

## Governance Under Pressure: The Capacity of States to Manage Global Social and Economic Crises

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### Abstract

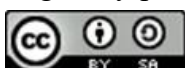
States today face overlapping global crises, including financial instability, pandemics, climate change, migration, geopolitical conflict, and widening inequality. These crises no longer operate in isolation but interact in what scholars describe as a polycrisis. This article analyzes how state capacity determines the ability to manage such compounded socio-economic shocks. Using a systematic literature review covering 2006–2025 and comparative analysis across political regimes and regions, the study identifies key determinants of crisis governance. Findings indicate that state capacity is not merely coercive strength but a multidimensional construct encompassing institutional quality, democratic legitimacy, multilevel coordination, and integration within global governance frameworks. Democratic regimes tend to demonstrate stronger long-term resilience, although authoritarian systems may respond more rapidly in early crisis stages. Welfare states show adaptive variation under globalization pressures, while fragile states face compounded challenges from corruption, sanctions, and external conditionalities. Multilevel and hybrid governance arrangements emerge as critical mechanisms for navigating polycrisis conditions. However, political short-termism, bureaucratic decline due to sanctions, and fragmentation of international organizations constrain effective and equitable crisis management. The article concludes that anticipatory and cooperative governance, supported by robust domestic institutions and coordinated global frameworks, is essential for sustaining socio-economic stability under conditions of systemic global disruption.

**Keywords:** *State Capacity; Polycrisis; Global Governance; Welfare State; Multilevel Governance; Resilienc*

### 1. Introduction

The contemporary international system is increasingly defined by overlapping and mutually reinforcing crises that challenge traditional assumptions about stability, sovereignty, and governance. Financial volatility, pandemics, climate change, biodiversity loss, geopolitical conflict, forced migration, and widening socio-economic inequality no longer unfold as isolated disruptions. Instead, they form interconnected systemic pressures that amplify one another across temporal and spatial scales. The acceleration of globalization, digital interdependence, and transnational mobility has intensified these linkages, making crises more contagious, complex, and difficult to contain. Scheffran (2025) conceptualizes this condition as a polycrisis, in which climate–conflict–migration–pandemic interactions produce cascading and compounding risks capable of exceeding governance tipping points. This framework emphasizes that crises are not merely additive but synergistic, generating feedback loops that destabilize political, economic, and ecological systems simultaneously.

The environmental dimension of this polycrisis further complicates governance capacity. Pörtner et al. (2023) demonstrate that climate change and biodiversity loss are tightly coupled with social vulnerability, food insecurity, displacement, and economic disruption. Environmental degradation intensifies conflict risks, undermines livelihoods, and increases migratory pressures, which in turn strain state institutions and social cohesion. As ecological



and socio-economic vulnerabilities intersect, governments are confronted with multidimensional risks that require integrated policy coordination rather than sectoral responses. The growing frequency of extreme weather events, global supply chain disruptions, and resource scarcity illustrates how systemic fragility has become embedded within contemporary governance structures.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a defining moment in revealing the structural weaknesses of both domestic and global governance systems. It exposed deficiencies in public administration, healthcare infrastructure, crisis communication, and international coordination mechanisms. Blum and Neumärker (2021) argue that globalization magnified both vulnerability and interdependence, demonstrating how deeply integrated economies and societies transmit shocks across borders with unprecedented speed. Pandemic responses varied widely across countries, yet even highly developed states encountered institutional bottlenecks, logistical constraints, and legitimacy challenges. The crisis revealed that preparedness and resilience are not solely functions of economic wealth but depend on institutional coherence, public trust, and adaptive governance frameworks. As crises compound, governance under pressure becomes not an episodic phenomenon but a defining structural condition of the twenty-first century state.

In this context, the concept of state capacity requires conceptual expansion. Traditionally associated with coercive authority, taxation ability, or bureaucratic reach, state capacity must now encompass multidimensional resilience administrative effectiveness, regulatory coherence, political legitimacy, and multilevel coordination. Vega-Muñoz et al. (2024), through a global panel dataset covering 178 countries from 2006 to 2022, show a strong correlation between governance quality indicators government effectiveness, rule of law, and corruption control—and fragility indicators such as institutional legitimacy, public service delivery, and social cohesion. These findings underscore that institutional integrity and legitimacy are not peripheral attributes but central determinants of crisis resilience. States with high governance quality are better positioned to absorb shocks, coordinate complex responses, and sustain public trust during prolonged disruptions.

