

Indicators and Components for Developing a Model of Anti-Corruption Policy in Iran (With an Electronic Government Approach)

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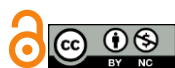
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ABSTRACT

Objective: The model development phase is one of the most crucial stages in the policy-making process. This research aimed to identify the indicators and components for developing a model of anti-corruption policy in Iran, focusing on the implementation of electronic government.

Method: This study was qualitative and applied in nature. It utilized the viewpoints of 20 experts related to the topic (from the academic community in the field of policy-making, who held Master's and Doctoral degrees and had sufficient experience and knowledge and were considered authoritative). To determine the sample size, purposive sampling and theoretical saturation rule were used. The research tool was semi-structured interviews, the validity of which was verified through face validity and reliability through the agreement coefficient among coders. Thematic analysis was used for analyzing the findings.

Findings: The findings revealed the existence of five basic themes (development of electronic and knowledge-based administrative systems; leveraging information technology and advanced administrative automation in the administrative system; consolidation of results and information from supervisory organizations and centers in an independent organization; the presence of appropriate collaboration and information exchange between organizations and supervisory centers; and enhancing transparency, speed, accuracy, and completeness of organizational information bases), two organizing themes (information and communication technology and integration of information systems), and an overarching theme (electronic government) for developing an anti-corruption policy model.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that combating administrative corruption is a complex issue that can be improved in terms of the quantity and quality of transparency and accountability of administrative duties through the development of electronic government.

Keywords: *Electronic Government, Policy-making Development, Administrative Corruption, Thematic Analysis*

1 Introduction

Public policies are models of methods and regulations for solving a public problem. Public policy is a decision made in response to a public issue, but policy-making is not merely about decision-making; rather, it is a process that encompasses all actions from the moment a problem is perceived to the evaluation of the outcomes resulting from policy implementation (Khoobroo & Ebrahimi, 2019). Nowadays, more than ever, it is emphasized that efficient, effective, and integrated policy-making among institutions, entities, and responsible organizations is essential (Khodashahi et al., 2019). Governments implement the national will through public policies. Governments aim to identify and solve public issues; however, if the formulated policies are not based on foresighted theoretical and practical considerations, not only will national issues remain unresolved, but it will also add to the country's problems (Khoobroo et al., 2018). The prevalence of corruption in governance, in addition to causing inefficiency and lowering the quality of service delivery, has adverse effects on social capital, trust, and consequently, public participation (due to eroding people's trust in governing institutions). Since corruption undermines democracy and the rule of law, leads to human rights violations, distorts markets, gradually destroys the quality of life, and creates a breeding ground for organized crime and security threats, combating and striving to reduce it is necessary (Ramezanzpour et al., 2020; Taghva et al., 2023).

Electronic government is a specific aspect of digital government that uses Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to deliver government services online. Although electronic government systems like electronic passports, electronic work permits, licensing, postal tracking, etc., are available, this concept is unfamiliar to most people (Niazi, 2023). In fact, choosing a model for the role of electronic government might not be ideal among different countries and cultures because perceptions vary across countries (Concha et al., 2012; Maor, 2015). Moreover, there is a debate in the academic community about the real effects of incorporating e-government in combating corruption, indicating a need for a clear organization regarding e-government initiatives and corruption (Al Mudawi et al., 2020; Alhammadi, 2018).

The study of policy formulation is a study of issues. Policy formulation begins with two separate but related dimensions: 1- Agenda setting 2- Policy design (Gheisari et al., 2019; Gheytasivand et al., 2020). Researchers believe

that policy formulation guides our thinking in decision-making. Policy formulation defines the scope within which future decisions must be made. It is a general program that serves as an action guide for managers, meaning that senior managers play a prominent role in determining the overall and national policy of the organization. The implementation method for organizational executives is determined by the policy, and it also serves as an effective means of controlling operations (Fadaei & Kiani, 2018; Gheisari et al., 2019; Gheytasivand et al., 2020; Ibrahimy et al., 2023; Khoobroo et al., 2018; Khoobroo & Ebrahimi, 2019; Maor, 2015; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983; McConnell, 2010; Moyson et al., 2017; Nouri et al., 2020; Rahnavard et al., 2019; Ramezanzpour et al., 2020; Tosun & Howlett, 2022; Weldesslassie, 2021). Policy formulation, regulation, and formulation derived from the formula simply mean designing and presenting a unified prescription as a plan, program, or method for addressing some needs or acting on an issue or problem. This marks the beginning of the initial activities of policy development, where no method for solving the problem has been determined yet.

