



MAPPING POLICY DESIGN LOGICS OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: A BIBLIOMETRIC AND THEMATIC EVOLUTION ANALYSIS (2015–2026)

Achmad Fauzi¹, Seno Andri², Muchid Albintani³, Febri Yuliani⁴, Adianto⁵, Meyzi Heriyanto⁶

¹Universitas Riau, Indonesia, achmad.fauzi6759@grad.unri.ac.id

²Universitas Riau, Indonesia, seno.andri@lecturer.unri.ac.id

³Universitas Riau, Indonesia, muchid@lecturer.unri.ac.id

⁴Universitas Riau, Indonesia, febri.yuliani@lecturer.unri.ac.id

⁵Universitas Riau, Indonesia, adianto@lecturer.unri.ac.id

⁶Universitas Riau, Indonesia, meyzi.heriyanto@lecturer.unri.ac.id

Email Corresponding: achmad.fauzi6759@grad.unri.ac.id

Abstract: Research on empowerment in the Global South has expanded rapidly, yet its integration within policy design theory remains conceptually uneven. This study aims to systematically map how empowerment has been framed, operationalized, and prioritized within policy design-oriented scholarship. Employing a bibliometric and thematic evolution analysis, the study examines 1,849 Scopus-indexed journal articles published between 2015 and 2026. Using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny, it combines descriptive performance analysis, co-authorship and co-word network analysis, thematic mapping, and longitudinal thematic evolution to uncover intellectual structures and dominant design logics. The findings reveal a fast-growing and globally connected research field dominated by sustainability governance, development policy, and implementation-focused domains. Across these clusters, empowerment is predominantly conceptualized as a functional outcome of policy instruments, coordination arrangements, and administrative capacity rather than as an explicit design variable linked to authority redistribution. Participation, inclusion, and engagement occupy central thematic positions, while concepts related to power, discretion, and institutional transformation remain peripheral and weakly consolidated. Although Global South contexts are extensively represented as empirical settings, conceptual framing and agenda-setting are largely shaped by transnational governance vocabularies, positioning these contexts more as sites of application than sources of theoretical innovation. The study concludes that empowerment operates primarily as an implicit and instrumental policy design logic. It highlights the need for future research agendas that integrate policy design analysis with power-sensitive theories and context-aware approaches to better capture empowerment as a political and distributive process in Global South governance.



Keywords: Bibliometric Analysis; Policy Design; Empowerment; Thematic Evolution; Global South Governance; Knowledge Mapping; Sustainability and Development Policy.

INTRODUCTION:

Over the past two decades, policy design has consolidated its position as a central analytical framework in public policy and governance research. Rather than viewing policies merely as expressions of political intent or administrative capacity, policy design scholarship emphasizes how policy instruments, decision rules, and implementation architectures systematically shape governance outcomes (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). From this perspective, policies are not neutral technical tools but structured configurations that embed assumptions about power, authority, and agency.

Within this expanding literature, empowerment has emerged as a prominent normative objective, frequently articulated through participation, engagement, and inclusion—particularly in developing and emerging economies (Kabeer, 2005; A. Sen, 1999). However, empirical research consistently shows that participation does not automatically translate into substantive empowerment. In many governance settings, participatory mechanisms result in procedural inclusion without meaningful redistribution of decision-making authority, producing outcomes that are largely symbolic (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2008).

From a policy design perspective, this discrepancy highlights a critical insight: empowerment is a design-dependent policy outcome, rather than an automatic consequence of participatory arrangements (Capano & Howlett, 2020). Empowerment materializes—or fails—through concrete design choices embedded within policy architectures, including instrument selection, authority allocation, and the degree of discretion granted to local actors. Consequently, analytical attention must shift from whether participation exists to how empowerment is designed, operationalized, and constrained within institutional contexts.

Empirical studies within the literature indexed in this study reinforce this observation. Research conducted in Global South contexts frequently frames empowerment in relation to implementation mechanisms, stakeholder coordination, and institutional performance, rather than as a reconfiguration of underlying power relations. For example, studies examining governance and institutional arrangements in Indonesia emphasize empowerment as an outcome of organizational design and coordination effectiveness rather than as a redistribution of authority (Susilawaty et al., 2025). Similar patterns are observed in sector-specific policy domains, where empowerment is treated as a functional goal linked to implementation success and service delivery outcomes (Chitiyo et al., 2026).



The fragmentation of empowerment-oriented policy research further complicates cumulative knowledge building. Relevant studies are dispersed across public administration, development studies, education policy, and sustainability governance, often employing divergent conceptualizations and context-specific indicators. Evidence from the analyzed corpus suggests that empowerment is frequently examined at the operational level—such as organizational capacity, stakeholder engagement, or program effectiveness—while its political and institutional dimensions receive less systematic attention (Kundu & Bej, 2025).

These challenges are particularly salient in Global South contexts. While developing and emerging economies constitute a substantial share of empirical settings in empowerment-oriented research, they are often framed primarily as sites of implementation difficulty rather than as sources of conceptual innovation (Grindle, 2004). Yet empirical findings from countries such as Indonesia and South Africa—well represented in the dataset—demonstrate that governance systems in the Global South are characterized by institutional hybridity, adaptive arrangements, and persistent power asymmetries that complicate standardized policy design models (Chitiyo et al., 2026; Susilawaty et al., 2025).

Despite the rapid growth of scholarship at the intersection of policy design, governance, and development, systematic synthesis remains limited. Existing bibliometric analyses have mapped governance, sustainability, and participation research broadly (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015), but rarely focus explicitly on empowerment through a policy design lens or trace its conceptual evolution over time. As a result, fundamental questions remain insufficiently explored regarding how empowerment has been conceptualized, operationalized, and constrained within policy design research, particularly in Global South contexts.

To address these gaps, this study undertakes a bibliometric and thematic evolution analysis of Scopus-indexed journal articles published between 2015 and 2026. By integrating descriptive performance analysis, co-word networks, and thematic mapping, the study systematically examines how policy design logics of empowerment have developed over time. In doing so, it contributes to policy design scholarship by clarifying conceptual trajectories, identifying underexplored dimensions, and repositioning Global South research as a substantive contributor to theory building rather than a peripheral site of application.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Bibliometric Approaches in Analyzing Scientific Knowledge

Bibliometric, scientometric, and informetric analyses constitute established quantitative



approaches for examining the structure, dynamics, and evolution of scientific knowledge. Bibliometrics focuses on statistical patterns of scholarly publications and citations, enabling systematic assessment of research productivity, impact, and intellectual structure within a given field (Larivière et al., 2013; Waltman, 2016). Scientometrics extends this scope by explicitly addressing the organization and dynamics of scientific systems, including disciplinary development and collaboration networks, while informetrics encompasses broader quantitative studies of information production and dissemination (Börner et al., 2003).

The methodological maturation of bibliometrics has shifted the field from descriptive citation counts toward network-based and content-oriented science mapping. These developments allow scholars to identify intellectual clusters, emerging research fronts, and thematic trajectories across time and space (Cobo et al., 2011). In policy-oriented research, such approaches are increasingly employed to synthesize fragmented literatures spanning public administration, governance, and development studies, where conventional narrative reviews often fail to capture structural complexity.

