

Improving Urban Governance in Ghumayqa Municipality: Lessons for Sustainable Municipal Development in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract. Urban governance plays a critical role in achieving sustainable and inclusive city development. This study examines the state of urban governance in Ghumayqa Municipality, a local government in Saudi Arabia, and proposes improvements aligned with international best practices. The analysis assesses Ghumayqa's governance structures, processes, and outcomes, using the City of Sydney (Australia) and Dutch municipalities as benchmark cases. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, including policy analysis, stakeholder interviews, and comparative benchmarking. The findings reveal that Ghumayqa faces challenges such as centralized decision-making, limited fiscal autonomy, and low civic participation, hindering its ability to implement sustainable urban development initiatives. In contrast, the City of Sydney and Dutch cities demonstrate how empowering local institutions, ensuring transparency, and engaging citizens can lead to more effective urban management. The discussion highlights how Ghumayqa can benefit from adopting elements of these global practices—such as participatory planning, smart governance, and multi-level strategic coordination—tailored to the Saudi context. Key recommendations align with Saudi Vision 2030 and SDG 11, emphasizing enhanced local capacity, citizen engagement, and transparency to improve municipal performance and urban livability. This 5,000-word manuscript offers practical insights for strengthening urban governance in Ghumayqa and similar Saudi municipalities, bridging global best practices and local application.

Keywords: Urban Governance; Municipal Decentralization; Sustainable Development; Participatory Planning; Vision 2030.

Introduction

Effective urban governance is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable city development. Broadly defined, urban governance refers to “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a city’s social and economic resources” (UN-Habitat, 2020). Good urban governance is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable urban development, anchored by principles such as sustainability, equity, efficiency, transparency, accountability, security, and civic engagement (Da Cruz et al., 2019; UN-Habitat, 2020). In an era of complex urban challenges, governance approaches are increasingly networked and participatory rather than hierarchical, reflecting the need for collaboration among government entities, the private sector, civil society, and local communities (Hohn & Neuer, 2006).

International frameworks like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore the importance of urban governance: for example, SDG 11.3 urges “inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management” by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Achieving this requires strengthening municipal capacities and promoting citizen participation in planning and decision-making. Saudi Arabia’s national development strategy, Vision 2030, similarly calls for an “effective, accountable” government at all levels (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016), implying a need to empower local authorities and improve public-sector performance.

Saudi municipalities have historically been highly centralized, with the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing (MoMRAH) retaining most planning and budgetary authority. Although elected municipal councils were introduced in 2005—and expanded in subsequent elections—to decentralize some powers, many challenges remain; local councils generally have limited control over major urban projects, which are still led by central ministries (Mandeli, 2016).

Ghumayqa Municipality, located in the Mecca Region of Saudi Arabia (Figure 1), exemplifies these broader national patterns. With a modest population and a predominantly residential character, it faces pressures to provide quality services and economic opportunities under highly centralized constraints. Issues reported in Ghumayqa include bureaucratic procedures for project approval, reliance on central funding for infrastructure, lack of strategic urban planning, and a dearth of formal channels for resident input. These challenges can impede effective local development and erode public trust.

Nevertheless, reforms under Saudi Vision 2030 and programs such as the Future Saudi Cities Programme are gradually encouraging more transparency, performance measurement, and citizen-oriented service delivery (UN-Habitat, 2020). Ghumayqa, like other municipalities, has begun experimenting with e-government services and modest community feedback mechanisms.

Despite growing interest in decentralization and municipal reform within Saudi Arabia, existing research has focused largely on major cities (e.g., Riyadh and Jeddah) and broad national initiatives (Mandeli, 2016; Aina, 2017). Comparatively less attention has been paid to smaller municipalities like Ghumayqa, which lack the resources and visibility of bigger urban centers but face similar governance challenges. This study aims to fill that gap by examining Ghumayqa’s governance through global best-practice benchmarks and offering context-specific recommendations for local policy and institutional reforms.

This study examines how Ghumayqa’s governance can be enhanced by learning from global best practices. The City of Sydney provides a benchmark for strategic, community-driven municipal governance, and the Netherlands offers a model of participatory, consensus-based governance (the polder model). By comparing Ghumayqa with these examples, the study identifies key gaps and opportunities for reform in the Saudi context.

