Institutional synergy for service innovation: A quality-centric multi-sectoral study

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Abstract

Aim: This study examined how institutional synergy can be operationalized to promote sustainable public service innovation through cross-sector collaboration anchored in quality management principles. It focused on how public institutions, including the Civil Registry Office, the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), higher education institutions (HEIs), and quality assurance (QA) units, can address fragmented systems, inconsistent standards, and limited collaboration to enhance citizen-centered service delivery.

Methodology: A qualitative action research design was employed to develop an implementation-ready framework through stakeholder engagement. Six key informants from government agencies, HEIs, and QA units participated in semi-structured interviews and collaborative design workshops. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify existing quality practices, barriers and enablers of institutional synergy, and feasible collaborative mechanisms.

Findings: The findings revealed that although participating institutions had established ISO-based quality assurance systems (ISO 9001 and ISO 21001), these operated largely in isolation and did not adequately support cross-agency learning or service innovation. Institutional silos, limited data interoperability, and weak collaboration protocols constrained innovation efforts. Key enablers of synergy included leadership commitment, policy alignment, integrated information systems, and shared capacity-building initiatives. A major outcome of the study was the development of the Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation, incorporating a shared Knowledge Hub to support audit learning, feedback integration, and evidence-based decision-making.

Conclusion: The study concludes that institutional synergy anchored in ISO-based quality systems and collaborative governance structures can significantly enhance sustainable and citizen-centered public service delivery. The proposed framework provides a scalable and replicable roadmap for transforming fragmented quality practices into coordinated, innovation-driven public services, thereby strengthening institutional responsiveness, accountability, and long-term resilience.

Keywords: *institutional synergy; public service innovation; collaborative governance; ISO 9001; ISO 21001; quality management; sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, public service systems are under increasing pressure to deliver efficient, transparent, and citizen-centered services in response to complex social, economic, and governance challenges. International governance frameworks emphasize collaboration, accountability, and innovation as essential elements of modern public administration (Meuleman, 2021). However, many public institutions continue to operate within siloed structures, resulting in fragmented service delivery, duplicated efforts, and inconsistent quality outcomes.

In the Philippine context, public-facing institutions such as the Civil Registry Office, the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), higher education institutions (HEIs), and quality assurance (QA) units frequently serve overlapping stakeholders but function under distinct mandates, policies, and operational systems. While these institutions are individually tasked with ensuring service quality and compliance, coordination across agencies remains limited. As a result,

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citizens often encounter delays, procedural inconsistencies, and uneven service standards despite the existence of internal quality assurance mechanisms.

Collaborative governance has emerged as a strategic response to these challenges, emphasizing deliberate cooperation among public agencies and partner institutions to address complex societal needs. Research suggests that collaboration enhances service effectiveness when supported by strong institutional design, leadership, and shared accountability mechanisms. However, collaboration alone does not guarantee synergy. Without common quality standards, interoperable systems, and shared learning platforms, collaborative initiatives often remain fragmented and transactional (Din, et al., 2023).

Despite extensive research on collaborative governance, public service innovation, and quality management systems, these areas have largely been examined separately. Studies on collaborative governance focus mainly on policy coordination, while service innovation research emphasizes co-creation without sufficiently addressing the operational role of quality systems. Likewise, research on ISO 9001 and ISO 21001 predominantly treats these standards as internal compliance tools, with limited attention to their potential as cross-institutional alignment mechanisms.

Moreover, few empirical studies explain how institutional synergy can be deliberately designed, operationalized, and sustained in multi-sector public service settings. This gap is particularly evident in the Philippine context, where agencies serving overlapping citizen groups operate under fragmented mandates and disconnected quality systems.

Addressing this gap, the present study developed and validated a Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric **Service Innovation**, integrating collaborative governance, service innovation, and ISO-based quality management into a single, implementation-ready model for sustainable and citizen-centered public service delivery.

The study contributed to both theory and practice by offering an operational model for quality-centric service innovation in public sector settings

Review of Related Literature

Global Perspectives on Collaborative Governance and Institutional Synergy

Collaborative governance theory emphasized joint decision-making, shared responsibility, and coordinated action among public institutions to address complex policy and service delivery challenges. Gestel and Grotenbreg (2021) argue that collaboration fosters innovation only when supported by deliberate institutional design and leadership capable of aligning diverse organizational interests.