Bibliometric Methods and Analytical Approaches

Contemporary bibliometric studies typically integrate multiple analytical layers. Descriptive bibliometrics examines publication growth, document types, disciplinary distribution, and geographical patterns, providing insights into the maturation and diffusion of a research field (Zupic & Čater, 2015). Network-based techniques—such as co-authorship, co-citation, and bibliographic coupling analyses—reveal collaboration structures and intellectual foundations underpinning scholarly communities (Small, 1973; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Content-oriented analyses, including keyword co-occurrence and thematic evolution mapping, enable the identification of dominant concepts and their transformation over time (Cobo et al., 2011). These methods are particularly valuable for tracing shifts in policy scholarship, where normative concepts such as empowerment may gradually be reframed into operational or design-oriented logics. Citation-based impact indicators further support evaluation of scholarly influence, although their limitations—especially biases favoring established journals and Global North scholarship—necessitate cautious interpretation (Waltman, 2016).

The increasing adoption of specialized tools such as Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny, VOSviewer, and CiteSpace reflects a broader move toward transparent, replicable, and visually interpretable bibliometric research (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Chen, 2006).



Prior Bibliometric Reviews on Governance and Policy Research

Bibliometric reviews have been widely applied to governance-related domains, including digital governance, e-government, sustainability policy, and public participation. Existing studies primarily map publication trends, influential journals, leading authors, and dominant thematic clusters, demonstrating the rapid expansion and diversification of governance scholarship (Donthu et al., 2021).

However, these reviews exhibit notable limitations. First, most focus on governance outcomes or technologies rather than policy design as an analytical logic, treating empowerment as a peripheral or outcome-oriented concept. Second, Global South contexts are frequently aggregated within global datasets, obscuring regional specificities and developmental asymmetries. Third, few studies systematically examine thematic evolution, limiting understanding of how empowerment-oriented policy discourse transforms across time.

These gaps suggest that existing bibliometric mappings insufficiently capture how policy design principles structure empowerment-oriented research, particularly within developing and emerging economies.

Conceptual Synthesis: Bibliometrics and Policy Design

From a conceptual perspective, bibliometric mapping enables synthesis across fragmented policy literatures by revealing relationships between theories, methods, and epistemic communities. In the context of policy design, bibliometrics facilitates examination of how design-oriented approaches—such as instrument choice, institutional configuration, and implementation architecture—intersect with normative commitments to empowerment, participation, and inclusion.

By combining network analysis with thematic evolution, bibliometrics contributes not merely as a descriptive technique but as a theory-supporting instrument. It enables identification of underexplored linkages between policy design scholarship and empowerment discourse, highlighting latent research streams that remain obscured in conventional reviews.

Across the policy design and governance literature, empowerment has been conceptualized and operationalized in markedly different ways, often depending on policy domain, institutional context, and analytical focus. While foundational theories emphasize empowerment as a redistribution of power and agency, empirical studies—particularly those situated in Global South contexts—tend to frame empowerment in more functional and implementation-oriented terms. Rather than being treated as a political design objective in itself, empowerment is frequently operationalized through participation mechanisms, administrative capacity building, or service effectiveness.



To clarify how empowerment is practically framed within policy design–adjacent research, Table 1 synthesizes representative studies from the analyzed corpus, highlighting dominant conceptual foci, policy domains, and the implied design dimensions through which empowerment is understood.

Table 1. Synthesizes representative studies from the analyzed corpus

Conceptual focus (what empowerment “means” in the corpus)	Typical policy domain(s)	How empowerment is framed (dominant operationalization)	Policy design angle implied	Representative studies
Participation vs. substantive power	Commons / environmental governance	Empowerment is linked to collective action and governance capacity, but often mediated by conflict, actors’ strategies, and institutional constraints	Authority allocation; rules-in-use; institutional change	Maryudi et al. (2022); Villamayor-Tomas et al. (2016)
Implementation capacity & “good enough” governance	Development / public sector reform	Empowerment is treated as an outcome of implementation arrangements and administrative learning, not automatically produced by participation	Implementation architecture; adaptation; discretion	Alaerts (2020); Langlois et al. (2016)
Regulatory access & community remedies	Business regulation / governance	Empowerment is operationalized as access to remedies/rights and effectiveness of nonjudicial mechanisms	Instrument choice; enforcement and accountability design	Haines and Macdonald (2020)
Behavioural and instrument	Sustainability / policy design	Empowerment is framed as behaviour change and	Instrument mix; design logics;	Markkanen & Anger-Kraavi (2019); Mukherjee &



Conceptual focus (what empowerment “means” in the corpus)	Typical policy domain(s)	How empowerment is framed (dominant operationalization)	Policy design angle implied	Representative studies
design for sustainability outcomes		instrument-enabled outcomes, not necessarily power redistribution	behavioural assumptions	Mukherjee (2018)
Socio-technical enablement (digital state capacity)	Digital governance / public administration	Empowerment is framed as improved administrative capability and information flows via ICT enablement	Institutional/technical design; capacity-building instruments	Liu & Yuan (2015)
Gendered empowerment in transitions	Energy transition / development	Empowerment is operationalized as agency and distributional inclusion in transitions, sometimes treated as co-benefit rather than core design target	Distributional design; inclusion mechanisms; transition governance	Schiffer et al. (2022); K. K. Sen et al. (2025)

The synthesis presented in Table 1 indicates that empowerment-oriented policy research within the corpus is predominantly anchored in implementation and capacity-based logics rather than explicit power redistribution. Across diverse policy domains—including environmental governance, development policy, digital governance, and energy transitions—empowerment is commonly framed as an outcome of institutional arrangements, coordination mechanisms, and instrument design.

This pattern suggests that empowerment functions less as an autonomous design principle and more as a contingent result of policy architectures and governance processes. Such conceptual tendencies have important implications for how empowerment is clustered, connected, and prioritized within the broader literature. Accordingly, the following section presents the bibliometric results, mapping the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and dominant design logics that underpin empowerment-oriented policy design research over time.



Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the proliferation of bibliometric studies in governance research, systematic mapping of policy design logics of empowerment in the Global South remains largely unexplored. Existing reviews rarely integrate policy design perspectives with empowerment frameworks, nor do they trace their conceptual evolution longitudinally.

Addressing this gap is theoretically and empirically significant, as empowerment-oriented policies in the Global South operate under distinct institutional constraints and developmental contexts. This study responds by conducting a longitudinal bibliometric and thematic evolution analysis (2015–2026) that explicitly centers on policy design and empowerment in Global South scholarship, thereby advancing both bibliometric methodology and policy design research.

METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a bibliometric research design to systematically map the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and collaborative patterns of policy design scholarship related to empowerment in the Global South between 2015 and 2026. Bibliometric analysis was selected because it enables large-scale, replicable, and theory-informed examination of scientific knowledge production, allowing both descriptive and relational insights into the development of a research field (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021).

Data were retrieved exclusively from the Scopus database, which was chosen due to its broad coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences, standardized metadata structure, and consistent citation indexing—features that are essential for reliable network and longitudinal analyses. While alternative databases such as Web of Science or Google Scholar offer complementary coverage, Scopus provides stronger consistency for bibliometric mapping and reduces noise from non-peer-reviewed sources. The search was conducted using the TITLE-ABS-KEY field to balance precision and recall. The final Boolean search string combined three conceptual clusters: policy design (“policy design” OR “institutional design” OR “policy framework”), empowerment-related concepts (“empowerment” OR “participation” OR “engagement” OR “inclusion”), and contextual delimiters (“global south” OR “developing countr*” OR “emerging econom*” OR “Indonesia”). The initial query returned 3,260 records; applying a temporal filter (2015–2026) reduced the dataset to 2,856 documents. Subsequent filters restricting document type to final journal articles and language to English yielded 1,849 records, which constituted the analytical corpus.



