Reconstructing Public Sphere and Urban Space through NGOs, Governance, and Habermasian Theory 🔵

Hasan Akay / Asst. Prof. Dr. 🆔
Adıyaman University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences
hakay@adiyaman.edu.tr

Yasin Can Gönültaş* / Asst. Prof. Dr. 🆔
Kırşehir Ahi Evran University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences
yasin.gonultas@ahievran.edu.tr

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

This study explores the interaction between governance and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through Jürgen Habermas's theories of the public sphere and communicative action. It addresses three key questions: (i) How can the relationship between governance and public or urban spaces be explained within a Habermasian framework? (ii) How can the role of NGOs in reconstructing these spaces be understood in terms of communicative action and participatory democracy? (iii) How can governance–civil society relations be analysed through these principles and mechanisms? A comprehensive literature review informed a theoretical content analysis and critical evaluation; no empirical data were collected. Using Habermas's concepts as a coding scheme, the study finds that governance practices can both expand and restrict public sphere and urban spaces through formal participation, while NGOs perform roles such as advocacy, oversight, mediation, and service provision. Communicative rationality strengthens when informal public discussions connect with formal decision-making. Overall, the Habermasian perspective indicates that participatory, communication-based governance and NGO involvement can reinforce the public sphere and urban sphere, deepening democracy. Yet this effect depends on equitable inclusion, transparent justification, and effective integration between communicative and administrative power.

Keywords: Habermas, Governance, NGOs, Public Sphere, Urban Space.

JEL Codes: H83, L31, O18

1. Introduction

The concept of the public sphere is central to understanding how modern democratic societies function. Habermas defines it as an intermediary space between the private sphere and the state, where private individuals come together to discuss social issues, express common interests, and influence political decisions (Kulak, 2023). In this sense, the public sphere depends on the existence of a public capable of rational debate, although historically this public emerged in the limited form of bourgeois publicness. At the same time, Habermas argues that while the liberal model of the public sphere remains normatively important for its emphasis on public access to information, it can no longer fully explain the conditions of advanced mass democracies organized through the welfare state. With the expansion of the press, propaganda, and organized interests, the public sphere extended beyond the bourgeoisie but also lost its earlier social exclusivity and coherence. As conflicts once confined to the private sphere increasingly entered public life, the public sphere became less a domain of rational consensus and more a field of competing interests and political bargaining. In this process, social organizations and large collective actors assumed an increasingly prominent role in mediating between society and the state, often seeking compromise outside genuine public deliberation. Habermas describes this transformation as a "refeudalization" of the public sphere, in which an apparent openness to participation masks the growing influence of organized power (Habermas, 1974).

Discussions of the public sphere concern not only an abstract domain of communication, but also specific geographical locations, particularly urban areas. Cities are the most visible arenas in which different social groups encounter one another, negotiate differences and contest public issues. Squares, streets, parks, neighbourhoods and local public institutions therefore provide the physical spaces for public debate. Consequently, debates on the reconstruction of the public sphere are closely linked to issues of urban space, local democracy and participatory governance. From a Habermasian perspective, urban spaces are important settings in which communicative action is embedded in everyday life, public debate becomes apparent, and political demands gain social and institutional significance.

Another important concept that remains current in the literature, alongside the concept of public space, is governance. This has been frequently discussed at both the national and international levels since the 1990s (Aydınlı & Memiş, 2015). Governance refers to a non-hierarchical, participatory management approach in which the state, the private sector, and civil society share decision-making and implementation processes. Unlike the traditional concept of 'management', governance asserts that the exercise of public power is not confined to state institutions, but rather comprises a network structure involving multiple stakeholders (e.g. civil society organisations, citizens and the private sector) who collaborate to address shared challenges (Badem, 2023). International organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) define governance as the mechanisms, processes and institutions used by political, economic and administrative authorities to manage a country's affairs. These definitions emphasise citizen participation, accountability and the effectiveness of these processes (UNDP, 1997).

This approach to governance is particularly evident at local and urban levels, where the consequences of public decisions, complex social problems and competing interests are most directly experienced. Cities therefore emerge as pivotal arenas of governance, shaped by participatory and consultative relations between local governments, civil society organisations, professional associations, neighbourhood initiatives and citizens. In this context, urban space is both a physical setting and a place where governance mechanisms intersect with the public sphere to produce concrete democratic, social and institutional effects. Civil society organisations play a vital intermediary role in this process, articulating social demands, representing citizens' interests, facilitating participation, and strengthening public accountability. From a Habermasian perspective, they can also be understood as carriers of communicative power. Although the relationship between governance and civil society has been widely discussed, literature often treats institutional governance mechanisms and normative theories of the public sphere separately. This study addresses this gap by arguing that the democratic significance of NGOs in urban governance depends not only on their formal inclusion in participatory mechanisms, but also on the extent to which the communicative power generated in the public sphere is translated into institutional decision-making processes. Accordingly, this article offers a Habermasian interpretation of governance–civil society relations, examining the conditions under which NGOs can contribute to the democratic reconstruction of the public sphere and urban spaces through inclusive, transparent, and meaningful participation.

2. Method and Research Design

2.1. Aim

This study aims to examine the relationship between governance and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the public sphere and urban spaces, using Habermas' theories of the public sphere and communicative action as a framework.

2.2. Method

The study is guided by three research questions: (1) What is the relationship between governance and public sphere and urban spaces, and how can this relationship be explained within a Habermasian framework? (2) From a Habermasian perspective, how do NGOs contribute to the reconstruction of public sphere and urban spaces, particularly in relation to public debate, the communication of societal needs, and participatory democracy? (3) How can the relationship between governance and NGOs be analysed through the lens of communicative action and participatory democracy, and under what conditions can these principles be incorporated into governance mechanisms?

To address these questions, the article employs a combined methodological approach based on directed qualitative content analysis and a critical-integrative literature review. The content analysis is theory-driven, using key Habermasian concepts as analytical categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2019), while the literature review critically synthesises existing studies on governance, civil society and urban public spaces (Torraco, 2005).

This study employs directed qualitative content analysis, based on initial codes derived from key Habermasian concepts. Relevant sources on governance, civil society and the public sphere were identified through a critical literature review. These sources included academic articles, books and policy reports, which were then interpreted through theory-driven content analysis. The study focuses on themes such as participatory democracy, good governance, and the role of civil society in the reconstruction of public sphere and urban spaces. After the literature review, the article presents its theoretical framework using Habermas's approach. The methodology section explains the analytical procedure, and the findings and discussion sections interpret the governance–civil society relationship from a Habermasian perspective. The conclusion presents the broader implications of the analysis together with policy recommendations.

The literature review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, graduate theses, and institutional reports that addressed governance, civil society, and Habermasian theories of the public sphere. Sources were selected based on their direct relevance to the study's research questions and their contribution to one of three thematic areas: (1) the relationship between governance and civil society; (2) participatory democracy and urban governance; and (3) theoretical interpretations of Habermas' concepts of the public sphere and communicative action. The objective was not to conduct an exhaustive review, but rather to identify analytically significant contributions that would enable the relationship between governance and civil society to be interpreted through a Habermasian framework. In line with this aim, the study employs directed qualitative content analysis, as it seeks to examine existing scholarship through predefined theoretical concepts rather than generate categories inductively from empirical data.

