawkins et al., 2021; Merritt & Stubbs, 2012), failure to address trade-offs and conflicting stakeholder interests (for example Sinervo & Laihonen, 2024), and a general disinterest in or lack of capabilities for collaboration (for

example Deslatte & Stokan, 2020). These constraints highlight the need for systemic reforms and capacity-building initiatives to support sustainability integration across all levels of public management.

Beyond these enabling and constraining factors, the review identifies five interrelated development patterns that characterize institutional responses to sustainability challenges: localization, strategization, hybridization, datafication, and accountingization of public management (see Figure 3). These patterns reflect efforts to overcome the limitations of fragmented and siloed governance structures and to address the growing complexity of sustainability issues. They offer promising avenues for reform and innovation in public management and future research. Public institutions often struggle to address the multifaceted nature of sustainability, and Meadowcroft (2022) emphasized that conventional bureaucratic and managerialist approaches frequently overlook the dynamic interconnections between the economy, society, and environment (see also Lange et al., 2013). The five identified trajectories provide possible remedies for the shortcomings of traditional approaches to managing public organizations and suggestions for future research. However, the reviewed studies also offer critical reflections on the limitations and conditions under which these trajectories can be effectively implemented.

Strategization: Leading sustainability transitions strategically

Strategization refers to the process of translating broad sustainability visions into concrete, actionable plans that guide organizational decision-making. Numerous studies highlight how public organizations are increasingly embedding sustainability into their strategic agendas, transforming abstract goals into measurable targets and operational priorities (for example Bhatia et al., 2024; Guarini et al., 2021; Ji & Darnall, 2018). Rather than being confined to environmental departments or delegated to individual specialists, sustainability is now recognized as a transformative, cross-cutting concern that must be integrated across all levels of planning and management (Nunan et al., 2012).

A proactive, organization-wide approach is essential for integrating sustainability into policies, budgets, and daily operations. This requires balancing effectiveness and inclusiveness, ensuring central oversight and local ownership, as well as aligning short-term goals with long-term objectives. Strategic leadership plays a critical role in navigating these tensions and fostering coherence across different sectors and levels of government.

Suggestion 1: Successful strategization depends not only on formal planning tools but also on public managers' ability to foster shared visions, build coalitions, and adapt strategies in response to evolving sustainability challenges.

Localization: Leading sustainability transitions locally

Localization refers to the adaptation of sustainability policies, strategies, and management practices to the specific needs, conditions, and cultural contexts of local communities. While the concept initially gained prominence in the Global South—often in response to donor-driven efforts to introduce Western public management models into African public organizations—it has increasingly become relevant in Global North as well. In these contexts, localization is recognized as essential for ensuring that sustainability strategies, policies, and associated management methods, tools, and frameworks are contextually grounded, socially accepted, and practically implementable.

Local priorities, institutional capacities, and stakeholder dynamics significantly shape how sustainability goals are translated into strategic agendas. This means that effective strategization must be sensitive to local contexts, allowing for flexibility in how broad sustainability visions are operationalized on the ground. Therefore, localization requires public managers to navigate the complex interplay between global sustainability frameworks and local realities, ensuring that implementation is both meaningful and feasible.

Although local ownership is widely promoted in policy discourse, particularly in multistakeholder initiatives and partnerships (for example Fowler & Biekart, 2017; Sharma & Nayak, 2013), its effectiveness is not guaranteed. Empirical studies show that local ownership does not always lead to enhanced sustainability outcomes (for example Chowns, 2015), and local priorities may at times diverge from global sustainability goals (Luhtala et al., 2024).

Suggestion 2: Public managers should carefully balance global and local dimensions when translating sustainability into practice, ensuring that local engagement enhances, rather than undermines, broader sustainability objectives.

Hybridization: Leading sustainability transitions openly

Hybridization refers to the integration of diverse actors, sectors, and knowledge systems in the pursuit of sustainability (see Lange et al., 2013). Effectively embedding and localizing sustainability in public management requires input from a broad range of stakeholders to ensure that goals are not only technically sound but also socially legitimate and politically feasible within specific contexts. More inclusive and open management approaches help advance sustainability within public organizations' direct operations and more broadly across society.

