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Institutional Instability and Methodological Stagnation in National Social Observatories: Evidence from the Omani Social Observatory

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ABSTRACT: Social observatories are widely recognized as critical infrastructure for evidence-based policymaking, yet research on their institutional sustainability and methodological adaptability remains limited. This study examines why the Omani Social Observatory, established in 2014 under the Scientific Research Council with a 138-indicator framework, has remained largely inactive and methodologically stagnant despite substantial national change. Using a qualitative interpretivist case study design, the study employs semi-structured interviews with ten purposively sampled founding experts and reflexive thematic analysis through hybrid inductive-deductive coding in MAXQDA. Six themes emerged: institutional instability and ownership fragmentation; funding insecurity and weak human-resource capacity; indicator obsolescence and methodological rigidity; data fragmentation and access barriers; mutually reinforcing institutional-methodological constraints; and expert recommendations for reform. Findings reveal that the Observatory's ineffectiveness stems from persistent governance failure rather than initial technical limitations. The study proposes a reform framework aligned with Oman Vision 2040 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Social observatory, Institutional governance, Evidence-informed policymaking, Indicator systems, Data governance, Oman vision 2040, Qualitative research, Gulf cooperation council.

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital Observatories are specialized organizations created to produce data needed to inform decisions about public policies and services, as well as to provide researchers with information in the social sciences. Although many statistics offices around the world produce data used to track patterns or trends in social issues and problems, social observatories were created specifically to help decision makers better understand how society is changing and what may be contributing to those changes. They can also identify areas of inequality and emerging social problems and translate that understanding into actionable intelligence for policymakers [1, 2]. Examples of social observatories include many regional observatories in Europe and several social monitoring programs in Latin America. There is considerable evidence that such institutions have helped promote informed policymaking by providing actionable intelligence on social developments to decision-makers [3, 4].

Social observatories are particularly important in countries such as those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), where there is a growing commitment to creating high-quality, evidence-based policymaking processes that use data collected at all levels of government. For example, Oman's Vision 2040 outlines a set of long-term goals aimed at transforming society through education, innovation, and evidence-based decision-making. These ambitions will require strong continuous monitoring of social development and the

ability to quickly recognize potential challenges to achieving the vision. To meet this need, Oman's Omani Social Observatory (OSO) was established in 2014.

The Omani Social Observatory was initially housed within the Science Research Council – which is affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation- and was designed to monitor changes in society across three major themes: Family Welfare and Cohesion; Youth Values and Employment; Living Standards. The council developed a comprehensive system of 138 social indicators to measure each theme [5]. Since its inception, however, the Observatory has undergone multiple institutional transfers, experienced severe funding irregularities, lost most of the original staff responsible for developing it, and has nearly stopped updating the social indicators it uses. Thus, the Omani Social Observatory has operated neither as a trusted national monitoring entity nor as a meaningful source of social evidence for policymakers.

The current situation regarding the lack of a functioning social observatory has become much more pressing in the post-COVID era due to multiple rapidly unfolding structural changes facing Oman, including, but not limited to: Rapid Economic Diversification; Labor Market Volatility; Digital Disruption; and Demographic Pressure. In terms of Oman Vision 2040, the failure to establish a functioning social observatory represents a serious evidence deficit for policymakers seeking to understand and address evolving social realities. Additionally, a lack of coordination between ministry-level data systems has hindered efforts to create integrated social data monitoring systems.

Although this is a critical issue, the reasons behind the institutional/technical stasis of the Observatory have never before been investigated empirically. Literature on social observatories in both the Middle East/GCC region and among Arab nations is extremely scarce. Further, few, if any, studies exist on social observatories conducted directly with the founders/practitioners involved in establishing them. Therefore, this project seeks to address this gap by investigating why the Omani Social Observatory did not evolve into an effective, evidence-based policymaking platform for decision-makers. The study relies upon qualitative evidence gathered from interviews with ten key figures from among the founding team of experts.

The study makes four connected empirical-theoretical-methodological-practical contributions. Firstly, the study provides a systematic record of the historical development of the Observatory (based on expert witness statements); and secondly, the study develops an understanding of how institutional instability produces methodological stagnation a relationship that has not been well developed in the literature on social observatories. Thirdly, the study illustrates the utility of qualitative institutional reconstruction for understanding the governance structures of observatories. Finally, the study develops a reform-oriented framework to position the Observatory as a responsive, participatory evidence platform aligned with Vision 2040. The study's contributions extend beyond Oman and offer general insights into observatory governance in developing and middle-income countries.

The rest of this paper will be presented as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework used in this study. Section 3 examines some of the major pieces of international literature relevant to the topic. Section 4 details the research question/problem, aims/objectives. Section 5 outlines the methodology employed in this study. Section 6 discusses thematic findings from this study. Section 7 discusses how these findings relate to both the previous literature and the theoretical framework. Section 8 concludes the paper with a summary of key policy recommendations arising from this study, limitations, and avenues for further research.

II. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis in this study is anchored in a composite theoretical framework that draws on institutional theory, data governance scholarship, and the literature on evidence-informed policymaking. Together, these three bodies of theory provide an integrated lens for examining why the Omani Social Observatory stagnated institutionally and methodologically.