Synergy theory further extended this perspective by positing that integrated institutional efforts can generate outcomes that exceeded the sum of individual contributions. In public service delivery, synergy enabled standardized processes, efficient resource utilization, and sustainable service outcomes when roles, accountability, and feedback mechanisms are clearly defined.

Quality Management Systems and Service Innovation

Total Quality Management (TQM) principles—such as continuous improvement, stakeholder focus, and process orientation—have long been associated with organizational performance and innovation. Empirical studies indicate that ISO 9001 supports innovation by strengthening organizational learning and coordination, particularly when leadership commitment and employee engagement are present (Arab, 2021; Mokhlis et al., 2019). Manzani et al. (2019) further suggested that ISO-based systems function as socio-technical mechanisms that influence routines and problem-solving practices.

In educational and public service contexts, ISO 21001 has been shown to support systematic quality assurance aligned with stakeholder needs, although additional tools for communication and motivation were often required to maximize its impact (Özkan, 2025). Despite these benefits, existing studies largely examined ISO implementation at the organizational level, leaving cross-institutional applications underexplored.

Service Innovation and Multi-Sector Collaboration

Service innovation literature emphasized value co-creation, stakeholder participation, and adaptive learning as key drivers of sustainable innovation. (Gustafsson et al., 2020) conceptualized service innovation as an ecosystem-level process shaped by interactions among multiple actors. Edvardsson et al. (2018) further argue that rapid contextual change necessitates collaborative planning and continuous feedback among public and private institutions.

Multi-sectoral studies, including university–industry partnerships, demonstrate that effective collaboration depends on aligned leadership, shared objectives, and supportive governance structures (Aldabbas et al., 2020). However, Feng and Jiang (2020) cautioned that innovation success varies across sectors, underscoring the need for context-specific strategies within broader integrative frameworks.

Taken together, the reviewed studies on collaborative governance, quality management systems, and service innovation informed the development of the Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation by identifying the governance structures, quality mechanisms, and learning processes necessary for achieving institutional synergy across public sector organizations.

Synthesis

The reviewed literature establishes that collaborative governance, quality management systems, and service innovation are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. However, there remains a notable gap in empirical research that integrates these domains into a single operational framework capable of guiding cross-sector public service innovation. Specifically, few studies examine how ISO 9001 and ISO 21001 can function as cross-institutional alignment mechanisms, supported by shared learning platforms such as Knowledge Hubs and formal collaborative governance bodies.

This study addressed this gap by developing and validating a Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation, providing a practical roadmap for translating fragmented quality practices into coordinated, sustainable, and citizen-focused public service delivery.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in the integrative framework advanced by Torfing et al. (2021), which combines collaborative governance, public innovation, co-creation, public value creation, and strategic management into a unified analytical lens for public sector transformation. From this perspective, institutional synergy was conceptualized as an outcome of deliberate governance design rather than informal or ad hoc cooperation. Building on this foundation, the Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation operationalized these theoretical dimensions by translating abstract governance principles into quality-anchored structures, shared learning mechanisms, feedback systems, and strategic coordination processes applicable to multi-sector public service contexts.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation, illustrating how institutional synergy emerged from the dynamic interaction of Quality Assurance, Innovation, and Sustainability. At the center of the framework is Innovation, which served as the integrative process through which institutions redesign services, adopt digital solutions, and co-create value in response to citizen needs. The bidirectional relationship between Quality Assurance and Innovation indicated that ISO-based standards, accountability, and continuous improvement provided structural discipline for innovation, while innovation enhanced and modernized quality systems. The interaction between Innovation and Sustainability highlighted the need to align service improvements with long-term institutional resilience, inclusivity, and governance continuity.

At the top of the framework, Quality-Centric Synergy represents the intended outcome of effective integration among the three pillars, reinforcing coordinated action across institutions. At the operational level, the Knowledge Hub and Joint Initiatives supported collaboration by enabling shared learning, evidence-based decision-making, and coordinated implementation. Collectively, the framework explained how structured collaboration led to sustainable, innovative, and citizen-centered public service delivery.

