Araştırma Makalesi ● Research Article

Digital Governance Practices in Local Governments: The Case of Sivas Province*

Yerel Yönetimlerde Dijital Yönetişim Uygulamaları: Sivas İli Örneği

Fatma Gök [a],**& Müzeyyen Eroğlu Durkal [b]

[a] Öğr. Gör. Dr., Sivas Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi Divriği Nuri Demirağ MYO, 58300, Sivas / Türkiye
ORCID: 0000-0003-4010-0324
[b] Doç. Dr., Erciyes Üniversitesi, 38280, Kayseri / Türkiye
ORCID: 0000-0002-5341-3613

MAKALE BİLGİSİ	ÖZ
	Teknolojinin hızla gelişmesi ve dijitalleşmenin yaygınlaşması, kamu hizmetlerine uzaktan erişimi cazip hale getirmiştir. Dünyada olduğu gibi Türkiye'de de yerel yönetimlerin dijital yönetişim bağlamında kamu hizmetlerini sunma biçimleri değişmiştir. Sivas il ve ilçe belediyelerindeki dijital yönetişim uygulamalarının gelişime açık ve araştırmaya elverişli olması da bu araştırmanın çıkış noktasını oluşturmuştur. Araştırmanın amacı, Sivas il ve ilçe belediyelerinde dijital yönetişim uygulamaları çerçevesinde belediye personellerinin yerel yönetimlerde sunmuş oldukları hizmetlerin vatandaş ve STK temsilcileri tarafından kullanımlarının belirlenmesidir. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden durum çalışması deseni ve amaçlı örneklem yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Sivas il ve ilçelerindeki 17 belediye personeli, 12 STK temsilcisi ve 17 vatandaş çalışma grubunu oluşturmakla birlikte toplam 46 katılımcının maksimum çeşitlik göstermesine dikkat edilmiştir. Çalışma kapsamında, katılımcılar ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Görüşmeler deşifre edildikten sonra tematik analiz yöntemi kullanılarak kodlamalar yapılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçlarına göre Sivas il ve ilçe belediyelerinde dijital yönetişim yaklaşımının ve e-belediyecilik uygulamalarının geliştirilmesi gerektiği, dijital yönetişim bağlamında, vatandaşların ve STK'ların katılımının sınırlı olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Ayrıca, belediyelerdeki maddi kaynakların yetersizliği de bu uygulamaların yaygınlaşmasını engelleyen önemli bir faktördür. Belediyelerde şeffaf, hesap verebilir ve katılımcı bir sistemin oluşturulabilmesi için tüm aktörlerin dahil edildiği daha fazla kamu hizmeti dijital uygulamalarla entegre edilmelidir.
ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The rapid development of technology and the spread of digitalisation have made remote access to public services attractive. As in the world, the way local governments provide public services in the context of digital governance has changed in Turkey. The fact that digital governance practices in Sivas provincial and district municipalities are open to development and suitable for research constitutes the starting point of this research. The aim of this research is to determine the use of the services provided by municipal staff in local governments by citizens and NGO representatives within the framework of digital governance practices in Sivas provincial and district municipalities. Case study design and purposive sampling method, one of the qualitative research methods, were used in the study. Although 17 municipal staff, 12 NGO representatives and 17 citizens in Sivas province and districts constitute the study group, maximum diversity of 46 participants was taken into consideration. Within the scope of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. After the interviews were transcribed, coding was made using thematic analysis method. According to the results of the study, it was determined that the digital governance approach and e-municipality practices should be developed in Sivas provincial and district municipalities, and the participation of citizens and NGOs in the context of digital governance is limited. In addition, the lack of financial resources in municipalities is also an important factor preventing the widespread use of these practices. In order to create a transparent, accountable and participatory system in municipalities, more public services involving all actors should be integrated with digital applications.

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1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies have led to the emergence of new concepts in the field of governance, such as digital governance, digital government, digital democracy, and digital citizenship. Just like central administrations, local governments have also engaged in the digital transformation process through the innovations provided by these technologies, offering faster and more user-oriented services to citizens and responding to social and economic development demands at the local level. They have been unable to resist digital innovations in this regard. Particularly, municipalities strive to establish more participatory and transparent communication by utilizing technology to deliver public services effectively and efficiently. This process has introduced the digital governance model, which enhances citizens' and other actors' access to and participation in public services.

Digital governance not only represents the transformation of the governance concept brought about by the information revolution but also emphasizes the mutual interaction between key governance actors such as the state, citizens, NGOs, and private sector organizations through information and communication technologies. In many studies, the concept of digital governance is described as a phenomenon that involves enhancing transparency, accountability, and participation; improving various public services such as transportation, energy, health, water, security, and municipal services; and employing ICT in the interactions between the state and actors like citizens, NGOs, and the private sector (Awan et al., 2013: 1; Gasco, 2003: 7; Gautam et al., 2017: 515; Poonia and Tanwar, 2014: 1417).

E-municipality practices, regarded as the local manifestation of digital governance, provide a practical field for both governance and digital governance elements at the local level. According to Meijer (2015: 199), citizens need opportunities, skills, and motivation to interact with government institutions in the production of public value. In this context, to what extent municipalities utilize e-municipality within the scope of digital governance to communicate and interact with actors such as citizens and NGOs emerges as an important issue to be examined. In most developing countries, particularly in provinces and districts with smaller populations that are not metropolitan, it is difficult to assert that the adoption of e-municipality and the associated services have reached the desired level (Nel-Sanders and Malomane, 2022: 1; Yılmaz, 2019: 509). According to Bojang and Bwando (2018: 14), online consultations between governments, local administrations, citizens, and the private sector in the context of digital governance are also very limited in developing countries. Gönüllü (2020: 67) states that a key feature of governance is ensuring the participation of all actors in decision-making processes. However, this participation cannot be achieved due to a lack of healthy cooperation. E-municipality platforms should transform citizens into active participants and support local-level participation. Municipalities use various digital tools for this purpose.

Although municipalities in Turkey have taken various steps towards digitalization, it is observed that e-municipality services and applications are more comprehensive and of higher quality in large-scale municipalities, whereas in small-scale provincial and district municipalities, these services and applications remain more limited, insufficient, ineffective, and less frequently used (Çetin and Parlak, 2023; Güven, 2022: 1645; Güven and Doğan, 2022: 478; Şengül and Balıkçı, 2021; Yolcu and Özdemir, 2020).

