








“Inclusive governance and related concepts: A review and policy insights”

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INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE AND RELATED CONCEPTS: A REVIEW AND POLICY INSIGHTS

Abstract

Inclusive governance has attracted growing scholarly attention as both a normative principle and a practical approach. This paper aims to conduct a bibliometric and science-mapping analysis of the academic literature on inclusive governance and related concepts. The analysis is based on 1,990 documents indexed in the Scopus database, covering the available period from 1976 to 2025. Data processing and analysis were conducted using the Bibliometrix package in R. The results reveal a pronounced growth trajectory of inclusive governance research, with a sharp acceleration after 2013 and particularly strong expansion in the post-2020 period. Citation dynamics highlight the enduring influence of foundational works on participatory and democratic governance, alongside the rising prominence of sustainability-oriented and decision-making frameworks. Keyword co-occurrence and thematic mapping identify a strong conceptual core centered on participatory governance and governance approaches, complemented by more specialized human- and community-centered themes. A domain-based thematic analysis further demonstrates that inclusive governance is conceptualized differently across research areas. Public governance emphasizes participation and normative sustainability principles, environmental governance focuses on resource management and issue-specific challenges, while economic and organizational governance integrates institutional, innovation-driven, and stakeholder-oriented perspectives. The findings confirm inclusive governance as a conceptually plural yet increasingly coherent research field, while also pointing to persistent gaps in geographical representation and contextual diversity, and offering directions for future research and policy-oriented inquiry.

Keywords

inclusive governance, participatory governance, human-centered, citizen-centered, bibliometric review

JEL Classification

H11, H83, I38

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, governance has increasingly been understood through its ability to respond to the growing complexity of contemporary societal challenges, including persistent inequality, climate change, accelerated technological change, rising uncertainty, and the need for ongoing innovation (Sovacool, 2011; Cosens et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, inclusive governance has gained prominence as a key governance paradigm. Building upon the principles of inclusive development, which emphasize social and environmental considerations as well as the needs of current generations, inclusive governance places particular emphasis on decision-making arrangements that incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives, enhance accountability, and support fair access to public resources (Gupta et al., 2015). This normative orientation toward inclusivity closely resonates with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most notably SDG 16, which highlights the role of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels of governance (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016).

Inclusive governance is generally defined as a mode of governance that seeks to broaden participation, reduce exclusion, and ensure that political, economic, and social institutions operate in ways that are responsive to all segments of society (OECD, 2020). This definition establishes a direct conceptual linkage with participatory governance, which denotes a set of democratic mechanisms designed to engage citizens in public policy-making and to strengthen the connection between public institutions and society in order to enhance the effectiveness and responsiveness of policy processes (Palumbo, 2018). In turn, this participatory orientation gives rise to a set of closely related governance concepts such as citizen-centered, people-centered, human-centered, and service-oriented governance, which represent complementary normative, value-based, and administrative perspectives within the broader governance discourse. In this study, we use an integrated analytical approach, grouping these conceptually related models into a single research framework because they share overlapping principles and foundations relevant to the study of inclusive governance.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive governance is generally understood as a system of governance that seeks to engage a wide range of stakeholders – including public authorities, the private sector, and civil society – in decision-making processes (OECD, 2020). It emphasizes the incorporation of diverse perspectives to ensure that outcomes are participatory, equitable, and responsive to societal needs (Betancur, 2007). In academic literature, inclusive governance is examined from multiple perspectives, including normative–institutional approaches focusing on legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms, societal approaches emphasizing representation and equity, and technological perspectives addressing digital inclusion and citizen engagement (Street et al., 2014; Isike, 2016; Bokayev et al., 2021). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that inclusive governance represents a broad and multi-dimensional concept rather than a single institutional model.

Despite this rich conceptual development, the field lacks a systematic mapping of its intellectual structure and thematic evolution. Although inclusive governance has been widely discussed in public administration and policy studies, bibliometric research directly focused on this concept remains limited. One of the few studies addressing the field explicitly is Annahar et al. (2023), who mapped the development of the “inclusive governance” literature and identified the governance principles most frequently associated with it. Their review demonstrated that the field has developed around themes such as participation, accountability, empowerment, and fairness, while also highlighting

its analytical dispersion across adjacent governance debates.

This limited number of direct bibliometric studies indicates that inclusive governance has not yet consolidated into a clearly bounded research domain. Instead, it appears to function as an umbrella concept overlapping with several adjacent strands of scholarship. One important adjacent strand is research on participatory governance mechanisms. In this regard, participatory budgeting represents one of the most visible institutional expressions of inclusive and citizen-oriented governance. Milosavljević et al. (2023), in their bibliometric review of 396 publications, demonstrate that participatory budgeting has expanded beyond political science into applied fields such as urban planning, environmental studies, economics, and management. Similarly, Maulana and Dečman (2023) combine systematic review and bibliometric mapping to examine collaborative governance in the context of digital transformation, showing that the interconnections between these concepts remain limited and that collaborative digital transformation is emerging as a distinct research domain within broader governance debates. These findings are directly relevant to inclusive governance, as they reflect how participatory and collaborative mechanisms constitute its core practical dimensions.