2.3. Research Design

This study employs a combined methodological approach comprising directed qualitative content analysis and a critical-integrative literature review. The directed qualitative content analysis identifies and interprets recurring themes, concepts and relationships within the selected body of literature using a predefined analytical framework (Hepkul, 2002). In line with this approach, key Habermasian concepts served as the principal coding categories that guided the analysis. The reviewed materials, comprising journal articles, books, reports and theses, were examined in relation to five main analytical dimensions: (1) characteristics of the public sphere and urban space , such as participation, inclusiveness, rationality, and the role of the media; (2) governance principles, such as multi-stakeholderism, network structures, accountability, transparency, and participatory mechanisms; (3) roles and effects of NGOs, such as advocacy, service provision, cooperation, and public opinion formation; (4) communicative action indicators, such as dialogue, collective reasoning, consensus building, conflict dynamics, and language use; and (5) participatory democracy practices, such as participatory budgeting, citizens' panels, and city councils.

Rather than providing a descriptive summary, the literature review offers a critical, theory-driven interpretation of existing scholarship, using Habermas's normative framework as a basis. The analysis examines how the literature addresses equal participation, public justification, and communicative rationality within the relationship between governance and civil society. The study draws on conceptually relevant and academically reliable sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and graduate theses. The main analytical themes are the public sphere, communicative action, communicative power, system–lifeworld relations, and deliberative democracy. These predefined concepts guided the analysis of literature concerning governance mechanisms, NGO roles, participatory practices and urban public spaces. The aim was not to measure frequency, but to identify recurring theoretical patterns, normative tensions and institutional implications. Although the study is limited by its non-empirical design, this methodology is appropriate given the aim of producing a theoretically grounded interpretation.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the literature was categorised according to governance mechanisms, the role of civil society, and participatory democracy practices. Secondly, these themes were interpreted using a theory-driven coding scheme based on key Habermasian concepts, such as the public sphere, communicative action, communicative power, system–lifeworld relations, and deliberative democracy. These predefined categories then served as interpretive tools with which to examine how the literature addressed governance structures, NGO roles, participatory practices and urban public spaces. Finally, the findings were synthesised to develop a theoretical interpretation of how NGOs may influence governance through communicative power in urban contexts. Rather than seeking to quantify patterns, the analysis aimed to identify recurring theoretical relationships, normative tensions and institutional implications across the literature. As a non-empirical study, this article provides a theoretically grounded interpretation rather than an empirically tested causal explanation.

3. Literature Review

Since the 1990s, the concept of governance has become central to debates on public space, particularly in relation to urban policy and local administration. International organisations such as the World Bank, the United Nations and the OECD have promoted 'good governance' as a framework emphasising participation, accountability and managerial effectiveness (World Bank, 1992). At the urban level, these principles have increasingly informed the planning and delivery of public services. However, governance has also been subject to competing ideological interpretations. Critical scholarship, particularly in the Turkish context, has demonstrated that governance can serve not only as a democratising framework, but also as a means of legitimising neoliberal restructuring. As Ataay (2006) argues, debates on governance in Türkiye have become polarised by the tension between democracy and neoliberalism, particularly when supranational actors and NGOs are incorporated into policy processes under unequal conditions. This tension is particularly evident in urban policy areas such as planning, transformation, infrastructure, and the environment. From this perspective, governance can mask techniques of control behind the language of participation. Such critiques echo Habermas's concern that system imperatives, particularly those of the market and bureaucracy, may dominate the lifeworld and undermine the communicative basis of democratic public life (Habermas, 1987).

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas conceptualises the public sphere as a historical product of salons, coffee houses, clubs, and other urban spaces. Located between civil society and the state, this sphere is rooted in urban spaces and the concept of rational, critical debate, in which individuals publicly scrutinise state action (Habermas, 1989; Odabaş, 2018). However, Habermas acknowledges that this bourgeois model has historically excluded women, workers, and the propertyless. This means it should be understood as a normative ideal based on equal participation and uncoerced discussion (Habermas, 1989). Nevertheless, Fraser criticises this model for prioritising a singular bourgeois public and overlooking the plurality of subaltern counter-publics, including those formed through local and urban struggles, such as neighbourhood initiatives, environmental movements and forums based on feminist, labour and minority interests (Fraser, 1990). In this context, NGOs can be seen as representatives of various social interests, as well as institutionalised expressions of these diverse publics. Participatory democracy is therefore better conceived as a field of parallel — and sometimes competing — public spaces, rather than a single, unified forum.

From the late twentieth century onwards, these debates gained renewed relevance with the rise of governance and growing criticism of the limitations of representative democracy. Theorists of participatory democracy argue that democracy cannot be confined to elections alone, but requires citizens' direct and continuous involvement in decision-making, particularly at a local level (Arnstein, 1969; Pateman, 1970). Pateman emphasises the educational function of participation, arguing that it fosters democratic norms and civic responsibility (Pateman, 1970). By contrast, Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' highlights the distinction between meaningful participation and tokenistic inclusion, and remains a useful framework for assessing the actual influence of NGOs and citizen initiatives in urban planning and local policy processes (Arnstein, 1969).

This theoretical background explains the growing importance of NGOs. In the modern governance paradigm, they function as institutional agents of citizen participation. At the urban level in particular, NGOs are the main actors that enable local issues such as housing, the environment, transport and the use of public spaces to become subjects of public debate. Environmental NGOs influence environmental policies, parents' associations influence education policies, and rights organisations influence human rights policies, providing an important mechanism for making the voice of the relevant community heard and influencing decision-making processes. Internationally, NGOs and transnational civil networks have also gained a voice in global governance. While the number of NGOs with consultative status with the United Nations was in the low hundreds in 1948, it reached 3,382 by 2010. The number of international NGOs (INGOs) has grown significantly over the past 50 years, increasing from around 9,521 in 1978

to 20,063 in 1989 and reaching 43,958 by 1999 — a fourfold increase in just two decades. 1999 can be considered a milestone for this growth (Figure 1). This growth represents a phenomenon that could be termed the rise of the Global Civil Society (Keane, 2003). Figure 1 below illustrates the rapid growth in the number of international NGOs:
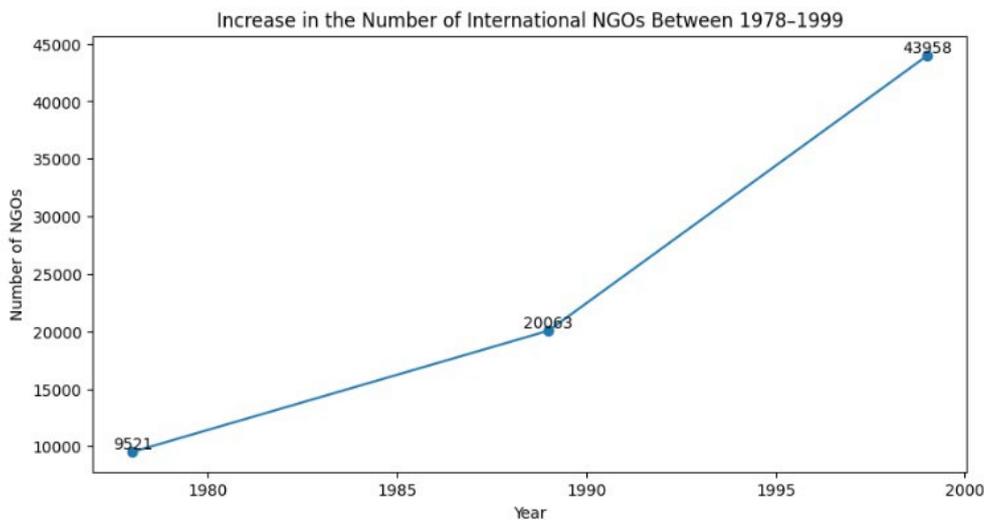

Figure 1. Increase in the Number of International NGOs (INGOs) Between 1978 and 1999
Source: Compiled from UIA Yearbook data.