Political regime type also shapes crisis management trajectories, though not in a simplistic or deterministic manner. Kaim and Kubbe (2025), analyzing 150 countries during the COVID-19 crisis, find that democracies may respond more cautiously or slowly in initial emergency phases due to deliberative constraints and accountability procedures. However, they demonstrate stronger long-term resilience, recovery capacity, and legitimacy retention. Authoritarian regimes often implement swift, centralized measures in early stages, yet may encounter limitations in transparency, accountability, and sustained public compliance. These findings complicate conventional debates that equate authoritarian efficiency with superior crisis management. Instead, regime performance appears contingent upon institutional depth, administrative capacity, and public trust rather than regime type alone.

Beyond regime structure, the transformation of welfare states represents another critical dimension of crisis governance. Across Europe, welfare systems confront pressures from liberalization, labor mobility, fiscal constraints, and digital transformation. Babina and Kryvdina (2025) highlight adaptive variation among Scandinavian, Continental, and Liberal welfare models, demonstrating that institutional configuration and social dialogue significantly influence crisis response capacity. However, Della Porta et al. (2021) note that the aftermath of the global financial crisis revealed structural tensions between economic competitiveness and social cohesion. Rising inequality and weakened national compromises have eroded segments of social solidarity, thereby constraining political legitimacy during subsequent crises. The sustainability of welfare arrangements thus becomes intertwined with broader questions of state capacity and democratic resilience.

Moreover, global governance dynamics further complicate national crisis management. International sanctions, geopolitical rivalries, and fragmented institutional mandates can

undermine domestic bureaucratic quality and limit policy autonomy, particularly in developing contexts. These external pressures intersect with domestic fragility, shaping uneven capacities to navigate compounded crises. Consequently, state capacity must be understood not only as a domestic institutional phenomenon but also as embedded within multilayered global governance architectures.

Despite the expanding body of scholarship on crisis governance, significant analytical fragmentation remains. Existing research often examines regime type, welfare transformation, fragility, sanctions, or global governance mechanisms in isolation. There is limited integrative analysis connecting these dimensions within a unified polycrisis framework capable of explaining why some states adapt and recover while others spiral into deeper instability. Without such synthesis, policy recommendations risk remaining sectoral or reactive rather than systemic and anticipatory.

This article addresses this gap by synthesizing comparative research across political regimes and regions to identify the structural determinants of effective crisis governance under polycrisis conditions. By integrating insights on institutional quality, democratic legitimacy, welfare adaptation, fragility dynamics, and multilevel global coordination, the study advances a multidimensional understanding of state capacity in the twenty-first century. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on resilience, governance reform, and the future of the state in an era marked by systemic global disruption.

## **2. Method**

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with comparative thematic analysis to examine how state capacity shapes governance performance under conditions of global socio-economic polycrisis. The SLR approach was selected because it enables structured synthesis of diverse empirical and theoretical contributions across disciplines, including political science, public administration, development studies, and global governance. Given the multidimensional nature of polycrisis spanning climate change, pandemics, economic instability, migration, sanctions, and institutional fragility a systematic and integrative review is essential to avoid fragmented or sectoral interpretations.

### **Research Scope and Data Selection**

The temporal scope of this review covers publications from 2006 to 2025, a period that captures the aftermath of the global financial crisis, the escalation of climate governance debates, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the emergence of polycrisis discourse. Articles were identified through searches in peer-reviewed international journals indexed in major academic databases. Keywords included combinations of: state capacity, governance, polycrisis, fragility, welfare state, sanctions, multilevel governance, pandemic response, and global institutions.