Inclusion criteria were defined to ensure analytical coherence and relevance: only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English, indexed in Scopus, and explicitly addressing policy design in relation to empowerment processes in developing or Global South contexts were retained. Exclusion criteria removed conference papers, book chapters, editorials, reviews, early-access items, and documents outside the defined thematic scope. The screening and selection process followed PRISMA-informed principles to enhance transparency and replicability, documenting retrieved, excluded, and included records at each stage.

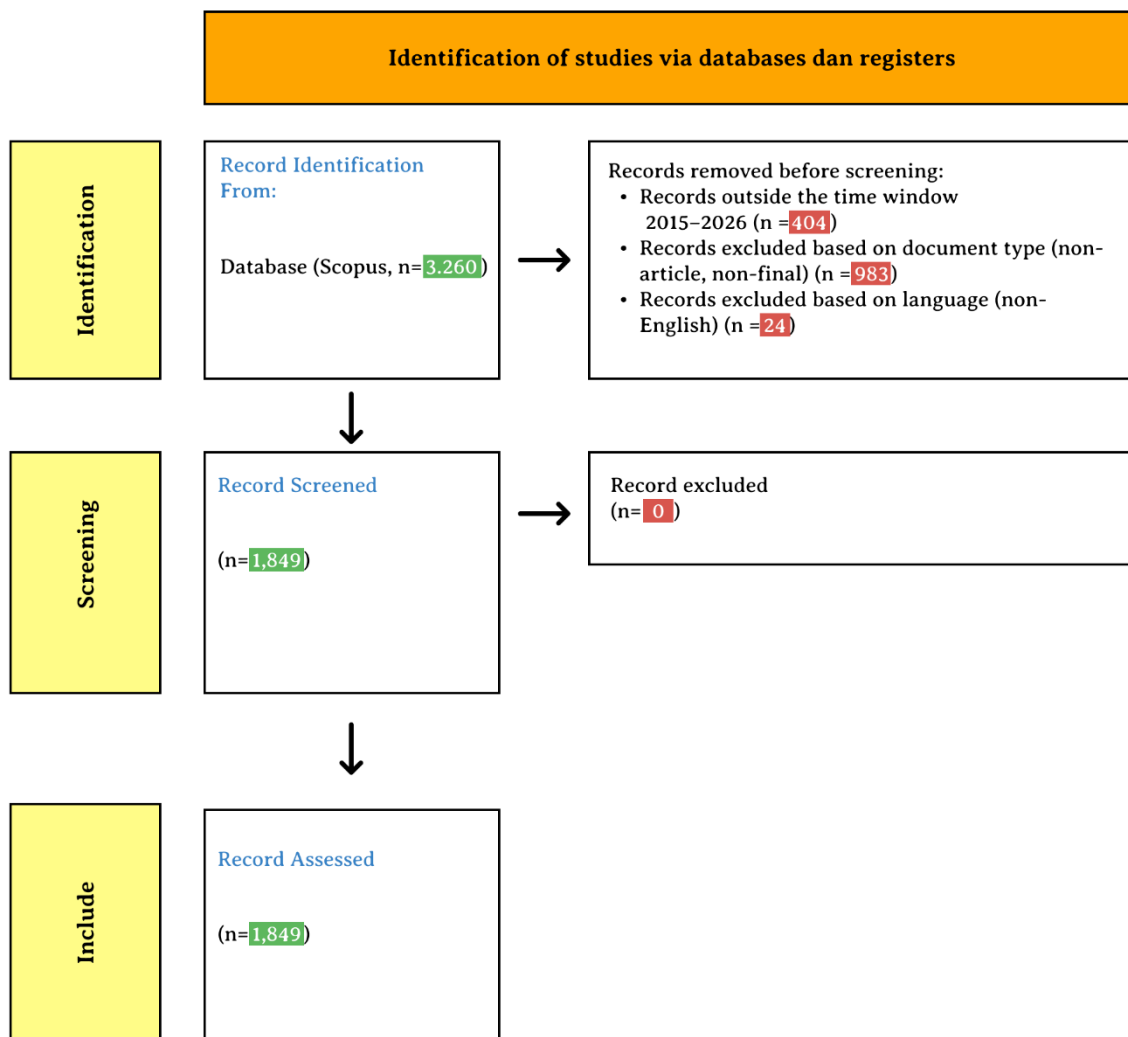


Figure 1. PRISMA-informed flow diagram of the study selection process

The figure illustrates the database-driven filtering and screening procedure used to construct the final bibliometric dataset.

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA-informed flow diagram of the study selection process. From an initial retrieval of 3,260 records from the Scopus database, automated filtering was applied based on publication year (2015–2026), document type (final journal articles), and language



(English), resulting in a final analytical corpus of 1,849 documents. As this study relies on a single bibliographic database and adopts a bibliometric mapping approach, screening was conducted at the metadata level without manual abstract or full-text review.

Following data retrieval, records were exported in CSV format and processed using RStudio through the Bibliometrix package and its graphical interface, Biblioshiny. Data cleaning procedures involved automated and manual deduplication, normalization of author names, institutional affiliations, and country labels, and consistency checks for missing or anomalous metadata. Keyword standardization was applied to harmonize synonymous terms and reduce semantic fragmentation (e.g., plural forms, spelling variants). These procedures aimed to minimize measurement bias and improve the reliability of subsequent network and thematic analyses (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

The analytical framework combined four complementary layers. First, descriptive bibliometric indicators were computed to examine publication growth, annual trends, geographic distribution of authorship, and productivity patterns across journals, authors, institutions, and countries. Second, network analyses were conducted to explore co-authorship structures, collaboration intensity, and co-citation relationships, enabling identification of influential actors and intellectual clusters within the field. Third, thematic and content analyses were performed using keyword frequency, co-occurrence networks, thematic maps, and thematic evolution analysis to trace how policy design logics of empowerment have shifted over time. Centrality and density metrics were used to classify themes into motor, basic, emerging, and niche categories, following established bibliometric conventions (Callon et al., 1991; Cobo et al., 2011). Fourth, impact assessment was undertaken using citation-based indicators, including total citations, average citations per document, and author-level metrics such as the h-index, to evaluate scholarly influence.

Temporal analysis was integrated across all analytical layers by segmenting the dataset into sequential time slices, allowing identification of emerging topics, declining themes, and periods of conceptual consolidation. This longitudinal approach supports interpretation of thematic evolution rather than static topic prevalence.

Analyses were primarily conducted using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny in R, complemented by spreadsheet-based validation in Microsoft Excel for descriptive statistics and cross-checking. Visualization outputs were generated using Biblioshiny's native functions; no custom scripts were employed beyond standard package routines.

To ensure methodological rigor, several validation and reliability measures were applied. Data



cleaning steps were cross-verified manually, keyword harmonization followed transparent rules, and sensitivity checks were conducted by inspecting whether minor variations in keyword grouping altered dominant thematic structures. As the study relied on automated bibliometric techniques rather than manual coding, inter-coder reliability was not applicable; however, analytical robustness was supported through reproducible workflows and documented parameter settings. Recognized limitations—most notably the exclusive reliance on Scopus—are acknowledged, and the findings are interpreted as representative of high-impact, peer-reviewed scholarship rather than the entirety of global policy design discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Overview of the Dataset and Analytical Landscape

The analysis is based on 1,849 Scopus-indexed journal articles published between 2015 and 2026, drawn from 930 academic journals. The corpus exhibits a high level of collaboration, with an average of 3.55 authors per article and 39.75% international co-authorship, indicating that research on policy design and empowerment is embedded within a globally interconnected scholarly ecosystem. Scientific output increases steadily over time and accelerates markedly after 2023, peaking in 2025. Publications indexed in 2026 reflect partial-year database coverage rather than a substantive decline. Overall, the dataset points to a research field in which empowerment in the Global South is increasingly examined through governance-oriented, sustainability-linked, and policy implementation-focused design frameworks, rather than through narrowly defined empowerment theory.