A growing body of bibliometric research also focuses on inclusion in the field of education. Pertiwi et al. (2025) examined science literacy in inclusive schools, revealing increasing global attention to equitable access to scientific knowledge. Wang and Liu (2026) observe a shift in inclusive educa-

tion research from macro-level discussions toward more practice-oriented, micro-level issues. In addition, Shadyrova et al. (2026) identify a transition from basic to advanced technologies in inclusive education, highlighting the growing importance of personalized learning. These studies demonstrate how inclusivity is operationalized within sector-specific governance contexts, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of inclusive governance in practice.

Another prominent stream of bibliometric research concerns financial and digital inclusion. Financial inclusion is increasingly conceptualized as an interdisciplinary domain (Martinez-Blasco et al., 2025; Dhaya & Sundaram, 2024), with many studies focusing on the role of technological innovation (e.g., Kesavan & Polisetty, 2025). In parallel, Perdana et al. (2025), in their bibliometric review of 97 Scopus-indexed publications on e-inclusion, show that research in digital governance increasingly addresses issues of accessibility, empowerment, digital literacy, trust, and unequal access to public services. These findings highlight the importance of digital and economic dimensions of inclusivity, which are central to contemporary governance systems.

Taken together, bibliometric studies related to inclusion and associated concepts reveal a strong focus on themes such as gender equality (Fengwen & Ali, 2023; Hermaputi & Hua, 2024), leadership (Najmaei & Sadeghinejad, 2019), and innovation (Mortazavi et al., 2021). In recent years, the sec-

toral scope of such research has expanded significantly, encompassing areas such as social services, environmental governance, agriculture, and entrepreneurship (Miranda et al., 2022; Dani et al., 2024; Rodrigues et al., 2023).

Overall, existing bibliometric studies related to inclusion remain fragmented across multiple domains and tend to focus on specific sectors or mechanisms rather than examining the broader conceptual structure of inclusivity in governance. This fragmentation limits a comprehensive understanding of how inclusivity is conceptualized and interconnected within governance research.

To address this gap, the present study aims to analyze the intellectual structure of inclusive governance by examining its semantic and thematic connections with related governance concepts, including participatory, citizen-centered, human-centered, and service-oriented governance.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a bibliometric analysis as its methodological framework (Figure 1), a well-established approach for systematically mapping academic fields and uncovering their underlying intellectual structures (Zupic & Čater, 2015). Bibliometric techniques facilitate the analysis of publication trajectories, citation dynamics, collaboration networks, and the evolution of research themes, offering both descriptive overviews and

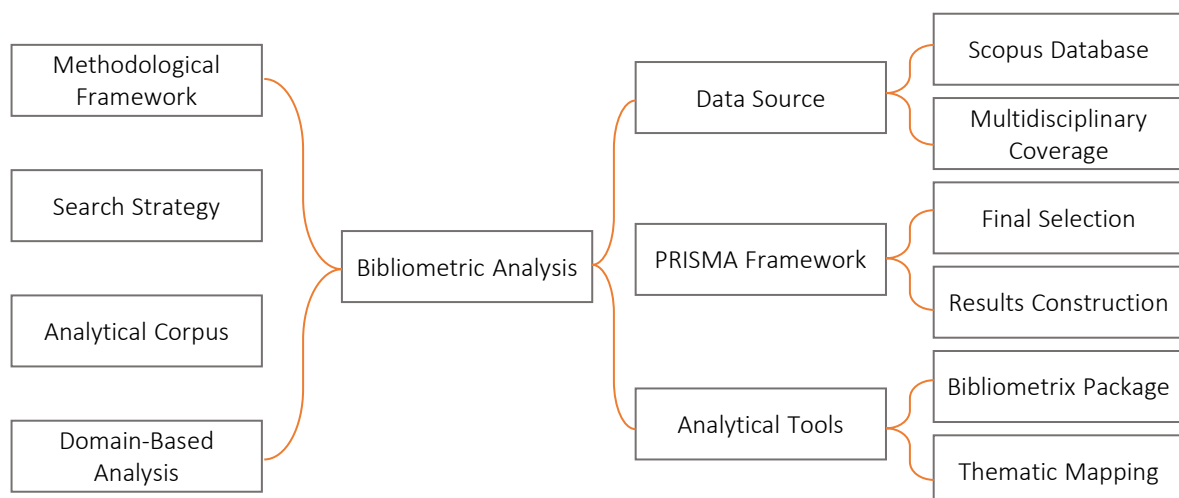


Figure 1. Bibliometric analysis workflow

relational insights into how scholarly domains develop over time. The Scopus database served as the principal data source due to its extensive and multidisciplinary coverage of peer-reviewed academic publications, which ensures a robust and representative corpus for analysis (Pranckutė, 2021; Baas et al., 2020).

