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Assessing the Impact of Good Governance Components on the Sustainability of Cooperative Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Bushehr Province During the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Mohammad Ali. Tamari: Department of Sociology, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
2. Sasan. Vadieh*: Department of Sociology, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
3. Khalil. Mirzaei: Department of Sociology, Ro.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

*corresponding author's email: sasanvadiea@iauctb.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess the impact of the components of good governance, government crisis management, and business crisis management on the sustainability and success of cooperative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Bushehr Province during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopted a descriptive–survey and correlational design. The statistical population comprised 3,500 cooperative SMEs operating in Bushehr Province, from which 343 units were selected as the sample using cluster random sampling based on the Morgan table. Data were collected using a researcher-developed 45-item questionnaire with confirmed validity (CVR = 0.856) and reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.836). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26, applying Pearson correlation coefficients and multiple linear regression analysis. The correlational findings indicated that the relationship between government crisis management ($r = 0.417$, $p < 0.01$) and business crisis management ($r = 0.368$, $p < 0.01$) with business success was positive and statistically significant. In contrast, the relationship between good governance and business success was weak ($r = 0.063$) and not statistically significant ($p = 0.245$). The regression results showed that the model consisting of the three independent variables collectively explained 24.1% of the variance in business success (adjusted $R^2 = 0.241$). Analysis of standardized beta coefficients revealed that business crisis management ($\beta = 0.342$) was the strongest positive and significant predictor of success, followed by government crisis management ($\beta = 0.315$). Surprisingly, good governance exerted a negative and statistically significant effect on business success ($\beta = -0.152$). The findings suggest that under crisis conditions, agency—manifested in crisis management undertaken by businesses themselves—and the operational performance of government at the frontline of the crisis played a more decisive role in ensuring the sustainability and success of SMEs than did macro-level governance structures. These results underscore the need to redefine crisis-support policies by focusing on strengthening firms' internal resilience and improving the quality of direct, tangible governmental actions.

Keywords: good governance, government crisis management, business crisis management, small and medium-sized enterprises, business success, COVID-19 pandemic, Bushehr Province

Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of good governance has emerged as a central analytical framework in management, public administration, and organizational studies, reflecting a paradigmatic shift from hierarchical

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control toward participatory, accountable, and transparent systems of decision-making. Good governance is commonly associated with principles such as accountability, transparency, rule of law, participation, effectiveness, and responsiveness, which collectively aim to enhance organizational performance and societal trust. Within organizational and managerial contexts, good governance is no longer viewed solely as a public-sector concern but rather as a multidimensional construct that shapes strategic decision-making, resource allocation, and stakeholder relations across both public and private organizations (1, 2). As organizations increasingly operate in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments, governance quality has become a critical determinant of resilience, adaptability, and long-term sustainability.

From a theoretical standpoint, good governance is deeply intertwined with human resource management and organizational empowerment. Scholars argue that governance mechanisms exert their influence not only through formal rules and structures but also through human capital development, ethical leadership, and participatory organizational cultures. Empirical studies have demonstrated that governance-oriented management systems can enhance employee empowerment, organizational commitment, and performance by fostering trust, fairness, and procedural justice (3, 4). In this sense, good governance functions as an enabling infrastructure that aligns individual capabilities with organizational objectives, thereby strengthening institutional effectiveness.

At the macro level, good governance has been widely studied as a cornerstone of public administration reform and economic development. Research across different national contexts highlights that governance quality plays a decisive role in shaping public-sector efficiency, policy implementation, and institutional legitimacy (5, 6). In developing and transitional economies in particular, governance reforms are often promoted as essential tools for reducing corruption, enhancing accountability, and improving service delivery. However, the effectiveness of such reforms remains contingent upon contextual factors, including administrative capacity, political stability, and socio-cultural dynamics.

Within the Iranian organizational and administrative context, good governance has received growing scholarly attention, especially in relation to structural challenges such as bureaucratic rigidity, fragmented decision-making, and weak coordination mechanisms. Several studies have identified systemic barriers that hinder the realization of good governance in Iranian organizations, including misalignment between formal regulations and operational practices, limited stakeholder participation, and insufficient managerial autonomy (7, 8). These findings suggest that while governance principles may be formally acknowledged, their translation into effective managerial action remains problematic, particularly under conditions of environmental turbulence.