Dataset Structure and Descriptive Patterns of Scientific Production

Table 2 summarizes the structural profile of the analyzed corpus and provides the empirical foundation for interpreting temporal, geographical, and thematic patterns.

Table 2. Main characteristics of the analyzed dataset (2015–2026)

Indicator	Value
Timespan	2015–2026
Sources (journals)	930
Documents	1,849
Single-authored documents	292
Average authors per document	3.55



Indicator	Value
International co-authorship (%)	39.75
Average citations per document	14.44
Total references	16,591
Average document age (years)	2.65

Several features are analytically salient. First, the dominance of multi-authored publications indicates that policy design and empowerment research is rarely conducted in isolation. Instead, it is embedded in collaborative research arrangements that often span institutions and national boundaries. This is reinforced by the high level of international co-authorship, suggesting that empowerment-related policy design questions are frequently investigated through cross-national comparisons and multi-contextual case studies, rather than within isolated national research traditions.

Second, the relatively young average document age points to a field that is still expanding rather than consolidating. This temporal youthfulness implies that conceptual framings and analytical approaches remain fluid, providing space for reinterpretation of how empowerment is defined, measured, and operationalized within policy design scholarship.

Temporal Dynamics of Scientific Production

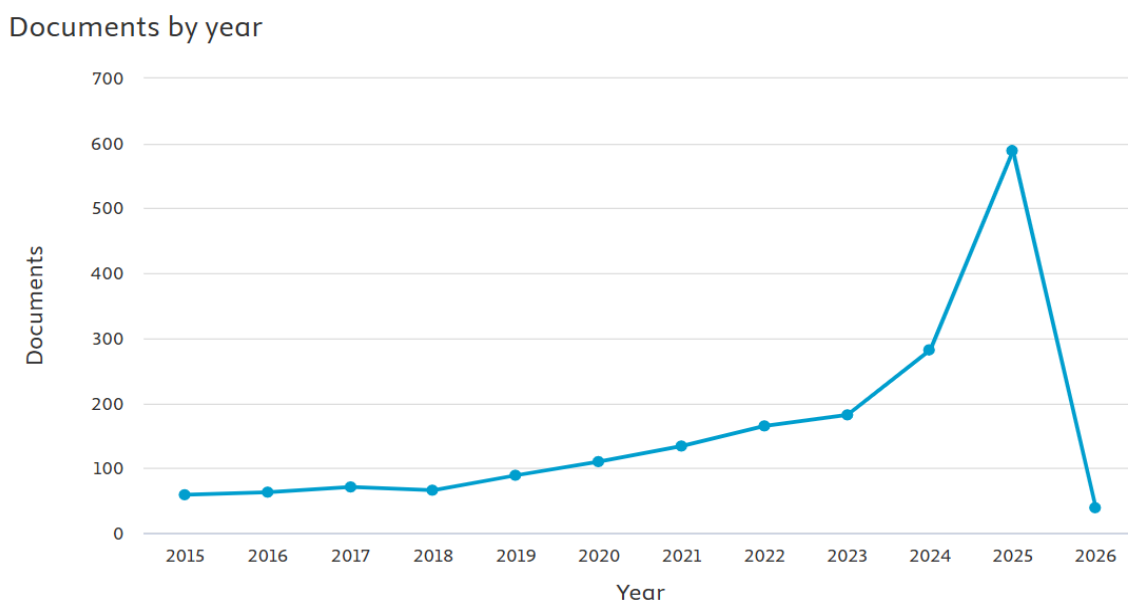


Figure 2. Annual scientific production, 2015–2026



The temporal distribution of publications reveals a clear structural pattern. From 2015 to 2023, scientific output increases gradually, reflecting the incremental consolidation of policy design as a relevant analytical framework for examining empowerment-related issues. During this phase, policy design emerges as a complementary lens alongside governance, development, and implementation studies, but does not yet dominate the discourse.

A pronounced shift occurs from 2024 onward, culminating in 589 publications in 2025. This surge represents more than linear growth; it signals a qualitative expansion of the field. The timing of this acceleration coincides with intensified global scholarly attention to sustainability transitions, governance reform, and policy implementation capacity. Within these domains, empowerment is increasingly treated as an operational outcome of policy architecture, embedded in instruments, implementation rules, and stakeholder arrangements, rather than as an abstract or purely normative ideal.

The apparent decline in 2026 should be interpreted with caution. As the most recent year in the dataset, it reflects incomplete database indexing and limited exposure time, rather than a substantive reduction in scholarly interest. Methodologically, this distinction is critical: without correcting for coverage, any inference regarding declining relevance or thematic exhaustion would be analytically unsound. The temporal pattern therefore underscores the importance of situating thematic interpretation within the dynamics of publication growth and database maturation.

Geographical Distribution of Research Output

Documents by country or territory

Compare the document counts for up to 15 countries/territories.

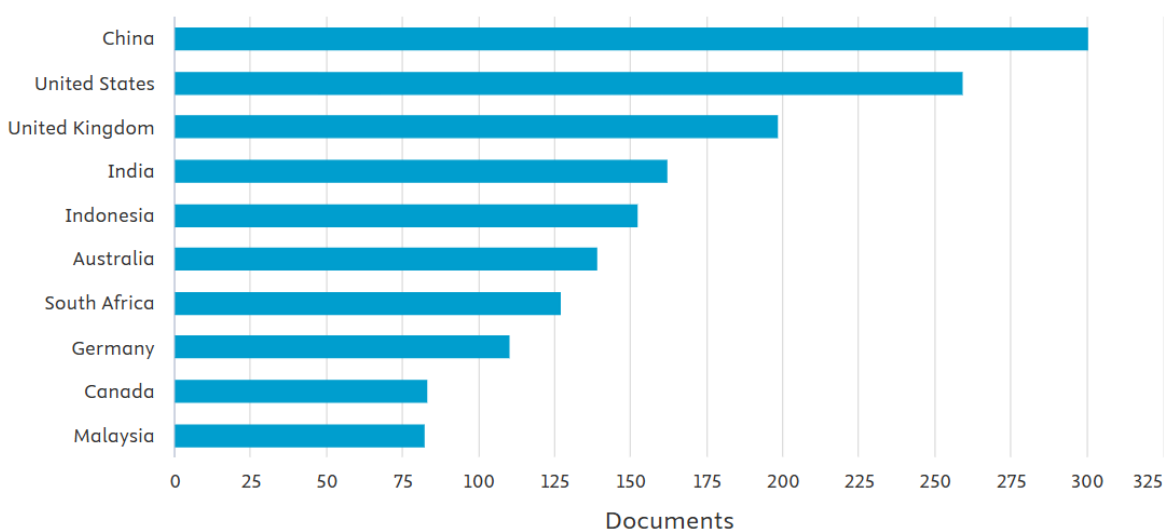


Figure 3. Country scientific production



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At the same time, the dominance of established research economies indicates a structural asymmetry in knowledge production. While Global South contexts frequently serve as empirical settings for studying empowerment, the conceptual framing, methodological conventions, and publication outlets are often anchored in globally dominant academic systems. This configuration suggests a division of labor in which empowerment is examined in the Global South but theorized through transnational governance and policy design vocabularies.

As a result, empowerment is commonly articulated in terms of participation, inclusion, and implementation effectiveness—concepts that travel well across contexts and align with comparative governance analysis—while locally grounded interpretations of power, authority, and political agency remain less visible within the dominant publication patterns.