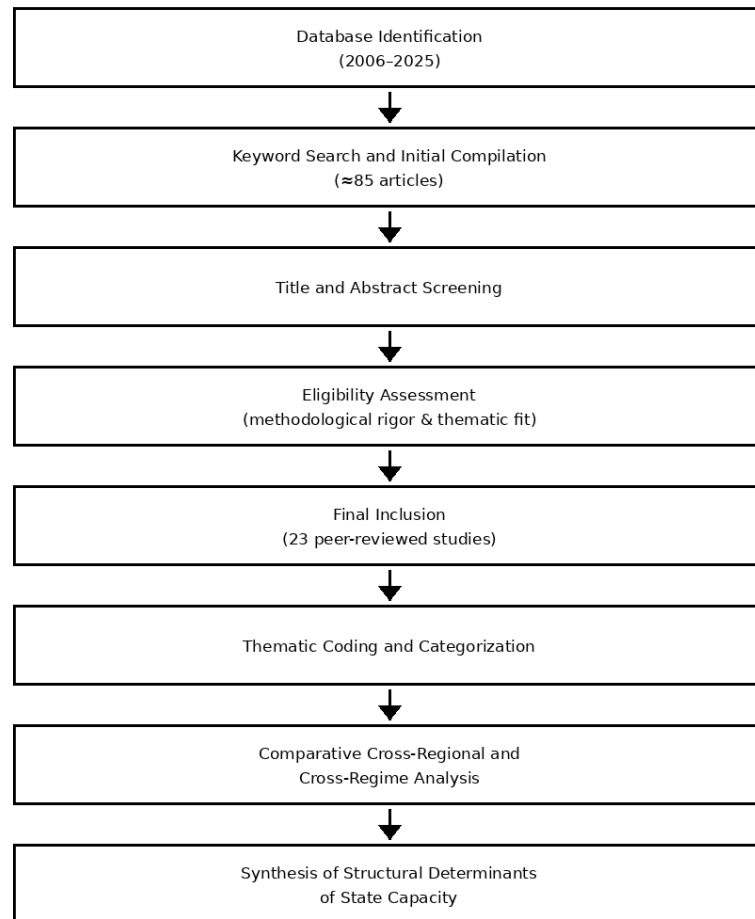
The selection process followed three principal criteria:

1. Relevance – Studies explicitly addressing state capacity, governance quality, crisis response, or multilevel/global coordination.
2. Scholarly rigor – Peer-reviewed publications presenting empirical data, comparative analysis, or conceptual frameworks grounded in systematic research.
3. Analytical contribution – Articles contributing to understanding institutional determinants of resilience, fragility, welfare adaptation, or global governance mechanisms.

From an initial pool of approximately 85 publications, 23 articles were selected for final inclusion after screening for thematic alignment and methodological consistency. These articles represent diverse geographical contexts, including Western Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, global panel datasets, and comparative cross-regime studies.

## Research Procedure

The research procedure is summarized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Research Procedure**

This structured process enhances transparency and replicability, which are central to methodological reliability in literature-based research.

## Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy consists of three interrelated stages:

First, thematic coding was applied to categorize findings into core dimensions of state capacity under crisis conditions. Five dominant themes emerged:

- (1) regime type and political legitimacy;
- (2) administrative and infrastructural capacity;
- (3) welfare state adaptation and inequality;
- (4) fragility, sanctions, and institutional decline;
- (5) multilevel and global governance coordination.

Second, a comparative framework was used to assess how these dimensions operate across different political regimes (democratic, hybrid, authoritarian) and geographical contexts. This approach enables identification of structural similarities and contextual variations.

Third, a synthetic integrative analysis was conducted to develop a conceptual model of state capacity under polycrisis conditions. Rather than testing causal hypotheses statistically, this study focuses on identifying structural patterns, convergences, and contradictions within the literature.

## Validity and Reliability Considerations

Although SLR-based research does not involve primary data collection, methodological rigor remains essential. To enhance validity, the review emphasizes:

- Inclusion of peer-reviewed empirical studies with transparent methodologies;
- Cross-validation of findings across different regional contexts;
- Attention to both supportive and contradictory evidence regarding regime performance;
- Integration of quantitative panel data (e.g., Vega-Muñoz et al., 2024) and qualitative case studies (e.g., Elander et al., 2021).

Reliability is strengthened through the explicit description of selection criteria and coding procedures. Nevertheless, limitations arise from variation in measurement frameworks across studies and differences in operational definitions of “state capacity” and “resilience.”

### **Research Limitations**

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, reliance on secondary literature limits direct empirical testing of proposed mechanisms. Second, differences in national data availability and governance indicators may affect comparability across cases. Third, rapidly evolving geopolitical dynamics particularly regarding sanctions and climate governance mean that findings represent a snapshot within a fluid global environment.