Figure 1 shows the rapid increase in the number of international NGOs, which points to their growing role in global governance. This development demonstrates that governance also encompasses the participation of non-state actors at an international level.

The relationship between governance and NGOs is viewed differently in the literature. Optimistic approaches evaluate the participation of NGOs in governance processes as a deepening of democratisation (Keser & Hışım, 2016). These evaluations are particularly evident in urban governance literature, which details the collaborations established between local NGOs and municipalities. This approach asserts that NGOs act as accountability and transparency mechanisms, thereby enhancing the quality of public policies. New Public Management and subsequent New Public Service approaches assert that citizens are governance partners, not customers. Therefore, the participation of NGOs in decision-making processes is crucial for generating public value (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). United Nations and EU documents also emphasise 'multi-stakeholder governance' and encourage civil society participation (Güçlü, 2013). Within the scope of the EU's Local Government Reforms and Participation Principles, it is recommended that local NGOs meet with municipal and provincial administrations on joint platforms (Kerman, 2009).

Critical perspectives on urban transformation, mega-projects and infrastructure investments tend to be sceptical of the discourse of governance, especially when NGOs are excluded from or only marginally included in decision-making processes. Mouffe (2005) argues that governance frameworks centred on consensus can mask underlying conflicts and power relations, potentially stifling legitimate political opposition in the name of unity. In such contexts, close cooperation between NGOs, the state and market actors may weaken the critical autonomy of civil society. The risk of co-optation becomes apparent when organisations that depend on corporate funding avoid challenging dominant economic interests (Kendir, 2019). Furthermore, some international NGOs have been criticised for prioritising Global North interests and inadequately representing actors from the Global South (Zibechi, 2012; Aslan & Alkış, 2013).

By contrast, Habermas (1984) emphasises the role of communicative rationality in coordinating social action through processes oriented towards mutual understanding. Within this framework, values, norms and truth claims are open to public debate, generating communicative power that can influence governance systems when the appropriate institutional conditions exist. However, Habermas also warns that the colonisation of the lifeworld by systemic forces, the commercialisation of the media and the professionalisation of politics may weaken the public sphere, reducing citizens to passive spectators (Habermas, 1987; 2006). These concerns have prompted scholars to explore new mechanisms for enhancing participation and fostering communicative interaction. While digital platforms seem to increase opportunities for public debate, issues such as misinformation, polarisation, and 'echo chambers' can also hinder deliberation (Çalışkan, 2014; Sunstein, 2001).

The literature also highlights the various ways in which NGOs can contribute to rebuilding the public sphere. For instance, international organisations such as WEDO have been described as establishing a 'global organisational public sphere' by connecting local issues to global discussions (Stohr, 2013). Similarly, Keck & Sikkink (1998) demonstrate how transnational advocacy networks utilise information, symbolic action and pressure strategies to influence state behaviour. In the Turkish context, the TESEV (2020) report emphasises that cooperation between municipalities and NGOs can expand the urban public sphere through mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, city councils and collaborative platforms. The Gezi Park protests have also been interpreted as the physical and symbolic reappropriation of public space, as well as the revitalisation of public debate, through horizontal forms of organisation (Tuşalp, 2014). However, subsequent developments have also demonstrated the limitations of the Habermasian ideal of communicative publicness in the context of contemporary politics.

The literature suggests that the relationship between governance and civil society is closely linked to the quality of democracy, becoming particularly apparent — and frequently more contentious — in urban contexts. In this respect, the ability of NGOs to participate effectively in public debate can be seen as an indicator of democratic vitality. Strong, autonomous civil society organisations, together with active public spheres and meaningful participatory mechanisms, tend to enhance the legitimacy and responsiveness of decision-making processes. Conversely, weak civil society or merely symbolic forms of governance limit the democratic substance of participation.

4. Public Sphere and Urban Space Theoretical Framework

According to Habermas, the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) is a normative communication space where public opinion is formed through public debate in the intermediate zone between society and the state; it cannot be reduced entirely to official institutions nor entirely to private life (Kulak, 2023). Historically emerging in urban spaces where voluntary associations were visible, such as coffee houses and salons, this sphere can be thought of as an 'intermediate space' operating on the principles of accessibility and visibility, where institutional centres intersect with everyday civil interactions; today, it materialises in cities in the form of squares, parks, neighbourhood-scale meeting areas, and local public spaces (Habermas, 1989). The subject of the public sphere is the 'public': although early formulations were historically dominated by a typology limited to property owners and literate individuals, the theoretical goal is a discussion framework open to the participation of equal citizens based on the principles of legal equality and inclusivity; this normative aim is expanded in the urban context to include access to public discussions for neighbourhood residents, migrants, and disadvantaged groups (Habermas, 1998).

This study draws on Habermas's work because his framework provides a robust normative basis for evaluating the democratic legitimacy of relations between civil society and the state, particularly in local government and urban decision-making. By locating legitimacy not only in elections but also in communication, public justification and communicative power, Habermas offers a valuable perspective for assessing participatory mechanisms such as city councils, neighbourhood forums and participatory budgeting (Habermas, 1998; 2006). At the same time, this study engages with his approach critically, in dialogue with Fraser's (1990) critique of multiple counter-publics and Mouffe's (2005) emphasis on conflict and power asymmetries. From this perspective, the public sphere is understood as a space of rational-critical discourse in which claims are justified and contested through reasons rather than coercion. In urban contexts, this is especially visible in debates over planning, the environment, transport and the use of public spaces. Habermas's concept of the ideal speech situation thus serves here as a normative benchmark rather than an empirical description of political reality (Habermas, 1984). In his classic formulation, Habermas defines the public sphere as the interface between the private realm and the state, where public opinion is formed through rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1989). His later work places greater emphasis on inclusiveness, equal access, deliberation and the transmission of communicative power into institutional decision-making (Habermas, 1998). This perspective is reinforced by his distinction between lifeworld and system, through which the public sphere is linked to communicative processes, while the state and market operate through instrumental logics (Habermas, 1987; 1998). In urban contexts, this distinction is particularly important because market-oriented planning and bureaucratic governance can undermine the conditions necessary for democratic public debate. Recent deliberative systems literature builds on this by conceptualising the public sphere as a network of formal and informal spaces. This approach is useful for analysing the layered structure of urban public life and its relationship with contemporary media ecologies (Keane, 2003).

The concept of governance is not addressed as explicitly or directly in Habermas's work as topics such as the public sphere, communicative action and democracy. Nevertheless, Habermas's theory of de-

mocracy sheds some light on debates surrounding governance. This indirect relationship is particularly evident in the literature on local and urban governance. Habermas addresses the topic of democracy, which occupies a large part of his work, through the model of deliberative democracy. According to this model, democratic legitimacy arises from both elections and the quality of public debate processes. Citizens and civil society form ideas in informal public spheres, which are often organized in urban spaces and at the local level. As these ideas are transferred to formal public spheres (parliament), they generate communicative power and ultimately influence the law-making process.

Habermas's Model of the Circulation of Political Power provides a diagram explaining this process (Habermas, 2006). According to this model:

- Constitutional institutions (parliament, govern-

ment, courts) and administrative power (executive) are located at the center. This is the official arena where decisions are made.