Literature Review

Urban Governance: Concepts and Importance

Urban governance encompasses the rules, processes, and relationships through which various stakeholders—government entities, the private sector, civil society, and residents—manage urban affairs (UN-Habitat, 2020). It defines how power and responsibilities are distributed and exercised at the city level. This shift recognizes that effective governance underpins efficient

service delivery, equitable resource allocation, and long-term strategic planning (Healey, 1998; Fung, 2015). Guided by frameworks such as the Global Campaign on Urban Governance and its Urban Governance Index, municipalities can assess strengths and weaknesses to foster inclusive, transparent, and accountable decision-making (Da Cruz et al., 2019). Empirical research further indicates that participatory models correlate with positive outcomes, including resilience and improvements in overall quality of life (Fung, 2015).

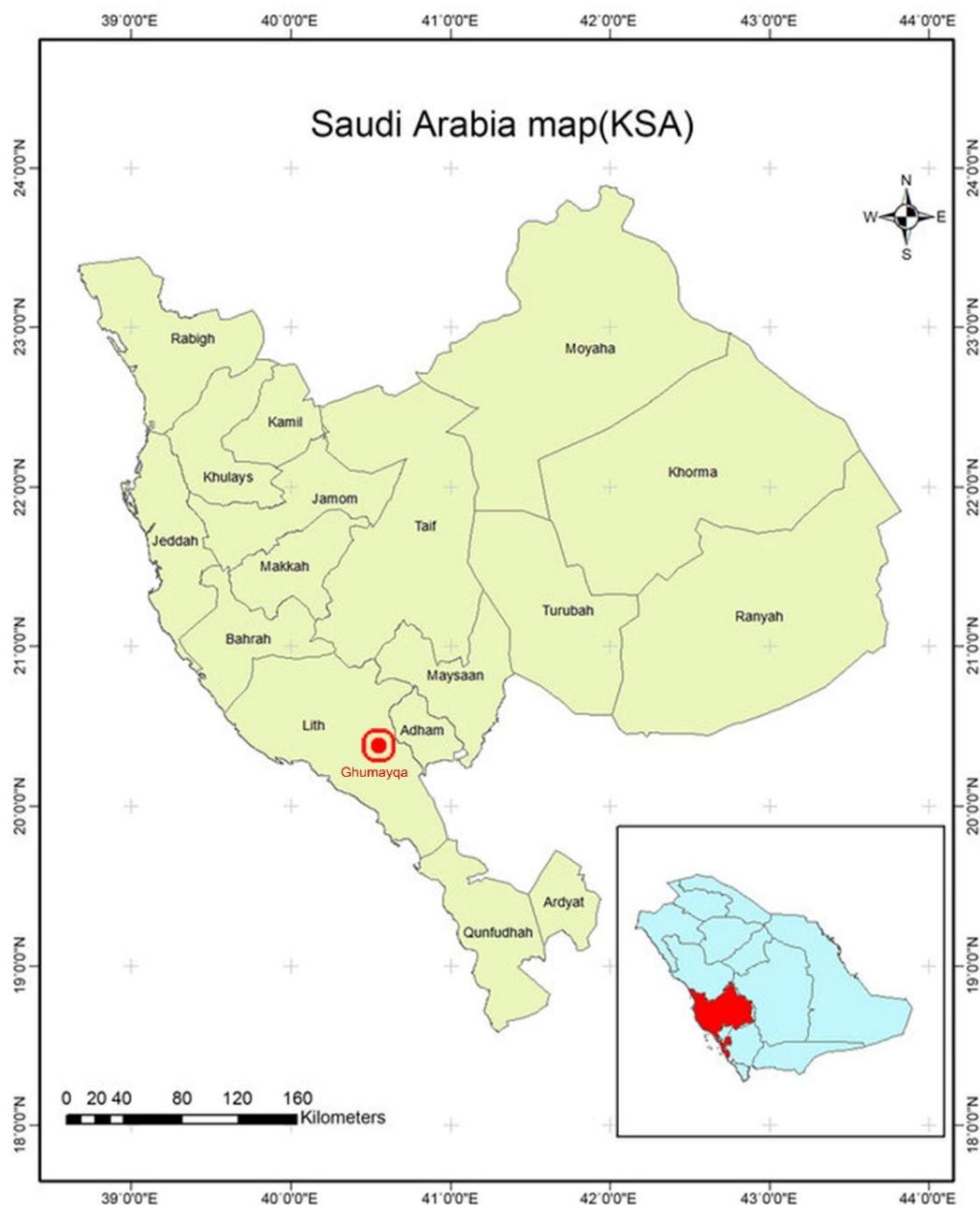


Figure 1. Ghumayqa municipality location within Makkah province map.