The components of the Synergy Framework were directly reflected in the study's empirical themes, wherein Quality Assurance corresponded to findings on standardized processes and accountability, Innovation aligned with themes on digitalization, process redesign, and knowledge sharing, and Sustainability was manifested in governance continuity, capacity development, and institutional learning mechanisms.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study
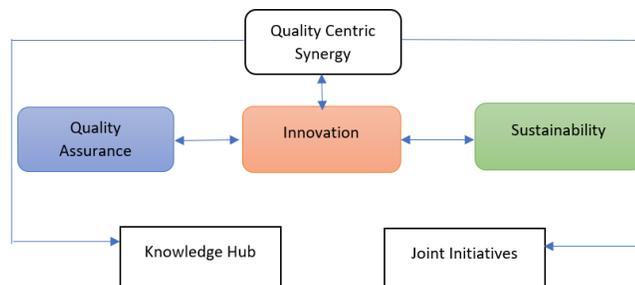
Statement of the Problem

Despite ongoing public sector reforms and the widespread adoption of ISO-based quality management systems, public service delivery in the Philippines continues to face persistent challenges related to fragmentation, limited inter-agency coordination, and inconsistent service standards. Government institutions such as the Civil Registry Office, the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), higher education institutions (HEIs), and quality assurance (QA) and research units operated under distinct mandates and accountability structures, yet they served overlapping citizen groups and shared public objectives. The absence of structured collaboration mechanisms often resulted in duplicated efforts, inefficient processes, and limited service innovation.

While quality assurance mechanisms such as ISO 9001 and ISO 21001 were increasingly implemented across sectors, these systems were typically applied in isolation and were seldom leveraged as integrative tools for cross-sector collaboration and innovation. Moreover, existing studies on collaborative governance and public sector innovation largely focused on policy coordination or network governance, with limited empirical attention given to how quality management systems can serve as operational enablers of institutional synergy, co-creation, and sustainable service innovation.

This gap was particularly evident in multi-sectoral service environments where innovation, sustainability, and citizen-centered governance required coordinated action across institutions. There remained a lack of empirically grounded, operational frameworks that explained how institutional synergy can be developed, sustained, and institutionalized through quality-centric collaboration. Addressing this gap was essential to support evidence-based governance reforms, strengthen inter-agency collaboration, and enhance the delivery of innovative, sustainable, and citizen-focused public services.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine how institutional synergy can be developed and sustained to support quality-centric service innovation through multi-sectoral collaboration among public institutions.
Specifically, the study aimed:
1. To examine existing quality assurance practices and collaboration mechanisms among the Civil Registry Office, the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), higher education institutions, and quality assurance and research units.
2. To identify the key barriers and enabling factors that influence institutional synergy in multi-sectoral public service delivery.
3. To explore how quality management systems (ISO 9001 and/or ISO 21001) can function as cross-sector enablers of collaboration and service innovation.
4. To co-develop a Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation grounded in collaborative governance, co-creation, and public value principles.

Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study sought to answer the following questions:
1. What quality assurance practices and collaboration mechanisms currently exist among the participating public institutions?
2. What barriers and enabling factors affect the development of institutional synergy in multi-sectoral service delivery?
3. How can ISO-based quality management systems be utilized as integrative tools for cross-sector collaboration and service innovation?
4. How can institutional synergy be operationalized through a quality-centric framework that supports innovation, sustainability, and citizen-centered governance?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative action research design to examine and operationalize institutional synergy for quality-centric service innovation in a multi-sector public service context. Action research was selected because the study aimed not only to analyze existing quality assurance and collaboration practices but also to co-develop and validate an implementation-ready framework through iterative stakeholder engagement.

Guided by the service action research model of Elg et al. (2020), the study operationalized four core phases: problem identification, collaborative sense-making, framework co-development, and validation. First, institutional challenges related to fragmented quality systems and limited collaboration were identified through interviews. Second, emergent

insights were jointly analyzed with stakeholders. Third, these insights informed the co-design of the Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation. Finally, the framework was validated through collaborative design workshops. This systematic application ensured that theory development and practical intervention progressed simultaneously.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of six (6) key informants purposively selected from public service institutions that regularly intersect in citizen service delivery, namely the Civil Registry Office, the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), higher education institutions (HEIs), and quality assurance (QA) and research units.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:
(1) direct involvement in ISO-based quality assurance initiatives;
(2) experience in inter-agency coordination or collaborative projects; and
(3) participation in planning, innovation, or service improvement activities.

The study was conducted in public sector institutions located in the Mandaluyong, Laguna, Quezon City, Manila, and Bulacan, with data collection undertaken between May-July 2025. The sample size was deemed adequate as data saturation was achieved, evidenced by recurring themes and convergence of perspectives across interviews and workshops.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using researcher-developed instruments, consisting of:
1. a semi-structured interview guide with four sections covering (a) quality assurance practices, (b) collaboration experiences, (c) innovation barriers and enablers, and (d) perceptions of institutional synergy; and
2. a collaborative workshop facilitation guide designed to support theme validation and framework co-development.