Given this importance, understanding and employing the characteristics of policy and the policy-making process in any type of public policy is a key aspect of public management (Elbahnasawy, 2014). In recent years, public management researchers have studied and theorized about the characteristics leading to the failure or success of public policy (McConnell, 2010). Undoubtedly, addressing ways to confront administrative corruption and its broad and diverse dimensions is necessary, which itself requires a unified, coordinated, and focused policy-making structure to correct costly and time-consuming duplications on one hand, and on the other, to provide an optimal mechanism for recognizing corruption issues and offering suitable solutions for an active and wise confrontation by the country (Gheisari et al., 2019).

One of the main factors for increasing transparency in governmental processes and improving the quality of public services has been the implementation and use of information technologies in e-government (Al Mudawi et al., 2020). Electronic public methods conducted by e-government systems play a significant role in national government programs, as their aim is to create active transparency and effective relationships with suppliers (Concha et al., 2012). Not only cultural factors but also e-government can influence corruption, such that technological, organizational, and environmental factors related to the expansion of e-government have an impact on reducing corruption (Zhao et al., 2017). Governments consider

transparency a vital method of accountability and public responsibility towards society and a crucial element of good governance (Nouri et al., 2020). Governments can prevent system manipulation and reduce corruption among high-ranking government employees by implementing a decentralized system. This includes measures such as oversight, ICT training, automation processes, reducing bureaucracy, simplifying procedures, and real-time customer support. Furthermore, e-government will create social consequences for reducing monopolistic power and intermediation among lower and higher-ranking officials who are still involved in corruption (Niazi, 2023).

Establishing sound governance is the primary desire of any government; under e-government, this becomes more fully realized. Since the quadruple interactions of e-government come with benefits such as ease and universality of access to services, security and corruption control must receive more attention. By designing and implementing an integrated project, public participation can be achieved by creating electronic reporting portals, and transparency of government agencies can be enhanced by creating electronic reporting portals for all actors in the anti-corruption field across the three branches of government, observing the role of each, and realizing public information and supervision through electronic reporting portals (Nouri et al., 2020). However, irregular technology distribution and low internet access can be obstacles to the development of e-government and lead to the spread of corruption. Complex and obscure government systems force users to prefer agents over systems for their transactions, where the presence of agents can create a market for bribery. A wide array of evidence shows that well-designed e-governance projects, accompanied by process reforms, reduce the discretion delegated to government employees, increase efficiency, and reduce corruption (Ibrahimy et al., 2023).

In general, online services are expected to help reduce government corruption through increased citizen participation, access to information, and media. The more active participation of citizens in government affairs, as well as media serving as watchdogs over the government, can help reduce government corruption and enhance the level of e-government development (Alhammadi, 2018). Electronic public methods via e-government systems play a significant role in national government programs because their goal is to create active transparency and effectively support relationships with suppliers (Rahnavard et al., 2019). Considering the results obtained, it must be said that e-government is not a complete solution, but it can be a

catalyst for change. E-government should be part of a broader commitment to public sector reform. In this direction, there are barriers that can be categorized into three factors, all of which are critical for the successful implementation of e-government. Firstly, there must be a willingness to reform. Secondly, the availability of information and communication technology infrastructure is important, and finally, institutional capacity to absorb and manage change is crucial (Niazi, 2023).