- The periphery consists of civil society and public sphere networks. Associations, social movements, and the media are part of this periphery. Urban NGOs, neighborhood initiatives, and local platforms are important components of this peripheral sphere.

- The media system acts as an interface between the center and the periphery; it conveys public debates to large audiences and shapes public opinion.

- Communicative power is generated in the periphery (civil society) and transmitted to the center; administrative power is concentrated in the center, but it must derive its legitimacy from communicative power.
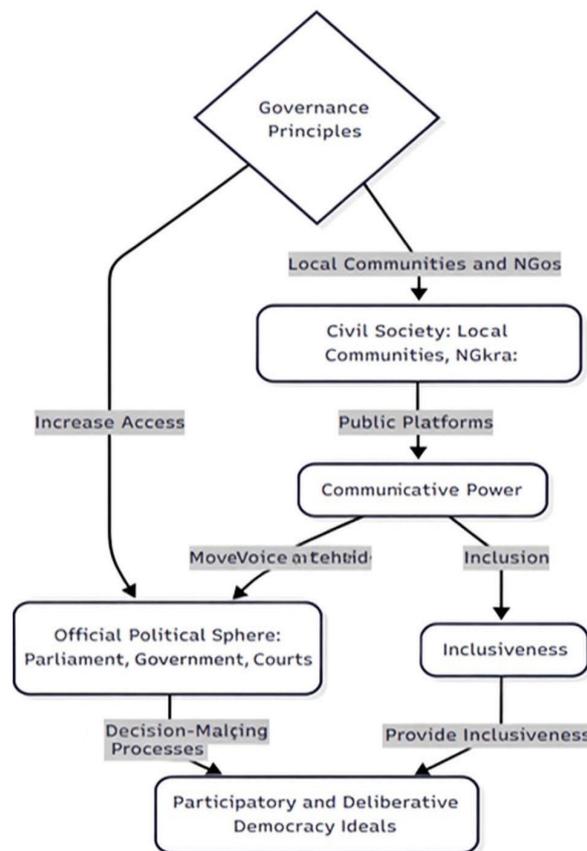

Figure 2. Habermas's Model of Democracy – The Circulation of Communicative Power (Center-Periphery Relationship)
Source: Habermas, 2006.

As illustrated in Figure 1, political communication operates through a layered system that links civil society, the media and the formal political centre. This model is particularly helpful for understanding urban politics, in which neighbourhood forums, local platforms, citizen initiatives and NGOs act as intermediaries between everyday social issues and municipal governance. While NGOs are not explicitly theorised by Habermas, they can be considered key actors within civil society. Habermas defines civil society as the realm of voluntary associations outside the state and the market, and it must remain autonomous from systemic control (Habermas, 1996; 1998). As carriers of communicative power, NGOs help to articulate social problems, to mobilise public debate and to channel urban demands concerning zoning, the environment, transport and public spaces into political processes. Governance

approaches seek to institutionalise this circulation by granting non-parliamentary actors more visible access to decision-making, particularly at the local level. However, such participation is only democratically meaningful when it is genuinely deliberative, inclusive and grounded in equality, rather than being reduced to formal consultation. Therefore, the literature stresses that participatory mechanisms may remain superficial and expose NGOs to co-optation by more powerful actors (Ataay, 2006; Kendir, 2019). This tension is particularly evident in urban transformation processes and large-scale projects, where disputes over space reveal the democratic potential of, and threats to, civil society. More broadly, cases such as the 2011 Arab Spring demonstrate how communicative power can evolve from civil society into collective action via urban public spaces. This supports Habermas's assertion that public spheres are increasingly operating across local, national and global scales (Habermas, 2006).

Both Pateman (1970) and Barber (1984) argue that democracy should extend beyond voting to encompass citizens' direct participation in governance. This argument is particularly pertinent to local and urban governance, where public decisions have a direct impact on everyday life. In Strong Democracy, Barber (1984) suggests that participation has a transformative function; through engaging in collective deliberation, citizens can develop a public mindset that transcends private interests. This view aligns with Habermas's theory of communicative action, which emphasises the formation of shared understandings through reasoned interaction. From this perspective, governance can be seen as an institutional attempt to implement participatory democratic ideals. Similarly, the OECD's (2009) guidelines on citizen participation recommend involving citizens and NGOs throughout the policy cycle, including design, implementation, and monitoring. Such approaches are particularly important in urban policymaking, where participatory mechanisms can integrate experiential knowledge alongside expert knowledge.

In his analysis of the 'Legitimacy Problem', Habermas (1984; 1987) argues that the legitimacy of modern states can no longer be secured solely through economic and bureaucratic performance, but must also be supported by public participation and communication. This legitimacy crisis is becoming increasingly apparent in city administrations through planning and decision-making processes that are disconnected from citizens. In this respect, the concept of governance intersects with Habermas's analysis of legitimacy. However, Habermas emphasises that not all participation automatically brings legitimacy; he presents the democratic design of participation processes as a precondition. If an NGO is merely included symbolically in the process and decisions are actually made elsewhere, this is not governance, but mere window dressing. This warning also applies to the content and impact of urban participation mechanisms. In summary, Habermas's theories of the public sphere and communicative action provide a robust basis for analysing governance and the role of NGOs.

Habermas's framework offers three main normative criteria for evaluating democratic participation: equality and inclusivity; rational-critical justification; and the institutionalisation of communicative power. Firstly, access to the public sphere must be free from exclusionary barriers and based on the principles of an ideal speech situation, where participants can contribute equally. In urban contexts, this also necessitates physical and social access to public spaces (Habermas, 1984). Secondly, democratic deliberation depends on claims being justified with reasons, being exposed to counter-arguments and being assessed according to the force of the better argument. This makes transparent discussion of urban policy essential (Habermas, 1998). Thirdly, preferences formed through public debate must be traceably connected to legal and administrative decisions, and communication between the political centre and the wider public must be institutionally secured (Habermas, 2006). From this perspective, participation in local governance is meaningful only when it has visible effects on decision-making. While Habermas does not address governance directly, his deliberative model offers a valuable normative framework through which to interpret governance practices, particularly in urban contexts where participation and civil society are paramount. Within this framework, the study makes two contributions to the literature: first, it adapts Habermas's criteria of equality, justification, and communicative power to contemporary participatory mechanisms; and second, it places his model in dialogue with Fraser's critique of plural publicness and Mouffe's agonistic democracy, showing that democratic participation involves legitimate conflict and negotiation as well as rational consensus. The study also highlights the significant, albeit indirect, connection between governance and communicative action, particularly with regard to the role of civil society actors in mediating centre–periphery communication and shaping the democratic quality of local and urban governance.

The theoretical discussion presented above suggests that the relationship between civil society, communicative power and governance can be understood as a process that links public debate to the arena of institutional decision-making. To clarify this, the study proposes a conceptual model showing how communicative power generated in urban public spaces can influence governance processes via participation in civil society.

| Civil Society / NGOs | → | Public Problem Articulation | → | Urban Public Debate | → | Communicative Power | → | Governance Influence |

Figure 3. From Communicative Power to Governance Influence: A Habermasian Model of Civil Society Participation in Urban Governance

As shown in Diagram 2, this simplified Habermasian model illustrates the influence of civil society on urban governance. It demonstrates that NGOs contribute to governance in a variety of ways, including articulating public problems, raising awareness of social issues, fostering urban public debate and generating communicative power, rather than merely through formal inclusion. From this perspective, public discussions in urban spaces can only shape governance when the communicative power emerging from civil society is translated into institutional processes. However, for this influence to be democratically meaningful, governance structures must be inclusive and transparent, and participation mechanisms must be designed so that civil society input can affect administrative decision-making.