The aim of this study is to analyze the perspectives of citizens and NGO representatives on how the services offered within the scope of digital governance are utilized in the provincial and district municipalities of Sivas. The main research question is defined as follows: What is the current state of digital governance practices in Sivas' provincial and district municipalities in terms of local actors' interaction and level of participation? The study emphasizes that approaching digital governance with a bidirectional and holistic structure involving municipal personnel, citizens, and NGOs can advance e-municipality beyond one-way service delivery. Additionally, the study outlines the digital tools used in accordance with the principles of transparency, accountability, and participation.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Digital Governance

Governance is positioned as an umbrella concept whose usage across different disciplines is increasingly widespread (Bevir, 2011: 4). First used by Harlan Cleveland in 1972 as an alternative to the term public administration or management (Korkmaz, 2020: 79), the etymology of the concept of governance traces back to the Greek word "kybernan," meaning "to steer," "to guide," "to govern," or "to pilot," which was translated into Latin as "gubernare" (Levi-Faur, 2012: 4). The English term "governance" corresponds to "yönetişim" in Turkish (Güler, 2003: 94). Governance emerged as a concept to explain the activities of all social, political, and administrative actors who manage, guide, and govern society, stemming from the fact that no single actor possesses sufficient knowledge or action potential to solve the complex problems present in social and political systems (Okcu, 2011: 46). Instead of a hierarchical network, governance emphasizes a structure made up of network relations in which no actor dominates the other (Güler, 2003: 114), indicating a shift from passive governance of the governed to active participation.

In the 21st century, advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT) have reshaped governance, giving rise to various technologies and applications aimed at solving problems using network data (Amodu, 2020: 207). Thus, developments in ICT have made it necessary to revisit governance and have paved the way for digital governance (Iyad, 2019: 1). According to Dwivedi and Bharti (2010: 37), digital governance is the best way to make governance more affordable, higher in quality, and more inclusive. It also plays an important role

in improving the digital level of education, healthcare services, and culture, especially in rural areas and districts, in promoting the digital governance process, integrating information resources, eliminating information barriers, and facilitating ease for citizens (Wang et al., 2024: 2). Estevez and Janowski (2013: 96) define digital governance as "the state's use of technology to transform both itself and its interactions with clients to create societal impact," emphasizing five dimensions of digital governance: the state, society, interaction, technology, and clients (business world, NGOs).

Digital governance is a broad governance approach shaped by the use of information and communication technologies, encompassing the state, citizens, NGOs, and the private sector. This structure enables civil society organizations, local governments, and businesses to form online public opinion and influence decision-making and policy processes (Doğan and Ustakara, 2013: 6). Transparency, accountability, accessibility, and evaluation are fundamental features of digital governance. It also involves seeking new ways to maintain the existing system and foster cooperation among stakeholders (Misuraca, 2007: 71-72). The objectives of digital governance are to improve service quality, ensure efficiency, strengthen interaction with the business world, and encourage citizen participation (Awan et al., 2013: 2). Particularly in local governments, municipalities aim to establish more effective interaction with citizens, NGOs, and the private sector under this understanding (Sayımer and Küçüksaraç, 2019: 173).

2.2. Digital Governance in Local Governments: E-Municipality Practices

The governance paradigm has gained a new dimension through technological advancements, offering significant opportunities and prospects to both central and local administrations. In this context, local governments enhance efficiency, productivity, quality, and accessibility in urban and public services by utilizing the possibilities of new digital technologies such as e-government, e-governance, e-municipality, smart services, and mobile service delivery methods (Kemeç & Gül, 2018: 808). For both central and local administrations, digital transformation refers not only to the integration of technology into management but also to a complex process involving the interaction of multiple stakeholders. For the successful realization of digital transformation in local governments, stakeholder management and collaboration are crucial (Sarıtürk, 2022: 557).

E-municipality, which has emerged as a local digital governance practice, refers to the digitization of public services provided to local residents (Şengül & Balıkçı, 2021: 417). E-municipality, as the local-level reflection of e-government applications, involves the provision of goods and services by municipalities to the local community through electronic means (Alodalı et al., 2012: 88). Additionally, it represents one of the practices introduced by

the digital governance approach, signifying a more transparent, efficient, effective, and citizen-participative structure (Sayımer et al., 2019: 424).

Municipalities utilize integrated software technologies such as the Electronic Document Management System (EDMS), e-petition, e-municipality, and e-signature within the scope of e-government applications to render the services they provide to the public faster and more efficient, and to implement the principles of good governance (Yıldız & Gümüş, 2023: 202). With its participatory, transparent, and accountable structure, digital governance highlights an e-municipality model that enables citizens to quickly convey their requests and receive responses, replacing the traditional municipal approach. Through this, municipalities offer online services, information, and participation opportunities to citizens via their websites (Şat, 2008: 208).

The practices and benefits of e-municipality, when reduced merely to online services, focus on only one aspect of the concept. The other aspect of e-municipality involves the coordination with central government in the production and delivery of services and the implementation of digital governance at the local level, enabling citizen participation in governance (Şahin, 2007: 167-168). Moreover, the intensive use of technology by municipalities increases the delivery of advanced democracy products to citizens (Ünlü, 2016: 78).

3. Methodology

3.1. Method

This section presents information regarding the research design, study group, data collection tool, data collection process, validity and reliability, data analysis, ethical principles, and the role of the researcher. Ethical approval for the face-to-face interviews conducted within the scope of this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Social and Human Sciences of Erciyes University with decision number 125, dated 29/03/2022.

3.2. Research Design

A case study design was used in the research. According to Merriam (2018, p. 40), a case study enables an in-depth examination of a bounded system, which may include elements such as place, institution (e.g., universities, schools, municipalities), artifacts, documents, or participants (Çapar & Ceylan, 2022, pp. 307-308). This study is an explanatory/descriptive case study. Explanatory case studies contribute significantly to causal or inferential studies and may employ multivariable cases to examine multiple effects in complex organizations or communities (Berg, 2001, p. 230). In this study, the state of e-municipality services within the context of digital governance is addressed in an explanatory/descriptive manner.

3.3. Study Group

In order to prevent data bias in the study, the maximum variation sampling technique, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used in the selection of participants. In this technique, the researcher aims to reach participants who share similar fundamental characteristics but have different experiences and perspectives (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024, p. 95). The study group consists of digital governance actors in the province of Sivas, including municipal staff, representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and citizens. Since digital governance requires a multi-actor collaboration between the state, citizens, and NGOs in decision-making and service delivery processes (Bovaird & Löffler, 2012), it was intended that the study group include these three key stakeholders. Citizens, as both the ultimate beneficiaries of digital governance and active participants in administrative processes, constitute an essential component of this research. The effectiveness of digital municipal services depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on the extent to which citizens perceive, utilize, and provide feedback on these services. Therefore, incorporating citizens' views enabled a more comprehensive evaluation of the participation and accountability dimensions of digital governance. The inclusion of NGOs in the research is also significant in terms of making the social dimension of digital governance at the local level visible and evaluating institutional participation mechanisms. A total of 46 participants were interviewed within the scope of the study. Care was taken to ensure maximum diversity in variables such as age, gender, education level, and institutional experience during participant selection.