Content validation was conducted by three experts with demonstrated expertise in (a) ISO-based quality management systems, (b) public administration and service innovation, and (c) qualitative research methodology. Validators reviewed the instruments for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Revisions were incorporated based on their feedback prior to data collection.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in two sequential phases. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face and via secure online platforms, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and focused on mapping existing quality practices, collaboration mechanisms, and institutional challenges.

Second, collaborative design workshops were conducted with the same participants. These workshops lasted approximately 2–3 hours and were facilitated to validate preliminary themes, prioritize key enablers of synergy, and co-develop the components of the proposed framework. Data collection activities were conducted within institutional premises or official virtual meeting platforms to ensure confidentiality and accessibility.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic six-step procedure. First, interview transcripts and workshop notes were transcribed and reviewed for familiarization. Second, initial codes were generated focusing on quality assurance practices, collaboration mechanisms, innovation drivers and constraints, and sustainability considerations. Third, related codes were grouped into emergent themes.

Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. Fifth, themes were clearly defined and named. Finally, themes were interpreted in relation to the study objectives and theoretical framework. Coding and theme development were conducted by the researchers, while workshop validation served as a credibility check, enhancing trustworthiness through participant confirmation and consensus-building.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Institutional and personal identifiers were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Ethical clearance and administrative permissions were secured before the conduct of interviews and workshops.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data gathered from key institutional stakeholders involved in public service delivery. The findings were organized around emergent themes that reflect patterns in quality assurance practices, collaborative governance, innovation processes, and sustainability mechanisms. Each theme

was accompanied by an interpretive discussion that explained its significance in relation to institutional synergy and service innovation. The thematic presentation follows the sequence of the study's research objectives and research questions to ensure logical coherence, analytical rigor, and alignment with the proposed Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation.

The findings revealed both the fragmented nature of existing institutional practices and the latent potential for synergy in advancing public service innovation. Results are presented according to the study objectives.

1. Existing Quality Practices and Gaps

Most participating institutions had ISO 9001 or ISO 21001 quality systems in place, supporting internal accountability and documentation, but these operated in silos with little cross-agency interoperability. Differences in audit formats, schedules, and quality protocols hindered shared learning and coordinated improvement. While functional internally, these systems were not designed to support collaborative service innovation. As noted by Lopes et al. (2022), integrating ISO 9001 with innovation standards presents challenges, as efficiency-focused quality systems can conflict with the flexibility needed for innovation. This underscores the need to reposition quality assurance from a compliance tool to a collaborative enabler for institutional synergy.

2. Barriers and Enablers of Institutional Synergy

Several barriers to institutional synergy were identified. These included the absence of formal collaboration protocols such as joint manuals or memoranda of understanding, limited digital integration between agencies, inconsistent stakeholder engagement mechanisms, and resistance to change at leadership or operational levels (Zheng, 2025).

Conversely, key enablers emerged. Participants highlighted leadership commitment, prior collaboration experiences (e.g., joint outreach or research initiatives), increasing public demand for integrated services, access to training resources, and national digital transformation agendas as factors that could support synergy. These enablers informed the operational logic of the proposed framework.

A prominent theme across interviews was the need for a shared Knowledge Hub. Participants emphasized the value of a centralized digital platform that could host audit findings, best practices, quality documentation, training materials, and real-time feedback. The Knowledge Hub was perceived as essential for transparency, institutional memory, and evidence-based decision-making, particularly in multi-sector service delivery environments.

3. Framework Co-Development and Validation

Through the collaborative design process, participants co-developed and validated the Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation. The framework is structured around three interrelated pillars: Quality Assurance, Innovation, and Sustainability, and incorporates the Plan–Do–Check–Act (PDCA) cycle to ensure continuous evaluation and adaptive improvement. Participants affirmed the framework's feasibility and scalability, noting that it aligned with existing mandates while addressing long-standing coordination gaps—an approach that echoes the conceptual model proposed by Al-Kasasbeh and Madadha (2025), which integrates leadership, technology, total quality management, and sustainable practices to drive performance and innovation, emphasizing sustainability as a vital complement to both quality and innovation.