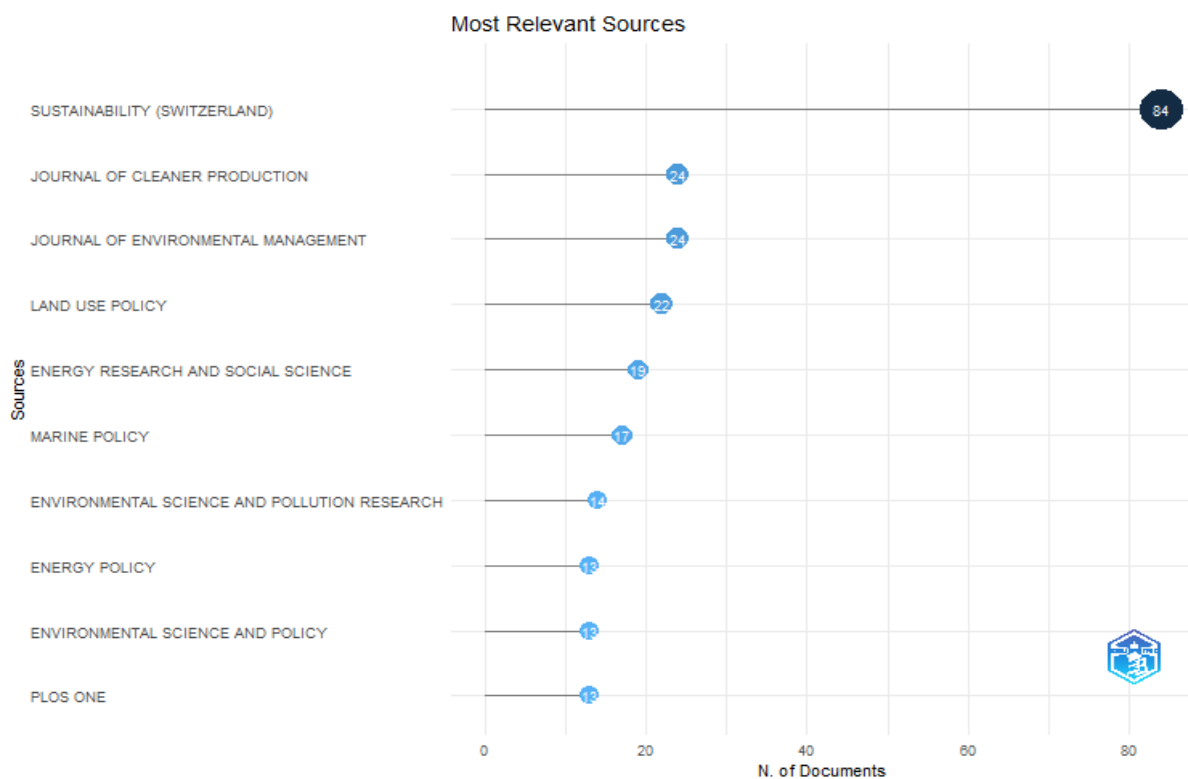


Figure 4. Most relevant sources
Source Dominance and Journal Ecology



The distribution of publications across journals further clarifies the intellectual orientation of the field. Output is heavily concentrated in sustainability-, environmental policy-, energy-, and development-oriented journals, including Sustainability, Journal of Cleaner Production, Land Use Policy, and Energy Research & Social Science. These outlets prioritize applied governance problems where policy design choices can be empirically assessed in terms of outcomes, implementation performance, and stakeholder engagement.

This journal ecology indicates that policy design logics of empowerment are primarily framed instrumentally, emphasizing policy mixes, regulatory mechanisms, and implementation architectures that translate empowerment into measurable outcomes. Normative or power-centric conceptions of empowerment—such as authority redistribution or political contestation—appear comparatively less central within the dominant publication venues. Consequently, empowerment is most often discussed as something that can be designed into policies, rather than as a disruptive challenge to existing institutional arrangements.

Authorship Patterns and Temporal Dynamics of Scholarly Contribution



Figure 5. Authors’ production over time

Figure 5 illustrates the temporal distribution of scholarly contributions among the most active authors in the dataset, integrating productivity and citation intensity over time. The figure reveals



a highly uneven pattern of engagement, characterized by a small number of scholars who demonstrate sustained or recurrent involvement, alongside a larger group of authors whose contributions are episodic or temporally concentrated.

Several distinct authorship trajectories are evident. Some authors—most notably Michael P. Howlett—entered the field early and maintained long-term engagement, underscoring their role as intellectual anchors in the development of policy design scholarship. In contrast, other contributors appear primarily in later periods, with publication activity clustered after 2020, coinciding with the rapid expansion of sustainability- and implementation-oriented policy research. Variation in node size and citation intensity further indicates that influence is not uniformly distributed over time, with some authors combining sustained productivity with higher annual impact.

This temporal authorship structure suggests a core-periphery dynamic in the evolution of policy design and empowerment research. Conceptual continuity and theoretical consolidation are largely maintained by a limited core of established scholars, while empirical diversification and contextual expansion are driven by newer or episodic contributors operating across diverse policy domains, including energy transition, environmental governance, health policy, and development programming.

International Collaboration Patterns and Cross-National Embeddedness

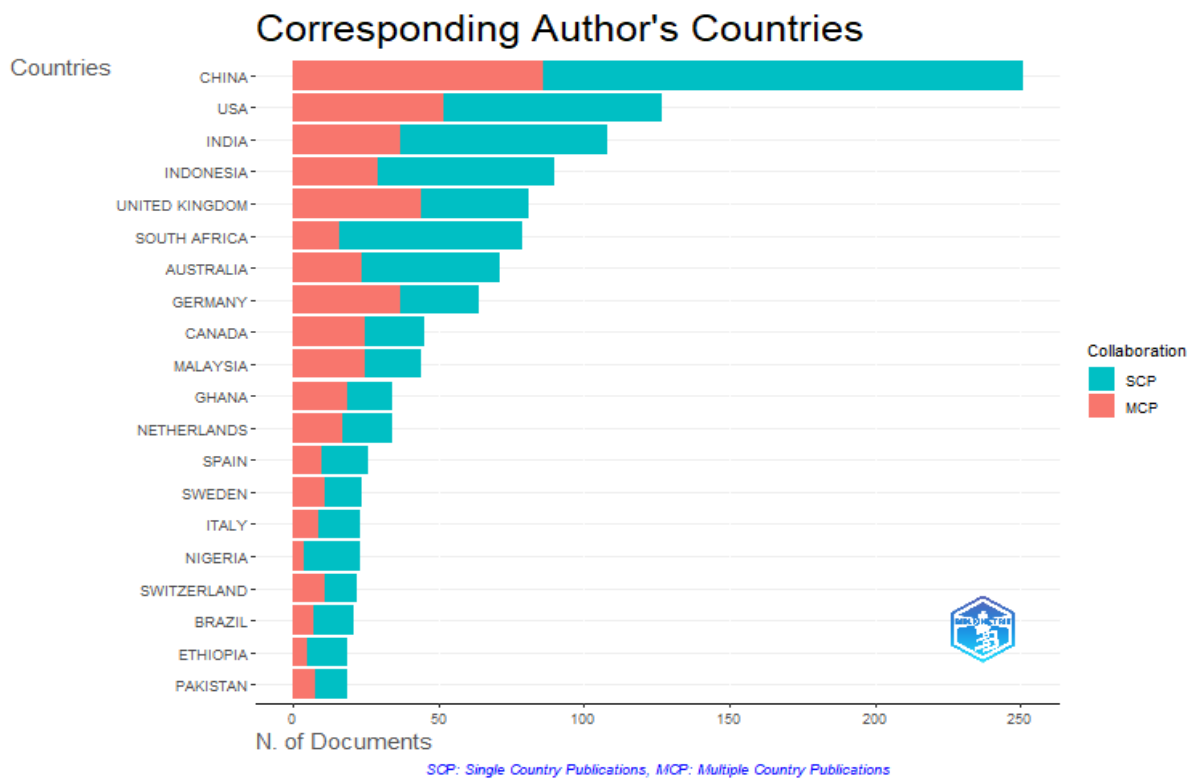


Figure 6. Corresponding author's countries and international collaboration patterns (SCP vs MCP)



Figure 6 presents the distribution of corresponding authors' countries, distinguishing between single-country publications (SCP) and multiple-country publications (MCP). This distinction provides an empirical basis for assessing the degree of cross-national embeddedness and international collaboration in policy design and empowerment research.