2.1. Data retrieval

A targeted search query was developed to identify publications on inclusive governance and conceptually related governance models. To ensure adequate conceptual breadth, the query incorporated a set of closely related terms commonly used in the literature, including participatory, citizen-centered, people-centered, human-centered, and service-oriented governance. In constructing the search strategy, both American and British spelling variants were explicitly taken into account to maximize retrieval coverage and reduce the risk of omitting relevant publications.

The initial search string was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (“inclusive governance” OR “participatory governance” OR “human-centered governance” OR “human-centred governance” OR “citizen-centered governance” OR “citizen-centred governance” OR “people-centered governance” OR “people-centred governance” OR “service-oriented governance”).

To enhance transparency and methodological rigor, the study followed the core principles of the PRISMA framework as a guiding checklist for the screening and refinement of the bibliometric dataset, particularly at the stages of final sample selection, results construction, and discussion of findings (Page et al., 2021). While the study does not constitute a systematic review, PRISMA principles were applied to document the selection logic and quality control procedures in a reproducible manner.

Following established bibliometric practice, the analysis was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles and review papers, which provide the most consistent citation structures and standardized metadata required for reliable science mapping and network-based analyses (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Other document types, including conference papers, book chapters, and books, were excluded due to heterogeneity in metadata structures and limited comparability in network-based analyses. In addition, only English-language publications were retained to ensure interpretive consistency and to reduce noise in keyword-based procedures (e.g., co-occurrence analysis) caused by multilingual variation in terminology. With regard to the temporal scope, no lower bound was imposed on the publication year in order to capture early and foundational contributions to the field, while the upper bound was set inclusively to 2025, reflecting the most recent complete year available at the time of data collection (December 2025). A deduplication procedure was conducted to remove repeated records. No further restrictions were imposed with regard to geographical scope, subject areas, or institutional affiliations, allowing the analysis to capture the full interdisciplinary breadth of the research field.

The search initially yielded 2,898 documents of all types. Following the refinement process, the final analytical corpus was reduced to 1,990 documents. This refined dataset comprised 1,807 journal articles and 183 review papers.

2.2. Data processing

The analysis was carried out using the R-based Bibliometrix package (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017), which provides a comprehensive suite of tools for science mapping, including data import, descriptive analysis, and network visualization. This package has been widely adopted in bibliometric studies across various disciplines (Derviş, 2019; Santoso & Lionardo, 2024). Policy-relevant insights were derived through a combined interpretation of the thematic map, keyword frequency analysis, and the distribution of keywords across co-occurrence clusters. Thematic positioning was used to assess the relative maturity and centrality of research domains, while keyword frequency served as an indicator of agenda salience. In addition, the clustering structure of the co-occurrence network enabled the identification of conceptual convergence and fragmentation within the field, thereby highlighting areas of policy consolidation as well as domains characterized by emerging or underexplored policy relevance (Callon et al., 1991; Cobo et al., 2011).

To examine how inclusive governance is conceptualized across different research traditions, an additional domain-based thematic analysis was conducted. Closely related subject categories were analytically aggregated to enable meaningful cross-domain comparison. This aggregation does not constitute a theoretical reclassification, but rather an analytical grouping based on Scopus subject classifications and disciplinary proximity.

Accordingly, publications were grouped into three main analytical domains:

- (i) public governance and social systems (social sciences; arts and humanities; $n = 1,429$);
- (ii) environmental and sustainability governance (environmental science; energy; agricultural and biological sciences; $n = 762$);
- (iii) economic and organizational governance (business, management and accounting; economics, econometrics and finance; $n = 384$).

