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Article

# Assessing the Feasibility of Downsizing Municipalities in Saudi Arabia: A Path Toward Efficiency

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## Abstract

This study investigates the feasibility and implications of municipal downsizing in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, focusing on improving governance efficiency, service delivery, and institutional coordination. Against the backdrop of Saudi Vision 2030 and decentralization efforts, three questions are addressed. (1) Can downsizing municipalities enhance local governance efficiency? (2) What structural, cultural, and economic barriers impede such consolidation? and (3) How can reforms be tailored to balance cost efficiency with the preservation of local identity? A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative survey data from 375 stakeholders, including policymakers, municipal employees, citizens, and urban experts, and using qualitative thematic analysis. The findings reveal moderate but differentiated support for downsizing, with variables such as age, education, and stakeholder role influencing perceptions. The regression and analysis of variance (ANOVA) results indicate statistically significant divergences, particularly around expected cost savings and perceived impact on service quality. A case analysis from the Eastern Province further illustrates mixed satisfaction with previous mergers, underscoring concerns about rural marginalization and administrative overreach. This study identifies digital transformation, public service enhancement, and improved municipal coordination as the preferred reform priorities. However, concerns regarding representation, identity erosion, and uneven development remain. The results emphasize the need for a phased, inclusive, and adaptive reform strategy that aligns with local contexts and is anchored in measurable performance outcomes. By bridging local insights with global experiences, this study contributes to the broader literature on public sector restructuring and offers actionable pathways for Saudi policymakers navigating the complexities of territorial reforms.

**Keywords:** municipal downsizing; local governance; Saudi Arabia; amalgamation; public administration reform; Vision 2030

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## 1. Introduction

Effective municipal governance is essential to ensure the efficient delivery of public services, promote local development, and foster citizen engagement. As cities grow and administrative complexity increases, governments worldwide are revisiting the structures and functions of local governments to enhance performance and reduce costs. One increasingly adopted strategy is municipal downsizing or consolidation, which involves merging smaller or overlapping local government units into larger entities to achieve economies of scale, minimize the duplication of services, and enhance strategic coordination [1,2]. This structural reform has been implemented in diverse contexts, such as Japan, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Canada, and is often driven by demographic changes, fiscal pressure, or the need to improve governance capacity [3,4].

Although large administrative units are considered to better manage complex infrastructure systems, allocate resources more efficiently, and deliver a wider range of services through professional management, the empirical findings on the effectiveness of municipal downsizing

remain mixed, with risks of diminished local democracy, weaker community engagement, and local identity erosion highlighted by some studies [5,6]. Therefore, the feasibility and desirability of downsizing must be assessed within the specific social, political, and institutional contexts of each country.

Under the auspices of Vision 2030, the government has committed to reforming the public sector, decentralizing decision-making, and improving urban management to support sustainable economic diversification and quality of life [7]. The municipal governance in Saudi Arabia is at a critical juncture, and the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing (MoMRAH) has led initiatives to digitize services, enhance administrative accountability, and promote inter-municipal cooperation [8]. Nonetheless, fragmentation across municipal boundaries, variations in resource capacities, and inefficiencies in service delivery continue to pose major challenges, especially in rural and peri-urban areas with low population levels and small or under-resourced governance units [9–11]. As Saudi Arabia transitions toward more participatory and effective governance models, municipal downsizing presents a potential pathway for reinforcing administrative capacity and improving service delivery. However, there is limited empirical research on how citizens, local officials, and policy experts perceive the potential impacts of downsizing, and the mechanisms that could ensure that consolidation respects local identities and socio-spatial diversity. Moreover, municipal consolidation in a top-down governance system, such as Saudi Arabia, may have different implications than in liberal democracies, necessitating a tailored approach grounded in national realities.

By integrating the perspectives of key stakeholders, policymakers, municipal staff, citizens, and domain experts, this study aims to comprehensively assess the opportunities and challenges of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia. It also seeks to contribute to the broader global discourse on public administration reform, particularly in transitional economies seeking to modernize local governance while maintaining inclusive and locally responsive systems [12,13]. These findings are intended to support evidence-based policymaking and inform future strategies for administrative restructuring that balance efficiency with identity, and scale with subsidiarity.

## 2. Literature Review

The evolving discourse on municipal reform underscores the growing global interest in restructuring local governance to enhance efficiency, equity, and responsiveness. As nations grapple with the twin pressures of urbanization and fiscal constraints, municipal downsizing, which encompasses amalgamation, consolidation, and rationalization, has emerged as a key strategy for streamlining administrative operations and reinforcing institutional performance. This literature review situates the concept of municipal downsizing within broader theoretical frameworks of public sector reform, exploring its rationale, benefits, and limitations through a conceptual analysis and comparative global experiences. It further examines the applicability of these reform models in the Saudi Arabian context, where centralized governance, socio-cultural dynamics, and the transformative agenda of Vision 2030's collectively shape the possibilities and constraints of local government restructuring. By reviewing theoretical underpinnings, international case studies, and domestic reform trajectories, this section provides a comprehensive foundation for assessing the feasibility and implications of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia.

### 2.1. Conceptual Framework: Downsizing and Local Governance Reform

Municipal downsizing, also termed amalgamation, consolidation, or rationalization, refers to the administrative reorganization of local government structures through the reduction in the number of municipalities or the redrawing of municipal boundaries. This structural reform aims to address inefficiencies in governance by streamlining operations, reducing duplication, and improving the delivery of public services. Rooted in broader theories of public-sector reform, fiscal efficiency, and institutional design, municipal downsizing is frequently positioned as a response to rising administrative costs, service fragmentation, and the need for integrated urban management

[1,2]. The core theoretical underpinning of municipal downsizing lies in the principle of economies of scale, the concept that larger administrative units can operate more efficiently owing to shared infrastructure, unified service platforms, and lower per capita overhead. These efficiencies are expected to translate into tangible fiscal benefits such as decreased administrative spending and improved resource allocation. However, evidence from global case studies is mixed. While some municipalities report short-term cost savings and administrative rationalization, others experience long-term cost increases owing to integration challenges, such as salary harmonization, system interoperability, and service expansion to previously underserved areas [5,14].

From the perspective of public choice theory, downsizing is advocated as a means of mitigating coordination failures and collective action problems arising from jurisdictional fragmentation. Tiebout [15] and Boyne [16] argue that small, disjointed municipalities often compete inefficiently, and fail to align on regional development goals. By contrast, larger consolidated entities are believed to have greater bargaining power with national agencies, more capacity to attract investment, and stronger capabilities to manage cross-cutting urban challenges, such as mobility, housing, and environmental protection. Therefore, consolidation is framed as a way to overcome “balkanization” and improve the strategic coherence of local governance.

However, the downsizing model is not without significant criticism, particularly from the perspective of governance theory and fiscal federalism. Scholars, such as Oates [17] emphasize that the proximity of local governments to their constituents is fundamental to democratic responsiveness and tailored service provision. Large municipalities may suffer from bureaucratic distance, weakened accountability, and reduced citizen engagement, especially in marginalized or rural communities. This highlights a fundamental trade-off: while administrative consolidation may improve operational efficiency, it can simultaneously erode the democratic intimacy and participatory nature of local governance.

Institutional theory further enriches this framework by highlighting the importance of the political context, administrative readiness, and legal frameworks in determining the success of downsizing reforms [13]. In decentralized systems with strong local autonomy traditions, voluntary amalgamations often outperform centrally mandated amalgamations owing to stronger local buy-ins. Conversely, in more centralized states such as Saudi Arabia, the central government plays a dominant role in shaping the pace, scope, and implementation of reforms. In such contexts, bureaucratic culture, strategic planning tools such as Vision 2030, and elite-driven decision-making processes significantly influence reform outcomes. Importantly, path dependence and cultural factors present formidable barriers to structural reform. Local municipalities in Saudi Arabia are often deeply embedded in tribal, historical, and social networks, thereby shaping local identity and legitimacy, which are not easily absorbed into newly formed administrative units. Alfaleh [18] noted that cultural capital invested in local emblems, leadership, and institutional memory cannot be replicated through technocratic mergers. Therefore, consolidation efforts that disregard these socio-cultural dimensions risk provoking community resistance, eroding trust in governance, and weakening the social contract between citizens and the state.