1. INSTITUTIONAL THEORY: INSTABILITY, LEGITIMACY, AND MANDATE AMBIGUITY

Institutional Theory, particularly its treatment of institutional stability, legitimacy, and path dependence, provides the theoretical foundation for this research. DiMaggio and Powell [6], in establishing new institutionalism, have indicated that organizations operate within institutional environments that influence organizational behavior through normative expectations, regulatory pressures, and cognitive frameworks. Institutional legitimacy is essential for social observatory operations; i.e., a broadly accepted view of authority, mandate, and analytical function. Without institutional legitimacy, or when it is being challenged, social observatories will lack the political/administrative backing needed to maintain operational viability over time.

Disruptions in the governance and administration of an organization such as repeated changes in institutional home, leadership; mandate, and/or funding arrangements are indicative of institutional instability. According to Scott [7], such disruption creates institutional voids, example, those situations in which there is no singular actor able to coordinate action; ensure compliance; or promote long term institutional purpose. Institutional instability has been shown to reduce organizational memory, disrupt methodological consistency, and undermine stakeholder confidence. Path dependence is also theoretically significant. Path dependence is the idea that once institutional decisions are made at some point in time, they create constraints on future development options. Specifically, the Observatory's original indicators were developed during a specific set of institutional/political conditions in 2014. These early indicators created a baseline that was difficult to revise as institutional ownership changed. As institutional resources declined and authority was diffused among different actors, the costs of deviating from existing methods increased, thereby maintaining stagnation.

2. DATA GOVERNANCE: FRAGMENTATION, INTEROPERABILITY, AND STEWARDSHIP

A second theoretical thread comes from Data Governance Scholarship that explores how organizations collect, use, and combine their data as an institutional strategic asset. As such, it is necessary not only to create effective Social Monitoring Indicators but also to establish a consistent and comprehensive Data Infrastructure, including standardized collection procedures, a compatible data system, and formal procedures for interagency data exchange [3, 8]. The absence of this type of data infrastructure can lead to Data Fragmentation a situation where social data exists in many different systems and formats, is collected using different definitions, and is owned as Institutional Property rather than being treated as Public Assets [9]. The institutional and technological aspects of Data Governance Failures reflect fundamental governance arrangements among ministries regarding the obligation to share each other's data and the existence of an authority to impose common data standards and resolve conflicting data claims. Therefore, failure in Data Governance directly impacts the Analytical Capacity of Social Observatories, as they are unable to link various social data streams through Longitudinal Analysis because the data cannot be combined into a single data source.

3. EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING AND ADAPTIVE GOVERNANCE

The third theoretical strand concerns the relationship between social observatories and evidence-informed policymaking. The Evidence-Informed Policymaking (EIP) paradigm holds that policy decisions should be grounded in systematically collected, analyzed, and interpreted empirical evidence [10]. Social observatories are institutional mechanisms through which EIP can be institutionalized at the national level: they translate complex social data into policy-relevant knowledge by applying analytical frameworks, benchmarking against international comparators, and generating longitudinal insights [2, 11]. While the creation of an EIP does not automatically create an observatory that can translate data into knowledge relevant to policymakers, there are three factors required to allow such transformation: a stable institutional structure, a modern and applicable methodology for indicators, and effective channels for the dissemination of the results of the observatory to policymakers. If the institutional status of an observatory is marginal or marginalized, the results of the analytical work of the observatory regardless of how scientifically valid they may be will likely never be considered as part of the policymaking process. In addition to EIP, Folke et al.'s [12] Adaptive Governance Theory also defines what a functioning and productive observatory would ideally

look like. This would be a living entity that could continually update its analytical models to meet changing societal needs, incorporate multiple types of knowledge through participatory approaches, and support prospective rather than purely retrospective policymaking. By applying this theory to Oman's specific case studies, Adaptive Governance Theory illustrates the differences between what the Social Observatory was intended to be and what it currently is.

The above composite theoretical framework allows for the articulation of the central thesis of the research: while the lack of updates to the indicators used by the Omani Social Observatory was certainly a technical problem related to the Observatory's functionality, there was a broader institutional governance failure resulting from the instability of the Observatory's ownership; the weakness of the Observatory's ability to act authoritatively within the institutional system; fragmentation in its data sources and collection systems; and limitations in its participatory structures, all of which prevented the Observatory from developing into a flexible, science-based, policy-oriented platform that would align with national development objectives.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the international literature on social observatories across five thematic areas, each of which is analytically connected to the research problem and the theoretical framework presented above.

1. SOCIAL OBSERVATORIES AND EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING

The literature has also consistently established social observatories as institutional mediators for data production and political decision-making. Rao [2], describes a social observatory as an organization that can transform raw social data into actionable policy intelligence. According to Rao, social observatories can be divided into two categories. On one hand, there are organizations that simply gather data. Organizations of this type do not provide the interpretative frameworks necessary to inform government actions. Conversely, social observatories develop such frameworks, enabling governments to make informed decisions based on social trends. Similarly, the World Bank [8] points out that knowledge systems or platforms that can combine multiple sources of information and address new and emerging problems faced by society have a key role in enabling governments in developing countries to govern through evidence rather than intuition or anecdotal experience.