The relationship between good governance and organizational performance becomes even more complex during periods of crisis. Crises—such as economic shocks, political instability, or public health emergencies—place extraordinary pressure on governance systems by demanding rapid decision-making, flexible resource deployment, and coordinated responses across multiple levels of authority. Traditional governance frameworks, which often emphasize procedural compliance and long-term planning, may struggle to accommodate the urgency and uncertainty inherent in crisis situations. As a result, the gap between governance ideals and operational realities may widen, raising critical questions about the functional relevance of good governance during crises (9).

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant global crises of the 21st century, profoundly disrupting economic activity, organizational routines, and governance systems worldwide. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were among the most vulnerable actors during this period due to their limited financial reserves, constrained access to credit, and high exposure to market fluctuations. Cooperative SMEs, in particular, faced compounded challenges stemming from collective ownership structures, reliance on local markets, and dependence on supportive institutional environments. In such contexts, the interaction between governance quality, governmental intervention, and firm-level crisis management strategies becomes a critical area of inquiry.

Emerging research suggests that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the effectiveness of governance systems was often evaluated not through abstract indicators but through the immediacy and tangibility of institutional responses. Governments that were able to implement swift fiscal support, regulatory flexibility, and targeted assistance programs were more successful in mitigating business failure and sustaining economic activity (10, 11). These findings point to the importance of government crisis management as a distinct yet related construct to good governance, emphasizing operational capacity and implementation effectiveness rather than structural or normative governance dimensions.

At the organizational level, business crisis management has been identified as a key determinant of firm survival and success under extreme conditions. Crisis management capabilities—including strategic agility, rapid decision-making, resource reconfiguration, and stakeholder communication—enable firms to respond proactively to disruptions and to exploit emerging opportunities. Studies grounded in agency theory highlight that even within restrictive structural environments, organizational actors retain the capacity to shape outcomes through adaptive strategies and innovative practices (12, 13). This perspective challenges deterministic views of governance by emphasizing the role of managerial agency and internal resilience.

Recent scholarship has further expanded the conceptual boundaries of good governance by integrating technological and innovation-driven approaches. For example, research on e-government, digital participation, and blockchain-based governance mechanisms underscores the potential of technological infrastructures to enhance transparency, accountability, and trust (14, 15). While such innovations hold promise for strengthening governance systems, their practical effectiveness during crises remains underexplored, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional constraints and uneven technological readiness.

In parallel, empirical studies within Iranian organizations have attempted to operationalize good governance by identifying its dimensions and components in relation to organizational development and performance. Qualitative and quantitative analyses conducted in sectors such as healthcare, public administration, and financial markets reveal that governance indicators are unevenly institutionalized and often exhibit weak linkages with performance outcomes (16-18). These findings raise important concerns regarding the contextual validity and crisis-sensitivity of prevailing governance models.

Taken together, the existing literature suggests a critical gap in understanding how good governance interacts with government crisis management and firm-level crisis management to influence business success under extreme conditions. While governance theories emphasize structural and normative dimensions, crisis contexts appear to privilege operational effectiveness, rapid intervention, and organizational agency. This tension is particularly salient for cooperative SMEs, whose sustainability depends simultaneously on supportive institutional frameworks and internal collective capacities.

Despite the growing body of research on good governance and crisis management, empirical studies that integrate these constructs within a single analytical model remain limited, especially in the context of cooperative SMEs in developing economies. Moreover, few studies have systematically examined whether good governance continues to exert a positive influence on business success during crises, or whether its effects are mediated—or even overridden—by government and business crisis management practices.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap by empirically examining the relative and combined effects of good governance, government crisis management, and business crisis management on the success of cooperative small and medium-sized enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on the context of Bushehr Province.

The aim of this study is to assess the impact of good governance, government crisis management, and business crisis management on the success of cooperative small and medium-sized enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods and Materials

This study is descriptive–survey in nature and falls within the correlational research tradition. It was conducted with an applied purpose and focused on testing the conceptual model of the study. The statistical population comprised all cooperative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Bushehr Province, totaling 3,500 units. Using cluster random sampling and based on the Morgan table, 343 units were selected as the study sample.