Despite these limitations, the integrative approach adopted here provides a comprehensive and analytically coherent understanding of how institutional quality, regime dynamics, welfare adaptation, and global coordination interact to shape state capacity under polycrisis conditions

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **Results**

The findings reveal that state capacity under conditions of global socio-economic polycrisis is neither uniform nor solely determined by regime type or economic development level. Instead, crisis governance outcomes emerge from the interaction between institutional quality, political legitimacy, administrative infrastructure, welfare adaptation, and integration within global governance structures. Across the reviewed literature, four structural dimensions consistently shape state resilience: regime dynamics, welfare transformation, fragility and sanctions, and multilevel/global coordination.

### **Regime Type and Crisis Resilience**

The comparative literature demonstrates that regime type influences crisis response trajectories, but not in a deterministic manner. Kaim and Kubbe (2025), analyzing 150 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, find that democracies often exhibited slower initial responses due to procedural constraints, public deliberation, and institutional checks. However, over time, democratic systems demonstrated stronger resilience, measured in recovery sustainability, social trust retention, and institutional legitimacy. Transparency, accountability, and participatory governance appear to enhance adaptive learning and long-term recovery capacity.

In contrast, authoritarian regimes frequently implemented rapid and centralized containment measures in early crisis phases. Yet, these systems encountered limitations related to information transparency, public trust, and accountability mechanisms. While centralization may accelerate emergency decision-making, the absence of participatory legitimacy can weaken compliance sustainability.

Importantly, Yavuz et al. (2025) complicate the regime dichotomy by showing that infrastructural power defined as administrative coordination and implementation capacity—was decisive in achieving widespread COVID-19 vaccination coverage. States with strong bureaucratic infrastructures succeeded in mass distribution regardless of whether they were democratic or authoritarian. This suggests that administrative capacity functions as a cross-regime determinant of crisis governance effectiveness.

Political time horizons also significantly affect crisis management. Improta and Mannoni (2024) demonstrate that increasing political short-termism in Western European democracies undermines long-term policy planning. Governments facing unstable coalitions or shortened tenures prioritize immediate electoral survival over structural reforms addressing climate change or inequality. Thus, even democracies with high institutional quality may struggle under conditions of political instability.

**Table 1. Regime Characteristics and Crisis Governance Outcomes**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Democracies</b>	<b>Authoritarian Regimes</b>
Initial Crisis Response	Often deliberative and slower	Rapid and centralized
Transparency & Accountability	High	Limited
Long-Term Resilience	Stronger recovery sustainability	Variable; dependent on state infrastructure
Public Trust	Participatory legitimacy	Compliance-based
Vaccination Coverage (if high infrastructure capacity)	High	High

Sources: Kaim & Kubbe (2025); Yavuz et al. (2025); Improta & Mannoni (2024)

### **Welfare State Adaptation and Inequality**

The literature highlights that welfare state structures significantly mediate crisis impacts. Babina and Kryvdina (2025) show that European welfare states remain relatively adaptive under globalization pressures, though with variation across models. Scandinavian systems demonstrate strong institutional capacity and social dialogue mechanisms that support redistributive resilience. Continental models balance corporatist traditions with fiscal prudence, while Liberal models rely more heavily on market flexibility and targeted assistance.

However, Della Porta et al. (2021) emphasize that the aftermath of the global financial crisis exposed structural tensions between economic growth and social cohesion. Persistent inequality and weakened social compromises eroded political legitimacy. Tassinari (2025) further notes that acute crises triggered renewed social concertation, yet these arrangements often aim to reassure financial markets rather than fundamentally restructure inequality.

The findings suggest that welfare capacity is not merely redistributive generosity but institutional adaptability combining fiscal sustainability, social partnership, and legitimacy. Where welfare institutions maintain trust and inclusiveness, crisis recovery tends to be socially stabilizing. Where inequality deepens, crisis governance risks reinforcing polarization.