For each domain, thematic maps were generated using the Biblioshiny interface of the Bibliometrix package. Thematic structures (niche, motor, basic, and emerging themes) were automatically derived based on centrality and density metrics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The bibliometric analysis is based on a dataset of 1,990 documents retrieved from Scopus database, covering the period 1976–2025. This body of literature comprises journal articles and reviews and provides a comprehensive overview of the scholarly debate on governance models. Table 1 presents the main descriptive information about the dataset.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the bibliometric dataset (1,990)

Description	Results
Timespan	1976:2025
Sources	1,047
Documents	1,990
Annual Growth Rate %	14.22
Document Average Age	4.66
Average Citations per Doc	18.98
Document Contents	
Keywords Plus (ID)	3,997
Author's Keywords (DE)	5,834
Authors	
Authors	5,815
Authors of Single-Authored Docs	503
Authors Collaboration	
Single-Authored Docs	541
Co-Authors per Doc	3.11
International Co-Authorships %	26.57
Document Types	
Article	1,807
Review	183

Although the search strategy covered the period from 1976 to 2025, scholarly output in the early years was extremely limited and largely sporadic. The first isolated publication appeared in 1976, followed by an extended period of near absence of relevant studies throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Only sporadic publications appeared in the mid-1990s, with two documents published in 1994 and isolated contributions in 1995 and 1996. These early works remained rare and did not yet indicate the presence of a stable or cumulative research stream. Rather, they suggest that scholarly engagement with the topic was still fragmented and episodic at that time. More regular publication activity began to emerge from the late 1990s. During the period from 1999 to around 2008, annual scientific output remained low and uneven, typically limited to single-digit figures. An initial increase is observed after 2009, although publication volumes exhibit

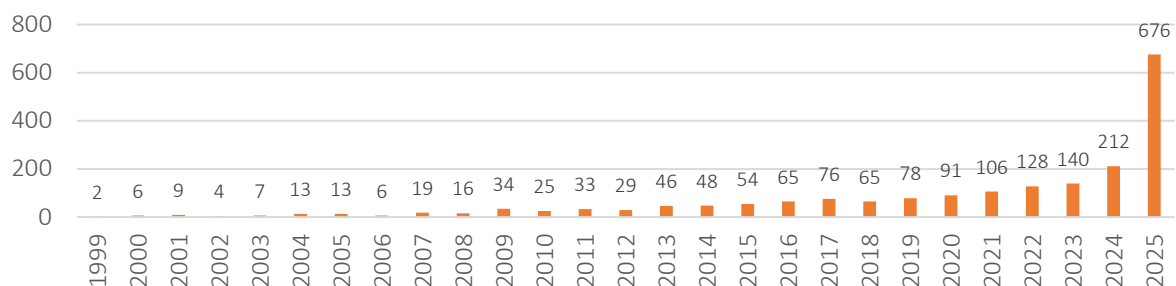


Figure 2. Annual production (1999–2025)

temporary fluctuations in the early 2010s, indicating that the field had not yet reached a stable growth phase. From approximately 2013 onward, publication activity shows a clearer upward trend, with a brief slowdown around 2018, followed by renewed and sustained growth. The most pronounced expansion occurs after 2020, culminating in a sharp surge in 2024 and an unprecedented peak in 2025, which records the highest number of publications in the dataset (Figure 2).

The highest peak in average annual citations is observed for articles published in 2005 (7.26), underscoring the strong and lasting influence of early foundational studies in the field. A comparable citation peak is also evident for publications from 2012 (7.10), while articles published in 2019 display elevated citation levels as well (6.38), reflecting the sustained relevance of both established and more recent contributions. In contrast, most publication years between 2003 and 2018 are characterized by moderate citation averages, generally ranging between 1.0 and 4.0 citations per year. The lower average citation values observed for the most recent years are primarily explained by shorter citation windows rather than diminished academic impact (Figure 3).

Table 2 presents the leading academic journals in which the analyzed publications are concentrated, reporting the number of articles alongside key journal-level impact indicators, including CiteScore 2024, SCImago Journal Rank (SJR 2024), and publishers. The highest volume of publications is observed in Sustainability (Switzerland) (84 articles), followed by Environmental Science and Policy (20), Marine Policy (20), Land (16), and Cities (15). The dataset is dominated by journals published by major international publishers, par-

ticularly Elsevier and MDPI, with additional representation from SAGE. The presence of high-impact outlets such as World Development, Energy Research and Social Science, and Cities – all characterized by elevated CiteScore and SJR values – indicates the strong positioning of inclusive governance research within influential interdisciplinary and policy-oriented journals. At the same time, the inclusion of journals spanning environmental studies (Water, Ocean and Coastal Management), rural and land-use research (Journal of Rural Studies, Land), and political and social sciences (Politics and Society) underscores the interdisciplinary nature of the research field. Overall, the distribution of sources reflects the integration of inclusive governance scholarship across sustainability, environmental policy, development studies, and governance-focused social science domains.

Table 3 reports the top 10 authors ranked by h-index within the dataset. For each author, the table presents the h-index, g-index, and m-index, along with the total number of citations, number of publications, and the year of first contribution, providing an overview of their citation impact and publication activity on the research topic.