The results reveal a differentiated collaboration pattern. Countries such as China, the United States, India, and Indonesia account for a large share of total publications, reflecting their role as high-volume contributors. However, a substantial proportion of their output remains SCP-dominated, indicating strong domestic research capacity but relatively lower reliance on international co-authorship. In contrast, countries including the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, the Netherlands, and Australia display higher MCP proportions, suggesting that they function as collaboration brokers that connect research efforts across national contexts.

This configuration facilitates the diffusion of policy design concepts across regions and supports comparative analysis and methodological transfer. At the same time, it highlights asymmetries in agenda-setting authority. Countries with higher MCP shares are better positioned to shape dominant analytical vocabularies and research standards, while countries with SCP-dominated output—many of which are located in the Global South—are more frequently positioned as empirical contributors rather than conceptual anchors. As a result, empowerment is often framed through internationally circulating governance paradigms, potentially marginalizing locally grounded interpretations of power and institutional change.

Conceptual Structure and Keyword Co-Occurrence

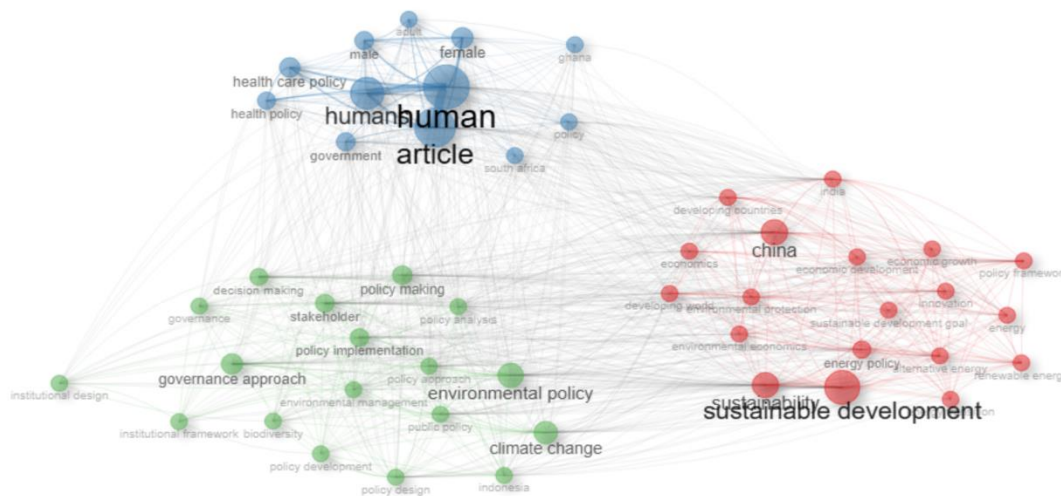


Figure 7. Keyword co-occurrence network



The keyword co-occurrence network reveals the conceptual backbone of the field. Several concepts occupy structurally central and bridging positions, including sustainable development, environmental policy, governance approach, policy implementation, and policy making. These terms connect multiple thematic clusters, indicating that empowerment is most commonly conceptualized as a function of governance design and implementation processes.

The prominence of sustainability- and policy-oriented keywords confirms that empowerment is frequently embedded within broader policy objectives, such as environmental transition, economic development, and service delivery. In contrast, concepts directly associated with power redistribution, political contestation, and institutional authority shifts occupy more peripheral positions in the network. This pattern suggests that empowerment is predominantly treated as an outcome of effective policy design, rather than as a transformative reconfiguration of power relations.

Thematic Clustering and Structural Organization of Research Themes

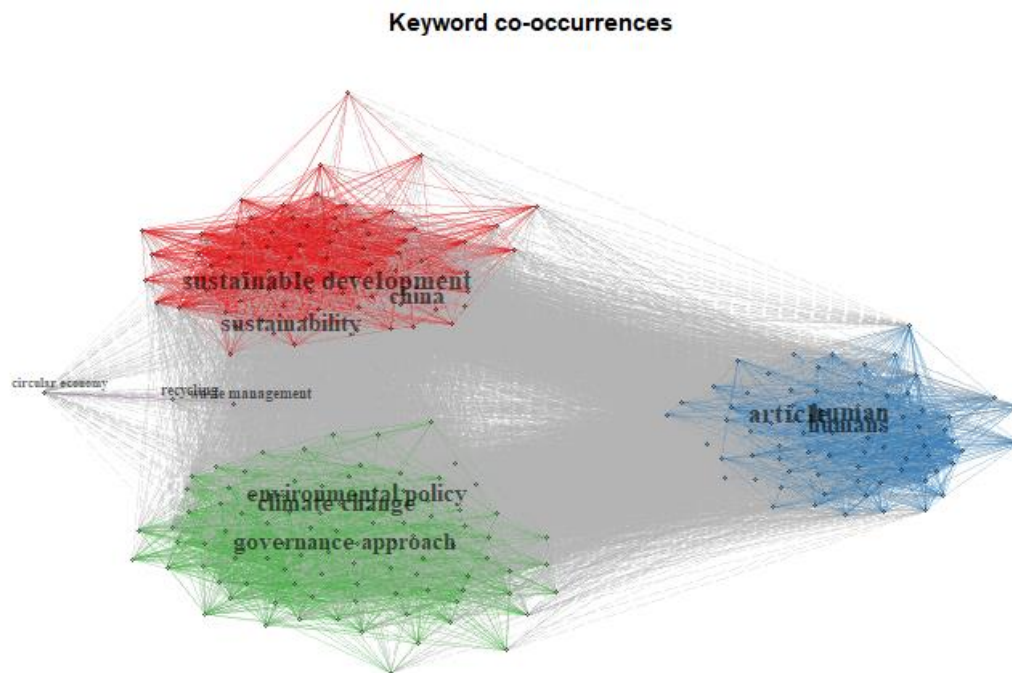


Figure 8. Keyword co-occurrence network (thematic clustering)

The thematic clustering analysis identifies coherent groups of research themes that structure the intellectual landscape of policy design and empowerment scholarship. The largest clusters are centered on sustainability and energy transition, policy implementation and governance, and



development-oriented interventions, including anti-poverty and livelihood programs. These clusters represent the dominant application domains in which empowerment is operationalized through policy instruments and governance arrangements.

Smaller clusters capture more specialized or episodic research contexts, such as health policy, crisis governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, and disaster risk management. While less central in terms of volume, these clusters illustrate how empowerment-related policy design concepts are mobilized in response to shocks and disruptions, rather than as part of long-term structural transformation agendas.