In qualitative research, sample size is considered sufficient when data saturation is reached. Creswell (2018) notes that in case study designs, in-depth data collection from 4 to 10 participants is generally adequate, although the key criterion is when data begin to repeat. In this study as well, interviews were concluded when no new information emerged, and thus data saturation was considered to have been achieved. The participant criteria were determined as follows:

- ➢ Age groups,
- ➢ Duration of using e-services,
- ➢ Educational background,
- ➢ Users of e-services,
- ➢ Interest in the delivery of e-municipality services,
- ➢ Variation among participating NGOs actively involved in the study.

Three distinct participant groups were interviewed: 17 municipal staff, 12 NGO representatives, and 17 citizens. Among the participants interested in e-municipality services in Sivas province and district municipalities, most were employed in financial services units, with no dedicated department for information and communication technologies. It was observed that the financial services unit mainly undertakes the responsibility of disseminating the modules prepared by the Ministry of Interior within the institution.

The municipal staff's institutional experience ranged from 7 to 35 years, and most participants had undergraduate degrees. The second group comprised 17 citizens residing within the municipal boundaries of Sivas province and districts, most of whom had not previously used e-municipality applications. Their ages ranged from 23 to 62, with most having completed secondary or undergraduate education. A majority had never benefited from e-municipality applications.

The final participant group consisted of NGO representatives. Most of the 12 NGO representatives had long served as managers in NGOs. Their ages ranged from 38 to 77, with the majority having a secondary education level.

3.4. Data Collection Tool

In qualitative research, understanding the characteristics of methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis allows the researcher to collect data and conduct analysis more effectively in case studies (Simons, 2014: 461). In this study, data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview form. In this technique, the questions are more flexible (Merriam, 2018: 88). Depending on the research stages and the types of participants (decision-makers, implementers, beneficiaries), the semi-structured interview can be used primarily to activate the informative or comprehensive dimension (Pin, 2023: 4).

The researcher prepared interview forms for three different participant groups: 12 questions for municipal staff, 13 for citizens, and 11 for NGO representatives. In order to assess the content validity of the questions, the interview forms were submitted to a language expert, an assessment and evaluation specialist, and two academics specializing in local governments and e-municipality. Based on expert feedback, the questions were simplified, redundant expressions were removed, and a final semi-structured interview form consisting of 27 items was developed: 9 questions for municipal staff, 10 for citizens, and 9 for NGO representatives.

In formulating the interview questions, a thematic structure was followed to reveal participants' perceptions of digital governance both at the individual experience level (e.g., frequency of digital service use, ease of access to information) and administrative processes level (e.g., participation in decision-making processes, digital transparency). In this respect, the interview questions directly contribute to addressing the research question. As part of the pilot study, preliminary interviews were conducted with two individuals from each participant group (a total of six people). During this phase, it was found that one question directed at citizens was not clearly understood, and after making the necessary revision, the interview form was finalized.

3.5. Data Collection Process

Field research was conducted in Sivas province and its 16 districts, with travel taking place between October and November. Interviews with 17 municipal staff members were conducted in their respective workplaces. For the citizen group, interviews lasting approximately 30-35 minutes were conducted in public spaces within the municipality boundaries, and with their consent, audio recordings were made.

Appointments were scheduled for interviews with NGO representatives, including setting the time and location in advance. However, not all 17 targeted NGO representatives could be reached. In two districts, there were no active NGOs; in two others, NGO representatives could not be reached; and in one district, a representative declined the interview, resulting in interviews with only 12 NGO representatives.

3.6. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, using the MAXQDA software. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify patterns (themes) within data and report them (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). It is used to examine participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and behaviors to identify patterns among the data. This experiential research approach seeks to understand what participants think, feel, and do (Clarke & Braun, 2017: 297).

In this study, the analysis of the interviews was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2019, pp. 883–890) six-phase thematic analysis approach with the assistance of MAXQDA software. During this process, interviews with all 46 participants were recorded with their consent. The data were transcribed by the researcher, and each audio file was listened to at least twice for accurate transcription. The transcribed texts were then imported into the MAXQDA software for analysis. Each text was read three times by the researcher, and the unit of analysis was determined to be the "word". Following this, the coding process was initiated to analyze the data, and themes and sub-themes were developed based on the codes. For example, a participant's statement—"Those who can use the internet access it online, while those who cannot prefer face-to-face communication."—was grouped under the code "face-to-face communication", which was then categorized under "non-digital tools" and later merged under the main theme "e-municipality tools". The consistency between codes and themes was continuously reviewed, and finally, two main themes and ten sub-themes were identified. The validity of the themes was supported by direct quotations included in the findings section. Initially, the transcribed data were read in detail, and expressions with similar meanings were coded accordingly.

3.7. Validity and Reliability

According to Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 59), validity pertains to accuracy. A measurement is valid if it truly measures what it claims or intends to measure. In this study, the criteria for ensuring validity in qualitative research, as suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), were considered:

> ➤ The explanations provided within the research should be rich and meaningful in context.

> ➤ The narration should be accurate, credible, and consistent.

> ➤ Triangulation across methods and data sources should be employed (individual interviews with different group members). According to Başkale (2016: 25), triangulation is one of the most well-known and applied strategies for enhancing internal validity.

> ➤ Findings should be presented clearly, consistently, and systematically.

> ➤ The data presented should be well-associated with previous or emerging theoretical categories

The coding and data analysis were conducted using the MAXQDA software. Figure 1 below presents an overview of the codes obtained from the participant groups of municipal staff, citizens, and NGO representatives.

Figure 1: Code Systems of Participant Groups in the MAXQDA Program

To support the significance of the themes, it is crucial to present images, networks, diagrams, screenshots, tables, and visualization techniques. When reporting and interpreting qualitative research findings, criteria such as reliability, validity, ethical challenges, vulnerability, and bias should be sufficiently addressed (Gupta, 2024, p. 26). As seen in Figure 1, the municipal staff group constitutes the group with the most intensive coding among the participants. The least coding was conducted within the NGO representatives group, which consisted of 12 participants. In Figure 2 below, two main themes and their sub-themes are illustrated along

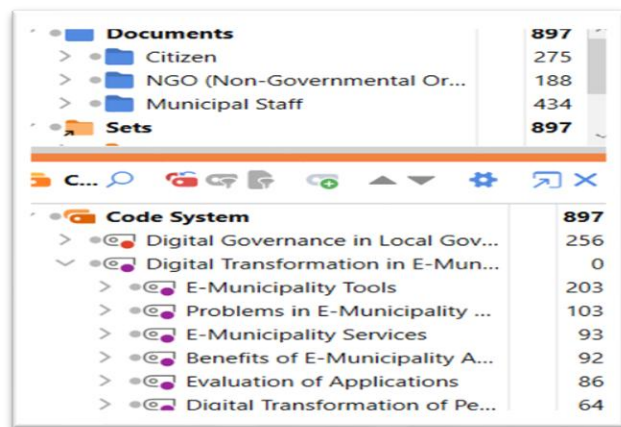with their codes as examples of the coding process.