When considering the institutional affiliations contributing to the dataset (Table 4), Wageningen University and Research records the highest number of publications (39), followed by the University of California (27) and the Leuphana Universität Lüneburg (24). A second group of institutions demonstrates comparable research output, including the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, the University of Tasmania, and the University of Toronto, each contributing 22 publications. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin follows closely with 21 articles, while Universitas Sumatera

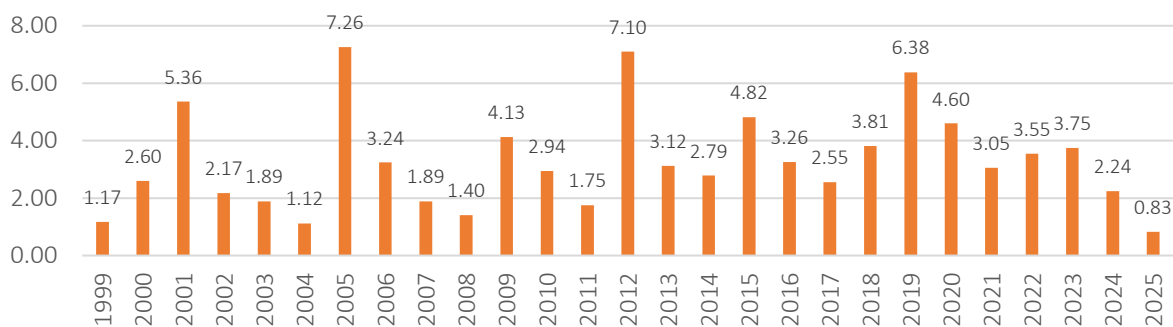


Figure 3. Mean total citations per year (1999–2025)

Table 2. Sources by number of publications on the research topic (top publication outlets)

Source Title	Number of Publications	Cite Score 2024	SJR 2024	Publisher
Sustainability (Basel)	84	7.7	0.688	MDPI
Environmental Science and Policy	20	10.4	1.715	Elsevier
Marine Policy	20	8.1	1.169	Elsevier
Land	16	5.9	0.773	MDPI
Cities	15	10.9	1.839	Elsevier
World Development	14	13.1	2.161	Elsevier
Geoforum	13	7.1	1.345	Elsevier
Water (Basel)	13	6.0	0.752	MDPI
Energy Research and Social Science	12	13.6	2.530	Elsevier
Journal of Rural Studies	11	11.3	1.763	Elsevier
Ocean and Coastal Management	11	9.8	1.245	Elsevier
Politics and Society	11	7.4	1.973	SAGE

Table 3. Authors' local impact

Author	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	NP	PY_start
Newig Jens	12	15	0.706	1449	15	2009
Komendantova Nadejda	8	10	0.889	211	10	2017
Renn O.	6	8	0.353	190	8	2009
Waheduzzaman Wahed	6	7	0.429	89	7	2012
Dean Rikki John	5	5	0.556	220	5	2017
Fischer Frank	5	6	0.25	1012	6	2006
Hertting Nils	5	7	0.556	115	7	2017
Jager Nicolas W.	5	8	0.5	335	8	2016
Kochskämper Elisa	5	6	0.5	290	6	2016
Bhusal Thaneshwar	4	4	1.333	23	4	2023

Utara and the University of Johannesburg each account for 20 publications. Rhodes University completes the top group with 19 publications.

Table 4. Most relevant affiliations

Affiliation	Articles
Wageningen University and Research	39
University of California	27
Leuphana Universität Lüneburg	24
International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis	22
University of Tasmania	22
University of Toronto	22
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin	21
Universitas Sumatera Utara	20
University of Johannesburg	20
Rhodes University	19

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of scientific production by country based on author affiliations, using a full counting approach whereby publications with international co-authorship are attributed to all participating countries. The United States leads the dataset with 619 publications, followed by the United Kingdom (499). Australia (309) and China (296) form the next

tier of contributors, while Indonesia (281) and Italy (268) also demonstrate substantial research output. Germany (244) and Canada (222) follow closely, alongside India (217), Spain (216), and the Netherlands (207). South Africa (163), Brazil (148), Belgium (104), and Sweden (100) complete the group of countries with the most notable publication activity.

Within the Central and Eastern European region (CEE), in addition to Germany, which remains the dominant contributor, a number of other countries have also made measurable contributions to the research field. Switzerland follows with a substantial publication output (90), indicating its strong engagement despite often being treated separately from the CEE grouping. Poland shows the average level of activity (28 publications), followed by Hungary (24) and Croatia (23). Slovakia contributes 19 publications, while the Czech Republic and Slovenia demonstrate comparable research output with 16 publications each. Serbia and Ukraine complete the regional picture, each accounting for 13 publications.