Across all clusters, empowerment is predominantly framed in pragmatic and instrumental terms, including enhanced participation, improved access to resources, and increased implementation capacity. This thematic structure reflects the applied orientation of the field, where empowerment is treated as a measurable outcome of policy design rather than as a contested political process.

Thematic Evolution and Temporal Dynamics of Policy Design Logics

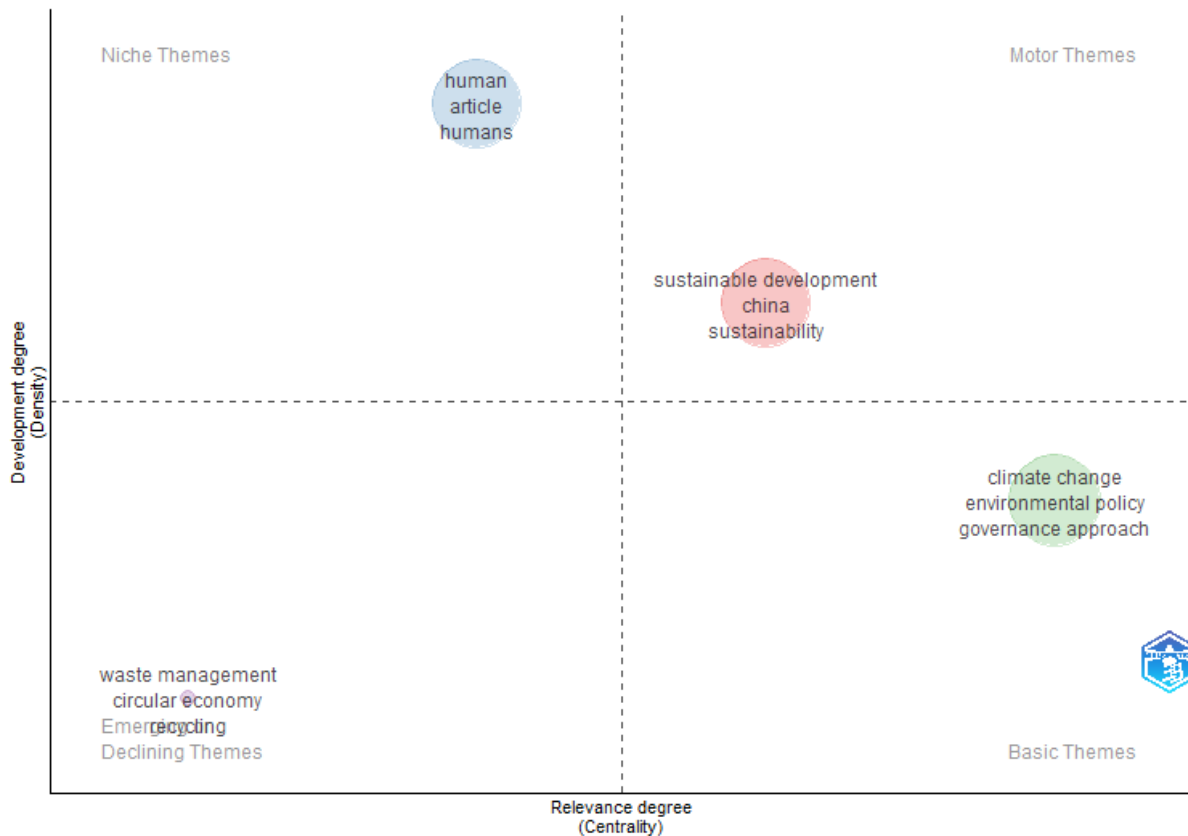


Figure 9. Thematic map and thematic evolution

The thematic evolution analysis shifts the focus from structural grouping to temporal dynamics, revealing how research themes have developed and repositioned over time. The



thematic map indicates that sustainability-oriented governance has emerged as a central motor theme in recent years, characterized by high internal development and strong external connectivity with other themes.

In contrast, themes associated with power redistribution, political agency, and institutional transformation remain either peripheral or emergent. Although these themes appear intermittently across periods, they have not yet consolidated into mature research trajectories. This temporal pattern suggests that while the field has expanded rapidly in applied domains, more critical and political interpretations of empowerment have struggled to gain sustained traction.

The divergence between dominant motor themes and marginal political themes highlights a significant conceptual gap. It indicates that policy design scholarship has prioritized how empowerment can be implemented, rather than whose power is transformed and through what institutional mechanisms. This imbalance delineates a clear opportunity for future research to integrate policy design logics with more explicit theories of power and institutional change.

Integrative Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the descriptive, collaboration, and thematic analyses depict a rapidly expanding and globally connected research field. Policy design scholarship addressing empowerment in the Global South is predominantly situated within sustainability- and governance-oriented policy domains, where empowerment is treated as a designable outcome embedded in policy instruments and implementation architectures. While Global South contexts feature prominently as empirical sites, the conceptual core of the field remains closely aligned with transnational governance vocabularies and applied policy logics.

This configuration reveals both the strength and the limitation of existing research. On the one hand, it demonstrates the capacity of policy design frameworks to operationalize empowerment within complex governance systems. On the other hand, it underscores the relative absence of sustained theoretical engagement with empowerment as a transformation of power relations. Addressing this imbalance represents a critical opportunity for future research and provides a strong justification for the analytical focus of this study.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Key Findings

The bibliometric evidence indicates that scholarship on empowerment within policy design-oriented research has expanded substantially since 2015, accompanied by increasing thematic differentiation across governance, development, sustainability, and digital policy domains.



However, this expansion has not produced conceptual convergence. Instead, empowerment is articulated through multiple design logics that coexist without a shared theoretical core, a pattern also observed in broader governance research (Alaerts, 2020; Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 2018).

In line with earlier studies on policy implementation and administrative reform, the findings suggest that empowerment is predominantly framed as an outcome of effective policy delivery rather than as a primary design objective (Haines & Macdonald, 2020; Langlois et al., 2016). Across several dominant thematic clusters, empowerment is operationalized through participation mechanisms, coordination arrangements, and improvements in service performance. This supports the view that contemporary policy design research often prioritizes functionality and feasibility over normative redistribution of authority.

Contrary to normative theories that equate participation with empowerment, the mapped literature reveals persistent gaps between inclusion and actual decision-making power. Participatory arrangements frequently coexist with entrenched institutional hierarchies and asymmetrical authority structures, particularly in complex governance systems (Maryudi et al., 2022; Villamayor-Tomas et al., 2016). This challenges the assumption that participation alone is sufficient to generate empowerment and adds empirical weight to long-standing critiques of procedural governance.

The analysis further highlights the centrality of Global South contexts in empirical research on empowerment. Studies situated in developing and emerging economies dominate several thematic clusters, especially those related to environmental governance, development policy, and institutional reform. However, these contexts are often treated as sites of implementation difficulty rather than as sources of conceptual innovation (Alaerts, 2020; Markkanen & Anger-Kraavi, 2019). At the same time, the prevalence of adaptive and hybrid governance arrangements in these settings complicates linear policy design models and underscores the importance of context-sensitive design logics.

To consolidate these interpretive insights, Table 3 synthesizes the dominant policy design logics through which empowerment is conceptualized in the literature, explicitly distinguishing their assumptions, empirical emphases, and design implications.