### **Fragility, Sanctions, and Institutional Decline**

In developing regions, structural fragility significantly constrains crisis governance. Akande and Ojo (2024) argue that in Sub-Saharan Africa, weak rule of law, corruption, and external policy conditionalities (e.g., structural adjustment programs, global development frameworks) limit policy autonomy and weaken state capacity. These domestic weaknesses are compounded by external economic pressures.

Ko et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence from 74 developing countries demonstrating that international sanctions particularly multilateral sanctions correlate with bureaucratic

decline, especially during economic downturns. Rather than strengthening compliance or reform, sanctions often reduce administrative quality and exacerbate inequality.

Vega-Muñoz et al. (2024), using panel data from 178 countries (2006–2022), confirm a strong statistical relationship between governance quality indicators (government effectiveness, corruption control, rule of law) and fragility dimensions (legitimacy, public services, economic stability). These findings suggest that fragility and governance quality form a reinforcing cycle: institutional decline increases fragility, which in turn weakens governance further.

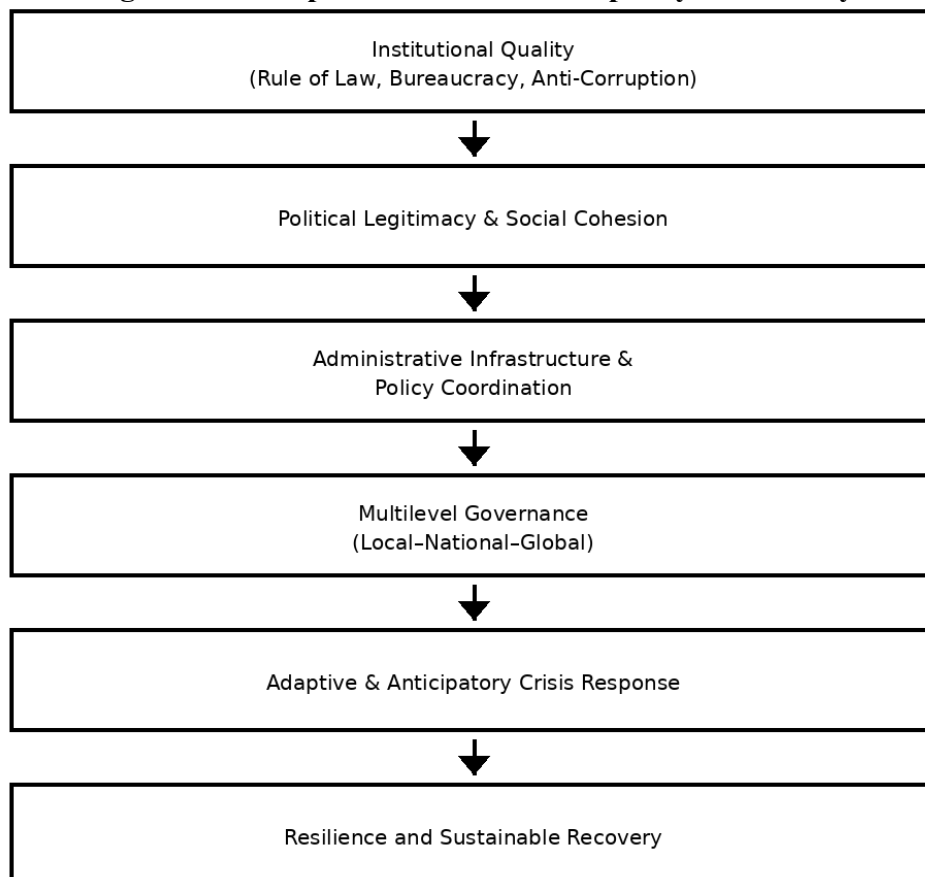
### Multilevel and Global Governance under Polycrisis

Crisis governance increasingly depends on multilevel and hybrid coordination. Elander et al. (2021) describe Sweden’s experience managing climate change, migration, and COVID-19 as a “perfect storm,” prompting hybrid governance arrangements combining regulatory authority, policy networks, and multilevel planning. Crisis securitization varied across issue areas, demonstrating differentiated governance logics.

Shevchenko and Likhonosova (2025) emphasize the need for proactive, digitalized public administration capable of anticipating and mitigating economic and financial risks. Witter et al. (2023) reconceptualize health system resilience as relational and power-based rather than purely resource-driven, highlighting the importance of coordination across global national local levels.