Figure 2: Documents and Code Systems Uploaded to the MAXQDA Program

In Figure 2, which presents the two main themes and their sub-themes along with their code frequencies, participants made the most statements regarding e-municipality tools, while the least number of statements were made concerning transparency/accountability.

3.8. Ethics and the Role of the Researcher

Interviews commenced after obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee for Social and Human Sciences of Erciyes University, dated 29/03/2022 with decision number 125. Before starting the interviews, participants were provided with preliminary information about the subject, and their consent for audio recording was obtained. It was confirmed that the audio recordings would be used solely for scientific research purposes, and the necessary interview environment was arranged accordingly.

4. Findings

4.1. Digital Governance in Local Governments

In line with one of the sub-questions of the study, "How is digital governance utilized in local governments?", the first main theme identified was digital governance in local governments. Within this theme, four sub-themes emerged, and these sub-themes are presented in Figure 3 along with their percentage distributions.

According to Figure 3, four themes were identified in digital governance within local governments. These are, respectively: "NGO-Municipality Cooperation" (33.2%), "Citizen-Municipality Cooperation" (32.4%), "Monitoring of Council Decisions" (18.4%), and "Evaluation in Terms of Transparency/Accountability" (16.0%). The figures related to the identified sub-themes are presented below.
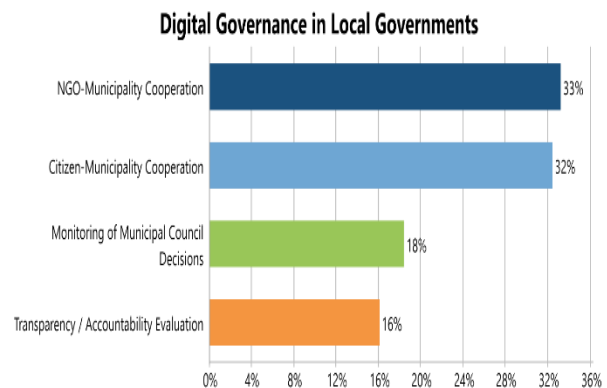

Figure 3: Digital Governance Themes in Local Governments

NGO-Municipality Cooperation

Questions regarding the mutual interaction and cooperation between NGOs and the municipality within the context of digital governance were directed to the NGO representatives in the study group. As a result of the participants' responses, 13 codes were identified under the theme of NGO-Municipality Cooperation. The percentage distribution of these codes is presented below in Figure 4.
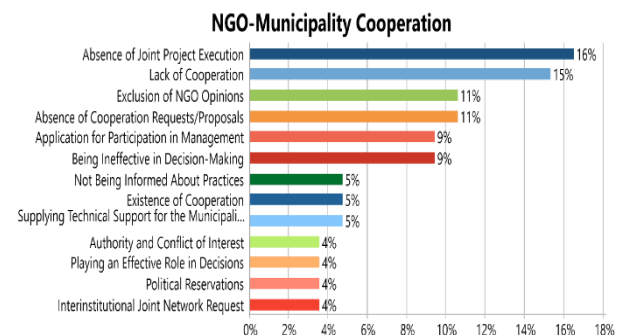

Figure 4: NGO–Municipality Cooperation

As seen in Figure 4, it is understood that the cooperation between NGOs and municipalities has not been sufficiently successful in carrying out joint projects, the level of collaboration is inadequate, and municipalities mostly do not take the opinions of NGOs into consideration. The findings also reveal that while NGOs are willing to participate in decision-making processes, their views are not sufficiently included, and therefore, their influence on the decisions made is limited. It is also observed that authority and interest conflicts, as well as political reservations, hinder the development of cooperation between NGOs and municipalities. Participant views are as follows:

"As a foundation, we have some activities related to the municipality… The foundation has work involving local administrations. There is some cooperation in certain provinces, but we couldn't fully achieve this in Sivas. Sometimes our requests for appointments were not

responded to, or we couldn't make it ourselves. We usually meet with the municipality to voice local issues, but this doesn't happen under the foundation's name—it's more through our personal initiatives. Otherwise, our foundation has many activities related to local administrations. However, in Sivas, we don't have any project with an established functionality like that (S8)."

"...So, we are currently doing contract farming with about 20 villages and 1,000 people. I believe that even in the most remote areas, where the municipality can't reach, we are slightly ahead of them in terms of staffing and team capabilities. But they haven't initiated any joint projects, provided any information, or made any proposals involving us. We do have a relationship, but it's not very close. We haven't had any project, cooperation, or joint activity that we carried out together (S3)."

Citizen–Municipality Cooperation

Questions related to mutual interaction between citizens and the municipality within the context of digital governance were posed to the citizens participating in the study group. Some of the questions directed to the participant groups also revealed potential codes under this theme. Within this scope, eight codes were identified under the theme of Citizen–Municipality Cooperation. The percentage distribution of these codes is presented below in Figure 5.
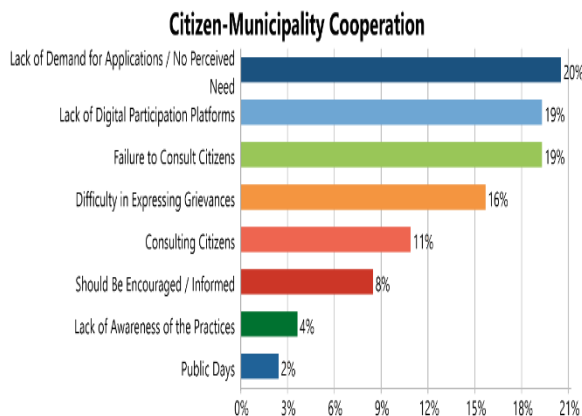

Figure 5: Citizen–Municipality Cooperation

As shown in Figure 5, there appears to be an insufficient level of demand for e-municipality applications, which represent the digital governance dimension within local administrations. It is also observed that, due to the small size of the districts, there is generally no perceived need for the use of such applications. Additionally, it is understood that citizens need to be encouraged and informed regarding the applications used by municipalities. The findings reveal that citizens' opinions are not adequately taken into account, there is a lack of digital platforms for participation, and even on existing platforms, complaints cannot be easily expressed. Participant views on the subject are as follows:

"Well, our district is actually quite small. I can't really say there's any application in use. As far as I know, there isn't

one. But honestly, there's no need for it at the moment anyway. This is already a small place. The municipality is very close to us. In fact, everything is close to each other here. As I said, it's a small area. We don't currently have an actively used municipal mobile application (V4)."