In response to these challenges, contemporary literature increasingly advocates for adaptive governance models that reconcile administrative efficiency with democratic inclusiveness and identity preservation. Alternatives such as inter-municipal cooperation, federated councils, and shared-service frameworks allow municipalities to collaborate on strategic functions, such as waste management or emergency services, without undergoing full structural amalgamation [3]. These flexible models offer a pragmatic middle ground by enabling economies of scale, while retaining local representation and responsiveness. They also create space for incremental reform, capacity-building, and stakeholder consultation. As Saudi Arabia continues to implement Vision 2030, municipal downsizing may serve as a strategic instrument for institutional modernization and regional planning reform. However, any restructuring effort must be embedded in a context-sensitive framework that carefully considers the Kingdom’s central governance traditions, sociocultural diversity, and historical legacies. Rather than a “one-size-fits-all” solution, successful reform depends

on a localized, inclusive approach that blends fiscal rationality with citizen participation, legal safeguards, and respect for place-based identities. In this regard, the conceptual framework of municipal downsizing must move beyond cost-efficiency narratives to embrace a broader governance transformation paradigm.

## 2.2. Global Experiences in Municipal Amalgamation

Municipal amalgamation has become a widely adopted reform strategy worldwide and has been employed to improve the efficiency, equity, and accountability of local governance systems. The rationale for amalgamation often stems from the desire to reduce administrative fragmentation, enhance public service delivery, and address fiscal constraints, especially in the face of urban sprawl, rural depopulation, and mounting infrastructure demands. Different countries have approached amalgamation with varying degrees of compulsion, scale, and stakeholder involvement, resulting in a rich tapestry of success, setbacks, and critical lessons. These global case studies provide valuable comparative insights for countries such as Saudi Arabia, considering structural reforms in their municipal landscapes. In one of the most ambitious and rapid municipal reform programs during the Heisei era (1999–2006), the Japanese government adopted a strategic mix of legislative reforms and fiscal incentives, successfully reducing the number of municipalities from 3,232 to 1,821 [19]. The motivations for this included financial stress, demographic decline in rural areas, and inefficiencies in administrative duplication. While the reform improved planning capacity and resource allocation in many urban areas, it also raised significant concerns about diminished local representation, identity erosion, and uneven service accessibility in peripheral regions. Furthermore, the high costs of integration, including aligning wage structures and administrative systems, mitigated long-term fiscal benefits [20].

Ontario and Quebec provinces in Canada implemented large-scale amalgamations during the late 1990s and early 2000s, with mixed results. Ontario's most high-profile case was the 1998 creation of the "megacity" of Toronto, designed to reduce costs and increase regional competitiveness [6]. However, subsequent evaluations showed that the anticipated cost savings were modest and often overshadowed by increased expenditures on wage equalization and expanded services [21]. In Quebec, forced mergers provoked strong public backlash, leading to a referendum in 2004 that allowed some municipalities to de-merge [22]. These cases highlight the importance of public consent, transparent communication, and sensitivity to local identity for successful municipal restructuring.

Denmark pursued a more consensus-oriented reform, which in 2007 consolidated its municipalities from 271 to 98, and its counties from 13 to five. Unlike the top-down reforms in Japan and parts of Canada, Denmark's approach was characterized by negotiations, intergovernmental coordination, and alignment of financial and administrative frameworks [23]. The process benefited from robust stakeholder engagement, resulting in relatively smooth transitions and higher levels of public acceptance. Nonetheless, post-merger integration still faced challenges, such as the alignment of Information Technology (IT) systems, disparities in service capacity, and managing the rural-urban divide [24]. Similar reform trajectories were followed in Sweden and Finland, where gradual, often voluntary, amalgamations aimed at improving service delivery amidst demographic aging and shrinking rural populations.

Rather than pursuing full territorial amalgamations, Germany and the Netherlands adopted a model of functional cooperation, emphasizing inter-municipal cooperation. In Germany, many small municipalities retain political autonomy while forming administrative unions to jointly manage services, such as waste disposal or emergency services, achieving cost savings without sacrificing local representation [4]. The Netherlands has employed a hybrid model since the 1990s, implementing some mergers while remaining strongly reliant on inter-municipal cooperation. Research shows that while amalgamations can boost technical and administrative capacity, their effectiveness depends heavily on pre-existing institutional relationships and the political compatibility between merging entities [25].

Several critical success factors have emerged across these diverse contexts. First, voluntary or incentive-based approaches tend to foster greater legitimacy and smoother transitions than forced mergers. Second, the political context and administrative culture play a significant role, with centralized states managing reforms more efficiently, while also being at a greater risk of alienating local communities if citizen engagement is weak. Third, reform must be holistic, considering not only structural consolidation, but also financial systems, human resource integration, and service harmonization. Lastly, transparency, phased implementation, and robust public communication are essential for sustaining public trust and minimizing social or political resistance. As local governance remains highly centralized in Saudi Arabia, and municipal identity is often intertwined with tribal and regional affiliations, these international experiences offer both inspiration and caution. Direct replication of top-down models, such as those in Japan or Ontario, may provoke local resistance or erode trust. Conversely, Denmark's consensus-based approach and Germany's functional collaboration strategies appear more adaptable to Saudi Arabia. These models offer pathways to achieve efficiency while respecting local legitimacy and cultural cohesion. Therefore, any municipal downsizing initiative in Saudi Arabia must prioritize inclusive stakeholder engagement, contextual sensitivity, and incremental implementation to maximize administrative effectiveness and public acceptance.

### *2.3. Municipal Governance in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Reform Trajectories*

Over the past few decades, Saudi Arabia's municipal governance system has gradually transitioned from a basic service delivery mechanism to a more strategic institution aligned with national development goals. This transformation has been spurred by rapid urbanization, changing citizen expectations, and, more recently, the ambitious objectives set out under Vision 2030 [7]. Despite these reforms, the municipal structure continues to face deeply rooted institutional and structural challenges. Municipal downsizing or amalgamation, although increasingly discussed, remains a complex issue, requiring careful consideration of the Kingdom's unique administrative culture, centralized governance model, and sociocultural fabric. At the core of Saudi Arabia's municipal challenges is its centralized administrative framework. The MoMRAH retains control over the policy, budgetary, and regulatory functions of more than 270 municipalities across the country, including 17 regional secretariats [8]. These municipalities rely heavily on fiscal transfers from the central government, with limited authority to generate local revenue, craft independent budgets, and prioritize development agendas [9,11]. The result is a rigid top-down model in which bureaucratic complexity and vertical decision making constrain municipal responsiveness to local needs. Moreover, overlapping responsibilities between the central and local authorities often result in duplicate efforts and misaligned planning, especially in sectors such as waste management, infrastructure development, and licensing [10].

Institutional fragmentation and geographic disparity are also major obstacles in service provision. While major urban centers such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam have made strides in developing sophisticated governance systems, including e-government platforms and professional urban management, many smaller municipalities remain under-resourced and understaffed [26]. This has led to a two-tiered system in which residents of peripheral towns and rural areas experience poor infrastructure, limited public services, and delayed implementation of development projects. The proliferation of small, weakly capacitated municipalities has not only diluted the effectiveness of public investment, but also blurred jurisdictional accountability. The lack of clarity regarding which municipality governs which area, and which services are guaranteed often leads to confusion among citizens and inefficient resource allocation.