Global Best Practices in Urban Governance

Cities worldwide have developed governance models that offer valuable lessons. One leading example is the City of Sydney, Australia, where local autonomy is high, supported by a directly elected Lord Mayor and council (Vogel et al., 2018). This structure allows Sydney to levy local taxes, set policies, and finance infrastructure projects that respond directly to community priorities. Institutionalized public participation—through community forums, surveys, and digital platforms—ensures inclusivity and bolsters public trust (City of Sydney, 2023).

In Northern Europe, local governments similarly enjoy substantial autonomy and a tradition of participatory governance. The Netherlands epitomizes consensus-building through its polder model, wherein municipalities engage diverse stakeholders in collaborative, long-term planning (OECD, 2017). Amsterdam's urban vision, for instance, evolved from extensive dialogues among residents, businesses, and regional authorities. While time-intensive, the process fosters broad acceptance and smoother implementation of projects (Dooren et al., 2021).

Smart governance and digital innovation also feature prominently in best-practice models. Singapore's Smart Nation initiative integrates technology in public services—transportation, healthcare, and emergency management—under a cohesive strategy (Lee et al., 2016). Although Singapore is more centralized than Australia or the Netherlands, its coordinated approach to data and ICT underscores the value of strategic alignment in harnessing digital tools for governance.

While Sydney and Dutch municipalities operate within socio-political contexts that differ markedly from Saudi Arabia—especially in terms of cultural norms and legal frameworks—their governance experiences remain useful references for Ghumayqa. Fundamental principles of decentralization, participatory decision-making, and transparent administration are widely transferable, provided they are adapted to local institutional and cultural realities (Mandeli, 2016). Saudi municipalities can selectively adopt these principles—e.g., e-governance tools, local budgetary authority, and community forums—in ways that respect religious and social values and align with national regulations.

Urban Governance in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's municipalities operate within a centralized framework, with significant oversight from national ministries (Mandeli, 2016). However, rapid urbanization has driven calls for localized governance to meet residents' needs more effectively (Husa in & Khalil, 2013). Reforms over the past two decades have introduced elected municipal councils and encouraged cities to develop local strategic plans (Aina, 2017). Nevertheless, local authorities often remain financially dependent on central allocations and lack meaningful public participation mechanisms (Hegazy et al., 2021).

Recent Saudi-focused research suggests that municipalities struggle to implement reforms due to limited administrative capacity, insufficient legal autonomy, and cultural hesitations around direct citizen engagement (Mandeli, 2016; Hegazy et al., 2021). Scholars highlight that incremental decentralization—accompanied by capacity-building and respect for local customs—can enhance trust and boost municipal performance (Saleh, 1995; Kanyane et al., 2020). Nevertheless, small or mid-sized municipalities such as Ghumayqa face an even steeper challenge because of constrained resources and less national policy attention compared to larger cities like Riyadh or Jeddah (Mandeli, 2016). This underscores the urgent need for tailored strategies that bridge global best practices with local governance realities.

In summary, effective urban governance is crucial for sustainable development and livability. Ghumayqa now has a window of opportunity—provided by ongoing national reforms—to strengthen local governance by drawing on these global best practices. The following sections present the methodology and findings of a detailed case study designed to identify context-specific recommendations for Ghumayqa.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative case study approach, focusing on Ghumayqa Municipality (Figure 2). The aim was to analyze Ghumayqa's governance structures, identify key shortcomings, and propose viable reforms by comparing them to two benchmark cases: the City of Sydney and the Netherlands' consensus-based municipal governance.



Figure 2. Ghumayqa municipality location within Laith Governorate.

Data Collection

1. Policy Documents and Regulations: Saudi municipal laws, Vision 2030 policy frameworks, and UN-Habitat reports on Saudi urban development provided the legal and administrative context.
2. Semi-Structured Interviews:
 - Sampling: We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample consisting of (a) 5 municipal officials (including council members and department heads), (b) 4 local residents active in community affairs, (c) 3 business owners, and (d) 2 community leaders with roles in local organizations. Participants were selected based on their involvement in or knowledge of Ghumayqa's governance and willingness to discuss municipal challenges.
 - Procedure: Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and included questions about decision-making procedures, project approval mechanisms, fiscal autonomy, and experiences with civic engagement. Interviews were conducted in person, except for two held via phone due to scheduling constraints.
 - Analysis: All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed. Transcripts were coded thematically (using an open coding approach), focusing on the five governance dimensions outlined below. Recurring themes such as “centralized control,” “lack of transparency,” and “low participation” emerged, which were then clustered for comparison against global benchmarks.
3. Comparative Benchmarking: Secondary data on Sydney and Dutch municipalities were drawn from official city websites, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reports from international organizations (e.g., OECD, UN-Habitat). This enabled systematic comparison across governance dimensions—decentralization, strategic planning, transparency, participation, and service effectiveness.