5. Theoretical Synthesis and Findings

This section provides an analytical synthesis of the literature reviewed in the study, using a Habermasian framework. Rather than merely summarising previous studies, the analysis aims to identify recurring patterns concerning the relationship between civil society, communicative processes and governance mechanisms in urban contexts. Interpreting these patterns in terms of communicative power, participation mechanisms and institutional decision-making processes clarifies the conditions under which NGOs can influence governance and contribute to the reconstruction of public sphere and urban spaces.

The following table summarises the institutional equivalents of key theoretical concepts used in this study, to clarify how Habermasian concepts are interpreted in the context of urban governance.

Table 1. Habermasian Concepts and Their Institutional Equivalents in Urban Governance

Habermasian Concept	Institutional Equivalent in Urban Governance	Explanation
Public Sphere	Urban forums, media debates, public spaces, civic meetings	Arenas where citizens and NGOs articulate demands and discuss public issues
Communicative Power	Public opinion formation, civic mobilization, advocacy campaigns	Collective pressure generated through public debate and civil society action
Transmission Mechanisms	Participatory platforms, city councils, consultation processes	Institutional channels through which civil society communicates with governance actors
Administrative Power	Municipal councils, local government administrations	Formal decision-making bodies responsible for urban policy implementation

Table 2 illustrates how the key Habermasian concepts employed in this study can be interpreted in the context of specific institutional mechanisms within urban governance processes. By linking theoretical notions such as the public sphere, communicative power and administrative power to particular areas of participation and decision-making, the table clarifies how processes of communication generated in civil society can influence governance structures in urban contexts. The following section builds on this conceptual mapping by analysing how governance practices interact with public sphere and urban spaces. It focuses on the conditions under which participatory mechanisms expand or constrain the communicative potential of the public sphere.

5.1. Analysis from a Governance Perspective Related to Public Sphere and Urban Space

This section examines the relationship between governance and public sphere and urban spaces from a variety of different angles. The findings reveal that both concepts are dynamic and influence each other.

5.1.1. Governance practices can contribute to the expansion of public sphere and urban space, but they can also limit it

The reviewed literature suggests that, depending on how participation processes are institutionally

designed, governance mechanisms can both expand and constrain public sphere and urban spaces. When governance reforms establish effective channels through which citizens and NGOs can express their views and influence public debate, they can enhance communicative processes within urban public spheres. However, if participation mechanisms remain merely formal or consultative, governance practices may limit the transformative potential of the public sphere, producing only symbolic participation.

The literature contains data indicating that governance reforms, such as adding NGO advisory boards to local governments and establishing policy networks at the national level, increase opportunities for public debate. This increase is particularly evident in urban areas, where it focuses on issues that directly affect daily life, such as the planning of local services, urban transformation, the environment, and transportation. For instance, the implementation of Citizens' Juries and Participatory Panels in the UK during the 2000s enabled citizens to express their views directly on public policies, creating new spaces for public discourse (Smith, 2005). These practices contributed to the formation of deliberative urban public spaces, enabling different social groups to come together at the city level to discuss local issues. In Türkiye, city councils gained legal status under the 2005 Municipal Law, creating a local public discussion environment by bringing together NGOs, neighbourhood representatives and citizens at a local level. In this respect, city councils redefine urban spaces as not only physical places, but also public spaces where negotiation and participation are institutionalised. Such governance mechanisms resemble the public negotiation environments advocated by Habermas, as they enable different stakeholders to discuss public affairs and exchange ideas.

On the other hand, the rise of governance as a popular discourse has also brought with it the risk of creating formal (merely symbolic) participatory structures in some cases. This risk is particularly visible in the context of urban planning and large-scale urban projects. According to Ataay's (2006) findings, despite the establishment of numerous NGO platforms and advisory boards in Türkiye in the 1990s and 2000s, a significant portion of these remained ineffective or unsustainable. This is a tendency to "pretend there is participation while actually making critical decisions behind closed doors." When it comes to urban areas, this situation can lead to citizens experiencing an illusion of participation, even though they cannot really influence decisions about the neighborhoods and cities they live in. In this case, governance measures have not truly expanded the public sphere, but may have further muddied it; for while citizens believe they are making their voices heard, decisions continue to be made in different

arenas. Such practices risk weakening the democratic potential of the urban public sphere and deepening spatial and social alienation.

Interpretation from Habermas's Perspective:
This finding can be linked to Habermas's concepts of legitimacy and the crisis of legitimation. According to Habermas (1975), if the system (administration) engages in window-dressing projects to produce legitimacy without ensuring genuine citizen participation, the output of legitimation will decline in the long term. This, in turn, can lead to new crises. In an urban context, this crisis may manifest as declining trust in local governments, a widening gap between city management and citizens, and political dysfunction in public spaces. Therefore, governance that is not supported by communicative action is not sustainable. Designing governance mechanisms that strengthen communicative rationality and genuine participation is especially critical for the reconstruction of the public sphere in urban areas.

5.1.2. NGOs play different roles simultaneously in governance processes as actors in public and urban spaces: service provider, advocate, monitor, intermediary, etc

The literature suggests that NGOs play multiple, often overlapping, roles in governance processes, particularly in urban contexts where public debate and policy decisions converge. NGOs act as service providers, advocacy groups, mediators, watchdogs and representatives of social demands. This diversity enables them to raise awareness, mobilise public support and transmit communicative power from civil society to governance institutions. Najam (2000) identifies four main roles in NGO–state relations: collaborative, oppositional, complementary and independent. In practice, however, NGOs often combine these roles rather than occupying a single fixed position (Teets, 2014). This is particularly evident in local and urban governance. For example, women's rights organisations in Türkiye may collaborate with state institutions on projects while also campaigning for legal reform. Similarly, organisations focused on transparency and anti-corruption play an important monitoring role, particularly in relation to municipal budgets, zoning decisions and urban transformation processes. NGOs also act as intermediaries, connecting local communities with public authorities and sometimes private actors. In urban conflicts concerning the environment, land use and redevelopment, this mediating role can be crucial for articulating demands and facilitating negotiation.

Interpretation from Habermas's Perspective:
All of these roles are valuable for the public sphere,

provided they are performed with communicative rationality. In Habermas's model, civil society actors act as 'alarm sensors'; identifying malfunctions in the social system and communicating them to the public (Habermas, 1998). In urban areas, this 'alarm sensor' function involves raising local issues such as housing, the environment, transport and security for public debate. However, if NGOs act according to a strategic logic of action (pursuing a strategy of closeness to the bureaucracy solely to increase their own funding), they deviate from the ideal of communicative action. In this case, the logic of the lifeworld (discussion for the common good) is replaced by the logic of the system (the effort to maximise interests). This can result in NGOs becoming detached from local communities in urban governance processes, thereby weakening the representational power of the public sphere. According to Habermas's theory, if an NGO prioritises its own survival over the public good, it behaves like an actor belonging to the system rather than the lifeworld.

5.1.3. As global governance mechanisms develop, the concept of national public and urban space is also changing

The literature suggests that the expansion of global governance mechanisms is transforming the traditional boundaries of national public and urban spaces. As transnational civil society networks and international organisations participate more and more in policy debates, public discussions about issues such as climate change, human rights and urban development are no longer confined to national borders. In this context, urban spaces often serve as important forums where global public debates become visible, and where the influence of civil society activism can impact both national and transnational governance processes.