Figure 2: Synergy Framework for Quality Centric Service Innovation
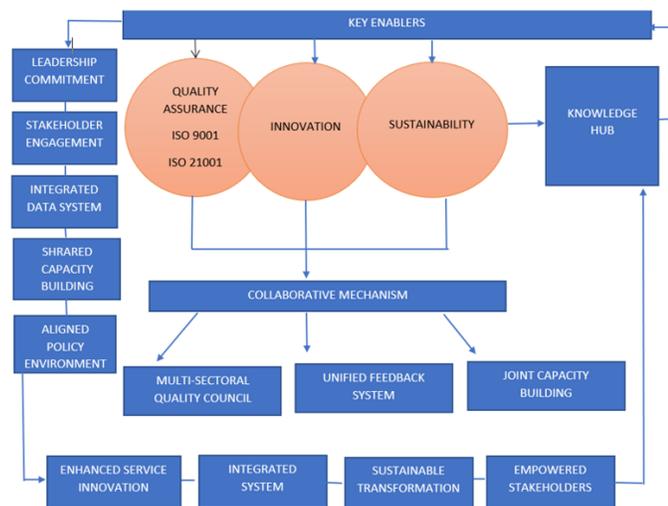
4. Strategic Actions and Sustainability Mechanisms

Participants identified actionable strategies to operationalize the framework, including the establishment of a Multi-Sectoral Quality Council (MSQC), joint capacity-building programs, unified KPI dashboards, and standardized collaboration protocols. Sustainability was framed not only in environmental terms but also as institutional resilience, inclusivity, and continuity of reforms through policy alignment and shared monitoring systems. This approach aligns with the recommendations of (Akkermans et al., 2019) emphasized the development of collaborative key performance indicators (KPIs) that measure and incentivize performance across inter-organizational service arrangements—explicitly designed to foster joint responsibility and sustained collaboration.

Consistent with collaborative governance theory, the results indicated that meaningful synergy required deliberate institutional design, including formal governance structures, aligned performance indicators, and integrated feedback mechanisms. The identified barriers reflected challenges documented in prior studies, where collaboration failed to mature without shared protocols and accountability structures. The study extended this literature by demonstrating how ISO-based quality systems can be repositioned as cross-institutional alignment tools rather than isolated compliance instruments.

The Knowledge Hub emerged as a critical operational mechanism that bridged quality assurance and service innovation. By transforming audit outputs and feedback into shared learning resources, the platform enabled evidence-based decision-making and continuous improvement across agencies. This aligned with service innovation and value co-creation perspectives, which emphasized feedback loops, stakeholder participation, and adaptive learning.

The three-pillar structure of the framework—quality assurance, innovation, and sustainability—illustrated that institutional transformation was multidimensional. Quality assurance ensured consistency and accountability; innovation promoted adaptability and relevance; and sustainability safeguards long-term institutional capacity and inclusivity. The PDCA cycle further reinforced the framework's dynamic nature, ensuring that reforms remained responsive to emerging needs.

Overall, the study contributed a technically novel and implementation-ready model that translated the abstract concept of institutional synergy into concrete governance mechanisms. By integrating quality management, collaborative governance, and service innovation, the framework addressed a significant gap in public sector innovation research and practice.

Conclusion

The study concludes that institutional synergy, when anchored on ISO-based quality management principles and collaborative governance structures, can significantly enhance sustainable and citizen-centered public service delivery. While participating institutions demonstrated strong internal quality practices, innovation was constrained by institutional silos, limited data interoperability, and weak collaboration mechanisms. The co-developed Synergy Framework for Quality-Centric Service Innovation addressed these challenges by integrating quality assurance, innovation, and sustainability within a PDCA-driven governance model supported by a shared Knowledge Hub and formal coordination structures.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following actions:

1. Participating institutions may formalize collaboration through MOUs that specify shared roles, data-sharing protocols, and accountability mechanisms for joint service outcomes.
2. A Multi-Sectoral Quality Council (MSQC) may be established to coordinate joint audits, prioritize cross-agency improvement projects, and oversee framework implementation.
3. A Knowledge Hub may be developed as a shared digital repository for audit results, standard work documents, training modules, and feedback analytics to support cross-agency learning.
4. Unified KPI dashboards may be adopted to enable comparable monitoring of service performance and evidence-based decision-making across partner institutions.
5. Joint capacity-building programs may be implemented on ISO integration, process redesign, and digital service innovation to address uneven maturity across agencies.
6. Digital transformation initiatives may be aligned with the framework's quality and sustainability indicators to ensure continuity, inclusivity, and long-term impact.
7. Dedicated funding lines may be allocated for synergy-driven innovation pilots, including platform maintenance, cross-agency training, and monitoring and evaluation.

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