Equally important are the cultural and social considerations that remain deeply intertwined with local governance. In Saudi Arabia, administrative boundaries are often aligned with tribal territories and historic settlements, and residents maintain a strong sense of attachment to their locality, including its name, emblems, and traditions [18]. These identities are not merely symbolic; they also shape how communities engage with authority and perceive legitimacy. Therefore, any effort to

consolidate or dissolve municipalities must be sensitive to these social dynamics. Abruptly abolishing or merging municipal units may be interpreted as erasing local identity or sidelining community representation. In rural areas, mayors and local council members often act as trusted intermediaries between citizens and the state, further reinforcing the importance of preserving local governance structures. Despite these challenges, Vision 2030 has opened new avenues for governance reform. Through the National Transformation Program (NTP), MoMRAH has introduced a suite of modernization initiatives, including the Balady digital portal, performance-based budgeting pilots, and frameworks for public-private partnerships (PPPs) in municipal services. The National Urban Strategy [8] further advocates for spatial equity, fiscal decentralization, and improved inter-municipal coordination. However, there remains a wide gap between high-level policy directives and local implementation. Municipalities often lack administrative autonomy, legal instruments, and skilled personnel to translate reform goals into actionable programs. Additionally, citizen participation remains minimal as most municipal councils are appointed rather than elected, curbing the potential for grassroots accountability and engagement [27].

In this reform context, municipal downsizing and consolidation present both risks and opportunities. On the positive side, merging municipalities could reinforce technical capacity, reduce administrative overhead, and foster integrated planning at the regional scale. Consolidation may also enable better use of digital infrastructure and performance monitoring systems, which require a certain level of institutional maturity. However, downsizing also entails significant political and social risks. Communities, especially those in historically distinct regions, may resist mergers owing to fear of marginalization or loss of representation. Moreover, larger administrative units may become more bureaucratically opaque and less responsive to citizen needs if participatory mechanisms are not enhanced simultaneously.

To navigate this complexity, Saudi Arabia may benefit from exploring alternative or transitional models, such as inter-municipal cooperation, shared-service agreements, or federated governance structures. These frameworks allow municipalities to collaborate on service delivery and infrastructure planning, while maintaining a degree of local autonomy and identity. For instance, small municipalities could pool resources for waste management, transportation, or IT systems, thereby achieving economies of scale without formal mergers. Such functional consolidation models have succeeded in Germany and the Netherlands, and could be adapted to the Saudi context to build institutional readiness before pursuing full-scale amalgamation. Ultimately, the success of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia depends on a context-sensitive and participatory approach. Rather than imposing top-down reforms, policymakers should prioritize community consultation, incremental implementation, and robust legal frameworks to manage transitions. Cultural identity, administrative capacity, and geographic diversity must be factored in the design of any reform agenda. If managed carefully, municipal restructuring could catalyze governance innovation, enhanced public service delivery, and more balanced regional development, which are the key pillars of Vision 2030's promise of a modern, inclusive Saudi state.

### 3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to explore the feasibility of downsizing municipalities in Saudi Arabia. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from interviews and open-ended responses, this study achieved both statistical generalizability and contextual depth. The rationale behind this approach is its capacity to capture both the breadth and depth of stakeholder perspectives, aligning with Creswell and Clark's [28] emphasis on the value of triangulation in complex governance studies. Quantitative methods enabled the empirical validation of relationships among variables, whereas qualitative data illuminated institutional, cultural, and political dynamics that are often inaccessible through standardized measures alone.

The study is anchored in three central research questions: (1) Can municipal downsizing enhance governance efficiency in Saudi Arabia? (2) What structural, cultural, and economic barriers impede municipal consolidation? and (3) How can downsizing be tailored to preserve local identity

while achieving economies of scale? These questions shaped the research instruments, participant selection, and analytical processes, ensuring methodological coherence and alignment with broader objectives related to institutional reform and public sector transformation [29]. To address these questions, this study explores four stakeholder groups: policymakers, municipal staff, civic-minded citizens, and governance experts. These groups were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants with direct experience or informed perspectives on municipal governance. The eligibility criteria included at least five years of professional or civic engagement with local governance structures. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error [30]. Of the 500 individuals, 357 completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 71%, which is consistent with the norms in GCC-related governance studies [31–33].

The primary data collection tool was a structured questionnaire divided into three sections: demographics, Likert-scale attitudinal items, and open-ended questions. The 20 Likert items were designed to capture dimensions such as governance efficiency, institutional trust, cultural attachment, and perceptions of reform. Content validity was established through a review by three academic and policy experts, and the instrument was piloted with 15 participants to ensure its clarity and relevance [34]. Additionally, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected experts and policymakers to explore topics such as institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and adaptive reform strategies. The interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed for qualitative coding.

The quantitative data analysis followed a five-step procedure. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were used to profile the respondents and identify general trends. Cronbach's alpha was further calculated to assess the internal reliability of multi-item constructs, with a threshold of  $\alpha \geq 0.70$  indicating acceptable consistency [35]. Third, One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to compare differences across stakeholder groups on key attitudinal factors, with post-hoc comparisons via Tukey's HSD tests to determine statistical significance ( $p < 0.05$ ). Lastly, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify the predictors of support for downsizing using variables such as institutional trust, municipality size, professional experience, cultural attachment, and awareness of Vision 2030 [36].

Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo 12 following a grounded theory approach to inductively generate codes and identify recurring themes [37,38]. Themes such as cultural resistance, administrative readiness, and trust in public institutions were triangulated with quantitative findings to reinforce analytical rigor. This integrative method ensured a deeper understanding of how institutional constraints and socio-cultural variables shape attitudes toward municipal consolidation.

Ethical integrity was a central concern throughout the research. Approval was obtained from the Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University Review Board (IRB-2025-06-0237), and all participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, anonymity protection, and the purpose of the study. Consistent with international research ethics standards [39], no personally identifiable data were recorded or disclosed, and the participants were granted the right to withdraw at any stage. Despite its methodological strengths, this study has several limitations. First, while purposive sampling ensures expertise, it may introduce bias by excluding less-engaged voices. Second, the cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of time, limiting the ability to assess evolving perceptions. Third, access to senior officials was restricted in some regions, potentially constraining their representation. Stakeholder diversity, triangulated data sources, and complementary analytical techniques mitigate these limitations.

## 4. Results

This section presents empirical findings from the quantitative survey of 357 stakeholders, and qualitative insights from expert interviews and open-ended responses. The results are organized into eight main subsections aligned with the applied statistical and thematic analysis methods: (1) Demographic Profile, (2) Awareness and Perception Metrics, (3) Perceived Benefits of Downsizing,

(4) Perceived Challenges and Rural Neglect Concerns, (5) Institutional Reform Priorities, (6) Case Evaluation – Eastern Province Merger, (7) Thematic Analysis for Open-Ended Feedback on Municipal Downsizing and Reforms in Saudi Arabia, and (8) Determinants of Perceived Fiscal Benefits and Stakeholder Variation.

#### 4.1. Demographic Profile

Understanding the demographic characteristics of survey respondents is essential in governance research as perspectives on municipal reform are often shaped by one's role, region, and lived experience. Data were collected from 357 respondents across Saudi Arabia, representing a wide spectrum of stakeholders engaged in or affected by local governance. This diversity reinforces the validity of the findings and provides a multidimensional lens through which the feasibility of municipal downsizing can be assessed [2,3].

As shown in Table 1, the stakeholder composition reflects a balanced cross-section of Saudi society. Academics and governance experts comprised the largest proportion of respondents (43.98%), followed by citizens (21.85%), municipal employees (17.09%), and policymakers (10.08%). The remaining 7% were consultants, retired officials, and civic activists. Such role diversity is critical in governance studies as each group has unique knowledge, expectations, and reform sensitivities [1]. Citizens often express concerns about identity and accountability, whereas policymakers and experts prioritize institutional efficiency and legal frameworks [5].

Geographical distribution further reinforces the study's representativeness. Respondents were drawn from all major regions of the Kingdom, including Madinah (21.29%), the Eastern Province (19.33%), and Riyadh (14.29%). Each region's demographic and administrative context affects its municipal structure, resource allocation, and governance. For instance, urban regions may perceive downsizing as a rational step toward streamlining services, whereas rural or tribal regions may view it as a threat to local identity and autonomy [18,27]. These regional dynamics are particularly salient in Saudi Arabia, where municipal boundaries often intersect with historical, cultural, and tribal divisions.