However, while international evidence supports the notion that social observatories can serve as important institutions to help governments understand complex societal trends, international experience also shows that their ability to influence public policy is shaped by many contextual factors. In particular, the level of political relevance of the issues being monitored by a social observatory, its institutional reputation among government officials, the quality of analyses produced by a social observatory, and the degree to which the research produced by a social observatory reaches high-level government decision-makers all play a significant role in determining whether or not a social observatory will have policy influence [1, 13]. For example, social observatories operating within unstable organizational structures or with weakly defined authority often produce reports that are ignored in the decision-making process.

2. INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

A large body of literature has established that governance issues are critical to determining an observatory's success. According to OECD [13], a lack of consistent governance can create confusion about roles among different ministers, reduce coordination among ministries, and decrease confidence in the institution. Furthermore, research on the use of Community Indicators and Monitoring Initiatives in many Latin American Cities demonstrates that unstable funding and governance instability specifically, where governments are marginalized from participatory monitoring systems are the two strongest indicators of whether an institution will be discontinued [4].

Reviews of the Social Observatory Concept identify three fundamental requirements for sustaining an institution: a clear and definitive mandate, sustainable financing not subject to short-term political pressure, and a continuous research team with adequate technical qualifications [1]. If any one of the above conditions does not exist, then there will likely be significant limitations placed upon the ability of the observatory to

operate successfully. However, if all three conditions do not exist simultaneously, such as in the case of Oman, then the institution will essentially be paralyzed.

Evidence from comparative analysis of urban observatories also underscores the importance of governance arrangements for observatories. Rusli [14] found that observatories within solid, multi-actor governance frameworks produced higher-quality data and were better at adapting to changing indicator needs than observatories led by a single ministry. Acuto [15] demonstrated that when governance is fragmented, it creates obstacles to Urban Knowledge Platforms' development of analytical products useful to policymakers in highly complex policy environments. Additionally, evidence from Latin American Community Indicator Systems shows that a monitoring system's survival is directly related to governance stability, stakeholder diversity, and long-term resource allocation. Therefore, systems without these factors were much more likely to experience service discontinuation than other communities [4].

3. INDICATOR SYSTEMS AND METHODOLOGICAL ADAPTABILITY

Indicators have never been merely objective instruments. As Hezri and Dovers [16] explained, social and sustainable indicators are social constructs; therefore, their design reflects the politics, culture, and institutions in which they are created and are relevant only if regularly reviewed against the contemporary context. Therefore, as indicated by empirical research at European observatories, the ability of indicators to be revised, expanded, or retired in response to changes in social reality a concept identified in this study as Indicator Obsolescence is a determining factor in whether a given observatory remains relevant [17].

OECD [18] argued for "Dynamic Indicator Systems" capable of adapting to new social issues arising from technology, such as digital transformation, platform labor markets, mental health, and environmental sustainability. Dynamic indicator systems require both technical capacity and institutional stability, along with the organizational authority to revise previously adopted frameworks without creating governance related conflict. Subjective social indicators add yet another perspective. Casas [19] found that comprehensive social monitoring required indicators that included both the objective dimensions of well-being such as income, education, and housing and the subjective aspects of quality of life such as social trust, sense of belonging to one's community, etc. However, the original Omani indicator framework was limited to objective measures and did not include either subjective or relational aspects of social experience a methodological omission that has widened as our understanding of well-being through the lens of the social sciences has evolved.

4. DATA GOVERNANCE, ACCESS, AND INTEROPERABILITY

Fragmented administrative data poses systemic problems to national statistical and monitoring systems. The World Bank [8] has shown that fragmented data ecosystems i.e., where government data is distributed across different departments in different data formats severely limit an observatory's analytical capabilities. OECD [3] has found that three major barriers exist to increasing data sharing among agencies and to making better use of the potential of administrative data for monitoring and policy-making purposes. These include: institutional siloing; incompatible legal regimes; and a lack of coordination amongst agencies. Janssen et al. [9] pointed out that both cultural-political and technical barriers to data-sharing should be given equal weight. Data is often treated as an instrument of sector-specific power and protection of resources by governmental agencies; therefore, administrative data can rarely serve as a national good or shared public good. Therefore, overcoming such barriers will require more than just technological innovations they will also require governance innovations that establish formal obligations, incentives, and accountability structures for data sharing.

There is new literature on open data governance and data stewardship that provides models for reform. For example, Wiedemann et al. [20] outline a model of the observatory-as-infrastructure, whereby the observatory acts as an integrator of data collecting, harmonizing, and analyzing information from many other agencies. Such a model relies on a degree of institutional authority and agency cooperation among various agencies, which most observatories embedded in single-ministry environments do not possess.

5. PARTICIPATORY AND FUTURE-ORIENTED OBSERVATORY MODELS

The number of studies promoting Participatory Observatory Models that involve Universities, Civil Society Organizations, and Communities, with these actors actively participating as Co-Authors of Social Knowledge, is growing rapidly. Liu et al. [21] report that Citizens Observatories, which integrate Community Actors within the Monitoring Process of Governance, have shown Greater Institutional Resilience and a Better Ability to sustain stakeholders' participation compared to top-down monitoring institutions lacking Participatory Mechanisms.