Table 3. Dominant Policy Design Logics of Empowerment in the Literature

Policy design logic	Core assumption about empowerment	Typical empirical focus	Dominant design dimension	Representative studies
Instrumental–implementation logic	Empowerment follows from effective policy execution and stakeholder engagement	Program delivery, coordination, performance outcomes	Instrument mix; delivery architecture	Langlois et al. (2016); Haines (2020)
Institutional–authority logic	Empowerment is conditioned by formal authority structures and bureaucratic control	Institutional reform, contested governance	Authority allocation; rules-in-use	Maryudi et al. (2022); Villamayor-Tomas et al (2016)
Adaptive–learning logic	Empowerment emerges through iterative learning and policy adjustment	Adaptive governance, reform trajectories	Policy learning; discretion	Alaerts (2020); Mukherjee & Mukherjee (2018)
Socio-technical enablement logic	Empowerment depends on access to information and technological capacity	Digital governance, administrative capability	Technical–institutional design	Liu & Yuan (2015)
Distributional–equity logic	Empowerment requires addressing inequality and power asymmetries	Gender, energy transition, inclusion	Distributive design; equity mechanisms	Schiffer et al. (2022); K. K. Sen et al. (2025)



Novelty and Contribution

This review offers a novel perspective by reframing empowerment as an implicit design logic rather than an explicit policy goal. Unlike prior bibliometric studies that map governance or sustainability research broadly (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015), this analysis systematically links empowerment to underlying policy design assumptions embedded within empirical research.

The findings uncover an understudied paradox: while empowerment is frequently invoked as a normative aspiration, it is rarely treated as a variable that shapes design choices concerning authority, discretion, or accountability. Instead, empowerment is subsumed under broader concerns with implementation success and institutional performance. By identifying this pattern across thematic clusters, the study challenges the notion that empowerment-oriented policy research has already moved toward transformative governance models.

Methodologically, the study contributes by combining thematic evolution analysis with structured interpretive synthesis. Rather than relying solely on network visualizations, it translates bibliometric patterns into analytically meaningful design logics. This approach extends the methodological repertoire of bibliometric research by demonstrating how quantitative mapping can inform theory-oriented interpretation.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications across theoretical, methodological, and practical dimensions. At the theoretical level, the predominance of instrumental and institutional logics indicates that policy design scholarship may still insufficiently engage with empowerment as a fundamentally political and distributive concern. Rather than being treated as a design variable linked to authority reallocation and power relations, empowerment is frequently subsumed under broader concerns with implementation effectiveness and administrative capacity. This tendency limits the ability of existing frameworks to capture how power asymmetries are reproduced or challenged through policy design, particularly in governance contexts characterized by institutional hybridity and fragmented authority structures (Maryudi et al., 2022). Strengthening policy design theory therefore requires more explicit integration of power-sensitive and distributive perspectives into analyses of design choices and governance architectures.

Methodologically, the findings demonstrate the added value of integrating bibliometric techniques with qualitative interpretive synthesis. While network and thematic analyses are effective in revealing structural patterns and thematic concentrations within large bodies of



literature, they offer limited insight into the underlying assumptions that organize those patterns. The use of interpretive tables to synthesize dominant design logics helps translate bibliometric structures into analytically meaningful constructs, thereby extending the explanatory potential of bibliometric research beyond descriptive mapping and toward theory-informed interpretation.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that empowerment-oriented policies cannot rely on participation alone as a proxy for meaningful empowerment. Policy designs that prioritize inclusion without addressing institutional constraints, authority distribution, and accountability mechanisms risk reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than transforming them. Effective empowerment therefore depends on deliberate alignment between policy instruments, governance arrangements, and decision-making authority, ensuring that participatory mechanisms are embedded within institutional structures capable of redistributing power rather than merely managing stakeholder involvement (Haines & Macdonald, 2020).

Future studies should examine how different design configurations influence empowerment outcomes across policy sectors. Comparative and longitudinal approaches would be particularly valuable in assessing whether adaptive and distributive logics gain prominence over time.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, reliance on a single bibliographic database may exclude regionally focused scholarship. Second, bibliometric methods identify patterns of knowledge production rather than causal effects. Finally, while the synthesis highlights dominant logics, it does not evaluate their normative desirability or practical effectiveness.

Future Research Directions

Future research could integrate bibliometric analysis with in-depth case studies to explore how empowerment-oriented policy designs operate in practice. Emerging clusters identified in the thematic evolution analysis also warrant closer examination, particularly those addressing distributional equity and socio-technical governance.

CONCLUSIONS

Synthesized Conclusion

This bibliometric analysis demonstrates that research on policy design and empowerment in the Global South has experienced substantial expansion over the last decade, yet this quantitative growth has not been matched by equivalent conceptual deepening. The literature is structured around applied policy domains—most notably sustainability governance, development



interventions, and implementation studies—where empowerment is predominantly framed as a functional outcome of effective policy delivery. Rather than being treated as a core design variable, empowerment is commonly embedded within broader concerns for participation, coordination, and performance.

The intellectual landscape is therefore characterized by a pragmatic orientation that privileges feasibility and implementation over explicit engagement with power relations. Participation is frequently assumed to signal empowerment, despite limited attention to whether decision-making authority, discretion, or accountability are substantively redistributed. Academically, this pattern constrains the explanatory reach of policy design theory by underplaying empowerment as a political and distributive phenomenon. Practically, it suggests that empowerment-oriented policies risk becoming procedural rather than transformative when design choices fail to address institutional asymmetries. By synthesizing dispersed bodies of work, this study clarifies how empowerment has been selectively operationalized within policy design research and highlights the conceptual consequences of this tendency for both theory and practice.

Strength and Distinctiveness Restatement

The distinctive contribution of this study lies in reframing empowerment as an implicit policy design logic rather than a taken-for-granted outcome. It moves beyond descriptive mapping by positioning Global South scholarship as analytically central to understanding design dynamics under conditions of institutional hybridity.

Future Research Agenda

Future research should pursue several complementary directions. In the short term, empirical studies should interrogate empowerment as a design-dependent outcome by explicitly examining how policy instruments allocate authority, distribute discretion, and structure accountability. Comparative analyses across policy sectors can help identify when and why empowerment remains procedural versus when it becomes substantively transformative.

Over the longer term, scholars should integrate policy design analysis with power-sensitive theoretical frameworks. Building on TCCM or TCM perspectives, future work could develop mid-range theories that connect empowerment to institutional change, adaptive governance, and distributive mechanisms. Global South contexts are particularly well suited for this task, as they expose the limits of standardized design templates and reveal how empowerment unfolds within fragmented and negotiated governance systems.



Methodologically, advancing the field will require moving beyond stand-alone bibliometric mapping. Combining longitudinal bibliometrics with qualitative synthesis, process tracing, or configurational analysis can help translate thematic patterns into causal explanations. Emerging text-as-data and mixed-method approaches also offer promising avenues to capture normative constructs—such as power, equity, and agency—that are weakly visible in conventional keyword-based analyses. Finally, application-oriented research should focus on translating empowerment-sensitive design principles into actionable policy instruments that align participation with genuine decision-making influence.

Closing Statement

By foregrounding empowerment as a deliberate and contestable design choice, this study sets a forward-looking agenda for policy design research that bridges analytical rigor with normative relevance.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

Data Availability Statement

The data extraction procedures and analytical workflows employed in this bibliometric analysis are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The bibliographic datasets were retrieved from the Scopus database under institutional subscription access, and their availability is subject to the terms and conditions of the database provider.

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AI Disclaimer

During the preparation of this manuscript, artificial intelligence–based tools were used to support specific stages of the research process. In particular, ChatGPT was utilized to assist with drafting, revising, and refining textual sections, while R-based bibliometric tools (Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny) were employed for data processing, analysis, and visualization. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, validated, and substantively revised by the authors. The interpretation of results, theoretical synthesis, and final conclusions were conducted solely by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.



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