In the era of global governance, events such as United Nations summits, the World Social Forum and processes for reaching international agreements have become spaces for public debate worldwide. These global public spaces frequently take the form of physical gatherings in specific cities. During the Paris Climate Agreement process (2015), for example, NGOs, scientists and activists from around the world gathered in Paris to put pressure on government delegations, thereby indirectly influencing the drafting of the agreement. The fact that Paris served as a 'global urban public sphere' during this process demonstrates the city's potential to become a hub for public debate. This situation can be cited as an example of Habermas's concept of a 'global public sphere'. Furthermore, the internet age has facilita-

ted global discussions by reducing geographical boundaries. However, even digital discussions are often fuelled by urban movements, city-centred protests and local spatial experiences. The #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements can be evaluated in this context as phenomena that originated in certain countries and quickly turned into global public debates. Many of these movements gained visibility in city squares, streets and public spaces, resonating on a global scale.

While national public spaces are influenced by global discourses, they also strive to preserve their local identities. This tension is more intensely felt at the city level, as cities are integrated into global networks while also being spaces where local social relations are produced. Some studies have shown that global NGO networks do not always penetrate the local base, sometimes even being perceived as 'foreign' by local NGOs (Hearn, 1998; Zibechi, 2012). This situation highlights the need to reinterpret global governance discourses within urban and local public spheres. This, in turn, reveals the tension between the global and local public spheres.

Interpretation from Habermas's Perspective:

Habermas has engaged with the issue of democracy beyond the nation-state scale and has supported the idea of a global public sphere and a cosmopolitan democracy appropriate to it. According to him, since issues such as "human rights, climate, and peace" require supranational solutions, there should be forums where communicative reason can operate (Habermas, 1998). A significant part of these forums is shaped through the multi-layered public spheres emerging in global cities. Habermas, who closely followed the European Union experience, viewed the EU as a model of transnational democracy, but lamented the lack of a common European public sphere. Although the EU has comprehensive governance mechanisms (Commission, Parliament, consultative bodies), the democratic legitimacy of its decisions is questioned because European citizenship and the arena for debate remain weak. This deficiency can also be linked to the failure to establish a strong public debate network among European cities. Looking at the findings from this perspective, there is a problem of compatibility between global governance practices and the national public sphere. Habermas sees the solution to this problem in the creation of multi-level public spheres: a network of communicative forces flowing from the local to the global. The nodes of this network are the debates and experiences generated in local and urban public spheres. This remains an ideal that is still being worked on.

5.2. NGOs in the Process of Reconstructing Public and Urban Spaces

5.2.1. The contribution of NGOs to the public sphere is largely proportional to their communication skills and the strength of their ties with the community

Not all NGOs have the same impact in the public sphere. NGOs with strong communication strategies that can mobilize society (e.g., NGOs that run major campaigns and use the media effectively) shape public debate more significantly. This impact is particularly visible in urban areas, as cities are hubs for media, civil society networks, and public spaces. For example, Greenpeace has been able to mobilize public opinion on environmental issues through effective actions and media campaigns on the international stage. Greenpeace's actions have often gained visibility by being carried out in large cities, in symbolic public spaces (ports, squares, around public buildings). Taking Türkiye as an example, TEGV (Türkiye Education Volunteers Foundation) has created a sense of educational mobilization in society through its campaigns in the field of education policy (e.g., "One Million Children Project"). These campaigns have found resonance in the urban public sphere, particularly through donation and awareness-raising events held in large cities. Such NGOs fulfill the function of "drawing public attention to certain issues," as pointed out by Habermas.

On the other hand, NGOs with weak grassroots support or limited communication channels struggle to make an impact, even if they do important work. Small-scale NGOs, especially at the local level, can often remain confined to a limited sphere of activity. This situation is also related to the impact of center-periphery differences and spatial inequalities within urban areas on public visibility. This has to do with the nature of the public sphere: visibility and audibility are important in the public sphere. An actor that is not visible cannot influence public debate. The voices of NGOs that are not present in urban public spaces (squares, local media, municipal council surroundings) may remain more limited. Therefore, there are debates about the professionalization of NGOs; while some argue that NGOs should increase their communication and public relations capacity (Demir et al., 2019), others argue that excessive professionalization could transform NGOs into bureaucratic institutions, damaging their structure and functioning (Dash & Mishra, 2014). This debate also raises the question of whether NGOs can maintain their connection with local communities in the context of urban governance.

Interpretation from Habermas's Perspective:

Habermas's concept of the public sphere assumes a communicative environment in which all participants and arguments are heard equally. In practice, however, public debate is often influenced by imbalances of economic, communicative and spatial power. In urban contexts, these inequalities are exacerbated by differential access to public spaces, uneven visibility in local media and the concentration of symbolic resources in city centres. As Habermas (2006) argues, the commercialisation of the media and the dynamics of the attention economy privilege visibility over reasoned argument, thereby weakening rational critical debate. This tension is particularly evident in urban protest and advocacy practices, where NGOs may feel pressured to adopt simplified, attention-seeking messages to maintain their public visibility. While such strategies may increase visibility, they also risk reducing the deliberative quality of public debate, making the urban public sphere more susceptible to manipulation.

5.2.2. From a Habermasian perspective, NGOs can only rebuild the public sphere not only by taking a stand against the state, but also by fostering critical awareness within society

Many NGOs tend to position themselves in opposition to the state (especially in authoritarian contexts). This is, of course, a legitimate and necessary role, but building the public sphere also requires transforming society. This transformation process is particularly visible and effective in urban areas, as cities are places where different social groups meet, interact, and learn from each other. For example, an NGO working in the field of gender equality does not merely criticize state policies; if it runs campaigns that challenge patriarchal perspectives in society, it can establish a new norm in the public sphere (e.g., making an issue that was taboo in the 1990s, such as violence against women, a key agenda item in the 2000s). This norm production often gains strength through activities carried out in city squares, universities, cultural centers, and neighborhood-level public spaces. In this context, NGOs taking on an educational role through methods such as educational activities, workshops, and public meetings is consistent with Pateman's (1970) understanding of participatory democracy: Participation increases the political competence of participants. Such participatory learning processes can be more lasting and transformative through face-to-face interaction in urban public spaces. NGOs can be the catalysts that trigger this.

Interpretation from Habermas's Perspective:

This finding can be interpreted using Habermas's concept of public reason, which assumes a public that is capable of critical reflection and justification. In this sense, NGOs contribute to the public sphere by representing interests and facilitating social learning through seminars, forums, workshops and other public learning networks, particularly in urban contexts. By supporting awareness-raising and critical debate, civil society actors help foster new public norms and a more inclusive urban culture.

From this broader theoretical perspective, the country examples discussed throughout the article are presented not as full empirical case studies, but as illustrative references that help to clarify the analytical argument. They demonstrate how key Habermasian concepts, such as the public sphere, communicative power, participation and the relationship between communicative and administrative power, take different institutional forms across governance settings. Thus, the examples clarify how similar theoretical dynamics can result in different democratic outcomes, depending on institutional design, the inclusiveness of participation mechanisms, and the extent to which civil society actors can influence decision-making processes.