Observatory Models Focused on Future Orientation Extend the Participatory Logic Applied to Strategic Foresight. The OECD [18] and the UNDP [11] both promoted the establishment of monitoring bodies capable of going beyond the Collection of Retrospective Data and applying scenario analysis, trend identification, and Anticipatory Policymaking Support. These types of Models are especially important in the GCC Context, where Ambitious Long-Term Development Visions Require not only the Monitoring of Current Conditions but also Analytical Support for Strategic Planning and Policy Adaptation. Alignment with National Development Visions is Considered an Essential Factor to Obtain Political Support and Institutional Recognition. According to Ramírez-Koctong et al. [22], Observatories with Explicit Programmatic Links to Long-Term National Agendas Have Demonstrated a Stronger Positioning to Maintain Institutional Continuity and Attract Funding Over Time.

6. SYNTHESIS: POSITIONING THE PRESENT STUDY

There are many similarities in the findings from the studies referenced above that provide a basis for informing the current research. There are five key points. Institutional Governance Arrangements (not simply Technical Design Choices) are the primary drivers of an Observatory's success. Indicator Systems need to continue to evolve Methodologically in order to remain Analytical Relevance. Data Governance Fragmentation exists as an institutional barrier (not solely a technical one). Participatory and Future-Oriented Models exist as Potential Pathways to Reforming Observatories. Alignment with National Development Priorities is important for both Legitimacy and Sustainability of Observatories.

Oman is notable among these examples since its Observatory was initially well designed with a clearly defined Mandate, Structured Indicators, and Experienced Founders but ultimately failed to develop into a functioning Observatory. Understanding why this occurred requires more than just an Account of the History of the Observatory; it also needs a Theoretically Grounded Analysis of the Institutional Governance Conditions that led to Stagnation. The present study fills that gap by providing such a theoretical analysis.

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN: PROBLEM, QUESTIONS, AND OBJECTIVES

1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Although created ten years ago (in 2014) to monitor society through an expansive set of indicators and a formalized mandate for social monitoring, the Omani Social Observatory has not yet developed into a working, evidence-based decision-making tool for the government. Since its creation, it has repeatedly moved from one institutional home to another. It has lacked stable funding consistently. Its original framework of 138 indicators, designed by a multidisciplinary team of experts, has remained unchanged over time and has therefore become outdated. This lack of development is consequential for many reasons.

Nationally, the Social Observatory's ongoing inability to function as intended leaves a significant gap in Oman's capacity to conduct social monitoring as it continues to implement large-scale changes to its economy and social structure under Vision 2040. Institutionally, it indicates a lack of success in leveraging substantial intellectual resources (the development of 138 indicators by a multidisciplinary group of experts) to sustain ongoing analytical processes. Policy-wise, it limits Omani policymakers' access to a credible National Evidence Base for their decisions on social policy matters such as Family Welfare, Youth Employment, Living Standards, etc.

The research question is further complicated by the lack of empirically based studies examining the causes of this stagnation. The views/ opinions of the founder-experts who constructed the original framework for the Social Observatory have never been formally captured or recorded, resulting in a risk that

all knowledge of how to build the first social observatory in Oman may disappear as those individuals retire or move to new roles. This Study seeks to address both the documentary and analytical gaps.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the following research questions:

Main Research Question (MRQ): What institutional and methodological challenges have constrained the development and effectiveness of the Omani Social Observatory since its establishment in 2014, and how do these challenges illuminate broader governance failures in national social monitoring institutions?

- RQ1: What institutional factors including administrative transfers, mandate ambiguity, funding arrangements, and human-resource constraints have undermined the Observatory's governance, continuity, and institutional legitimacy?
- RQ2: What methodological limitations including indicator obsolescence, thematic coverage gaps, and restricted access to social data have impaired the Observatory's analytical capacity and policy relevance?
- RQ3: How do institutional and methodological constraints interact and reinforce one another to compound the Observatory's stagnation and prevent effective reform?
- RQ4: What institutional and methodological reforms do founding experts recommend to revitalize the Observatory and align it with the requirements of Oman Vision 2040 and international best practice?

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study pursues four corresponding objectives:

- O1: To document and analyses the institutional factors that have undermined the governance, continuity, and legitimacy of the Omani Social Observatory (addressing RQ1).
- O2: To examine the methodological constraints arising from indicator obsolescence, restricted thematic coverage, and fragmented data access that have impaired the Observatory's analytical capacity (addressing RQ2).
- O3: To analyze the interactive and mutually reinforcing dynamics between institutional instability and methodological stagnation (addressing RQ3).
- O4: To identify and synthesize expert-driven reform recommendations for revitalizing the Observatory as an adaptive, participatory, and Vision 2040-aligned evidence platform (addressing RQ4).

V. METHODOLOGY

1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONING

This study uses an interpretative/qualitative methodology. Because the data being examined the institutional governance dynamics, the professionals' experiences of stagnated policy development, and the experts' opinions about the reform in their respective areas of work have been constructed through the understandings, perceptions and interpretations of the people who worked within those processes [23], the qualitative/interpretive paradigm will allow for better capture of these practices.

The study is best characterized as a qualitative case study of institutional governance failure, with the Omani Social Observatory serving as the focal case [24]. Case study methodology is appropriate when, as here, the research aims to generate an in-depth, contextually sensitive understanding of a complex institutional phenomenon within its real-world setting. The single-case design is justified by the Observatory's uniqueness as Oman's sole national social observatory and by the bounded, historically specific nature of the governance processes under examination.