The research instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of 45 items, designed on a five-point Likert scale. The validity of the instrument was confirmed through content validity, with a Content Validity Ratio (CVR) of 0.856, and the reliability of the questionnaire was verified by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α = 0.836).

Data analysis was conducted at two levels—descriptive and inferential statistics—using SPSS software, version 26. In the descriptive statistics section, indices such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency were used. In the inferential statistics section, Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationships among variables, and multiple linear regression analysis was used to predict the dependent variable based on the independent variables. All analyses were performed at a significance level of 0.05.

Findings and Results

Data analysis in this study was conducted quantitatively and proceeded in two main stages.

In the first stage, correlational analysis was applied. At this stage, the linear relationship between each independent variable (including **good governance**, **government crisis management**, and **business crisis management**) and the dependent variable (**success**) was examined separately by calculating Pearson's correlation coefficient. This analysis demonstrated the strength and direction of each variable's individual relationship with success and determined whether the relationship was statistically significant.

In the second stage, multiple linear regression analysis was employed. The purpose of this analysis was to examine the combined predictive power of the predictor variables for the dependent variable and to determine the unique contribution of each variable in explaining the variance in success. In this model, all three independent variables were entered into the analysis simultaneously to assess their predictive power in conjunction with one another.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Coefficients

Variable	Good Governance During the COVID-19 Outbreak	Government Crisis Management During the COVID-19 Outbreak	Business Crisis Management During the COVID-19 Outbreak
Success	Pearson correlation	0.063	0.417**
	Significance level	0.245	0.000
	N	344	344

These findings clearly indicate that during the COVID-19 crisis, macro-level governance structures were unable to play an effective role in determining the success of small businesses. The non-significant relationship between good governance and business success (r = 0.063) reflects a functional gap in formal institutions. From a sociological perspective, when macro-structures fail to adapt to crisis conditions and provide rapid and practical responses, they lose their influence at the micro level of society. This finding suggests that the mere existence of theoretical indicators of good governance, without being translated into tangible actions, cannot resolve the challenges faced by economic actors.

In contrast, the statistically significant and relatively strong relationship between government crisis management and business success (r = 0.417) indicates that under crisis conditions, the role of government as a direct operational agent becomes particularly salient. From a sociological standpoint, this finding confirms that in emergency situations, economic actors are more influenced by immediate and tangible actions taken by governing institutions than by abstract governance models. Operational governmental measures during the crisis, including the provision of financial facilities and direct support, were able to maintain institutional legitimacy among economic actors and exert a direct effect on their success.

The strongest positive relationship observed in this study was between crisis management undertaken by businesses themselves and their success (r = 0.368), which is highly meaningful from a sociological perspective. This result supports agency theory in contrast to structural determinism, according to which social actors retain the capacity for change and adaptation even under severe structural constraints. During this crisis, small businesses demonstrated that as active agents, by leveraging their cultural, social, and economic capital, they were able to design effective strategies for survival and success and to overcome structural limitations.

Table 2. Summary of the Regression Model

Model	Correlation (R)	Coefficient of Determination (R^2)	Adjusted R^2	Standard Error of the Estimate
1	0.498[a]	0.248	0.241	4.212

Predictors: business crisis management during the COVID-19 outbreak, government crisis management during the COVID-19 outbreak, good governance during the COVID-19 outbreak

The results of the linear regression analysis for predicting business success indicate that the model composed of the three predictor variables—business crisis management, government crisis management, and good governance—collectively explains 24.8% of the variance in the dependent variable (business success) ($R^2 = 0.248$). After adjusting for the number of predictors and the sample size, the adjusted coefficient of determination was 0.241, indicating that approximately 24.1% of the variation in business success can be explained by these three variables. The multiple correlation coefficient (R = 0.498) reflects a relatively moderate relationship between the linear combination of the predictor variables and the criterion variable. The standard error of the estimate was reported as 4.212, indicating that, on average, the model's predictions of business success deviate by approximately 4.212 units.