"To be honest, we do want to work on that, we want to implement something, but as I mentioned, it's a small district, a small municipality... People can come here and access all the information they need. ...council decisions, committee decisions... We provide them with everything they want. So, there's no real need for them to access it online. That's why we're moving a bit slowly in that area (B1)."

"If citizens could use it, e-municipality services would be helpful, but when they access the website, they don't know how to use it. For example, if someone wants to pay a water bill, they can't even figure out where it is. There are menus, of course—they're supposed to select payments—but the guidance is poor. The citizens are not very skilled, and the guidance is weak as well. It's both sides (V12)."

Following Council Decisions

NGO representatives and citizens were asked the question: "Do you follow the council decisions in your province or district?" Based on the coding of participants' responses, four codes were identified under the theme of "Following Council Decisions." The percentage distributions of these
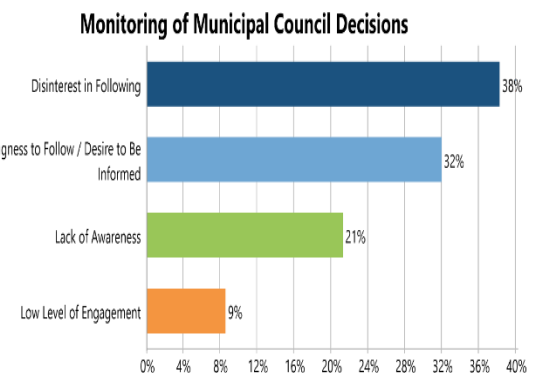
codes are presented below in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Following Council Decisions

When the findings under the sub-theme of "Following Council Decisions" in Figure 6 are examined, it is understood that citizens and NGOs do not sufficiently follow municipal council decisions and that there is a general lack of interest in these decisions. It has also been determined that those who do wish to follow the decisions are often not informed about the council's agenda or the decisions made. Furthermore, it is observed that there are demands for municipalities to publish council agendas and decisions on digital platforms. Participant views are as follows:

"I can't follow them. Sometimes I come across council decisions that are said to be for the public good, but we don't

always agree with them. Still, we don't see any authority we can reach out to, approach, or where we can express our opinions, so we can't get involved (S8)."

"If asked, they're shared more. Otherwise, they're not visible online or anything like that. Since our website isn't active, they're not published there either. So citizens can't get informed online. They can't see the status of council decisions (V6)."

Evaluation in Terms of Transparency / Accountability

Under the theme of Evaluation in Terms of Transparency / Accountability, four codes were identified. The percentage distributions of these codes are presented below in Figure 7.
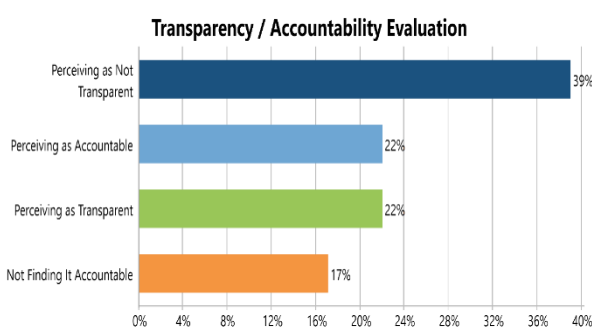

Figure 7: Evaluation in Terms of Transparency / Accountability

As shown in Figure 7, based on the statements of citizens and NGO representatives, it is observed that municipalities are not considered sufficiently transparent and accountable. On the other hand, participants who do consider municipalities to be transparent and accountable stated that, given the services provided within the scope of e-municipality, transparency and accountability in the digital environment are inevitable. Participant views on the matter are presented below:

"...but as far as I can see, they only send what they want to be seen, so you can't really expect transparency. The content is clearly biased. These are not the kinds of posts where different opinions can be expressed or discussed. That's why I think there is no transparency—because there is nothing truly transparent being shared... (S10)."

"I don't think it's transparent. For individual transactions done online, of course, there's some transparency because we handle them ourselves. But when it comes to general procedures, I don't think there is any transparency (V12)."

"I really doubt that anyone questions anything. And I don't think they provide information unless you specifically ask, like you're just supposed to know without asking. Personally, I don't think any of this is really being done (V1)."

4.2. Digital Transformation in E-Municipality Services

Based on the responses to one of the sub-questions of the study, "What is the nature of digital transformation practices in e-municipality services?", the second main theme identified is digital transformation in e-municipality services. Through the questions directed to the participant group — consisting of municipal staff, citizens, and NGO representatives — the study aimed to reveal how e-municipality applications are used by all stakeholders within the scope of digital governance in the provincial and district municipalities of Sivas.

The themes that emerged under digital transformation in e-municipality services and their percentage distributions are presented below in Figure 8.
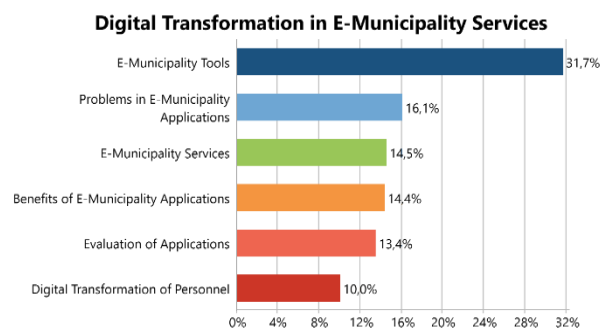

Figure 8: Digital Transformation in E-Municipality Services

According to Figure 8, six sub-themes were identified within the digital transformation of e-municipality services. These are, respectively: "e-municipality tools" (31.7%), "problems in e-municipality applications" (16.1%), "e-municipality services" (14.5%), "benefits of e-municipality applications" (14.4%), "evaluation of applications" (13.4%), and "digital transformation of personnel" (10.0%). Among these sub-themes, the most prominent based on participants' statements was "e-municipality tools."

E-Municipality Tools

In this sub-theme, which includes questions about the tools used in e-municipality applications, the usage intensity of both digital and non-digital tools has been identified. Under the theme of E-Municipality Tools, three sub-theme codes were discovered. The percentage distribution of these codes
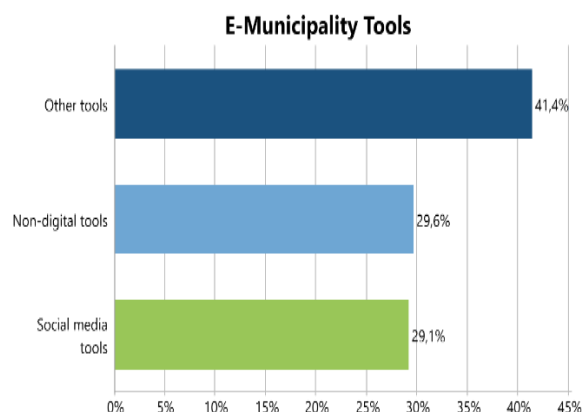
is presented below in Figure 9.