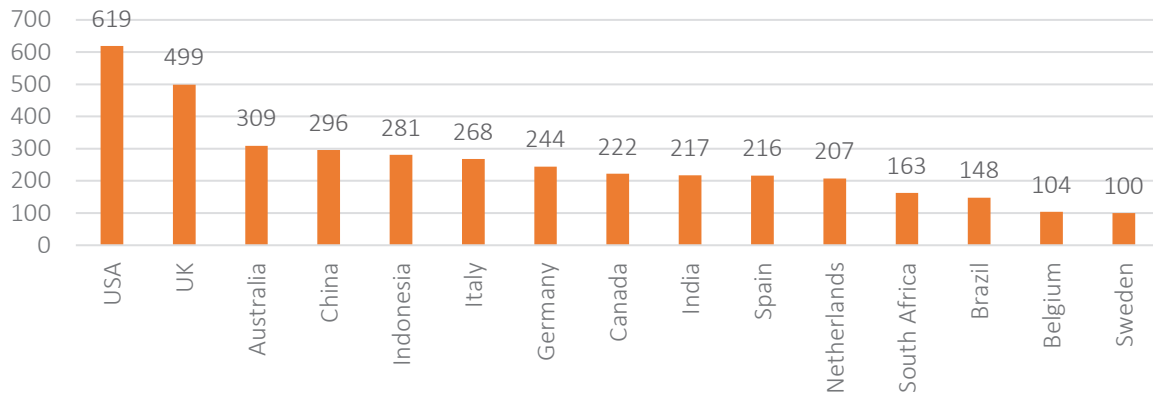


Figure 4. Country production

The most globally cited publications in the dataset are characterized by exceptionally high citation counts, reflecting their central role in shaping the intellectual foundations of the field. Highly influential works are concentrated around themes of governance innovation, participatory governance, and urban sustainability. Seminal contributions such as “Smart cities of the future” (Batty et al., 2012) and “Governance innovation and the citizen” (Swyngedouw, 2005) illustrate the strong influence of urban and governance-oriented perspectives. At the same time, widely cited studies on participatory democracy and environmental governance (e.g., Fung & Wright, 2001; Newig & Fritsch, 2009; Fung, 2015) highlight the enduring relevance of participation, multi-level governance, and inclusiveness.

The keyword co-occurrence network reveals a clearly structured thematic landscape dominated by a central cluster organized around governance approach, participatory governance, and participatory approach. These concepts occupy the most central positions in the network, indicating their

integrative role in connecting multiple research themes, including sustainability, decision-making, local participation, and public policy. A secondary cluster, positioned at the periphery, is associated with human- and community-oriented terms such as human, community participation, leadership, and stakeholder engagement, suggesting a more specialized or contextualized line of inquiry. Overall, the network reflects a strong conceptual core centered on participatory governance frameworks, alongside complementary but less densely connected human-centered perspectives.

The thematic mapping analysis revealed a highly simplified structure characterized by a limited number of well-defined clusters. The analysis identified a tightly grouped set of concepts (governance approach, participatory governance, and participatory approach) representing a thematically cohesive but relatively specialized research focus with high internal density and limited external connectivity. In contrast, generic terms such as human and humans demonstrated high centrality but low thematic development, reflect-

Table 5. Most global cited documents

Paper	TC	TC per Year	Normalized TC
Smart cities of the future (Batty et al., 2012)	1,906	136.14	19.17
Governance innovation and the citizen: The Janus face of governance-beyond-the-state (Swyngedouw, 2005)	1,435	68.33	9.42
Anthropogenic stresses on the world’s big rivers (Best, 2019)	1,021	145.86	22.86
Deepening democracy: Innovations in empowered participatory governance (Fung & Wright, 2001)	919	36.76	6.85
Putting the public back into governance: The challenges of citizen participation and its future (Fung, 2015)	819	74.45	15.44
Environmental governance: Participatory, multi-level – And effective? (Newig & Fritsch, 2009)	804	47.29	11.45
Insurgent planning: Situating radical planning in the global south (Miraftab, 2009)	657	38.65	9.36

source management and decision-making processes, alongside issue-specific concerns such as energy justice and urbanization. By contrast, economic and organizational governance exhibits a more diversified thematic profile, combining institutional, innovation-oriented, and stakeholder-based perspectives, with emerging attention to SDGs, legitimacy, and gender equality.

The bibliometric evidence shows that inclusive governance research has gradually evolved from a fragmented and emerging topic into a fast-growing interdisciplinary field. Early studies primarily approached inclusive governance within organizational settings rather than in relation to citizens and public policy; for example, a 1976 paper examined it as staff participation in hospital decision-making (Hirsch & Shulman, 1976). During the 1980s and early 1990s, publications remained sporadic and did not form a coherent research direction, suggesting that inclusive governance had not yet developed into an independent field of study.