Age distribution across the sample was also broad, with the largest cohort (31.37%) falling in the 46–65 years category, followed by respondents aged 36–45 years (23.53%) and 26–35 years (20.45%). Younger participants (18–25 years) and older adults (65+ years) accounted for 11.48% and 13.16% of the sample, respectively. This range offers valuable generational insights into attitudes toward reform, with older respondents potentially more rooted in traditional municipal identities, and younger respondents more open to institutional modernization. Literature suggests that age can significantly influence trust in governance and openness to change, particularly in societies undergoing rapid structural transitions [3].

Regarding sex, the sample was relatively balanced, with males and females accounting for 54.34% and 45.66% respectively. This near parity reflects the evolving inclusiveness of public discourse in Saudi Arabia and provides an opportunity to assess sex based perspectives on municipal services, representation, and local identity. Previous studies show that women may prioritize community engagement and service equity, offering important counterpoints to efficiency-centered reform narratives [21]. Including both male and female voices enhances the study's legitimacy and aligns with Saudi Arabia's broader push toward sex-inclusive policymaking under Vision 2030. Lastly, the educational backgrounds of the respondents revealed a highly literate and professionally informed sample. Of the respondents, 82% held at least a bachelor's degree, with PhD holders, master's graduates and bachelor's graduates accounting for 29.41%, 24.65%, and 28.01%, respectively. Higher education levels often correlate with greater awareness of institutional processes, reform initiatives, and public administration challenges [13,16]. This enhances the reliability of responses, particularly regarding complex governance reforms such as municipal downsizing. Overall, the demographic profile provides a strong foundation for the interpretive and statistical analyses presented in subsequent sections.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile (N = 357).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Role	Academic/Expert	157	43.98%	2.55	1.25
	Citizen	78	21.85%		
	Municipal Employee/Official	61	17.09%		
	Policymaker/Government Official	36	10.08%		
	Other	25	7.00%		
Region	Madinah	76	21.29%	3.64	1.98
	Eastern Province	69	19.33%		
	Riyadh	51	14.29%		
	Qassim	44	12.32%		
	Northern Region	41	11.48%		
	Southern Region	36	10.08%		
	Makkah	35	9.80%		
	Other	5	1.40%		
Age	46–65 years	112	31.37%	2,84	1.27
	36–45 years	84	23.53%		
	26–35 years	73	20.45%		
	65+ years	47	13.16%		
	18–25 years	41	11.48%		
Sex	Male	194	54.34%	1.39	0.49
	Female	163	45.66%		
Education Level	PhD	105	29.41%	2.64	1.14
	Bachelor's	100	28.01%		
	Master's	88	24.65%		
	High School	48	13.45%		
	Other	16	4.48%		

#### 4.2. Awareness and Perception Metrics

Understanding stakeholder awareness and perceptions is vital for evaluating the feasibility of governance reforms such as municipal downsizing. Reforms introduced without sufficient public awareness or perceived necessity often face implementation challenges, resistance, and policy failure [2,12]. This study analyzes two key dimensions: (1) familiarity with municipal downsizing and (2) perceived necessity of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's strategic framework for governance and economic transformation.

The results indicate that familiarity with the concept of municipal downsizing remains relatively limited among the respondents (Table 2). Only 26.33% of participants reported being "very familiar" with the concept, while the largest proportion (38.10%) indicated they were "not familiar," and 35.57% were "somewhat familiar." The mean score for familiarity was 1.9 (SD = 0.83), suggesting that the public understanding of municipal restructuring remains in its early stages. This limited awareness could reflect the absence of widespread national dialogue on the administrative implications of downsizing, or a lack of localized public engagement campaigns.

These findings have practical implications for policy design and communication reform. Public administration scholars argue that stakeholders are more likely to support reforms that they understand and perceive as aligned with their values or interests [3,5]. Without adequate familiarity, citizens may conflate downsizing with loss of representation or cultural erasure. Therefore, improving public literacy regarding the goals, benefits, and safeguards of municipal consolidation is a prerequisite for building consensus and legitimacy in reform efforts.

The study further assessed the perceived necessity of Vision 2030 as a driver of municipal reform. The responses were more evenly distributed, reflecting a complex blend of optimism and skepticism. Approximately 26.61% of respondents rated Vision 2030 as "very necessary" for governance reform, 27.17% rated it "somewhat necessary," while 22.13% remained "neutral," and

24.09% viewed it as “unnecessary.” The mean score was 2.21 (SD = 1.04), indicating a mild lean toward perceived necessity, but also revealing significant ambivalence among stakeholders.

This ambivalence is attributable to several factors including regional disparities in the implementation of Vision 2030, political trust dynamics, and a lack of tangible outcomes in some municipalities. While Vision 2030 has been widely praised for promoting innovation, decentralization, and digital transformation [7], it is criticized for uneven execution and perceived top-down policy delivery. The mixed perceptions captured in this study align with existing literature, noting that national reform visions often face varied interpretations across regions and social groups [27].

Notably, the relationship between familiarity with downsizing and perceived necessity of Vision 2030 appears to be significant. The regression analysis in Section 4.8 confirms that those familiar with Vision 2030 are more likely to support municipal downsizing, suggesting that national frameworks can effectively drive localized reform, provided that messaging is clear and consistent. This supports the findings of Andrews and Schroeder [13], who emphasize the importance of integrating sectoral reforms within overarching governance strategies to enhance policy coherence and stakeholder alignment. In conclusion, while there is cautious optimism about the role of Vision 2030 in enabling reform, the low levels of public familiarity with downsizing highlight a critical knowledge gap. Bridging this gap through targeted education, transparent communication, and participatory policy design is essential for ensuring public buy-in and successful implementation. Without meaningful stakeholder awareness, even well-intentioned reforms risk political pushback or institutional stagnation.

**Table 2.** Awareness and Perception Metrics (N = 357).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Familiarity with Downsizing	Very Familiar	94	26.33%	1.9	0.83
	Somewhat Familiar	127	35.57%		
	Not Familiar	136	38.10%		
Perceived Necessity for Vision 2030	Very Necessary	95	26.61%	2.21	1.04
	Somewhat Necessary	97	27.17%		
	Neutral	79	22.13%		
	Unnecessary	86	24.09%		

#### 4.3. Perceived Benefits of Downsizing

Perceptions of the potential benefits of municipal downsizing play a pivotal role in shaping stakeholder support for reforms. This study evaluates three primary benefit statements: (1) whether larger municipal units improve infrastructure management, (2) whether downsizing enhances service speed, and (3) whether merging municipalities reduce operational costs. The degree of agreement across these statements reveals both the strengths and limitations of public expectations surrounding municipal consolidation.

As shown in Table 3, the highest level of agreement was observed for the statement, “Larger units improve infrastructure management.” Approximately 65.54% of the respondents either “strongly agreed” or “agreed,” while only 16.25% expressed disagreement, and 18.21% remained neutral. The mean score was 3.94 (SD = 1.22), indicating generally favorable perceptions. This reflects the widespread belief that municipal expansion can promote better coordination, investment capacity, and technical expertise in the management of infrastructure systems. These findings are consistent with the literature that links economies of scale with improved infrastructure outcomes in large or consolidated municipalities [1,14]. In contrast, responses to the statement “downsizing improves service speed” were more ambivalent. While 46.22% of the respondents agreed to some extent, a significant portion (31.37%) were neutral, and 22.41% disagreed. The mean score was 3.28 (SD = 1.34), indicating moderate support. This finding suggests uncertainty among stakeholders regarding whether merging municipalities accelerate service delivery or create bureaucratic

bottlenecks. As Faulk and Hicks [5] caution, while larger municipalities may benefit from centralized systems, they may also experience service delivery delays if they are not managed efficiently or supported by digital infrastructure.

The third benefit statement, ‘Merging reduces operational costs,’ also received mixed support. While 48.31% agreed, nearly one-third (32.02%) were neutral, and 19.10% disagreed. The mean score was 3.41 (SD = 1.30), indicating modest optimism regarding fiscal savings. This cautious stance aligns with international research showing that the financial outcomes of amalgamation often fall short of expectations owing to transition costs, staff restructuring, and administrative integration challenges [6,21]. Respondents may also have considered the upfront costs of reorganization, such as IT system integration, salary harmonization, and legal restructuring. Importantly, the pattern across all three benefit statements reveals a distinction between technical optimism and implementation skepticism. Stakeholders seem to recognize the theoretical advantages of downsizing, particularly in areas such as infrastructure and cost management, but remain uncertain about real-world execution. This distinction supports the findings of Tavares [2], who noted that public support for amalgamation depends not only on perceived benefits, but also on institutional trust and reform readiness.