Data collection was constrained by the limited public availability of municipal records, as Ghumayqa does not systematically publish policy or budget documents. Interviewees sometimes hesitate to speak candidly about shortcomings in municipal operations due to concerns over hierarchical sensitivities. These limitations reduced the depth of certain financial and regulatory details, but triangulation with policy documents and media reports helped cross-verify key points.

Analytical Framework

Ghumayqa's governance was analyzed across five dimensions, identified from the literature:

1. Institutional Framework & Decentralization – Examines local authority, decision-making autonomy, and alignment with national entities.
2. Planning & Strategy – Evaluates the existence and coherence of strategic plans at the municipal level.
3. Transparency & Accountability – Assesses openness in budgetary processes, policy decisions, and oversight mechanisms.
4. Public Participation – Looks at citizen engagement tools, formal or informal, and the presence of civil society groups.

5. Service Delivery & Effectiveness – Reviews the quality, responsiveness, and coordination of municipal services.

Interview data were coded according to these categories, and the emergent themes were compared to practices in the City of Sydney and Dutch municipalities to highlight key gaps and opportunities.

Data Analysis

Thematic coding of interview transcripts and document content facilitated the identification of recurring governance challenges. Triangulation with official statements, local media reports, and best-practice city documentation strengthened the reliability of findings. A comparative matrix juxtaposed Ghumayqa's performance in each dimension against that of Sydney and Dutch municipalities, revealing potential governance reforms suited to the Saudi context.

A limitation of this study is its single-case focus, which constrains broader generalizability. Nonetheless, Ghumayqa's profile is representative of many smaller Saudi municipalities. Future research could expand to multiple case studies and incorporate quantitative metrics (e.g., municipal performance indicators). Despite these constraints, the methodology provides a grounded analysis of Ghumayqa's governance and a robust basis for the ensuing recommendations.

Findings

The assessment of Ghumayqa's urban governance revealed several critical challenges, as well as a few emerging positive signs. The findings are organized by key governance dimensions.

Institutional Setup and Autonomy

Ghumayqa's municipal governance remains highly centralized, with limited local autonomy due to the dominance of national authorities, particularly the Ministry of Municipal, Rural Affairs, and Housing (MoMRAH) and other government ministries. Major decisions and urban projects are largely controlled at the national level, leaving the municipality with minimal decision-making authority. The local mayor and a municipal council of approximately a dozen members oversee basic local services, but their role is predominantly advisory, with substantive decision-making power residing outside the municipality.

Financially, Ghumayqa is heavily dependent on central government allocations, lacking the authority to generate independent revenue or reallocate funds. This financial reliance contributes to a slow, top-down decision-making process that may not effectively address local priorities.

Despite these constraints, the introduction of an elected municipal council since the mid-2000s—including the participation of women since 2015—has provided a degree of local representation and accountability. However, councilors report having limited influence over budgetary decisions and project execution, highlighting the municipality's restricted governance capacity. In practice, Ghumayqa's local government functions primarily as an administrative extension of central authorities, rather than as a self-governing entity with substantial policymaking autonomy.

To further illustrate the governance disparities between Ghumayqa and international best practices, Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of key governance attributes in Ghumayqa, the City of Sydney, and Dutch municipalities.

Table 1. Comparison of Key Governance Attributes in Ghumayqa, the City of Sydney, and Dutch Municipalities