Figure 9: E-Municipality Tools

In Figure 9, under the theme of E-Municipality Tools, the following codes were identified within the sub-theme of "Other Tools", in order of frequency: phone, SMS/WhatsApp, CİMER (Presidency Communication Center), and email. Within the "Non-Digital Tools" sub-theme, two codes were discovered: face-to-face communication and request/complaint form or petition. The "Social Media Tools" sub-theme consists of four codes: municipal website, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

It was observed that citizens predominantly prefer phone and face-to-face communication. Due to the small size of the districts and the belief that visiting the municipality in person results in quicker resolution of problems, many citizens choose direct interaction. While municipal websites are used in some municipalities to collect requests, suggestions, and complaints, in others, they are primarily used for sharing institutional information. Online services, as one of the tools of e-municipality applications, are found to be insufficient. This is due to their limited use in providing services, the absence of interactive features for user engagement, and the lack of efforts toward improving such functionalities. Among social media tools, Facebook is the most frequently used platform.

"Most interactions happen via phone or face-to-face. Digital channels are used less frequently. CİMER complaints are the third most used tool (B5)."

"I submitted a complaint to CİMER about the local administration. Half an hour later, someone from the local government called me by name asking why I wrote it. This issue is not just about local administrations. If someone from the municipality can find out that I submitted that message to CİMER — which is part of the Presidential Office — then there's no point in even discussing social media here (S10)."

"Facebook is more commonly used. Since the population here is mostly elderly, and middle-aged people tend to use Facebook more, I think that's where they're most active (V1)."

Problems in E-Municipality Applications

This section seeks to identify the problems encountered in e-municipality services within the provincial and district municipalities of Sivas. Within this scope, 13 codes were identified under the theme of "Problems in E-Municipality Applications." The percentage distributions of these codes are presented below in Figure 10.
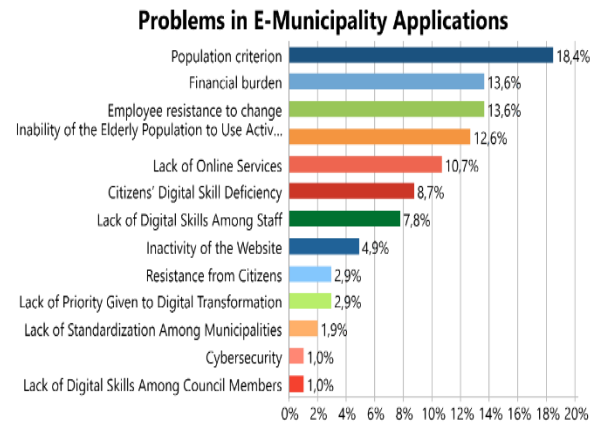

Figure 10: Problems in E-Municipality Applications

As shown in Figure 10, it is understood that in districts, both the small population size and the fact that the majority of residents are elderly reduce citizen demand for e-municipality services. In municipalities where e-municipality services are not available, the absence of online services is seen as a problem, particularly by users who are aware of such applications. Limited financial resources of municipalities, along with the resistance of both municipal staff and citizens to the changes brought by digitalization, are among the prominent issues. In addition to these problems, the lack of digital skills among both citizens and municipal personnel, as well as the inactivity of municipal websites, are also identified as key challenges.

"Well, our district is actually quite small. I can't really say there are any applications in use... But to be honest, there's no need for them at the moment anyway. This is a small place. The municipality is very close by... (V4)."

"There is of course a financial aspect to this. To properly run the software we develop, a certain level of technological infrastructure is required. There are server costs, security software is needed to securely store citizens' data, and higher internet speeds are necessary to provide faster responses to citizens (B10)."

Another barrier to the implementation of e-municipality applications is that users tend to resist digital transformation and prefer traditional municipal practices. A review of the literature reveals that the success of e-municipality is not solely dependent on the technology used, but also on whether these applications are accepted and adopted by users.

"...Even though it's possible to make payments through the e-government system or by going to the bank to pay municipal debts, citizens still come here to make the payment themselves. They wait in line, chat, order tea, and say, 'Since I'm here, let me stop by the mayor's office as well.' Unfortunately, these habits are still very common in our region... (B2)."

E-Municipality Services

This section aims to identify which e-municipality applications are actively used by citizens and NGOs, and which services are provided by municipal staff and through which types of applications. Within this scope, two sub-theme codes were identified under the theme of E-Municipality Services. The percentage distribution of these codes is presented below in Figure 11.
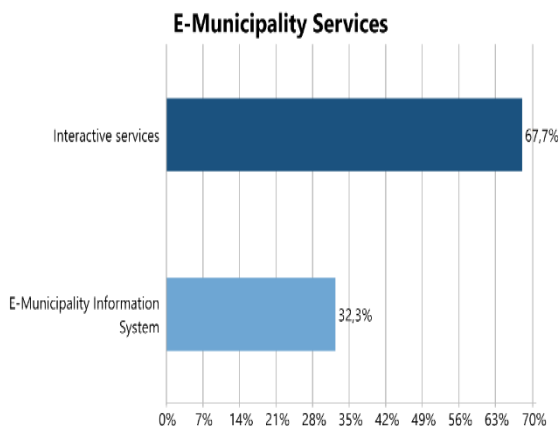

Figure 11: E-Municipality Services

As shown in Figure 11, under the code "Desire for Interactive Use," it is evident that municipal staff, citizens, and NGO representatives express a desire for more interactive usage. When examining the findings related to interactive services, it appears that current applications are mainly used for payments and e-tenders. Moreover, all stakeholders — municipal staff, NGO representatives, and citizens — desire applications that enable mutual interaction. However, no municipal application was found that enables such two-way interaction between municipalities and other actors. There is also a noted demand for tools such as surveys and live broadcasts.

"Let me put it this way — I am also a citizen. I would like the municipality to ask me before doing something. At least they could ask for my opinion. They should offer options — like, should we do this or that? Or should we do it at all? I'm sure citizens want this too. That's why their thoughts and expectations are important. This should be valued. NGOs also want their opinions to be heard (B1)."

"I think it would be great to have a platform in the name of digitalization. Citizens' opinions could be gathered more effectively. Instead of fixed ideas, more collaborative decisions could emerge from a mix of different perspectives. People may talk among themselves, but within their own circles. Not everyone would prefer to directly share their opinion with the mayor, but if such a method existed, it would be easier and more transparent. It would also encourage people to take action (V11)."