Table 2. Governance Indicators and Civil Society Participation

Country	Voice and Accountability (0–100)	Civil Society Participation (0–1)	Comment
Sweden	99	0.88	Very high level of participation and accountability
USA	83	0.72	High, but with a declining trend in recent years
India	59	0.60	Moderate; despite being the world's largest democracy, civil society organizations may face constraints
Türkiye	47	0.54	Lower-middle; legal pressures on civil society organizations reduce the index
Russia	18	0.30	Low; the suppression of civic space results in very low accountability
Nigeria	44	0.47	Lower-middle; democracy is fragile, and while civil society organizations exist, their effectiveness is limited
Brazil	60	0.65	Moderate; civil society organizations are influential, but political institutions are weakened by corruption

Source: Compiled by the authors based on Voice and Accountability data from the World Bank (2022) and Civil Society Participation data from V-Dem (2025).

Table 1 shows a clear link between the quality of governance and the level of civic participation. Higher scores generally correspond to more institutionally consolidated democratic settings, while lower scores tend to be associated with more authoritarian or politically restricted regimes. The table thus supports the study's central argument that governance and civil society are mutually reinforcing. Where civic participation is institutionally supported, governance tends to be more accountable and legitimate. Conversely, where civil society is constrained, the democratic quality of governance is weakened. The relationship between the two is therefore best understood as a key dimension of democratic capacity.

Overall, the analysis suggests that the relationship between governance and civil society in urban contexts is a process by which the power generated through public debate is transferred to formal governance institutions. The literature indicates that NGOs play a pivotal role in raising awareness of social issues, galvanising public opinion and connecting informal public discussions with institutional decision-making processes. However, the effectiveness of this process largely depends on the design of participation mechanisms and the institutional conditions under which civil society actors engage with governance structures. From a Habermasian perspective, therefore, the democratic potential of governance lies not merely in the formal inclusion of civil society actors, but in the extent to which communicative power can meaningfully influence administrative decision-making processes.

6. Discussion

This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature on governance and civil society by offering a Habermasian interpretation of the relationship between non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public debate, and urban governance processes. Firstly, the study establishes a conceptual link between Habermas's ideas of the public sphere and communicative power, and the practical institutional mechanisms of urban governance. This demonstrates how civil society actors can influence decision-making processes through participatory structures. Se-

condly, it highlights that the democratic potential of governance does not merely derive from the formal inclusion of civil society actors, but from the extent to which the communicative power generated in public debates can be transmitted to administrative decision-making arenas. Thirdly, by situating these processes within the spatial context of cities, the article contributes to urban political debates by demonstrating how urban public spaces function as key arenas in which the interactions between civil society and governance institutions become visible and have political consequences.

Democratic Legitimacy: Contemporary governance structures at national and international levels are increasingly facing crises of legitimacy. The 2019 protests in Chile, for instance, reflected the widespread perception that government policies lacked democratic legitimacy, and that citizens had been excluded from the decision-making process. The fact that these protests took place in major urban centres such as Santiago illustrates how cities and public spaces often serve as the primary arenas in which such crises are expressed. These cases suggest that governance mechanisms must be responsive to public debate and maintain continuous dialogue with citizens and civil society actors. When these communicative channels are institutionalised at local and urban levels, they can help to address tensions before they develop into broader legitimacy crises.

Technology and New Public, Urban Spaces: In the age of social media, NGOs have also moved their activities online. Digital activism has created a new form of public space. However, it is difficult to carry out "communicative action" in this space. This is because social media discussions are often superficial and polarized. This situation also makes the relationship between digital public spaces and urban public spaces important; online discussions often gain meaning through physical actions and gatherings in city centers. Innovations are needed in the design and use of digital platforms to achieve the high-quality discussion environment envisioned by Habermas (e.g., more moderation, combating disinformation, applications that encourage in-depth discussions among small groups). NGOs can create participatory democracy experiences by using digital tools more efficiently (e.g., e-petitions, online town hall meetings, etc.). Such digital-physical hybrid participation models can lead to the emergence of new forms of urban public space, especially in large cities. This will be a key issue in the future of governance.

Authoritarian Populism and Civil Society: In recent years, populist leaders in many countries have targeted non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and legal restrictions have been imposed in some countries, such as Russia's 'foreign agent' law and Hungary's financial restrictions on NGOs. This trend carries the risk of narrowing the public sphere. In cities, this is manifested through the control of public spaces and restrictions on freedom of protest and assembly. According to the Habermasian perspective, the way to protect the public sphere in such situations is through international solidarity and normative pressure. For instance, the EU is considering sanctions, such as cutting funding, for practices that restrict NGO freedoms in member states. Such pressure mechanisms are also crucial for protecting NGOs operating at local and urban levels. They can serve as tools to secure the place of NGOs in governance.

Local Governance and NGOs: The construction of the public sphere is necessary not only at the national political level, but also within local communities. Neighbourhood forums, village associations and local initiatives are closest to real-world issues and embody Habermas's concept of the lifeworld. These structures function as fundamental public spaces where neighbourhood-level issues (housing, the environment, security and transport) are discussed, especially in urban areas. Participatory local governance, as exemplified by participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, may be where the public sphere is most vibrant, as it enables citizens to participate directly in decisions affecting their daily lives. This model shows that the urban public sphere has the capacity not only for discussion, but also for decision-making. The success of this model has inspired higher levels of government. In Türkiye, limited initiatives in this area have begun with neighbourhood councils and local assemblies. Strengthening these would reinforce the public sphere at the grassroots level. This strengthening is crucial for establishing a democratic culture in cities.

Conceptual Debate: Does the concept of governance complement or transform democracy? According to some theorists, unlike the concept of 'management', governance offers a model in which power is distributed and the state is not the sole determinant (Rhodes, 1996). In this sense, it softens the state-centred understanding of sovereignty. This idea coincides with Habermasian democracy, as Habermas favours the concept of self-governing citizens over those who are governed. This idea can be observed in practice in participatory governance experiences, particularly in urban areas. However, if democratic institutions are weak, governance can also reduce accountability. For instance, when public services are managed by NGOs or the private sector, it can be challenging to exercise control and ensure accountability. This can result in citizens becoming distanced from the decision-making processes involved in providing urban services such as transport, the environment and social services. Therefore, the concept of the accountability chain is important in understanding the impact of governance on democracy. Democratic governance should form

a chain in which each actor is accountable to a higher authority. NGOs should be transparent with the public, the state should be transparent with the public, and NGOs should be transparent with the state (with regard to the use of funds, for example). Habermas discusses the publicisation of power and its transparent and open use. When governance is implemented well, this is achieved; when it is implemented poorly, however, the opposite can occur, leading to problems such as 'no one being accountable'.

From the Perspective of Participatory Democracy: if we consider the relationship between governance and NGOs in terms of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, citizen control is at the top, while levels such as consultation and information sharing are at the bottom. Today, many governance practices remain at the consultation level. Public administrations consult with NGOs, but the state still makes the decisions. This situation is frequently observed, particularly in urban planning and urban transformation processes. Participatory democracy, however, advocates joint decision-making. This study's analysis argues that communication mechanisms must be strengthened to achieve this. Without collective wisdom, joint decisions may be unsound. Urban public spaces are some of the most suitable places for producing this collective wisdom.