The prevalence of neutral responses, especially to service speed and cost-reduction statements, suggests that many stakeholders remain undecided or underinformed about the specific consequences of downsizing. This reinforces the findings in Section 4.2, where limited familiarity with the downsizing concept was observed. Therefore, public engagement efforts should focus on not only communicating potential benefits but also addressing uncertainties and clarifying reform pathways through data-driven forecasting and transparent implementation plans. In summary, stakeholder perceptions of the benefits of municipal downsizing are cautiously positive, particularly regarding infrastructure improvement. However, uncertainty regarding service delivery and fiscal efficiency persists, underscoring the need for evidence-based planning, pilot testing, and communication strategies to build public confidence. Recognizing and addressing these mixed perceptions is essential for the successful design and implementation of any municipal restructuring initiative in Saudi Arabia.

**Table 3.** Perceived Benefit Agreement Levels (N = 357).

Benefit Statement	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Larger units improve infrastructure management	Strongly Agree	104	29.13%	3.94	1.22
	Agree	130	36.41%		
	Neutral	65	18.21%		
	Disagree	38	10.64%		
	Strongly Disagree	20	5.61%		
Downsizing improves service speed	Strongly Agree	83	23.25%	3.28	1.34
	Agree	82	22.97%		
	Neutral	112	31.37%		
	Disagree	48	13.45%		
	Strongly Disagree	32	8.96%		
Merging reduces operational costs	Strongly Agree	89	25.00%	3.41	1.30
	Agree	83	23.31%		
	Neutral	114	32.02%		
	Disagree	42	11.80%		
	Strongly Disagree	26	7.30%		

#### 4.4. Perceived Challenges and Rural Neglect Concerns

Perceptions of risk and resistance are critical to understanding the feasibility of public sector reforms. In the context of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia, stakeholders were asked to assess the criticality of several key challenges, including the loss of local identity, bureaucratic inefficiencies,

resource inequality, internal resistance, and rural marginalization. These insights illuminate the sociopolitical and institutional terrain that any consolidation effort must navigate [5,6].

As shown in Table 4, the most prominent concern was the potential loss of local identity and autonomy, which 63.59% of respondents rated as either “most critical” or “very critical.” This finding aligns with previous sections of the study and is consistent with research emphasizing the symbolic and cultural roles of municipal boundaries in socially cohesive societies [18]. In Saudi Arabia, where local identity is often intertwined with tribal affiliation, administrative status, and the names of historic places, consolidation can trigger fear of marginalization or erasure, particularly in smaller or rural municipalities. Similarly, Tavares [2] noted that loss of identity is a major factor driving resistance to municipal mergers in culturally distinct regions.

Bureaucratic delays were also rated as a major concern, with 60.78% of the respondents classifying them as “most” or “very critical.” This suggests skepticism about the administrative readiness of municipalities to manage transition processes smoothly. Despite the intended goal of streamlining operations, reform may initially introduce complexity owing to overlapping regulations, system integration issues, and unclear lines of authority. These findings echo international experiences, where poorly sequenced amalgamations have resulted in service interruptions, role confusion, and internal inefficiencies [14,21]. Another critical issue was unequal resource distribution. Nearly 59.38% of the respondents considered it “most” or “very critical,” signaling widespread concern that smaller or rural municipalities might be deprioritized in a merged administrative framework. This challenge is particularly salient in Saudi Arabia, where infrastructure and public investment are often unevenly distributed across regions [27]. Participants feared that centralizing governance in urban hubs could lead to further marginalization of peripheral areas unless safeguards were implemented to ensure equitable resource allocation. The survey also assessed internal dynamics, revealing that resistance from municipal staff was perceived as a moderate yet significant challenge. While only 43.98% rated it as “most” or “very critical,” a higher proportion (56.02%) rated it as either “moderately” or “least critical.” This divergence suggests that, although staff resistance exists, it may be mitigated through appropriate change management strategies, including capacity-building, stakeholder inclusion, and clear communication. As Faulk and Hicks [5] argue, municipal employees often fear job loss, reclassification, or loss of status in consolidation processes, concerns that must be addressed with transparent workforce policies.

**Table 4.** Perceived Challenges and Rural Neglect Concerns (N = 357).

Variable	Criticality Level	Frequency	Percentage
Loss of local identity/autonomy	Most Critical	135	37.82%
	Very Critical	92	25.77%
	Moderately Critical	74	20.73%
	Least Critical	56	15.68%
Bureaucratic delays	Most Critical	104	29.13%
	Very Critical	113	31.65%
	Moderately Critical	85	23.81%
	Least Critical	55	15.41%
Unequal resource distribution	Most Critical	115	32.21%
	Very Critical	97	27.17%
	Moderately Critical	82	22.97%
	Least Critical	63	17.65%
Resistance from staff	Most Critical	72	20.17%
	Very Critical	85	23.81%
	Moderately Critical	94	26.33%
	Least Critical	106	29.69%
Concern about rural neglect	Extremely Concerned	112	31.37%
	Concerned	133	37.25%
	Neutral	67	18.77%

Somewhat Concerned	33	9.24%
Not Concerned	12	3.36%

A particularly salient concern was the perception of rural neglect. Approximately 68.62% of the respondents reported being either “extremely concerned” or “concerned” about the potential for rural communities to be underserved in a downsized system. This is significant given Saudi Arabia’s geographical and administrative history, where many smaller municipalities act as vital nodes for rural service delivery. Centralization without localized representation mechanisms could exacerbate inequalities, reduce service responsiveness, and weaken social cohesion [13]. In summary, although stakeholders acknowledge the potential benefits of municipal downsizing, they highlight a range of institutional, cultural, and equity-related challenges. Addressing these concerns requires more than technical reform; it requires a participatory, phased approach that integrates equity safeguards, cultural preservation measures, and staff engagement protocols. Without such measures, resistance and social fragmentation could undermine the long-term success of municipal consolidation in Saudi Arabia.

#### 4.5. Institutional Reform Priorities

Understanding stakeholder priorities is essential to shape effective and legitimate municipal reform strategies. This study explores three core dimensions of reform preferences: (1) the balance between efficiency and local autonomy, (2) the perceived importance of digital governance, and (3) priority service areas requiring improvement. These variables illuminate the normative and practical expectations that shape stakeholder support for municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia.

The survey revealed that most stakeholders sought a balanced reform model that did not sacrifice one principle over another (Table 5). When asked to choose between efficiency and autonomy, 50.42% of respondents preferred “both equally,” 33.05% favored efficiency, and only 16.53% prioritized local autonomy. The mean score ( $M = 2.1$ ;  $SD = 0.86$ ) reflected a moderate inclination toward structural streamlining, while preserving local self-determination. This mirrors the trends in global governance reform studies, where hybrid models, such as federated municipalities or decentralized clusters, are increasingly favored to reconcile administrative efficiency with community legitimacy [2,3].

The second dimension examined was the importance of digital governance, a key enabler of efficient service delivery and administrative transparency. Here, 60.78% of the respondents considered it either “very important” (31.93%) or “important” (28.85%). Only 15.68% of the participants viewed it as unimportant or very unimportant. The mean score ( $M = 2.44$ ;  $SD = 1.25$ ) signals strong support for digital transformation initiatives, which are already central to Vision 2030’s municipal modernization agenda. These findings align with OECD [27] recommendations that emphasize digital platforms as critical tools for managing municipal mergers, standardizing service delivery, and enhancing civic engagement.