| Governance Attribute | Ghumayqa Municipality | City of Sydney | Dutch Municipalities |
|---|--|---|--|
| Institutional Framework & Autonomy | <i>Highly centralized; limited local decision-making authority; financial dependence on central government</i> | <i>High degree of local autonomy; direct revenue generation; elected mayor and council</i> | <i>Decentralized, consensus-driven governance; strong fiscal autonomy</i> |
| Planning & Strategy | <i>Reactive, segmented planning; lacks a comprehensive urban strategy</i> | <i>Long-term strategic planning; integrated land-use, transport, and economic plans</i> | <i>Participatory, long-term urban planning integrated across sectors</i> |
| Transparency & Accountability | <i>Low transparency; minimal access to budget and decision-making details</i> | <i>High transparency; open council meetings, public budgets, and performance metrics</i> | <i>Transparent decision-making with multi-stakeholder input</i> |
| Public Participation | <i>Very limited public participation; informal feedback channels</i> | <i>Strong public participation; institutionalized community engagement mechanisms</i> | <i>Institutionalized participatory governance; co-creation with citizens</i> |
| Service Delivery & Effectiveness | <i>Basic services managed; major projects rely on central government funding</i> | <i>Efficient, localized service delivery; responsive to local needs</i> | <i>High service efficiency due to autonomous local management</i> |
| Smart Governance & Innovation | <i>Minimal adoption of smart governance tools; e-government in early stages</i> | <i>Advanced smart governance; digital platforms for citizen services and urban management</i> | <i>Smart governance integrated into municipal operations; data-driven planning</i> |

Planning and Strategy

Ghumayqa's municipality lacks a comprehensive urban development plan, resulting in a reactive and fragmented approach to planning. The municipality's technical capacity is limited, with its small planning department primarily focused on permit approvals rather than proactive urban design. Sectoral planning—covering housing, transportation, and utilities—is managed by respective national ministries, with minimal coordination at the municipal level. Consequently, the city has no integrated strategy to guide long-term growth or infrastructure investment, and development is largely driven by immediate needs and external directives rather than a locally conceived vision.

For instance, the construction of new roads and public facilities is typically initiated by central authorities as part of national programs, rather than through a locally driven plan. However, recent efforts under the Future Saudi Cities Programme have led to the drafting of a basic land-use plan, outlining designated residential, commercial, and public spaces. While this plan, if adopted, could provide a preliminary framework for structured development, its enforcement and implementation remain uncertain due to the municipality's reliance on higher-level funding and regulatory support.

Overall, Ghumayqa's planning approach remains short-term and fragmented, underscoring the urgent need for a coherent, locally driven urban strategy that aligns municipal decision-making with long-term sustainability and growth objectives.

Transparency and Citizen Participation

Historically, Ghumayqa's governance has been marked by low transparency and minimal civic engagement. Major decisions—such as budget allocations and project selection—were

typically made behind closed doors, announced to the public only after finalization, and lacked independent oversight from local media or civil society groups. Additionally, institutionalized participatory mechanisms (e.g., town hall meetings, public hearings, advisory councils) have been absent, forcing citizens to rely on informal channels—like personal networks or appeals to influential figures—to express concerns. As a result, only a small, well-connected group has historically shaped local government.

However, recent developments suggest a shift toward greater openness. The municipality has begun using the national “Balady” e-portal, which enhances procedural transparency by allowing residents to track permit applications and access municipal services online. Additionally, project announcements and municipal updates are now shared more frequently via Ghumayqa’s website and social media platforms, marking an improvement in public communication. Informal engagement between local officials and community members has also increased, reflecting a growing awareness of the need for public involvement.

Although incremental improvements in communication have occurred—such as limited e-government services—Ghumayqa still lacks formal consultation processes, participatory budgeting, and independent oversight bodies. This absence of structured engagement undermines institutionalized transparency and inclusive public involvement, ultimately constraining effective decision-making and accountability.

Service Delivery and Performance

The effectiveness of service delivery in Ghumayqa presents a mixed picture. The municipality effectively manages basic services such as street cleaning, waste collection, and permit issuance, which fall within its direct administrative control. While these services are generally provided, occasional delays and quality inconsistencies—such as irregular garbage collection in certain neighborhoods—have been reported by residents.

For larger-scale services and infrastructure projects, Ghumayqa remains highly dependent on central government programs. Major projects, including road improvements, new schools, hospitals, and utility upgrades, are typically planned and funded by national ministries, leading to potential delays and misalignment with local priorities. For instance, a critical road repair was postponed for several years due to ministerial approval and funding constraints, despite clear local demand. Residents perceive that urgent local needs are often deprioritized within national planning frameworks, limiting the municipality’s responsiveness. Additionally, budgetary constraints and a lack of technical expertise restrict the municipality’s ability to undertake complex projects independently.