The literature highlights the importance of co-designing sustainability strategies (for example Bhatia et al., 2024; Trischler et al., 2024), collaboratively innovating solutions to social, environmental, and economic challenges (for example Brorström, 2015) and building governance networks to foster urban development and sustainability (Karppi & Vakkuri, 2020). These hybrid approaches often involve partnerships between public agencies, private sector actors, civil society organizations, and citizens, creating new spaces for experimentation, dialogue, and shared ownership of sustainability transitions.

Hybridization also reflects a shift away from hierarchical, top-down governance models toward more networked and participatory forms of public management (see Bianchi et al., 2021). While these approaches can enhance legitimacy and responsiveness, they also introduce new challenges related to co-ordination, accountability, and power

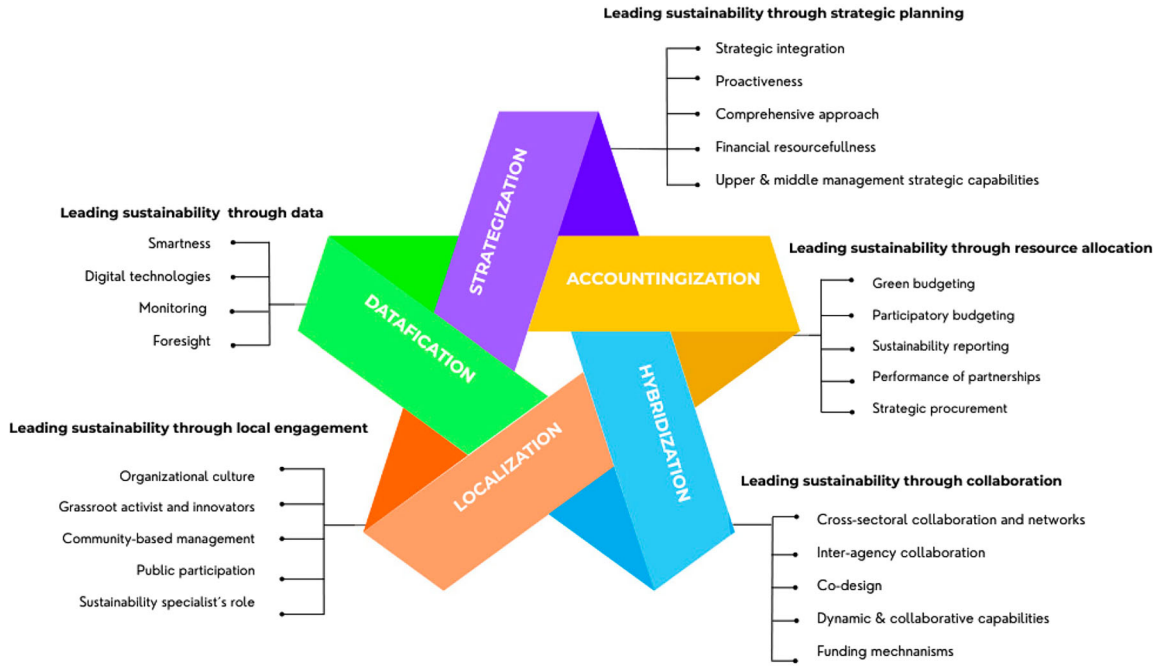

Figure 3. Five development trajectories—managing sustainability in public administration.

asymmetries. The success of hybrid governance arrangements depends on public managers' ability to navigate diverse interests, build trust, and facilitate collaboration across institutional and sectoral boundaries. Collective dialogue and shared knowledge formation have become increasingly important in sustainability transitions (see Laihonen et al., 2024).

Suggestion 3: Public managers should actively build multi-stakeholder governance networks to co-design sustainability strategies and foster collaboration across sectors, prioritizing trust-building, transparent dialogue, and shared ownership—supported by clear frameworks for co-ordination and accountability.