Table 3. Analysis of the Regression Model

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance
1	Regression	1986.520	3	662.173	37.319
	Residual	6032.875	340	17.744	
	Total	8019.395	343		

Dependent variable: success

Predictors: business crisis management during the COVID-19 outbreak, government crisis management during the COVID-19 outbreak, good governance during the COVID-19 outbreak

The results of the F-test assessing the overall significance of the regression model indicate that the model comprising the three predictors—business crisis management, government crisis management, and good governance—is statistically significant in predicting the dependent variable, business success ($F = 37.319$, $p = 0.000$). This F value is significant at the 99% confidence level ($p < 0.05$), demonstrating that the combined predictors have sufficient explanatory power to account for variations in the dependent variable. The regression sum of squares (1986.520) represents the portion of variability in business success explained by the model, whereas the residual sum of squares (6032.875) reflects the unexplained variability. Despite the remaining unexplained variance, the significant F-test indicates that the present model possesses adequate explanatory strength and can be considered a valid predictive model for assessing business success during the COVID-19 period.

Table 4. Regression Coefficients

Model	B	Standard Error	Beta	t	Significance
(Constant)	7.894	1.078		7.325	0.000
Good governance during the COVID-19 outbreak	−0.043	0.016	−0.152	−2.714	0.007
Government crisis management during the COVID-19 outbreak	0.178	0.028	0.315	6.260	0.000
Business crisis management during the COVID-19 outbreak	0.115	0.020	0.342	5.769	0.000

Based on the regression coefficients, three key findings can be identified. First, the most influential factor in explaining the success of small businesses during the pandemic was business crisis management, which exhibited the strongest positive and statistically significant effect ($\beta = 0.342$). This finding underscores the central role of agency and the active managerial capacity of firms in navigating crises, indicating that internal crisis management strategies exerted a greater impact on success than any external factor.

Second, government crisis management demonstrated a positive and statistically significant relationship with business success ($\beta = 0.315$). This result suggests that although the government did not perform effectively within overarching governance frameworks, it played a meaningful role in supporting business survival and success through concrete and operational measures, such as providing financial facilities and direct support. In other words, the government as an operational actor proved far more effective than the government as a macro-level policymaker.

The third—and perhaps most controversial—finding concerns the negative and statistically significant effect of good governance on business success ($\beta = -0.152$). This paradoxical result suggests that policies implemented under the label of good governance may have manifested in practice as administrative barriers, incoherent decisions, or ineffective actions that hindered rather than facilitated business success. Taken together, these findings indicate that during crisis conditions, operational actions at the micro and meso levels were substantially more effective than abstract macro-level policymaking.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide a nuanced and, in some respects, counterintuitive picture of how governance-related variables operate under crisis conditions. The regression results demonstrated that business crisis management and government crisis management exerted positive and statistically significant effects on the success of cooperative small and medium-sized enterprises, whereas good governance showed a negative and significant relationship with business success. Taken together, these results suggest that during the COVID-19 pandemic, operational and action-oriented capacities were more decisive for business outcomes than abstract or structural governance arrangements. This pattern aligns with the descriptive and inferential findings, which showed that firms' internal crisis responses and direct governmental interventions explained a substantial portion of variance in success, while good governance indicators failed to translate into supportive outcomes at the enterprise level.

The strongest predictor of business success was business crisis management, indicating that firms that actively engaged in adaptive strategies, rapid decision-making, and internal resource reconfiguration were more capable of sustaining operations during the pandemic. This finding is consistent with agency-oriented perspectives, which emphasize the capacity of organizational actors to shape outcomes even under restrictive structural conditions. Prior studies have shown that empowered human resources, managerial agility, and organizational learning mechanisms enhance resilience in turbulent environments (3, 12). The present results extend this line of research by demonstrating that, for cooperative SMEs, internal crisis management capabilities outweighed external governance factors in determining success. This reinforces the argument that during systemic shocks, survival and performance are strongly contingent upon firms' ability to mobilize their own cultural, social, and economic capital rather than relying solely on institutional frameworks.

Government crisis management emerged as the second most influential predictor of business success, underscoring the critical role of the state as an operational actor during emergencies. While good governance frameworks often emphasize transparency, participation, and procedural accountability, the present findings suggest that in crisis contexts, firms respond more strongly to tangible governmental actions such as financial support, regulatory flexibility, and targeted relief measures. This interpretation is consistent with studies highlighting that public trust and organizational compliance increase when governments deliver visible and timely interventions (6, 10). Similarly, research on public management during crises suggests that effectiveness and responsiveness take precedence over deliberative governance ideals (5, 11). The positive association observed in this study indicates that even in environments where governance structures may be perceived as weak or fragmented, decisive governmental crisis management can partially compensate for structural deficiencies and support business continuity.