Niazi (2023) concluded in a study that e-government helps the public sector combat corruption and increases transparency by preventing physical interactions between government employees and citizens, reducing administrative formalities and bureaucracy through the provision of online services nationwide, allowing applicants to easily apply through the online system. She also states that combating corruption and promoting transparency and accountability are only possible when governments provide online services with simpler processes, reduce paperwork, and eliminate queues, preventing physical interactions between citizens and public employees, where most bribery requests are made face-to-face (Niazi, 2023). Taghva et al. (2023) prioritized key parameters effective in combating corruption in Iran's e-government in a study. The results showed that outcomes such as information technology and network access, laws and regulations, services, and human capital not only impact corruption reduction but also form key priorities in the e-government structure; thus, e-government is an effective factor in reducing corruption, which is realized when the components of e-government are properly considered (Taghva et al., 2023). Ibrahimy et al. (2023) found that e-government decentralizes power among public employees, reduces corruption, and enhances transparency and accountability with corruption reporting through social media, online complaint forms, emails, and toll-free numbers 450 (Ibrahimy et al., 2023). Additionally, the main factors reducing corruption through e-government have been identified. In another study, the significant outcomes of e-government in combating corruption were revealed (Weldeslassie, 2021). In practice, the use of electronic-based public services or e-government was not effective in preventing corruption in local government in Indonesia (Al Mudawi et al., 2020; Alhammadi, 2018). Alhammadi (2018) found that, contrary to previous research, e-government can reduce corruption and increase transparency in the public sector in Yemen through quantitative research on government employees (Alhammadi, 2018).

Today, what is important is the fight against corruption and the establishment of e-government, and this indicates the need for policy formulation for combating corruption and e-government and transparency. If e-government is considered in policy formulation, it can lead to the reduction or elimination of corruption. Today, the fight against corruption is of great importance, and its consequence is administrative health. This article examines the role of e-government in management discipline in formulating anti-corruption administrative policy through thematic analysis. Therefore, the main question of this research is: What are the indicators and components for developing a model of anti-corruption administrative policy in Iran (with an approach to establishing e-government)?

2 Methods and Materials

This study was qualitative and applied in nature. The viewpoints of 20 subject matter experts (from the academic community in policy-making, holding Master's and Doctoral degrees, and possessing sufficient experience and knowledge) were utilized. Purposive sampling and the rule of theoretical saturation were employed to determine the sample size. The research tool was semi-structured interviews, validated through face validity and reliability achieved by the agreement coefficient among coders. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis.

Table 1

Coding and Enumeration of Base Themes from Interviews

Indicator	Selected Propositions	Base Themes
1-2	Utilization of information technology for public access to information and transparency, precise planning and studying all aspects of the issue, prioritizing issues, scheduling evaluations, and policy amendment	Integration of results and information from organizations and supervisory centers in an independent organization; Use of information technology; Increase in transparency, speed, accuracy, and completeness of organizational information bases
2-3	The foremost in any policy formulation is having knowledge and mastery of the subject; thus, the more familiar the formulators are with theories and paradigms of the anti-corruption process, the more successful they will be. After knowledge, the next impactful indicator in policy formulation is having personal and administrative skills in this area. Therefore, it is necessary to employ individuals in policy formulation who possess the required skills and competencies	Level of knowledge and skill of policy formulators; Expertise and skills of managers and employees in formulating policies; Support for structures, processes, and methods of policy formulation; Alignment of policies with public culture
3-4	Proper policy formulation in combating administrative corruption will minimize administrative corruption because proper formulation will ensure that the requirements for policy implementation and evaluation are well considered, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the formulation process and reducing administrative corruption	Eliminating the perception of corruption as a facilitator or accelerator of tasks

Table 2 shows that five base themes emerged, each interview section containing a theme that comes to mind upon reading, and two organizing themes (information and communication technology and information system

3 Findings and Results

Among the participants, 15 individuals (75%) held Doctoral degrees and 5 (25%) held Master's degrees. By gender, 17 participants (85%) were male, and 3 (15%) were female. Regarding years of service, 12 individuals (60%) had 5 to 10 years, 6 (30%) had 11 to 15 years, and 2 (10%) had more than 15 years of service.

After conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 experts and university professors, all interview codes that seemed related to the research topic were extracted. This part of the thematic analysis process consisted of two subsections: coding and theme analysis. Initially, all data sources were reviewed for familiarity with their contents. After examining sources related to the topic, a systematic coding process began aimed at understanding, analyzing, and labeling. Considering related concepts, parts of the text generating related codes were marked, named according to their meaning, and continuously reviewed with textual coding. Through careful reading and re-examination of data, new names were assigned during coding. Repeated similar codes and many overlaps were integrated, extracting the thematic analysis from the original text and forming the base themes.

Table 1 presents the coding analysis process.

integration) and an overarching theme (e-government) were identified. Table 2 also outlines the elements and indicators of anti-corruption policy-making.

Table 2*Indicators of Anti-corruption Policy-making*

Base Themes	Organizing Themes	Overarching Theme
Development of an electronic and knowledge-based administrative system for anti-corruption policy-making	Information Technology	Electronic Government
Utilization of information technology and advanced administrative automation in the administrative system		
Integration of results and information from organizations and supervisory centers in an independent organization		
Existence of appropriate collaboration and information exchange between organizations and supervisory centers	Information Integration	
Increase in transparency, speed, accuracy, and completeness of organizational information bases		

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research was to identify indicators and components for developing an anti-corruption administrative policy model in Iran (with an e-government approach). The findings align with the previous studies (Al Mudawi et al., 2020; Alhammadi, 2018; Concha et al., 2012; Elbahasawy, 2014; Ibrahimy et al., 2023; Niazi, 2023; Nouri et al., 2020; Rahnavard et al., 2019; Taghva et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2017). The results demonstrate that policy formulation is a challenging art where the most crucial part of strategies has the potential for implementation, and the implementation of these strategies has outcomes, namely the establishment of e-government for public service transparency. This study analyzed the concept of policy formulation and the realization of e-government in the model, identifying and enumerating components and indicators (base, organizing, and overarching themes). This article demonstrates the conceptual nature of policy formulation. There's a constantly changing configuration of academics, government officials, political actors, and working groups in a non-linear, supra-governmental formulation process. There are implications for the concept of authority in policy formulation, validating the functions of actors relying on various frameworks of knowledge and professional experience (such as technical reasoning, academically conscious, or pragmatic) to gain authority for decision-making in combating corruption. Thus, authority is distributed among multiple levels and networks within the institutional domain. However, it's crucial to note that policy texts, which may become inaccessible compromises, are important. The findings of this research will assist policy-makers in planning to combat administrative corruption in Iran, setting the conditions for implementing e-government. The findings indicate that e-government aids the public sector in fighting corruption and increases transparency by

preventing physical interactions between government employees and citizens, reducing administrative formalities and bureaucracy through nationwide online services. In analyzing the role of e-government in policy formulation, it can be stated that "policy formulation involves understanding and identifying the stages of the analytical development process of actionable paths, addressing foreseeable resources or capacities, and examining potential future solutions to what constitutes the agenda of laws and professional regulations effective policy consulting for decision-makers." In the dimension of e-government, special attention should be paid to integrating information across various agencies through information and communication technology to face unified and comprehensive information for policy formulation. Moreover, information and communication technology, leveraging its control capabilities, can reduce administrative corruption in policy formulation by clarifying procedures, facilitating public services, and reducing bureaucratic processes.

Every research faces limitations during implementation. This study also encountered difficulties with conducting face-to-face interviews, time-consuming nature, and low participation from some experts due to their work commitments. We hope that a fresher and more precise interest in policy formulation not only increases the social impact of our field and visibility of our academic work outside the academic realm but also opens doors for researchers to apply their studies to institutions making political decisions. Therefore, governments are responsible for adopting policies that meet public interests and solve public issues. Based on this, the research results offer practical suggestions for the executive branch. Better performance can be achieved through full implementation of e-government and leveraging information and communication technology capabilities across all sections, with policy formulation in data policymaking and enhancing

government accountability and transparency of processes, reducing staff interventions in the policy-making process, and eliminating conditions conducive to corrupt behaviors by creating clear and transparent information on identified components and indicators.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Authors Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Ethics principles

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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