In the e-municipality information system, the modules currently in use are limited to the EBYS module (Electronic

Document Management System), which allows internal correspondence among municipal personnel; the Document Management System Module for archiving; the Accounting Module; the Social Assistance Tracking System Module; the Decision-Making Bodies Module; and the Marriage Registration Module. It is also understood that there is no standardization across municipalities regarding the use of these modules, which were introduced by the Ministry of Interior.

"We are fully and effectively using the e-municipality system provided by the Ministry of Interior, particularly the EBYS (e-correspondence) and accounting system as a complete package, and we are very satisfied… There's no such thing as 'the document is lost' or 'I never received it.' You can find everything the moment you search for it. The same applies to the accounting and expenditure documents — they are considered valuable documents. Expenditures are made, scanned, and archived (B2)."

Benefits of E-Municipality Applications

In response to the question "What are your thoughts on e-municipality applications?" directed to municipal staff, citizens, and NGO representatives participating in the study, the identified responses predominantly emphasized the benefits of these applications. Within this scope, 14 codes were identified under the sub-theme titled "Benefits of E-Municipality Applications." The percentage distributions of these codes are presented below in Figure 12.
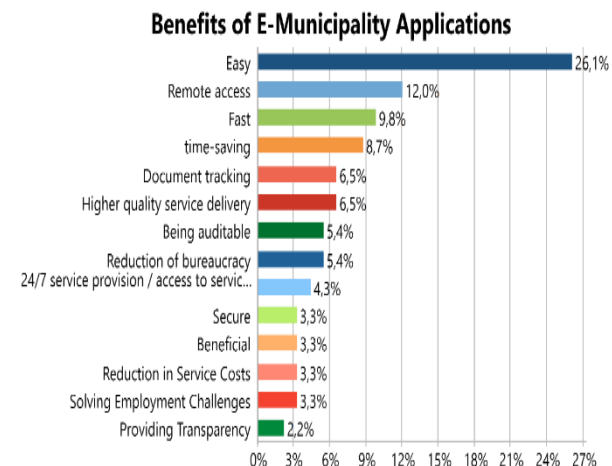
Figure 12: Benefits of E-Municipality Applications

As shown in Figure 12, under the sub-theme "Benefits of E-Municipality Applications," it is observed that municipal staff, NGO representatives, and citizens find these applications fast, secure, easy, and useful — without the limitations of time and place. It is also revealed that e-municipality practices reduce bureaucracy and municipal service costs. Moreover, they facilitate document tracking and auditing, contribute to higher quality service delivery, and may help eliminate employment-related issues in municipalities.

"Managing these processes in a physical environment has

disadvantages, especially in terms of workforce and time. Also, mistakes are more likely to occur in physical settings — a wrong phrase or a spelling error can mislead the citizen. In a digital environment, it's easier to monitor, and both petitions and responses are easier to view. There are also clear advantages in terms of stationery costs when it's all done digitally (B10)."

"I think it's a great application. It's something that should be available everywhere. It saves people from physical effort and unnecessary expenses. From wherever they are, people can simply log in to the municipal website via phone or computer and carry out their transactions quickly, easily, and securely. I think that's really great. I believe it should be implemented everywhere (V4)."

"Whether in terms of transportation, time management, or reducing the workload of municipalities — I believe these systems must be used. In today's world, it's no longer practical to do things physically. I find it more reasonable and convenient for people to handle their affairs digitally and through social networks, rather than in person (S3)."

Evaluation of Applications

In the context of digital governance, various questions were posed to participants from the provincial and district municipalities of Sivas to evaluate the e-municipality applications provided by their municipalities. Based on participants' responses, five codes were identified under the theme of "Evaluation of Applications." The percentage distribution of these codes is presented below in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Evaluation of Applications
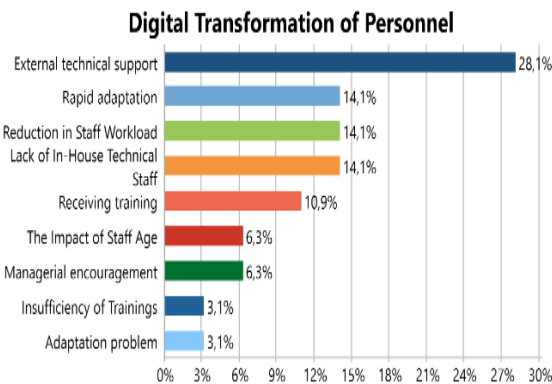
As seen in Figure 13, under the theme of Evaluation of Applications, it is observed that municipal staff, NGO representatives, and citizens have a certain level of awareness regarding e-municipality applications. Although the population in the districts is small and largely elderly, there is a noticeable awareness of the availability and use of these applications. However, a significant portion of the population still does not actively use them. In addition to the digital services offered by municipalities, it is understood that the applications are not considered sufficient in terms of transparency, accountability, and especially in enabling participation, as well as submitting requests, suggestions, and complaints. Considering that one of the features of e-

municipality is providing services without time or location constraints, both citizens and NGO representatives expressed a demand for municipalities to be more accessible in this regard.

"They could be more active through a proper website — especially for things like water payments, environmental cleaning taxes, or advertisement fees, particularly for tradespeople. I think it could make things easier for them if payments could be made directly through the site (S11)."

"A citizen shouldn't have to go to the municipality just to submit a petition. The citizen should be able to write their petition, receive a code via SMS to their phone or use the e-Government platform to submit it. They should also be able to receive a document tracking number through the system. That's how the process should work (V17)."

Digital Transformation of Staff

This section seeks to identify the digital skill levels of municipal staff providing services in the provincial and district municipalities of Sivas. Within this scope, nine codes were identified under the theme of Digital Transformation of Staff. The percentage distributions of these codes are presented below in Figure 14.
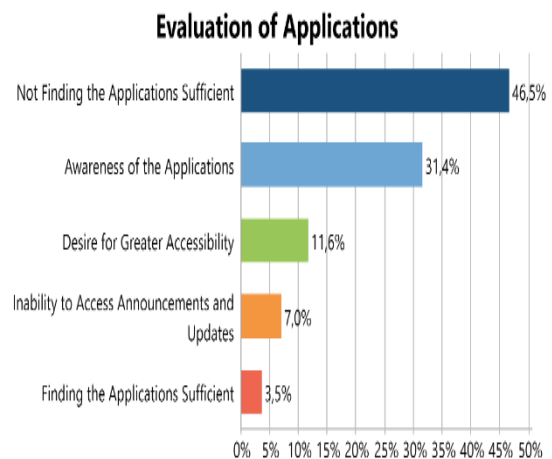
Figure 14: Digital Transformation of Staff

When the codes related to the digital transformation of staff in Figure 14 are evaluated, findings from interviews with municipal personnel in the provincial and district municipalities of Sivas reveal that in many municipalities, external experts are brought in to provide technical support for new software systems and problem resolution. On the other hand, it is observed that municipalities with university-educated and younger personnel adapt more quickly to innovations brought about by digital transformation, and that the age of personnel plays a role in this process. Considering that providing internal training for staff helps municipalities overcome technical and cognitive challenges, such training is recognized as a key factor in the success of e-municipality applications. Although not sufficient, it is noted that such training programs are being organized in Sivas's provincial and district municipalities.