At the global level, Agyemang (2025) argues that international organizations (UN, WTO, IMF, WHO) remain indispensable for collective crisis management but face constraints from funding limitations, geopolitical fragmentation, and overlapping mandates. Liu et al. (2025) illustrate how transnational pressures reshape national communication strategies, underscoring global interdependence.

**Figure 2. Conceptual Model: State Capacity Under Polycrisis**



This model synthesizes findings across regime types and regions, indicating that crisis resilience depends on the interaction of institutional depth, legitimacy, coordination, and global integration.

### **Synthesis of Structural Determinants**

Across cases, four structural determinants consistently emerge:

1. Institutional Integrity – Strong bureaucratic effectiveness and rule of law correlate with lower fragility.
2. Political Legitimacy – Democratic accountability enhances long-term resilience.
3. Administrative Infrastructure – Implementation capacity determines policy success regardless of regime.
4. Multilevel Integration – Coordination between domestic institutions and global frameworks strengthens adaptive governance.

Conversely, structural constraints include political short-termism, sanctions-induced bureaucratic decline, welfare inequality pressures, and fragmentation within international organizations.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective governance under polycrisis conditions requires anticipatory, cooperative, and institutionally grounded approaches. State capacity is not static but relational and adaptive, shaped by domestic institutional quality and the architecture of global governance within which states operate.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that governance under polycrisis conditions must be understood as a systemic and relational challenge rather than a sequence of isolated crisis responses. The concept of polycrisis emphasizes how climate instability, pandemics, economic volatility, migration flows, and geopolitical tensions interact in reinforcing feedback loops that amplify vulnerability across sectors (Scheffran, 2025). When governance structures fail to anticipate interdependencies among these domains, cascading effects may exceed institutional tipping points. The coupling between climate and biodiversity crises further intensifies social and economic fragility, requiring integrated responses instead of fragmented policy interventions (Pörtner et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed structural weaknesses in public administration, healthcare systems, and global coordination. Globalization has deepened interdependence while simultaneously magnifying systemic vulnerability, demonstrating that crisis shocks are rapidly transmitted across borders (Blum & Neumärker, 2021). Consequently, governance under pressure is no longer episodic but structural, demanding anticipatory institutional arrangements capable of managing complex risk interconnections.

One critical structural constraint identified in this study is political short-termism. Governments operating under shortened electoral horizons struggle to maintain long-term policy commitments necessary for addressing climate transition, economic restructuring, and inequality reduction. Improta and Mannoni (2024) show that declining tenure stability in Western European democracies undermines strategic governance capacity. Under polycrisis conditions where risks accumulate over time short-term political incentives weaken institutional continuity and reduce adaptive resilience.

Regime type influences crisis governance trajectories but does not singularly determine outcomes. Democracies tend to demonstrate stronger long-term resilience due to transparency, accountability, and participatory legitimacy mechanisms (Kaim & Kubbe, 2025). However, initial crisis responses in democratic systems may be slower due to procedural constraints. Authoritarian regimes may implement rapid centralized measures, yet sustained legitimacy and adaptive recovery remain contingent on institutional trust. Crucially, administrative

infrastructure mediates regime effects. High infrastructural power particularly coordination and implementation capacity proved decisive in achieving widespread COVID-19 vaccination coverage across regime types (Yavuz et al., 2025). These findings indicate that bureaucratic professionalism and policy execution capacity are central determinants of crisis resilience.

The welfare state dimension further shapes governance capacity under pressure. European welfare systems display adaptive variation in response to globalization pressures, with institutional configuration significantly influencing crisis mitigation capacity (Babina & Kryvdina, 2025). Welfare institutions act as stabilizers during economic downturns and social disruption. However, persistent inequality and weakened national compromises following the global financial crisis have eroded social cohesion and legitimacy in several European contexts (Della Porta et al., 2021). Although renewed social concertation mechanisms may provide stabilization during acute crises, they often prioritize market reassurance rather than addressing structural inequality (Tassinari, 2025). Moreover, gendered labor burdens and care responsibilities embedded in global economic structures complicate resilience strategies, particularly when crises disproportionately affect marginalized groups (Tanyag, 2025). The fragility of public-private labor governance in post-pandemic industrial sectors further illustrates how institutional weaknesses exacerbate socio-economic vulnerabilities (Wickramasingha & Smith, 2025).