Performance monitoring in Ghumayqa remains limited and input-focused, with no formal system of local performance indicators. Unlike advanced cities that measure service efficiency, response times, or citizen satisfaction, Ghumayqa primarily reports administrative outputs—such as the number of permits issued or completion of ministry-assigned projects—rather than evaluating service outcomes. Moreover, the absence of local development targets, such as increasing green space per capita or reducing traffic congestion, further hinders proactive urban management.

Nonetheless, when granted specific mandates and resources, the municipality has demonstrated the ability to execute small-scale projects successfully. A notable example is the

construction of a local marketplace, completed on time and within budget, highlighting the potential for improved service delivery with greater local authority and capacity.

Overall, while basic municipal services are maintained, heavy reliance on central government approvals, limited discretionary power, and weak performance management undermine Ghumayqa's ability to proactively address local needs and enhance urban living conditions.

Discussion

The comparison between Ghumayqa's current governance and the practices observed in the City of Sydney and Dutch municipalities highlights several areas of divergence and potential learning. The following discussion synthesizes these comparative insights and proposes how Ghumayqa (and similar Saudi municipalities) might move toward more effective governance in line with global standards, while aligning with national goals.

Decentralization and Local Empowerment

A key takeaway from international case studies is the advantage of empowering local governments. Cities like Sydney and those in the Netherlands thrive under significant self-governance: Sydney's City Council has both the authority and financial resources to implement local initiatives, while Dutch municipalities operate under legal mandates with sufficient funding to manage their own affairs. In contrast, Ghumayqa functions within a highly centralized system. Providing Ghumayqa with a modest degree of autonomy—such as a dedicated local development budget or the authority to approve specific projects—would enable it to address community needs more effectively.

As a practical measure, the central government could launch a pilot program granting Ghumayqa and similar municipalities expanded local control in key areas like planning approvals and budget allocations. This initiative would help demonstrate the benefits of decentralization. International experience indicates that cities perform more efficiently when they can govern themselves within a structured accountability framework, ensuring oversight to prevent mismanagement.

For Saudi policymakers, revising laws and regulations to delegate specific responsibilities to municipalities like Ghumayqa could lead to more responsive and effective governance. However, any move toward decentralization should be accompanied by robust oversight and capacity-building measures, mirroring the balanced approach seen in Dutch multi-level governance, where local autonomy operates within well-defined national frameworks.

Strategic Planning

The lack of a local strategic plan in Ghumayqa contrasts sharply with Sydney's deliberate long-term planning and the Netherlands' tradition of integrated spatial planning. Developing a strategic urban development framework—such as a "Ghumayqa 2035 Vision"—would provide a clear roadmap for sustainable growth and investment. This plan should be formulated with active input from local stakeholders and aligned with broader objectives, including Vision 2030 and regional development strategies.

A well-defined, community-endorsed strategy would help Ghumayqa prioritize its development goals and strengthen its position when negotiating with the central government for funding or project approvals, demonstrating how local initiatives align with national priorities.

This approach mirrors initiatives like the Future Saudi Cities Programme, which encourages municipalities to develop data-driven urban plans with ministerial support.

Dutch cities exemplify how well-integrated, cross-sectoral urban plans effectively guide sustainable development. Similarly, a robust strategic plan would enable Ghumayqa to move from reactive problem-solving to proactive city-building—identifying opportunities such as new parks and economic zones while preparing for future challenges like population growth and climate adaptation.

Beyond its technical benefits, the planning process itself holds immense value: engaging local residents, businesses, and community leaders fosters a shared vision and builds consensus around the city’s future. Moving forward, Ghumayqa’s leadership should prioritize developing and institutionalizing a strategic plan, ensuring it serves as the foundation for broader governance improvements and long-term resilience.

Community Engagement

Ghumayqa has an opportunity to make rapid progress in citizen engagement by adopting best practices from leading global cities. Sydney’s experience demonstrates that regularly involving the public in decision-making leads to more effective and widely supported policies. To achieve similar results, Ghumayqa’s municipality could introduce structured community consultation forums, such as quarterly town hall meetings or issue-specific workshops, to solicit public input on local plans, budget priorities, and upcoming projects.

Even small initiatives—such as establishing a citizen advisory committee for park improvements or inviting youth representatives to contribute ideas—would signal a shift toward greater public participation. Some Gulf cities have already piloted similar measures, including youth councils and participatory budgeting forums, offering valuable lessons that Ghumayqa can adapt to its context.

Over time, these engagement practices can be institutionalized within municipal governance—making public consultation a required step for major projects or creating permanent neighborhood committees to ensure ongoing dialogue. Digital engagement will also play a crucial role: the municipality can leverage social media, online surveys, and a dedicated e-participation platform to reach a wider audience and gather diverse perspectives.