"We receive support for the maintenance of the website. When a problem occurs on the website, we can intervene to a certain extent. Because the control and security are provided by an external company… They are also responsible for its security. We pay a fee under the names of maintenance-repair and security charges." (B15)

"We do not have any staff related to information and communication technology. We are now in the information technology era; we experience some issues related to personal data and our own security. A computer engineer or technician could be employed in the municipality. When a computer-related issue arises, it could be addressed immediately within the municipality. Small municipalities like ours experience this problem." (B17)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Municipalities, as the administrative units closest to citizens and responsible for delivering public services effectively, efficiently, and in a citizen-oriented manner at the local level, today aim to establish more participatory, transparent, and effective communication with citizens by utilizing technological opportunities. The research conducted in the province and districts of Sivas indicates that digital governance practices at the local level remain limited in terms of participation, transparency, and accountability. The cooperation between municipalities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) remains weak, and NGO participation in decision-making processes is mostly symbolic. Although participants expressed a willingness to contribute to governance, they also stated that their opinions were not taken into account. This highlights both a lack of communication and the absence of an institutionalized governance culture. Furthermore, conflicts of authority and political concerns weaken the culture of collaboration. Similar findings are observed in studies conducted in other provinces across Türkiye (Arabacı, 2021; Eroğlu et al., 2023; Yıldırım, 2021). However, this study contributes a unique local perspective to the literature by revealing that, particularly in rural municipalities, the lack of digital tools further restricts NGO participation.

Municipal practices related to transparency and accountability are developing within the framework of e-municipality, yet digital practices in these areas mostly remain at the level of "information sharing." Participants indicated that municipalities are not transparent and that accessing council decisions digitally is difficult. These findings are consistent with similar studies conducted in Türkiye (Üzüm & Şenol, 2020; Karaca & Öztürk, 2019). However, this study also shows that digital transparency in small-scale municipalities is hindered not only by a lack of infrastructure but also by institutional reluctance.

It was observed that tools such as CIMER (Presidency Communication Center), WhatsApp lines, and phone calls stand out in citizens' processes of submitting requests, complaints, and obtaining information. This finding indicates that local digitalization processes are being substituted by centralized systems (e.g., CIMER). Durmuşoğlu and Genel (2022, p. 70) concluded that CIMER is the most reliable and accessible source of information for all participants, and is used by citizens as a pressure mechanism on public institutions to resolve issues. Therefore, digital transformation in local governments strengthens indirect forms of communication rather than direct citizen interaction, which points to a structural weakness in terms of digital governance objectives.

Although the use of social media is becoming widespread in municipalities, it does not sufficiently support the principles of participation and accountability. According to research findings, municipalities generally use social media for announcements and promotions, and citizen feedback is not systematically evaluated. This result shows that while local governments see social media as a communication tool, they do not yet adopt it as a means of two-way interaction. As suggested by new generation municipal practices (Karaca & Öztürk, 2019) or digital governance-oriented social media strategies (Erdoğan, 2019), there is a need to develop participation-focused digital tools.

The low demand for e-municipality services is closely related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the districts in Sivas. Factors such as small population size, a high proportion of elderly residents, and limited digital literacy cause citizens to prefer face-to-face communication over digital channels. The findings reveal that citizens usually convey their issues either by visiting the municipality in person or by phone, and municipalities, in turn, do not prioritize the development of digital services due to this trend. Most municipal websites are used solely for information sharing, while the effectiveness of digital tools in processes such as receiving requests, tracking complaints, or collecting feedback is highly limited. The fact that online services are largely confined to basic operations and that there are no participatory platforms enabling interactive engagement with users represents the weakest link in digital governance. This indicates that local-level digital services are affected not only by technological factors but also by administrative and cultural limitations. Similarly, Güven and Doğan (2022) found that e-municipality practices are more comprehensive in large municipalities, while limited and ineffective in smaller ones. Yılmaz (2019) also reported in his study conducted in the provinces of Muş and Bitlis that e-municipality services are inadequate in most districts and underutilized by citizens. The study by Kahraman and Özen (2025) emphasizes that the success of digital transformation in local governments is directly linked to digital competencies. In this context, our study demonstrates that strengthening the digital skills of both personnel and citizens in small-scale municipalities is critically important for increasing digital governance capacity.

Interviews with municipal staff revealed that digital transformation is largely dependent on the quality of personnel and managerial support. Younger and well-

educated staff adapt more quickly to digital innovations, whereas resistance is observed among older personnel. This situation shows that differences in internal digital competencies directly affect governance processes. These findings indicate that a lack of digital capacity in rural municipalities is a key obstacle to sustainable transformation. In conclusion, this study conducted in the province of Sivas shows that digital transformation in local governments requires not only technological change but also administrative, institutional, and social transformation. The digitalization process in rural municipalities is progressing slowly due to limited infrastructure, low digital awareness, and institutional reluctance. Therefore, it is important for policymakers to take steps to increase digital literacy, provide in-service training for municipal personnel, and strengthen citizen and NGO participation through digital platforms. These findings offer a new perspective on the localization of digital governance and emphasize the need to develop a practical roadmap particularly for small-scale municipalities.

5.1. Recommendations

Within the scope of this study, the following recommendations are offered for practitioners and researchers aiming to conduct comparative analyses of digital governance practices in local governments involving municipal staff, citizens, and NGOs:

• Municipalities should implement programs and training to enhance digital literacy across all segments of society, especially older citizens, and encourage the understandability and usability of existing services to reduce the digital divide.

• Investments should be made to improve municipal staff's digital skills, and in-service training should be organized to prevent resistance to technological innovations. At the same time, municipalities should employ expert personnel in information and communication technologies.

• Municipalities should implement joint projects that support the needs of all stakeholders and foster mutual recognition between citizens and NGOs as partners. Especially, digital governance projects that emphasize the relationship between technological innovations and participation should be developed.

• Considering the expected increase in the number of smart cities in the future, citizen usage of e-municipality applications should be enhanced. Municipalities should develop digital solutions that support participation and allow disadvantaged groups—especially the elderly and disabled—to express their specific needs.

• The sample size can be expanded to enable comparison of digital governance practices with other municipalities, and different qualitative and quantitative research methods can be used.

• Digital governance practices in local governments can be examined by comparing metropolitan municipalities and provincial municipalities in terms of transparency, accountability, and participation principles.

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