Stakeholders were also asked to identify priority areas for service improvement, offering valuable insights into reform motivations beyond structural realignment. Public parks (22.13%), waste management (19.61%), and water/electricity supply (19.61%) emerged as the top three concerns. These were followed by permit approvals (17.09%) and road maintenance (12.89%). The wide distribution of responses suggests that downsizing alone may not address service deficiencies unless it is accompanied by targeted investment and performance accountability mechanisms. The relatively high emphasis on parks and waste management also reflects shifting citizen expectations toward livability, environmental quality, and sustainable urbanism [10].

**Table 5.** Reform Priority Preferences (N = 357).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Efficiency vs. Autonomy	Both equally	180	50.42%	2.1	0.86
	Efficiency	118	33.05%		

	Local Autonomy	59	16.53%		
Digital Governance Importance	Very Important	114	31.93%		
	Important	103	28.85%		
	Neutral	84	23.53%	2.44	1.25
	Unimportant	42	11.76%		
	Very Unimportant	14	3.92%		
Service Improvement Needs	Public Parks	79	22.13%		
	Waste Management	70	19.61%		
	Water/Electricity Supply	70	19.61%	3.19	3.44
	Permit Approvals	61	17.09%		
	Road Maintenance	46	12.89%		
	Other	31	8.68%		

The prioritization of efficiency and digital transformation, integrated with service-specific concerns, indicates that stakeholders are not merely focused on cost cutting, but rather envision a more competent, transparent, and responsive municipal system. Policymakers must take this broader reform vision seriously; as Faulk and Hicks [5] emphasize, consolidation efforts succeed when aligned with service improvement goals and embedded in long-term urban development strategies.

These findings also support the conclusion that Saudi stakeholders favor adaptive and phased reform models. The balance between autonomy and efficiency implies that any downsizing effort must be accompanied by mechanisms to preserve symbolic representation, empower local voices, and integrate regional development priorities. Furthermore, the high importance placed on digital governance suggests that e-governance infrastructure could be a unifying backbone for reform, helping overcome disparities in institutional readiness and administrative capacity across municipalities. In summary, the institutional reform priorities identified by stakeholders provide a roadmap for designing responsive, equitable, and future-oriented governance restructuring in Saudi Arabia. Emphasizing balanced models, digital tools, and public service delivery, rather than administrative mergers, is the key to sustaining stakeholder support and realizing the broader objectives of Vision 2030.

#### 4.6. Case Evaluation – Eastern Province Merger

To contextualize the national debate on municipal downsizing, this study examines stakeholder evaluations of a specific merger scenario in the Eastern Province, one of Saudi Arabia's most urbanized and economically vital regions. This case serves as a microcosm for broader reform feasibility by assessing whether consolidation leads to improvements in service quality and decision-making. Public sentiment around localized cases often determines reform success or failure, as real-world performance influences trust and perceived legitimacy [2,5].

The survey results revealed widespread skepticism about whether the merger led to tangible improvements in service quality (Table 6). Only 33.89% of the respondents answered "Yes" when asked if service quality had improved, while 46.22% answered "No," and 19.89% were "Not Sure." The mean score was 1.89 (SD = 0.87), indicating a slight lean toward negative perceptions. These findings suggest that service enhancements, which are often cited as a key justification for consolidation, have not yet been convincingly realized in this regional context. This gap between reform promise and perceived outcomes is consistent with findings in other countries, where anticipated efficiency gains from amalgamation have been slow to materialize [21,41].

When evaluating decision-making efficiency perceptions were more balanced but still revealed significant ambivalence. The mean satisfaction level was 3.32 (SD = 1.16), indicating a moderate relationship between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. While 15.69% were "very satisfied" and 22.97% "satisfied," a plurality of 32.49% remained "neutral," and 28.85% expressed dissatisfaction (either "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied"). These mixed evaluations underscore the importance of administrative agility in post-merger governance, especially in fast-growing and economically strategic regions, such as the Eastern Province.

The integrated results of service quality and decision-making evaluations point to a trust gap between policy intentions and public experience. Mergers that do not yield clear, immediate improvements risk undermining stakeholder confidence in not only local authorities, but also national reform agendas such as Vision 2030. As the OECD [27] noted, effective municipal restructuring depends on not only efficiency gains, but also how well reforms meet citizens' expectations of responsiveness, equity, and performance.

One possible explanation for the perceived underperformance may be implementation asymmetry. For example, if the administrative merger occurs without harmonizing service delivery frameworks, budgeting mechanisms, or inter-municipal coordination, residents may experience uneven access to utilities, delayed approvals, or unclear lines of responsibility. This interpretation is supported by Faulk and Hicks [5], who stress that "technical amalgamation without functional integration" often leads to bureaucratic inertia and citizen disillusionment. Moreover, the relatively high percentage of "Not Sure" and "Neutral" responses across both metrics indicates a significant level of public ambiguity or limited information. This suggests that communication and transparency may be as important as performance in shaping public opinion. If residents do not clearly understand the goals, structure, or outcomes of the merger, they are unlikely to view it as successful, even if certain back-end efficiencies are achieved.

In conclusion, the Eastern Province illustrates the critical importance of perceived outcomes in the success of municipal reforms. Although the theoretical benefits of consolidation are recognized, they must be translated into tangible improvements in service delivery and decision-making processes to gain public approval. For Saudi policymakers, this underscores the need to embed reforms within performance management systems, ensure consistent regional engagement, and develop robust public communication strategies to align stakeholder expectations with administrative realities.

**Table 6.** Eastern Province Merger Evaluation (N = 357).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Service Quality Improvement	Yes	121	33.89%	1.89	.87
	No	165	46.22%		
	Not Sure	71	19.89%		
Decision-Making Speed Satisfaction	Very Satisfied (5)	56	15.69%	3.32	1.16
	Satisfied (4)	82	22.97%		
	Neutral (3)	116	32.49%		
	Dissatisfied (2)	70	19.61%		
	Very Dissatisfied (1)	33	9.24%		

#### 4.7. Open-Ended Feedback on Municipal Downsizing and Reforms in Saudi Arabia

Qualitative insights from 357 open-ended responses on municipal downsizing and reforms in Saudi Arabia were thematically analyzed using NVivo 12 [40,41], revealing six interconnected themes. The most prominent theme centered on Legal and Regulatory Foundations, where 24% of the responses emphasized the need for robust legal frameworks to redefine jurisdictions and prevent administrative overlap. This aligns with Pollitt and Bouckaert's [42] assertion that legislative clarity is critical for public sector restructuring, directly supporting Saudi Vision 2030 governance goals [43].

These legal foundations enable Administrative Restructuring and Efficiency, which are intrinsically linked to the second theme. Streamlining services through mergers and unified systems (22% of responses) enhances resource efficiency by reducing bureaucratic redundancy, reflecting New Public Management principles [44] and Christensen and Lægheid's [45] work on structural optimization. This restructuring is particularly vital for Saudi Arabia's multi-tiered municipalities, where integrated systems directly reduce operational costs. Operationalizing these structural changes relies critically on technology as a crosscutting catalyst, which has been identified as the third theme. Digital transformation was pivotal for both downsizing (18%) and broader reforms (27%),

with a demand for AI-driven governance and digitized services. As Gil-Garcia et al. [46] confirmed, technology enables smart governance through automation, which is especially relevant in Saudi Arabia's arid regions for sustainable urban management [47] and central to Vision 2030's digitalization strategy [7].

Simultaneously, Participatory Governance and Transparency emerged as the fourth essential theme for legitimizing reforms. Community engagement (15%) and transparency mechanisms (18%) counter social resistance, echoing Fung's [48] emphasis on inclusive decision-making and Wampler's [49] evidence that openness reduces backlash. This balances the centralization inherent in downsizing with local responsiveness [50], anchoring reforms in public trust.

Sustaining implementation across all preceding themes demands Human Capital and Financial Sustainability, which is the fifth theme. Staff training (9%) and financial prudence (12%) underpin success, with capacity building mitigating transition risks [51] and fiscal reviews ensuring resource equity. These efforts align with fiscal decentralization theory [52] and Vision 2030 sustainability targets, providing operational fuel for reform machinery.