2. SAMPLING STRATEGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

We used purposive sampling to recruit participants for this study. I selected people who work directly in the area of developing, implementing, governing or evaluating the Omani Social Observatory. Purposive sampling is the most suitable methodology for accessing specialized knowledge grounded in practitioners' experiences to meet specific research goals [25]. Random sampling was not considered feasible due to the small number of available experts and their limited geographic distribution.

The final sample consisted of 10 practitioners (P1-P10) who represented academia, government, professional research organizations, and social policy institutions. The participants have at least 15 years of professional experience in social research, social policy, or related areas. Each of them also contributed to the original technical design of the Omani Social Observatory, either as part of the indicator's development team, as an institutional administrator, as a contracted researcher, or as an advisor to the body responsible for establishing the Observatory. Please see Table 2 below for a summary of participant demographics.

A sample of 10 practitioner participants is consistent with the Information Power Framework outlined by Malterud et al. [26], which states that the appropriate sample size in qualitative studies should be based on the amount of information produced relative to the study's analytic objectives rather than on an arbitrary numerical limit. Given the level of specialization in practitioners' expertise and their direct involvement in designing the Observatory, along with the convergence of responses across the interview process for all four research questions, my sample achieved analytic saturation.

3. DATA COLLECTION

3.1 Semi-Structured Expert Interviews

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed specifically for this study. The guide was organized around four thematic modules corresponding to the four research questions: (i) institutional history and governance arrangements; (ii) indicator design, relevance, and methodological limitations; (iii) the interaction between institutional and methodological constraints; and (iv) reform recommendations. Each module combined focused open-ended questions with prompt questions to encourage elaboration and critical reflection.

Interviews were conducted in Arabic and English according to participants' preference, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were conducted face-to-face or by secure video conference over a six-month data collection period. This extended timeframe was adopted to accommodate the professional availability of senior-level experts and to allow for follow-up clarification of emerging analytical themes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

3.2 Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis was employed as a secondary data source to contextualize and corroborate interview evidence. Documents reviewed included the Observatory's founding charter, the original indicator framework documentation, relevant administrative correspondence, published government reports, and Oman Vision 2040 policy documents. Documentary analysis served two analytical functions: first, to establish an accurate chronological account of the Observatory's institutional history; and second, to identify discrepancies between official institutional narratives and the experiential accounts provided by expert participants.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis [27, 28], a method well-suited to generating rich, interpretive accounts of complex social phenomena from qualitative data. Thematic analysis was implemented through a hybrid inductive deductive coding strategy: preliminary codes were generated inductively from the data without reference to pre-established categories, and subsequently organized into themes informed by the theoretical framework described in Section 2.

Analysis was conducted in four stages. First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to develop deep familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated across the full dataset, with MAXQDA (version 22) used to organize, retrieve, and display coded segments systematically. Third, initial codes were clustered into candidate themes through iterative comparison and discussion. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and clear differentiation, and were mapped onto the research questions and theoretical framework. A total of six principal themes and multiple sub-themes were identified through this process.

5. TRUSTWORTHINESS

The trustworthiness of the study was determined using four standards from Lincoln & Guba's [29] model. The credibility of the data was demonstrated and enhanced through member checking, in which five participants reviewed preliminary results and agreed that they were accurate and reflected their professional experiences. Support for the transferability of results was demonstrated through the inclusion of detailed descriptions of the institutional setting, participant profiles, and the analytical process, thereby allowing others to judge whether there would be similar applicability to their own settings.

Dependability of results was ensured by documenting an audit trail for each methodological decision, coding procedure, and analysis decision made during the study in a reflexive methodological journal maintained throughout the research. Confirmability of results was addressed by explicitly documenting the relationship between the evidence collected and the analytical claims developed throughout the findings section. In addition, it was ensured that all themes presented were based on participant-provided quotes related to each theme rather than solely on the researcher's interpretations.

6. REFLEXIVITY

As a researcher with professional proximity to the Omani social policy context, the lead author was cognizant of the potential for interpretive bias in analyzing accounts of institutional failure. Reflexive practices employed included the maintenance of a methodological journal to document analytical assumptions and decisions, peer debriefing with researchers external to the study context, and deliberate attention to divergent or contradictory evidence within the data. Member checking provided an additional reflexive mechanism by subjecting preliminary interpretations to critical scrutiny by research participants.

7. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent prior to interviews and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. To protect participant anonymity, all identifying information has been removed from interview extracts, and participants are referenced only by the codes P1 through P10 throughout this article. Data were stored in encrypted, password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

VI. FINDINGS

The six thematic areas were identified through a qualitative thematic analysis of 10 expert interviews that described the key institutional and methodological barriers the Omani Social Observatory faces. Following this, the themes have been arranged chronologically from institutional constraints through methodological constraints, and the interactions between these themes have been examined, as have the reforms the participants recommend. In addition to describing each theme using participant testimony, analytic claims have been made regarding each theme. The core dimensions of each theme are illustrated via quotes and references (P1-P10) for each participant. Where relevant and analytically important, notable discrepancies in participants' emphasis due to differing professional backgrounds or institutional perspectives have also been noted.

1. THEME 1: INSTITUTIONAL INSTABILITY AND FRAGMENTED OWNERSHIP

Institutional instability was identified by participants as the most consistent and emphatic issue across all 10 interviews. It was the foundation upon which all other challenges were based. Institutional instability arose from the frequent changes in the Observatory's administration. The Science Research Council and subsequent ministries have been responsible for administering the Observatory at various times. All participants agreed that this constant administrative turnover has led to a lack of strategic coherence, institutional memory, and accountability among stakeholders.