Datafication: Leading sustainability transitions through data

Datafication involves the growing use of sustainability-related data and digital technologies to inform public decision-making. Themes such as smart infrastructure, strategic monitoring, and foresight practices underscore the role data play in navigating complex sustainability challenges (for example Bifulco et al., 2016; Karppi & Vakkuri, 2020; Meijer, 2018). Closely interwoven with the other development patterns, datafication enables the translation of sustainability strategies into measurable targets—facilitating progress tracking—and supports evidence-based decision-making.

The increasing availability and use of data allows public organizations to produce detailed accounts of local conditions, conduct baseline and impact assessments, and evaluate both potential and past actions. Moreover, open data initiatives, participatory dashboards, and digital co-production tools create new opportunities for engaging diverse stakeholders in sustainability governance. These tools not only enhance transparency and accountability but also enable citizens, civil society, and other actors to interact with sustainability data and contribute to the creation of shared future visions.

Suggestion 4: Public organizations' capacity to harness sustainability data should be strengthened by developing institutional frameworks, ethical safeguards, and training programmes, as well as ensuring that data-driven practices are inclusive, transparent, and aligned with democratic values to support the responsible and meaningful use of data in sustainability governance.

Accountingization: Leading sustainability transitions transparently

Accountingization of public sector organizations in sustainability is evident in the growing body of literature focused on environmental and social reporting, accounting, and sustainability performance management (see Grossi & Argento, 2022; Di Tullio et al., 2022; Sinervo et al., 2024b). Closely linked with other development trajectories, accountingization refers to the development of the influence and integration of sustainability accounting practices and highlights how accounting extends beyond financial reporting. However, it simultaneously brings the risk of sustainability being governed by metrics rather than broader ecological or social values (Dumay et al., 2010).

With accountingization, accountabilization also becomes a clear development trend. Accountabilization is grounded on increasing the generation and use of data, and reinforces strategization through more transparency over resource allocation, concrete actions, and their impacts. In the context of sustainability, it also involves reporting on environmental, social, and economic performance and fostering transparency, responsiveness, and trust among stakeholders.

Suggestion 5: Implementation of integrated sustainability accounting and reporting systems enhances transparency and trust in sustainability governance. These systems should go beyond financial metrics to include environmental and social performance indicators while embedding clear accountability frameworks that prevent over-reliance on narrow metrics and uphold broader ecological and social values.

Conclusions

The aim of this literature review was to provide a broad overview of how public management research has addressed the topic of sustainability, outline gaps in the current body of knowledge, and suggest avenues for future research. The literature reviewed in this study is often fragmented. Sustainability is rarely examined in a multidimensional way, as it is often approached through the SDG framework and its definition is generally taken for granted. In addition to the drivers and barriers affecting how long-term environmental, social, and economic concerns are integrated into public sector management, the thematic synthesis highlighted five interconnected and overarching development trajectories of public management amidst sustainability crises: localization, datafication, strategization, hybridization, and accountabilization. Each one carries high expectations for transforming public management in the face of sustainability challenges, yet also warrant critical scrutiny, opening a vital research and practice agenda for public management scholars and practitioners alike.

For future research, it is crucial to understand how public managers operationalize adaptive strategization by balancing formal planning tools with coalition building and responsiveness to evolving sustainability challenges. The mechanisms for aligning global sustainability objectives with local engagement without compromising broader goals and governance models that foster collaboration, transparency, and shared ownership across sectors are also important areas for further investigations. Moreover, future research should explore how institutional frameworks and ethical safeguards ensure the inclusive, democratic use of sustainability data and how integrated reporting systems enhance transparency and trust while avoiding narrow metrics. These areas of research highlight an agenda for both academic research and practice that grapples with the promises and complexities of integrating sustainability in public management.

Ultimately, advancing sustainability in public management globally requires management practices that reflect the development practices identified in this review. Sustainability-oriented and data-driven approaches must be supported by institutional capacities that enable joint visions, shared responsibilities, coalition-building and adaptive strategies. Public managers play a central role in translating global sustainability goals into local action.

Disclosure statement

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