From the late 1990s onward, scholarly interest began to stabilize, followed by steady growth after 2010. This trajectory has culminated in a sharp increase in publications in the mid-2020s, with 2024–2025 showing record output, indicating that inclusive governance has become a well-established academic topic. These findings are consistent with recent bibliometric studies in related governance fields, which report a rapid expansion of research after 2015 (Bhusal & Humagain, 2024), with a particularly notable surge in the post-pandemic period (Milosavljević et al., 2023). The recent growth is likely driven by increasing global demands for transparency and citizen participation, the rising importance of sustainability and good governance agendas, and the expansion of academic publishing, including open-access journals that support innovative governance research (Mudey & Arshad, 2025).

Corresponding to this quantitative growth, the analysis reveals a thematic convergence around core concepts of participatory decision-making. Co-occurrence mapping (Figure 5) shows that terms such as “governance approach,” “participatory governance,” and “participatory approach” form the central nexus of the literature. This indicates that scholars across various subfields co-

alesce around the principle that broad stakeholder involvement is essential to inclusive governance processes. A similar pattern was noted in the bibliometric review by Annahar et al. (2023), who identified participation as one of the key principles of inclusive governance, although not as the dominant organizing theme of the field. Emerging themes such as e-government and e-participation also indicate a growing role of digital tools in facilitating inclusive governance.

At the same time, the structure of the knowledge base points to areas that are comparatively underdeveloped or peripheral. Notably, a secondary cluster of keywords – including terms like “human,” “community participation,” “leadership,” and “stakeholder engagement” – appears at the margins of the network. These concepts, while present, are less densely connected to the main backbone of participatory governance research. Their peripheral position suggests that issues of individual agency, grassroots leadership, and social capital, though recognized, have not been fully integrated into the core theoretical debates. In other words, much of the literature has focused on institutional and procedural aspects of governance (e.g., designing participatory frameworks or evaluating governance outcomes), whereas the more nuanced human factors – how inclusion empowers particular groups, builds community resilience, or alters power dynamics – remain somewhat secondary.

In contrast to the findings of Annahar et al. (2023), a declining emphasis on human-centered and community-specific aspects of inclusion is observed. This divergence may reflect the increasing formalization of the field, where participation is more frequently conceptualized in institutional and procedural terms, potentially at the expense of a deeper understanding of how inclusion operates in practice at the level of individuals and communities.

This finding echoes observations in the broader governance scholarship that enhancing social equity through participation is challenging. Fung (2015), for example, notes that recent participatory innovations have uncertain effects on legitimacy and face significant obstacles in advancing social justice.

The cluster analysis reinforces this point: aspects like gender, youth, and marginalized communities' empowerment (which one might expect to be integral to truly inclusive governance) are not yet central in the literature. This indicates a gap whereby the breadth of participation (ensuring diverse voices) and the depth of participation (empowering those voices to influence outcomes) need to be more holistically addressed in future research.

The citation landscape of the field also helps to clarify its main ideas and practical relevance. A small number of highly influential works shape much of the discussion, showing both the stability of core concepts and the way the field has adapted to new governance challenges. One of the most cited studies is Fung and Wright's "Deepening democracy: Innovations in empowered participatory governance" (Fung & Wright, 2001), which examined real examples of power-sharing, such as participatory budgeting in Brazil and local governance councils in India. Their work demonstrated that participatory and deliberative practices can make governance more responsive and fair. Another key contribution is Swyngedouw's (2005) well-known argument that new governance arrangements are "Janus-faced," meaning they can create both democratic opportunities and risks. Its high citation count shows that many scholars recognize this dual nature of inclusive governance. From a policy perspective, this highlights an important warning: creating participatory spaces alone is not enough; their design must prevent elite capture and ensure broad inclusion. The most cited publications also illustrate that inclusive governance research is closely linked to real-world sustainability and urban challenges. Widely cited works such as "Smart cities of the future" (Batty et al., 2012) and "Anthropogenic stresses on the world's big rivers" (Best, 2019) come from urban planning and environmental science, yet their prominence in our dataset shows that inclusive governance is increasingly viewed as essential for addressing complex environmental and development problems. This confirms that inclusive governance is not an isolated topic but a connecting bridge between public administration and major global issues. Similar conclusions have been reached in scientometric analyses of collaborative governance, where Mashur et al. (2023) highlight

the role of the concept in addressing a wide range of global issues. However, their study does not explicitly conceptualize collaborative governance as an overarching or umbrella framework.

The analysis also reveals important conceptual gaps. In particular, inclusive governance research remains fragmented in its use of terminology and theoretical frameworks. While scholars increasingly converge around related concepts – such as collaborative governance, participatory management, and stakeholder engagement – the field lacks a unified conceptual foundation, and the term "inclusive governance" itself is not yet consistently adopted. This suggests that the field is still in a formative stage of theoretical integration.