There has been an unstable institutional environment at the Observatory; thus, the mandates and directions have never been clearly defined. A P4 said: "The Observatory was passed from one organization to another without a valid transition plan. We began again each time rather than continuing cumulatively."

Participants indicated that they have continually had to develop short-term strategies due to repeated handovers of the Observatory. With each transfer, participants experienced new expectations, revised priorities, and the loss of some institutional knowledge developed under previous administrators.

A second issue involved uncertainty about which entities/organizations held the authority to make decisions regarding resource allocation, etc. Most participants felt that no single organization/group had the legitimate institutional authority to allocate resources, define data-sharing practices, etc., or to hold program partners accountable for their commitments. As P7 noted, although the Observatory exists on paper, it lacks sufficient institutional power to serve as a national reference point. Several participants suggested that the Observatory's location within a particular sectoral ministry limits its ability to be cross-sectoral. As P3 indicated, "if it is housed within one ministry, then it will pursue the agenda of that ministry and will be unable to address issues arising beyond that area"; see also (P9).

Lastly, several participants indicated that the cumulative loss of institutional memory resulting from staff turnover and other organizational disruptions has caused problems. Many participants believed that the loss of the original technical team's experience-based knowledge of the indicator framework, data sources, and analytical methodologies was irrevocable.

2. THEME 2: FUNDING INSECURITY AND WEAK HUMAN-RESOURCE CAPACITY

In addition to institutional instability, participants identified financial instability as closely connected to both the cause of instability in the Observatory and its consequences. Participants stated that the funding for the Observatory has been characterized by extraordinary volatility and unpredictability. Funding was available to keep the Observatory operational for a certain period; however, it would be discontinued, and the Observatory would enter another period of operational suspension.

Several participants noted that the Observatory has repeatedly lacked funding for extended periods, leaving it unable to function. One participant stated: "At one point in time, the Observatory did not have a budget at all... essentially the Observatory ceased operation" (see P6; also, P10). These funding interruptions severely limited the human resources needed to identify and update indicators. For an organization such as an Observatory to track indicators over time, sustained funding is required to support a professional research staff. An expert from the field further elaborated on this point, stating: "Without a dedicated team, every attempt to revive an observatory will depend on short-term contractual agreements and/or temporary personnel to provide ad hoc expertise, which cannot provide sustainable long-term monitoring capabilities." (P2). Another participant noted: "While hiring short-term contract employees and relying on temporary help to provide ad hoc expertise may satisfy needs for specific projects, it does not permit the development of institutional memory nor consistently apply methodologies across time." (P8). Therefore, each change within the institution resulted in nearly a complete loss of institutional knowledge, as specialized knowledge developed prior to each change dissipated due to a lack of continuity among the core staff members.

Another major obstacle posed by human resources was the specialized skill sets required to operate an observatory successfully. Interviewees reported a serious shortage of researchers in Oman with the necessary skills to design indicators, conduct quantitative social analyses, use mixed-methods research approaches, and produce policy-relevant knowledge. One participant commented: "It wasn't simply a matter of 'we didn't have enough money,' it was a matter of we didn't have sufficient numbers of people trained to link together theoretical frameworks of society, data analysis methods, and production of knowledge applicable to policy problems." (P5). Due to human capital constraints stemming from this shortage, it was extremely challenging for the Observatory to develop its capacity, even during periods when additional funding was available.

3. THEME 3: INDICATOR OBSOLESCENCE AND METHODOLOGICAL RIGIDITY

The methodological obsolescence of the Observatory's foundational indicator framework was the most detailed analytic theme reported by all 10 interviewees. All participants indicated that the 138 indicators developed in 2014 were largely obsolete given Omani social realities today not because the original framework was a bad design choice; rather, there has never been an institutionalized process for systematically revising indicators.

All participants provided descriptions of the indicators based on their design contexts and current limitations. Participants said that the original indicators were adequate at capturing the social reality of 2014 and also the lack of adequacy of those indicators to describe contemporary social realities: "They were created for a social reality that no longer exists" (Participant 3); "There are no indicators related to the digital world and social media; there are no indicators regarding platform labor markets and precarious work; there are no indicators related to mental health and psychological well-being; there are no indicators related to environmental sustainability and climate-related social risk; and there are few if any indicators regarding gender inequality that are broader than basic demographics" (Participant 9); "You cannot understand what we do socially now without taking into account our digital environment — however, none of these areas were included in the original indicator framework" (Participant 9); "The way we treat youth unemployment is limited: youth unemployment issues require many different types of data to measure and analyze — the current set of indicators does not allow us to accurately assess the extent of youth unemployment in the way that we need to" (Participant 6).

The participant group identified another problematically structured and methodologically challenged concern in the indicator system: the absence of reasonably detailed sub-indicators for each of the 3 macro-domains. Although the broad macro-domains of Family, Youth, and Living Standards were defined fairly clearly, participants felt that these domains did not provide sufficient internal detail to enable the sub-domain-specific assessment required to produce useful insights for policy-makers. Participant #4 expressed this idea very clearly as follows: "Broadly-defined themes cannot effectively represent complex social phenomena without being reinforced by sub-indicators that have been designed and evaluated carefully."