Ultimately, all themes converge toward Sustainable Urban Futures, with the sixth theme prioritizing environmental resilience (23%) and economic diversification (11%). Green infrastructure and SME support, resonant with Beatley's [53] "green urbanism," address rapid urbanization while advancing Vision 2030's sustainability pillars. Therefore, municipal reforms have become vehicles for climate adaptation and innovation [54], transforming structural changes into lasting impacts.

Collectively, these themes form a synergistic framework; legal foundations enable administrative restructuring, technology streamlines both, participatory governance secures legitimacy, human/financial resources sustain execution, and sustainable future-proof outcomes. Saudi Arabia's approach mirrors global public administration trends but distinctively aligns with Vision 2030's triple objectives, enhancing efficiency, accelerating technological adoption, and building environmental resilience, requiring culturally attuned integration for lasting success.

#### *4.8. Determinants of Perceived Fiscal Benefits and Stakeholder Variation*

Understanding what drives stakeholder perceptions of the financial efficiency of municipal downsizing is critical for shaping evidence-informed reform strategies. This section integrates two complementary statistical approaches, group difference analysis (ANOVA) and multiple regression, to investigate how stakeholder roles, demographic characteristics, and reform familiarity influence beliefs about the cost-saving potential of municipal mergers in Saudi Arabia. Collectively, these methods offer both a structural and individual-level lens into the patterns underlying public attitudes toward governance reform (Table 7).

The analysis began with an internal consistency test for the scale evaluating the perceived benefits of downsizing (i.e., merging municipalities will reduce operational costs, downsizing will improve the speed of public services, and larger municipal units can better manage infrastructure projects). A Cronbach's alpha score of 0.639, which is slightly below the conventional threshold of 0.70 [55], indicates moderate reliability. This suggests that the scale has some internal cohesion, but could be enhanced in future iterations by refining item wording or expansion to additional dimensions of benefit perception. Nevertheless, the results provided a valid foundation for subsequent inferential analyses, reinforcing the importance of psychometric evaluations in policy-focused surveys.

A one-way ANOVA was further conducted to test whether belief in the cost-saving potential of mergers (i.e., merging municipalities will reduce operational costs) significantly varied across stakeholder groups. The result was statistically significant ( $F = 2.872$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ), confirming that perspectives on fiscal efficiency are not uniform across society. Although Tukey HSD post-hoc tests did not identify any specific group-to-group differences as statistically significant at the 0.05 level, some comparisons (e.g., citizens vs. private sector) approached significance, suggesting subtle but noteworthy variation in expectations. This reflects broader global findings in which governance preferences often diverge based on institutional roles and administrative exposure [2,21].

To explore the individual-level drivers of these perceptions, multiple linear regression was conducted using merging municipalities to reduce operational costs as the dependent variable. The model included five predictors including age, education, region, familiarity with municipal downsizing, and whether the respondent believed downsizing is necessary for Vision 2030. The overall model was statistically significant ( $F = 4.435, p = 0.0006$ ) with an  $R^2$  of 0.060, indicating that, while the explanatory power was modest, the included variables contributed meaningfully to understanding the variation in beliefs. These results align with the broader public administration literature, which shows that personal characteristics and institutional context shape reform beliefs.

Among the predictors, age ( $\beta = 0.171, p = 0.001$ ) and education level ( $\beta = 0.132, p = 0.022$ ) emerged as significant. Older and more educated respondents were more likely to believe that municipal mergers would lead to operational cost savings. This pattern suggests that these demographic segments may have greater exposure to inefficiencies in current fragmented governance models or a stronger grasp of the reform rationale. Conversely, familiarity with municipal downsizing, region, and alignment with Vision 2030 were not statistically significant, indicating that technical knowledge or ideological alignment alone does not necessarily shape belief in reform benefits. These findings echo Slack and Bird's [21] conclusion that reform acceptance depends more on experience and perceived credibility than on information outreach alone.

Collectively, ANOVA and regression analyses provide complementary insights. Stakeholder roles influence fiscal beliefs; however, demographic variables, particularly age and education, are stronger individual-level predictors. This reinforces the importance of designing reform narratives that resonate with distinct demographic groups and avoids the assumption that responses are uniform across institutions or regions. Moreover, the lack of impact from familiarity with Saudi municipal downsizing initiatives and Vision 2030 alignment suggests that reform messaging should focus on tangible, lived outcomes rather than abstract policy alignment. In summary, these findings offer a nuanced understanding of how beliefs about the fiscal benefits of downsizing are formed and distributed. Policymakers who aim to build support for municipal consolidation must move beyond technocratic arguments and engage with the experiential realities and value systems of diverse stakeholder groups. As Saudi Arabia advances its Vision 2030 agenda, success in restructuring local governance will depend on not only institutional design, but also how reform is framed, communicated, and experienced across the population.

**Table 7.** Complementary Statistical Approaches.

### 1. ANOVA Results:

Whether perceptions regarding the cost-saving potential of municipal mergers (Q8) varied significantly across different stakeholder groups (e.g., citizens, municipal staff, policymakers, etc.)

F-statistic: 2.872; p-value: 0.023; Significance: Significant at  $p < 0.05$

### 2. Post-Hoc Comparison: Tukey HSD Test

Group 1	Group 2	Mean Diff	p-adj	95% CI Lower	Upper	Reject Null?
1	2	-0.0201	1.000	-0.5221	0.482	No
1	3	0.1212	0.9668	-0.3912	0.6336	No
1	4	0.3740	0.2510	-0.1297	0.8777	No
1	5	0.8333	0.0628	-0.0270	1.6937	No
2	3	0.1413	0.9492	-0.3887	0.6713	No
2	4	0.3941	0.2347	-0.1275	0.9156	No
2	5	0.8534	0.0579	-0.0175	1.7243	No
3	4	0.2528	0.6889	-0.2788	0.7843	No
3	5	0.7121	0.1723	-0.1648	1.5890	No
4	5	0.4593	0.5992	-0.4125	1.3312	No

Notes: Although the overall ANOVA was significant, the Tukey HSD test did not identify any pairwise differences as statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

### 3. Multiple Linear Regression Results

Dependent Variable: Merging municipalities will reduce operational costs

Predictor	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-statistic	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Constant	2.8628***	0.278	10.305	<0.001	2.316	3.409
Age	0.1713***	0.051	3.344	0.001	0.071	0.272
Education Level	0.1324**	0.057	2.305	0.022	0.019	0.245
Familiarity with Saudi municipal downsizing initiatives	-0.1122	0.085	-1.319	0.188	-0.279	0.055
Perceived necessity for Vision 2030 goals	0.0183	0.068	0.269	0.788	-0.115	0.152
Region	-0.0118	0.032	-0.363	0.717	-0.075	0.052

Notes: Model Summary Statistics:  $R^2 = 0.060$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.046$ , F-statistic = 4.435 ( $p = 0.000626$ ), Log-Likelihood = -568.67, Observations = 356, AIC = 1149, and BIC = 1173. Significance Levels: \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.10$ . Standard errors assume correct covariance matrix specification. Omnibus test  $p$ -value = 0.000, Durbin-Watson = 1.888.

## 5. Discussion

This study provides a timely and context-specific exploration of the feasibility of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia, a country undergoing transformative reforms under Vision 2030. The results suggest a complex but generally receptive landscape for consolidation, contingent on a range of demographic, institutional, and perceptual factors. This study addresses three interrelated questions including whether downsizing can enhance governance efficiency, what barriers impede reform, and how to reconcile administrative rationalization with local identity. The following discussion interprets the findings in light of these questions and situates them within the broader literature on local government reforms.

The most prominent insight from the statistical analysis is the moderate but non-uniform support for the fiscal rationale of municipal mergers. Although age and education emerged as significant predictors of belief in cost savings, neither regional affiliation nor policy familiarity had a substantial impact. This underscores a critical theoretical point; support for structural reforms such as downsizing is not purely technocratic, but rather filtered through the lived experiences, expectations, and sociopolitical identities of stakeholders [2,3]. These findings align with the literature on other transitional contexts, such as Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, where administrative reforms succeed only when accompanied by cultural and institutional adaptation [13].