The negative and statistically significant effect of good governance on business success represents the most striking and theoretically provocative finding of this study. Contrary to a large body of literature that links good governance to improved organizational performance and empowerment (1, 4, 19), the present results suggest that governance mechanisms labeled as "good" may have functioned as constraints rather than enablers during the COVID-19 crisis. One plausible explanation is that governance policies, when implemented rigidly or without sufficient contextual adaptation, can generate administrative burdens, procedural delays, and coordination failures that hinder rapid response. This interpretation is supported by studies within the Iranian context that document gaps between formal governance models and operational realities, particularly under conditions requiring flexibility and speed (7, 8).

From an institutional perspective, good governance frameworks are often designed for stability-oriented environments, where long-term planning, accountability mechanisms, and participatory processes can unfold over extended time horizons. In contrast, crisis situations demand immediacy, improvisation, and discretionary decision-making. When governance systems fail to recalibrate accordingly, they may inadvertently obstruct effective action. Empirical evidence from organizational development studies suggests that governance indicators do not automatically translate into performance gains unless they are embedded within adaptive managerial practices (16, 17). The negative coefficient observed in this study may therefore reflect a misalignment between governance prescriptions and the urgent needs of cooperative SMEs during the pandemic.

The findings also resonate with critical governance scholarship that cautions against the uncritical application of universal governance models across diverse contexts. While innovations such as participatory governance, digital transparency, and decentralized decision-making have shown promise in stable settings (14, 15), their effectiveness during crises depends on institutional capacity and implementation coherence. In environments characterized by bureaucratic fragmentation and limited coordination, such mechanisms may exacerbate uncertainty rather than alleviate it. This may explain why cooperative SMEs in Bushehr Province perceived governance-related processes as obstacles rather than sources of support during the COVID-19 period.

Another important implication of the findings lies in the distinction between governance as structure and governance as practice. The positive effects of government crisis management highlight that when governance principles are operationalized through concrete actions, they can positively influence organizational outcomes. Conversely, when governance remains confined to formal indicators or policy rhetoric, its practical relevance diminishes. This distinction echoes arguments in the literature that emphasize ethical and effective leadership as the mediating mechanism through which governance principles exert influence (9). Without such mediation, governance reforms risk becoming symbolic rather than functional.

The combined explanatory power of the three predictors, accounting for approximately one-quarter of the variance in business success, suggests that while crisis management variables are important, other factors also shape SME outcomes during crises. These may include market characteristics, sectoral differences, access to informal networks, and regional economic conditions. Nonetheless, the relative weight of business and government crisis management compared to good governance underscores a broader theoretical insight: in times of crisis, agency and operational capacity tend to supersede structure.

Overall, the results contribute to the literature by empirically demonstrating that good governance does not operate uniformly across contexts and may even produce unintended negative effects under extreme conditions. By integrating governance theory with crisis management perspectives, this study advances a more context-sensitive understanding of organizational success and highlights the need to rethink governance models for crisis-prone environments.

One limitation of this study concerns its cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships among good governance, crisis management, and business success. In addition, the reliance on self-reported questionnaire data may introduce response bias, particularly given the heightened stress and uncertainty experienced by respondents during the pandemic. Finally, the focus on cooperative SMEs in a single province limits the generalizability of the findings to other organizational forms or regional contexts.

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how the effects of governance and crisis management evolve over different phases of a crisis and into the post-crisis period. Comparative studies across regions, sectors, or types of enterprises would also provide deeper insight into contextual contingencies. Moreover, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or case studies could enrich understanding of how governance mechanisms are interpreted and enacted by managers and employees under crisis conditions.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that policymakers should prioritize flexible, rapid, and targeted interventions during crises rather than relying solely on standardized governance frameworks. Strengthening firms' internal crisis management capacities through training, access to information, and managerial support can significantly enhance resilience. For organizational leaders, investing in adaptive capabilities, decentralized decision-making, and proactive crisis planning appears essential for sustaining success in highly uncertain environments.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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