As such, the current study has highlighted a key tension between the conceptual breadth and analytical depth of the original indicator framework. The inability to be flexible within the indicator framework was also enhanced by the lack of an institutionalized mechanism for periodically reviewing/revising the indicators. Due to a lack of a permanent institutional home and ongoing staffing resources to facilitate the revision of indicators, the participants could not update the indicators -- not because there were no new ideas about how to revise the indicators, but rather because they had no authority to obtain funding, evaluate potential revisions to the original framework, or implement those revisions.

4. THEME 4: DATA FRAGMENTATION AND ACCESS BARRIERS

The fourth theme concerns the systemic disintegration of the Omani social data system. The participants expressed the view that the social data collected by the Government of Oman is dispersed across various institutions. They further indicated that the data collected by these institutions are based on incompatible definitions and methods of collecting such information, and are treated as assets of each institution rather than as a collective resource for all of them.

The impact of the disintegration of social data systems within Oman's institutions has been very serious. The participants described many examples in which two or more separate government agencies have presented conflicting statistical evidence on the same issue during the same period. These conflicts have left policymakers unsure which statistical information to believe and have also contributed to a lack of confidence in the government's published statistics.

As noted by one participant, “when two ministries produce different numbers for the same indicator, then it creates a problem for policy makers as they don’t know whose numbers to use… and consequently the Observatory doesn’t have a valid database to analyze” (P1. See also P8).

In addition to barriers created through formal means such as laws and regulations, there are barriers created through informal means. Formal barriers include a lack of legal or regulatory frameworks that enable the sharing of data between agencies; “data is generally viewed as property of the institution that collects it, therefore creating a great deal of difficulty for collaborative efforts” (P10). Operational barriers are those that prevent access to data. Participants referred to the complexity and length of the process involved in gaining access to administrative data for research or monitoring purposes. Therefore, participants stated that the complexity and time required to obtain administrative data prevented the systematic data collection and integration necessary for the Observatory’s monitoring functions (P5).

Furthermore, participants emphasized that although the Observatory is established to monitor and report on Oman's development activities, it lacks a centralized data management system to serve as a hub for integrating data. Consequently, since the Observatory relies heavily on voluntary cooperation from ministries to obtain data, it depends on ministries having both an interest in providing the data and a mandate to do so. In other words, without a common data management system, the Observatory is unable to perform longitudinal analysis it because to relies on isolated contributions. "Therefore, without a single data system, the Observatory relied upon discrete sources of input, limiting its ability to provide longitudinal studies" (P2).

5. THEME 5: THE MUTUALLY REINFORCING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

Participants consistently described institutional and methodological barriers to development not as separate obstacles but as part of an interconnected web of limiting factors. In several cases, participants clearly articulated how institutional instability impeded the Observatory's ability to adapt methodologically; similarly, they stated that the obsolescence of indicators would undermine the Observatory's credibility and thus reduce the political support required to stabilize the institutions supporting it.

Several participants specifically articulated this interdependent relationship at length in their interviews. For example, P7 made the following comment regarding the critical dynamic of this interdependency: "When the institution is unstable, there will never be an incentive to invest in new methodologies, and when the methodology is out of date, decision-makers have reason to question the relevance of the institution." Similarly, P4 described the structural 'catch-22' which led to the failure of all prior efforts to achieve some level of reform: "The Observatory fell into a vicious circle where weaknesses in structure and stagnation in methodology fed back into one another each made the other worse."

These findings are highly relevant theoretically. They suggest that institutional stagnation in social observatories can only be understood and rectified by considering both institutional and methodological capabilities as a mutually constituting pair. Thus, these results suggest that simply addressing institutional instability or developing new methodologies individually is insufficient to break the stagnation cycle.

6. THEME 6: EXPERT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

The sixth theme represents the reforms recommended based on participants' direct professional experience of how the Observatory functions and their knowledge of international observatory models. The reforms suggested by these experts are not intended as prescriptive policies; however, they do represent evidence-based, analytical perspectives from professionals who have unprecedented institutional knowledge of the Observatory.

There were four consistent reform priorities that were emphasized throughout all the interviews. Participants requested the creation of the Observatory as an independent or semi-independent entity, with a formally stated mission statement, an established institutional home, and multi-annual budgetary allocations under a higher level of government (i.e., Council of Ministers): "Independence is not a luxury it is the prerequisite for credibility and for cross sectorial coordination that a National Observatory needs" (P3; See Also P6).

Participants further advocated for the development of an iterative, inclusive indicator update process: "the Observatory's indicators should be updated in a way that is not just technically feasible at one time but as part of ongoing processes involving structured discussions between academia, civil society organizations, and communities affected by the Observatory's findings" (P1; See Also P9). Participant believed this type of iterative indicator updating process would provide both enhanced relevance to stakeholders' interests and enhance stakeholder interest in the Observatory's outputs.

All participants supported the idea that there must be substantial alignment between the themes covered by the Observatory and those identified in Oman Vision 2040: "if an Observatory does not reflect the national development agenda, then it will lack credibility among policymakers – thus its findings will be viewed as academic studies rather than as strategic intelligence" (P2; See Also P5, P10). A number of participants

requested that the Observatory develop futures-thinking and scenario-analysis capacity so that it may serve as an anticipatory, rather than purely reflective, monitoring institution.