By fostering open communication channels, the municipality can enhance decision-making while strengthening its legitimacy. Experiences from high-trust societies like Scandinavia highlight how meaningful participation creates a virtuous cycle of civic trust and cooperation. This approach aligns with SDG 11.3’s emphasis on participatory urban planning and directly addresses the current disconnect between local officials and the public.

As residents see their input valued and translated into tangible improvements, community engagement will evolve into a standard and expected part of governance in Ghumayqa, reinforcing a culture of transparency, trust, and shared responsibility.

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is a crucial complement to public participation, and Ghumayqa must work toward making its operations significantly more open. As seen in Sydney and other well-governed cities, transparent governance is a prerequisite for meaningful civic engagement—people are far

more likely to participate when they have access to information and see that officials are held accountable.

To begin, the municipality should publish an annual report outlining its budget, expenditures, and project progress in a clear and accessible format. Major decisions—such as municipal council resolutions, development proposals, and planning approvals—should be made publicly available, whether on the municipality’s website or through notices at community centers. Additionally, council meeting agendas and minutes should be published, allowing residents to track discussions and deliberations on local matters.

Enhancing transparency will empower residents to stay informed and hold the municipality accountable, fostering constructive pressure for improved governance. To further strengthen accountability, Ghumayqa could introduce citizen feedback mechanisms, such as public satisfaction surveys or independent local audits, to assess municipal performance. For instance, an annual “citizen report card” where residents rate local services could identify areas needing improvement and encourage responsive action from officials.

A more robust accountability framework could also include an oversight committee, potentially composed of respected community members, to review municipal spending and ethics. While Ghumayqa is already subject to upward accountability to the central government, it would benefit from stronger downward accountability to its residents—ensuring that local leadership is responsive to the needs and expectations of the community.

By embracing open-government principles and proactive accountability measures, Ghumayqa can gradually build public trust and instill a culture of integrity. These reforms align directly with Vision 2030’s governance objectives of transparency and effectiveness, while also mirroring global best practices for clean, citizen-centered governance.

Smart Governance and Innovation

Technology can be a powerful enabler of the reforms outlined above, helping Ghumayqa streamline services, enhance transparency, and engage citizens more effectively. By following global best practices, the municipality can implement e-governance tools that modernize public administration and make local government more accessible.

Expanding the use of the Balady platform (or a similar local system) for permit applications, issue reporting, and information access would significantly improve efficiency while reducing bureaucratic barriers. Additionally, introducing a 311-style system or a mobile app that allows residents to submit service requests and track responses in real time would make government services more responsive and citizen-friendly.

A dedicated open data portal where key municipal data—budgets, project updates, and service performance metrics—are published could further boost transparency and encourage community-driven solutions. Singapore’s success with smart city initiatives demonstrates that technology works best when paired with strong governance and a clear strategic vision.

To maximize impact, Ghumayqa should integrate technology in ways that directly support broader governance goals. For instance:

- Online platforms for public consultations would combine digital tools with participatory governance.
- Data analytics could be used to identify service gaps and inform strategic urban planning.

Such innovations would not only modernize Ghumayqa's administration but also align with Vision 2030's digital transformation objectives, strengthening the city's technological capacity and civic engagement. Young, tech-savvy residents would particularly welcome these improvements, potentially encouraging greater youth participation in municipal affairs.

However, the adoption of new technologies must be accompanied by capacity-building measures—including training staff in ICT, maintaining digital systems, and ensuring digital inclusivity so that residents without internet access are not left behind. With thoughtful planning and investment, smart governance tools can make Ghumayqa's administration more efficient, transparent, and responsive to its citizens' needs.

Local Context and Capacity

While global models provide valuable lessons, reforms in Ghumayqa must be contextually adapted to align with local cultural norms and institutional realities. Proposed changes should respect traditional values; framing citizen participation as an extension of the concept of shura (consultation) can make engagement more culturally resonant. At the same time, strengthening the municipality's institutional capacity is essential. Targeted training programs for municipal staff and councilors in strategic planning, e-governance, and participatory methods will equip them with the necessary skills to implement these changes effectively.