In developing regions, structural fragility presents compounded governance challenges. Weak rule of law, corruption, and external policy conditionalities reduce state capacity to pursue autonomous development strategies (Akande & Ojo, 2024). Additionally, international sanctions may unintentionally degrade bureaucratic quality, particularly during economic downturns, thereby reinforcing inequality and institutional decline (Ko et al., 2024). Empirical panel data confirm a strong correlation between governance quality indicators and fragility dimensions across 178 countries, reinforcing the cyclical relationship between institutional deterioration and vulnerability (Vega-Muñoz et al., 2024). These dynamics suggest that governance deficits can become self-reinforcing under external and internal pressures.

Administrative modernization and digital transformation are increasingly recognized as essential components of resilience. The transformation of public administration toward proactive, digitalized, and security-oriented governance enhances economic and financial stability in volatile environments (Shevchenko & Likhonosova, 2025). Hybrid governance arrangements combining regulatory authority, network coordination, and multilevel planning demonstrate adaptive flexibility in complex crises, as evidenced in Sweden's management of climate change, migration, and COVID-19 (Elander et al., 2021). The Neo-Weberian State framework further underscores the importance of professional bureaucracy oriented toward the common good, integrating administrative competence with democratic accountability (Galego et al., 2025).

Health system resilience research reinforces the relational nature of governance. Resilience is not solely resource-based but depends on coordinated power relations and governance integration across global, national, and local levels (Witter et al., 2023). Transnational pressures and global information flows also reshape domestic policy adaptation processes, as illustrated by evolving pandemic communication strategies (Liu et al., 2025). These findings highlight that national governance capacity is embedded within broader global institutional ecosystems.

At the international level, collective crisis management depends heavily on the effectiveness of global organizations. While institutions such as the UN, WTO, IMF, and WHO play critical roles in coordinating responses, they face structural limitations related to funding constraints, geopolitical polarization, and institutional fragmentation (Agyemang, 2025). Without reforms that enhance coordination and reduce fragmentation, global governance mechanisms risk lagging behind accelerating systemic risks.

Overall, governance under polycrisis conditions is shaped by the interaction between domestic institutional strength and global structural dynamics. Institutional integrity, political legitimacy, administrative infrastructure, welfare inclusiveness, and multilevel coordination form the core pillars of resilience. Conversely, short-termism (Improta & Mannoni, 2024), persistent inequality (Della Porta et al., 2021), sanction-induced bureaucratic erosion (Ko et al., 2024), labor governance fragility (Wickramasingha & Smith, 2025), and fragmented global institutions (Agyemang, 2025) undermine adaptive capacity.

In sum, effective governance under pressure requires a shift from reactive crisis management toward anticipatory, cooperative, and institutionally grounded frameworks capable of addressing interconnected systemic risks (Scheffran, 2025). State capacity in the twenty-first century is not static or purely domestic; it is relational, dynamic, and embedded within multilayered governance networks shaped by globalization and geopolitical complexity.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that state capacity is a multidimensional determinant of governance performance under conditions of global polycrisis, where crises such as economic instability, climate change, pandemics, migration pressures, geopolitical conflict, and inequality interact and reinforce one another. Effective crisis governance cannot be explained solely by regime type, economic strength, or administrative centralization, but rather depends on institutional integrity, political legitimacy, administrative capacity, welfare adaptability, and integration within multilevel and global governance frameworks. Resilience in such contexts requires coherent institutions, cross-sectoral coordination, and sustained long-term policy continuity. While democratic systems tend to exhibit stronger long-term resilience when supported by transparency and accountability, administrative and infrastructural capacity remain decisive across all regime types. Adaptive welfare institutions strengthen social cohesion, whereas persistent inequality undermines legitimacy and stability. In fragile and developing contexts, institutional weaknesses, corruption, and external pressures intensify governance challenges and create cycles of decline. Ultimately, effective governance rests on four key pillars: institutional integrity, political legitimacy, administrative coordination, and multilevel integration while anticipatory governance, institutional reform, digital modernization, and strengthened international cooperation are essential to maintaining stability and public trust amid increasingly interconnected global disruptions..

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