Moreover, in the Eastern Province case study, despite theoretical claims about the efficiency gains of consolidation, a significant proportion of respondents reported no improvement, or even deterioration, in service quality and decision-making agility post-merger. This reflects a well-documented global phenomenon of municipal amalgamations promising economies of scale, while rarely delivering immediate or equitable outcomes because of a lack of robust change management and performance tracking mechanisms. This case highlights the risk of public disillusionment when reforms are implemented without visible service-level improvements. The emergence of identity and equity concerns is equally important, particularly among the citizens in rural or historically autonomous communities. While most respondents supported reform scenarios that preserve local input, many also expressed fear of symbolic marginalization and rural neglect. This reflects the tension at the heart of territorial reform: how to centralize functions without alienating communities or undermining place-based governance [1]. In contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where tribal affiliations, geographic disparities, and regional heritage remain salient, reforms must walk a careful line between efficiency and inclusiveness.

The stakeholder preferences documented in this study reveal that support for downsizing is strongest when tied to tangible improvements in service delivery, digital governance, and municipal coordination. These priorities suggest a vision for reform that goes beyond administrative consolidation to encompass modernization and capacity building. This mirrors successful international cases, such as Estonia's municipal reform program, in which digital infrastructure was used to improve service accessibility while reducing administrative overhead [56]. Regarding Saudi

Arabia, integrating downsizing with digital transformation may present a path for reform that aligns with both economic goals and citizen expectations. Another notable finding is the limited impact of the Vision 2030 alignment on reform perceptions. Despite being a central driver of national transformation, the perception that municipal downsizing is essential to Vision 2030 was not a significant predictor of belief in its cost-saving potential. This suggests that top-down strategic alignment alone may not suffice to mobilize support for local reforms. As Slack and Bird [21] argue, successful amalgamations require bottom-up legitimacy and must be framed as economically necessary, socially desirable, and politically just.

The mixed results from the ANOVA and regression analyses underscore the importance of designing context-sensitive and adaptive reforms. A “one-size-fits-all” approach is unlikely to succeed in Saudi Arabia’s diverse municipal landscape. Urbanized areas, such as Riyadh and Dammam, may benefit from consolidation for economic coordination, whereas sparsely populated rural areas may prioritize representational equity and local access. This requires reform strategies that are both spatially differentiated and operationally flexible, emphasizing the need for municipal typologies and scenario-based implementation plans [1,27].

Collectively, these findings reinforce the value of participatory and phased reforms, highlighting the need for implementing downsizing as a continuous process involving stakeholder consultation, capacity development, and iterative evaluation. The absence of strong post-hoc statistical differences between stakeholder groups suggests that there is space for consensus-building, particularly if reforms are framed in a way that emphasizes shared benefits, such as improved services, reduced duplication, and increased accountability. In conclusion, this study shows that the success of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia depends on not only administrative rationalization, but also the social and political legitimacy of reforms. By foregrounding stakeholder perceptions, institutional barriers, and design preferences, the findings provide a grounded and actionable understanding of how local government restructuring can be effective and inclusive. Hence, the path forward lies in hybrid governance models, evidence-based policymaking, and a commitment to reform processes that are as democratic as they are technocratic.

## 6. Conclusions

This study explored the feasibility of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia by assessing stakeholder perceptions, institutional challenges, and policy preferences. Through a mixed-methods approach, this study investigated whether municipal downsizing can improve governance efficiency, what barriers may impede consolidation, and how such reforms can be designed to preserve local identity while achieving economies of scale. The findings suggest a cautious but generally favorable attitude among stakeholders toward reform, with nuanced variations based on demographic and institutional profiles. Statistical analyses revealed that stakeholder perceptions of cost-saving benefits were modestly shaped by age and educational level, whereas variables such as regional location and familiarity with the concept of downsizing had limited predictive power. These findings align with previous research indicating that structural reforms are often grounded in personal values, generational experiences, and civic exposure, rather than policy knowledge alone [2,21]. Furthermore, the ANOVA results confirmed the perceptual variation across stakeholder groups, underscoring the importance of tailored communication and phased reform strategies that consider institutional identity and capacity.

The Eastern Province merger case evaluation further illustrates the complex relationship between administrative reforms and public satisfaction. The skepticism expressed by many respondents about tangible improvements in service quality and decision-making speed mirrors the global findings from countries such as Israel, Canada, and Australia, where mergers often failed to meet initial efficiency expectations owing to weak implementation frameworks or poor public engagement [1,14]. These insights reaffirm that successful downsizing requires more than just structural realignment and must deliver visible and equitable service gains. Although the majority of stakeholders favored reform models that balance efficiency and local autonomy, emphasizing the

importance of preserving local identity, especially in rural and historically autonomous communities, strong concerns remained about the potential erosion of symbolic representation and equitable service access. This duality reflects broader tensions between centralization and subsidiarity in governance reforms, and highlights the need for hybrid models that incorporate decentralization, digital governance, and citizen engagement [3,56,57].

While the survey reveals support for digital transformation, improvements in public services, and coordination between municipalities, which aligns with Vision 2030, this readiness is conditional on an inclusive reform design, enhanced communication, and measurable outcomes. The mixed levels of public confidence, particularly in post-merger service quality, suggest that downsizing efforts must be embedded in performance management systems and transparent evaluation processes to gain legitimacy. In conclusion, as a governance reform pathway, the success of municipal downsizing in Saudi Arabia depends on navigating complex stakeholder expectations, addressing institutional asymmetries, and demonstrating measurable public value. The insights revealed in this study contribute to both national reform discourse and global literature on municipal restructuring, offering lessons for all comparable transitioning economies seeking to balance administrative efficiency with social legitimacy.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research

Among the limitations of this study, the first is the use of a cross-sectional survey design that limits the ability to assess how stakeholder attitudes may evolve over time, particularly as reforms are implemented or debated publicly. Perceptions captured at a single point may not reflect long-term changes in awareness, experience, or policy outcomes [29]. Hence, future longitudinal studies are needed to trace shifts in stakeholder beliefs and assess whether early support or resistance translates into post-reform satisfaction or disillusionment.

Second, although a purposive sample of approximately 357 respondents, including policymakers, municipal staff, citizens, and governance experts allowed for targeted input from diverse and relevant actors, its generalizability is limited. As these findings cannot be statistically extrapolated to all the regions or populations of Saudi Arabia, future studies should utilize larger, randomly selected samples or comparative designs across multiple regions to enhance representativeness and reinforce inference (Bel & Warner; 2016). Third, the relatively modest internal consistency of the perceived benefits scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.639$ ) indicates that the construct could be measured more robustly. The scale's refinement in future research, with clearer or additional items, could improve its psychometric reliability and deepen the understanding of the cognitive dimensions underlying stakeholder assessments. Moreover, expanding the survey to include qualitative follow-up interviews or focus groups could provide richer insights into the nuances of stakeholder views, particularly in rural areas, where community identity and service accessibility are highly sensitive issues [2]. Another limitation is the analytical framework. Although the integration of descriptive statistics, ANOVA, and multiple regression provided a strong quantitative foundation, these methods primarily capture linear relationships, often not fully reflecting the complexity of the interaction effects or causal mechanisms underlying reform perceptions. Future studies could explore more advanced modeling techniques such as structural equation modeling (SEM) or multilevel analysis to better account for nested influences (e.g., municipal size, urban-rural divide) and the interplay between institutional and demographic variables [58]. Additionally, the real-world merger scenario in the Eastern Province provides only a partial picture of regional implementation dynamics. Although valuable as a pilot case, future research should include additional regional comparisons, particularly from areas with different socio-economic or administrative characteristics. For example, contrasting perceptions from more rural regions such as Najran or Al-Jouf with urban centers such as Riyadh and Jeddah could reveal divergent expectations and adaptive capacities [27].

Considering these limitations, future research should aim to deepen and diversify the empirical basis of municipal downsizing assessments in Saudi Arabia. This includes incorporating longitudinal tracking, expanding stakeholder diversity, refining measurement tools, and enhancing regional

comparisons. By addressing these dimensions, subsequent studies can offer stronger empirical grounding for reform design and contribute more effectively to both national governance strategies and comparative international literature on administrative consolidation.

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