However, significant barriers may impede these reforms:

- Legal and Regulatory Hurdles: National legislation may limit the extent of local fiscal autonomy, making decentralization reforms slower to implement.
- Cultural Resistance: Some community members or officials might prefer traditional, top-down decision-making structures, slowing acceptance of participatory governance.
- Capacity Gaps: Ghumayqa's municipal staff will require training to manage new digital platforms and participatory processes. Without capacity-building, technology could be underutilized.
- Financial Constraints: Ongoing dependence on central government allocations may restrict the municipality's ability to implement large-scale projects, even if it gains the authority to propose them.

By anticipating these barriers, local leaders can collaborate with national ministries, communicate the benefits of participatory approaches, and seek external support (e.g., from UN-Habitat) to ensure that governance reforms are gradual, well-resourced, and integrated into the broader Saudi policy framework.

Recommendations

In summary, the following actions are recommended for Ghumayqa Municipality to enhance urban governance:

1. Empower Local Authority: Gradually decentralize fiscal and administrative powers to Ghumayqa. For example, increase its discretionary budget for local projects and allow the municipal council greater decision-making authority as part of a pilot program under national supervision.
2. Formulate a Strategic Plan: Develop a comprehensive City Development Strategy (e.g., "Ghumayqa 2035") through a participatory planning process. This plan should align with

Saudi Vision 2030 objectives and set clear local targets for infrastructure, economic development, and quality of life.

3. Institutionalize Public Participation: Establish formal mechanisms for community engagement, such as quarterly town hall meetings, citizen advisory committees for key projects, and participatory budgeting initiatives for a portion of municipal expenditures. Ensure that diverse groups (including women and youth) are actively included in these engagement efforts to capture a wide range of perspectives. Leverage online platforms to gather broader citizen input.
4. Enhance Transparency and Accountability: Publish annual reports detailing municipal budgets, project progress, and performance metrics. Make council meetings and decisions accessible to the public (e.g., by publishing meeting minutes or allowing observers). Implement citizen feedback tools (surveys, report cards) and independent audits to evaluate services, thereby strengthening downward accountability.
5. Adopt Smart Governance Tools: Expand e-government services (building on the Balady platform) to streamline permitting and complaints. Introduce a mobile app or 311 system for citizen service requests, and create an open data portal for municipal information to increase transparency. Such digital initiatives can also engage tech-savvy youth and local entrepreneurs in co-developing solutions.
6. Build Municipal Capacity: Invest in training programs for Ghumayqa's staff and elected officials on strategic planning, community engagement, and digital governance. Seek partnerships with national ministries, universities, or international agencies (e.g., UN-Habitat, OECD) for technical assistance and knowledge exchange (for example, seconding Ghumayqa's staff to learn from well-governed cities or establishing twinning arrangements). Additionally, creating incentives to attract and retain skilled municipal employees (urban planners, IT specialists, etc.) will strengthen the capacity base.
7. Monitor and Evaluate Progress: Develop a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) for governance (e.g., number of public meetings held, budget execution rate, citizen satisfaction scores) and track them annually. Comparing these metrics against benchmarks or targets (including SDG 11 indicators) will help evaluate the impact of reforms and guide continuous improvement.

By taking these steps, Ghumayqa can make significant strides toward a more responsive, effective, and sustainable urban governance model that fulfills the promise of Vision 2030 and the SDGs.

Conclusion

This study examined how Ghumayqa's urban governance could be reformed by drawing on global best practices and aligning with Saudi Vision 2030 and the SDGs. The City of Sydney and Dutch municipalities highlight the effectiveness of decentralization, inclusive planning, and transparent administration. Although Ghumayqa faces substantial structural constraints—particularly in budgetary and decision-making autonomy—selective adaptation of these approaches is both feasible and beneficial.

Key recommendations include developing a “Ghumayqa 2035” strategic plan, institutionalizing citizen engagement (e.g., regular town halls, advisory committees), enhancing financial and decision-making authority, and adopting smart governance tools to improve

transparency and accountability. Capacity-building—through staff training, clearer municipal mandates, and stronger oversight—remains crucial for sustained success. These steps can help Ghumayqa become a local leader in effective governance, inspiring other Saudi municipalities to embrace participatory, transparent, and technology-enabled governance models.

While this research concentrated on a single municipality, many findings apply broadly to smaller cities throughout Saudi Arabia. Future studies could expand on the methodology by including multiple cases and incorporating quantitative metrics of governance performance. Ultimately, Ghumayqa's reforms, if well-implemented, will show how localized governance innovations can contribute meaningfully to national development strategies and improve the day-to-day lives of urban residents.

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