At the same time, links to established frameworks and global policy agendas remain limited. For instance, stakeholder theory is only recently emerging in the literature, and relatively few studies explicitly connect their analyses to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), despite the relevance of Goal 16.7. Strengthening these connections could enhance both theoretical coherence and policy relevance.

Another important gap concerns the geographical distribution of research. The bibliometric data reveal a strong concentration of publications from North America and Western Europe, with the United States and the United Kingdom accounting for a substantial share of the literature, followed by other high-income research hubs such as Australia, China, and Canada. By contrast, regions facing acute governance challenges – including much of Sub-Saharan Africa, parts of South Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe – remain underrepresented. Even within Central and Eastern Europe, aside from countries such as Poland and Hungary, scholarly contributions appear sporadic. This geographical imbalance is consistent with findings from other bibliometric studies, which frequently identify a dominance of China and Global North scholarship in governance research (Rahayu, 2023; Arbayah et al., 2025).

This imbalance implies that the conceptualization of inclusive governance is largely shaped by Western academic contexts, while insights from regions where governance innovations often

emerge under conditions of inequality, informality, or political transition receive limited attention. Meaningful participation frequently develops through grassroots mobilization in contexts shaped by colonial legacies and socio-political exclusion (MirafTAB, 2009). The relative scarcity of such perspectives points to an epistemic bias in the literature. From a policy perspective, this suggests that advancing inclusive governance requires more inclusive knowledge production. Strengthening collaboration with scholars from underrepresented regions and supporting context-sensitive research would enhance the relevance, transferability, and practical value of inclusive governance frameworks across diverse institutional settings.

In light of these findings, several interpretative conclusions and policy insights can be drawn.

First, inclusive governance is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development and effective policy-making. The fact that academic output accelerated post-2015 (around the time the SDGs were adopted) and surged even more after 2020 suggests a reinforcing feedback: global agendas and crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need for trust and community engagement) have likely spurred research into how governments can be more inclusive and adaptive. This is a positive development for policymakers: they now have at their disposal a growing evidence base on the designs, benefits, and pitfalls of various participatory mechanisms.

Second, the divergences and gaps identified in the literature pinpoint where both scholarship and practice need to focus going forward. Encouragingly, topics like “gender equality” and “broad diversity” are beginning to emerge in the literature (particularly in the context of economic

and organizational governance), but these must transition into core considerations rather than afterthoughts. By doing so, future studies can provide guidance on how to ensure that inclusive governance is truly inclusive – that women, youth, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized stakeholders are not only present but influential in governance processes. This will help address the secondary status that cluster analysis found for community-oriented themes, making them part of the “bulk” of work rather than side notes.

Third, the thematic findings point to several actionable lessons for decision-makers. For one, the rise of terms like “e-government” and “e-participation” in recent years (notably appearing as emerging themes in public governance research) signals the importance of digital tools and platforms in enabling broader participation. Policymakers should invest in accessible e-governance platforms – for example, online consultation portals, participatory budgeting apps, crowdsourcing systems for local problems – as a complement to traditional in-person forums. Another insight is drawn from the environmental governance subfield: our analysis highlights emerging themes like “energy justice,” “alternative energy,” and “urbanization” in the context of participatory governance. This reflects a recognition that solving complex challenges like climate change and urban resilience requires inclusive approaches. Inclusive governance should be mainstreamed into sectoral policies – for instance, cities developing climate action plans should incorporate citizen assemblies or stakeholder committees to capture local knowledge and values (a practice already piloted in some leading cities). Likewise, energy transition projects (such as introducing renewables or phasing out coal) will likely see more success if communities are engaged in dialogue about justice and compensation.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to perform a bibliometric and science-mapping analysis of the academic literature on inclusive governance and its related concepts. The results show a gradual evolution of the field, with limited activity until the early 2010s, followed by steady growth after 2013 and a sharp expansion after 2020, reaching a peak in 2025. The thematic structure reveals a clear core centered on participation and participatory governance, while human-centered and community-specific aspects, as well as emerging themes such as digital governance, remain more peripheral and less integrated into the main body

of research. At the same time, the findings suggest that inclusive governance operates as an overarching umbrella concept that brings together diverse governance approaches within a broader analytical framework.

These findings lead to several conclusions. First, inclusive governance has transitioned into a mature and rapidly expanding research domain with a stable conceptual core. Second, the field remains uneven in its development, with important dimensions – particularly human-centered and digital aspects – requiring further theoretical and empirical integration. Third, the umbrella nature of inclusive governance underscores its potential as a unifying framework for addressing complex governance challenges across sectors. Overall, advancing the field will depend on strengthening conceptual coherence while broadening its thematic and empirical scope.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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