From a Habermasian perspective, governance and NGOs are democratically significant insofar as they connect participation and communication with decision-making processes. When they are designed inclusively and transparently, they can expand the public sphere, particularly in urban contexts. However, when they remain tokenistic or exclusionary, they risk undermining democratic legitimacy and disconnecting citizens from governance. At the same time, it is important to recognize the structural limitations that may constrain the democratic potential of governance processes. Power asymmetries between state institutions, private actors, and civil society organizations can significantly shape participation outcomes. In many cases, participation mechanisms remain symbolic, allowing civil society actors to express opinions without granting them meaningful influence over decision-making processes. Institutional agenda-setting power, unequal access to resources, and the professionalization of some NGOs may also create risks of co-optation, where civil society actors become integrated into governance structures without maintaining their critical autonomy. From a Habermasian perspective, these dynamics illustrate how communicative processes may be distorted by systemic inequalities, highlighting the importance of institutional designs that genuinely enable inclusive and effective participation.

This study examines the relationship between governance and civil society organisations (CSOs) theoretically, based on Habermas's theory of the public sphere and communicative action. Within this scope, the research has reached various conclusions on the following thematic issues:

Participatory Governance: Participatory governance can revitalise the public sphere by enabling the inclusive and meaningful involvement of NGOs, citizens and other stakeholders in decision-making processes. Mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, citizens' juries and public policy forums are important in this respect, as they create institutional spaces for dialogue, public justification and the expression of collective concerns. These mechanisms are particularly significant in urban contexts, where public issues directly impact everyday life, and where participatory practices can transform the public sphere from a normative ideal into a tangible democratic experience.

Communicative Reason and Governance: According to Habermas's theory of communicative action, decision-making processes should be structured so that claims are assessed through reason-giving and public justification rather than mere administrative authority. In practice, however, many policy decisions are implemented without sufficient explanation, which undermines public trust. From this perspective, governance requires a clear duty to justify decisions, particularly in the areas of urban planning, transformation and infrastructure policies, where administrative choices directly impact the material and social conditions of the public sphere.

The dual role of NGOs: NGOs act as representatives of the public against the state, while also acting as agents of societal transformation. Maintaining balance in this dual role is crucial. While fulfilling their representative function, they must be accountable to the public. At the same time, they must be inclusive when transforming society. CSOs that represent a broad spectrum of interests, rather than just those of a specific group, and that can form coalitions, expand the public sphere. To this end, CSOs must also have democratic processes within their own organisations – Habermas's ideal requires this. In an urban context, this dual role involves NGOs acting as monitors and advocates in relation to local authorities, as well as organising processes of social learning and solidarity at neighbourhood, district and city levels.

Management of Media and the Digital Sphere: Media is an important component of the public sphere. The role of both traditional and social media in governance processes is critical. While Habermas emphasises that traditional media should play a supportive role in the public sphere, the opportunities and threats presented by social media today must be balanced. Disinformation undermines rational debate and is the greatest enemy of communicative action. Therefore, digital literacy and reliable information verification mechanisms must be established

within governance structures. This is a necessity that was perhaps not foreseen in Habermas's time, but which is essential today. Digital public spaces, which tend to be concentrated in large cities, should interact with physical urban spaces, and online discussions should link to concrete channels of participation at city level.

Legal and Institutional Framework: A legal basis is essential if NGOs are to play an effective role in governance. The more rights such as freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression and the right to information are protected, the broader the public sphere becomes. In countries such as Türkiye, governance processes will function more effectively when bureaucratic obstacles hindering the activities of NGOs are removed (e.g. excessive scrutiny, arbitrary closure cases and funding restrictions). Similarly, state institutions should develop a culture of cooperation with NGOs; public officials should view NGOs as partners rather than enemies or rivals. Implementing these legal and institutional arrangements at local and urban governance levels will contribute to the spatial expansion of the public sphere.

Democratic Renewal in the Light of Habermas's Views: The Habermasian perspective remains highly relevant in the context of contemporary democratic challenges. In an era characterised by polarisation, disinformation and a decline in public trust, Habermas's focus on communicative rationality provides a valuable normative framework for reconsidering governance. As this study argues, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and participatory governance mechanisms can help connect public debate with policymaking, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and responsiveness of decision-making processes. In urban contexts in particular, this democratic potential hinges on strengthening public spaces and participatory arenas that integrate political communication into everyday life.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that the relationship between civil society and governance in urban contexts is largely determined by the extent to which communicative processes can influence institutional decision-making. The analysis shows that NGOs contribute to the reconstruction of public and urban spaces by raising awareness of social issues, encouraging public debate and building communicative power. However, the effectiveness of this process depends on institutional factors, such as the inclusiveness of participation mechanisms and the transparency of decision-making processes. It also depends on the existence of channels through which civil society input can meaningfully affect governance outcomes. Therefore, the findings indicate that strengthening the institutional link between

communicative power and administrative decision-making is essential for enhancing the democratic potential of governance. Based on these findings, the following policy recommendations address the institutional conditions that shape civil society participation in governance processes.

1. The institutionalisation of governance mechanisms:

This study found that participatory mechanisms often remain merely formal, failing to establish a meaningful connection between public debate and decision-making processes. Therefore, councils of civil society organisations and platforms for public–civil society partnerships should be established at national and local levels. These bodies should also be granted a more substantive role than simple consultation in selected decision-making processes. For instance, when preparing a city's strategic plan, formal mechanisms could be introduced to enable city councils and civil society organisations to communicate their views to the administration in a structured and effective manner.

2. Transparency and feedback:

The analysis indicates that communicative power can influence governance only when civil society input is visibly linked to institutional outcomes. For this reason, NGOs and citizens participating in governance processes should receive clear feedback on how their contributions are handled, including details of which proposals were accepted or rejected and the reasons for this. Such transparency would help to strengthen trust in governance processes and reduce the risk of symbolic participation.

3. Training:

The findings also show that the democratic quality of participatory governance depends not only on the existence of participation mechanisms, but also on the communication skills of those involved. Accordingly, training programmes in negotiation, communication and mediation should be organised for public officials and NGO representatives. This would improve the quality of deliberation and bring participation closer to the Habermasian ideal of reason-giving and mutual understanding.

4. Digital democracy tools:

The study demonstrates that new public spaces are emerging in digital environments. However, these spaces are often weakly connected to formal governance processes. Therefore, innovations in e-governance that encourage reliable and transparent digital participation should be encouraged. These platforms could allow NGOs and citizens to express their opinions, discuss public issues and contribute

to decision-making processes. However, their democratic value depends on whether these contributions are taken seriously and incorporated into institutional processes.

5. International learning and solidarity:

Finally, the analysis suggests that governance and public debate are increasingly operating across multiple scales, from the local to the global. In this context, good governance practices should be shared by strengthening the links between international and local civil society networks. Successful participatory experiences in one country or city should be recognised as learning opportunities for others. Such exchanges could contribute to the development of a broader democratic governance culture, strengthening local urban public spheres in the process.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the reconstruction of public and urban spaces hinges on the extent to which governance processes incorporate the participation of civil society and translate communicative power into institutional decision-making. Habermas's conceptual framework provides a valuable basis for evaluating this relationship in terms of democratic legitimacy, participation and public justification. The analysis shows that, when participatory mechanisms are inclusive, transparent, and meaningfully connected to decision-making processes, governance and NGOs can strengthen the public sphere; however, they can also reproduce exclusion and symbolic participation when these conditions are absent. Urban contexts are particularly significant in this sense, as they are the concrete arenas in which public debate, civil society action and governance institutions intersect in everyday life. By examining this relationship through the lens of urban public spaces, the study makes a valuable theoretical contribution to contemporary debates on governance, civil society, and democratic legitimacy.

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