Finally, participants indicated a need for long-term investments in human resources for the Observatory, including developing graduate programs in social monitoring, indicator design, and policy-oriented social research to establish a domestic base of expertise on which a revived Observatory could rely see tables 1 to table 5.

Table 1. Institutional timeline of the Omani social observatory, 2014–2024.

Period	Key Developments	Institutional Location	Governance Implications
2014	Observatory established under the Scientific Research Council (SRC) 138-indicator framework developed across three domains Founding technical team assembled from academia and government	Scientific Research Council (Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation)	Clear original mandate; strong founding expertise; institutional home aligned with research function
2015–2019	Multiple institutional transfers between government bodies Funding instability and resource constraints No systematic indicator updates Erosion of institutional memory and technical capacity	Multiple ministries (successive transfers)	Progressive institutional destabilization; loss of founding team expertise; accumulating methodological stagnation
2020	COVID-19 exposes gaps in social monitoring capacity Oman Vision 2040 launched Observatory not referenced as key mechanism SRC transformed into the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation	Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (then transitioning)	Stagnation becomes visible; Vision 2040 misalignment; renewed institutional uncertainty
2021–2023	Growing recognition of Observatory stagnation among policymakers Indicators remain unamended from 2014 framework Observatory transferred to Ministry of Social Development	Ministry of Social Development	Continued institutional uncertainty; limited operational activity; further erosion of credibility
2024	Observatory transferred to Ministry of Economy Present study initiated to document institutional history Expert interviews reveal scope of challenges and reform priorities	Ministry of Economy	Urgent need for comprehensive reform identified; institutional memory at risk of permanent loss

Table 2. Overview of study participants (p1–p10).

Code	Professional Sector	Primary Expertise	Years of Experience	Role in Observatory
P1	Academia	Social policy and indicator methodology	20+ years	Original indicator design team member

P2	Government	Social monitoring and data systems	25+ years	Institutional governance advisor
P3	Academia	Sociological research methods	18+ years	Thematic framework consultant
P4	Policy research	Evidence-based policy analysis	22+ years	Observatory evaluation and review
P5	Government	Statistics and social data	30+ years	Data systems and integration specialist
P6	Academia	Youth studies and social welfare	15+ years	Domain specialist Youth domain
P7	Professional org.	Social development and planning	20+ years	Institutional strategy advisor
P8	Government	Human resource and capacity planning	17+ years	Operational capacity advisor
P9	Academia	Digital sociology and new media	15+ years	Thematic gap review contributor
P10	Policy research	Observatory governance and reform	22+ years	Governance structure reviewer

Table 3. Key challenges and expert recommendations: institutional and methodological dimensions.

Dimension	Key Challenges	Expert Recommendations	Relevant RQs	International Parallel
Institutional Governance	Repeated administrative transfers No stable institutional home Mandate ambiguity and ownership gaps Weak inter-ministerial coordination	Establish independent/semi-autonomous body Place under high-level authority Develop formal inter-agency coordination mechanisms	RQ1, RQ3	OECD [13]: governance instability reduces observatory credibility and inter-agency coordination
Funding and Capacity	Irregular and insufficient funding Absence of permanent research team Limited specialized social research expertise	Secure sustainable multi-year funding Build a permanent core research team Invest in graduate training in social monitoring	RQ1	Niemann & Hoppe [4]: Latin American community indicator initiatives with irregular funding and governance instability face disproportionately high discontinuation rates
Indicator Methodology	138 indicators unamended since 2014 No thematic coverage of digital society, mental health, or gender equality Insufficient sub-indicator depth within macro-domains	Establish dynamic, participatory indicator revision process Expand thematic domains to include emerging priorities Develop sub-indicator frameworks within existing domains	RQ2, RQ3	OECD [18]: dynamic indicators are essential for policy relevance; Eurostat [17]: systematic indicator refresh is standard European practice

Data Governance	Fragmented social data across ministries Absence of data-sharing frameworks No centralized, interoperable data infrastructure	Develop national social data governance framework Mandate inter-agency data sharing protocols Invest in integrated data infrastructure	RQ2, RQ3	World Bank [8]: data fragmentation undermines monitoring capacity; OECD [3]: barriers to data access and inter-agency sharing impede effective monitoring
Strategic Alignment and Governance	Disconnected from Oman Vision 2040 Limited participation of academia, civil society Purely retrospective orientation	Align Observatory with Vision 2040 and SDGs Develop participatory governance with universities and civil society Add foresight and scenario analysis capabilities	RQ4	OECD [18]; UNDP [11]: anticipatory, participatory observatories are increasingly the international standard

Table 4. Comparative overview: current and proposed Omani social observatory framework.

Dimension	Current Status (2014 Framework)	Proposed Reform Framework	Theoretical Rationale
Institutional Home	Unstable; multiple successive transfers across ministries	Independent/semi-autonomous body under high-level cross-sectoral authority	Institutional theory: stable mandate and legitimacy are preconditions for sustained function
Governance Structure	Single-ministry, top-down; limited multi-stakeholder participation	Multi-stakeholder governance board including academia, civil society, and relevant ministries	Adaptive governance: participatory co-production enhances legitimacy, relevance, and resilience
Funding Model	Irregular; dependent on single institutional budget line; frequently interrupted	Sustainable multi-year funding from diversified sources; protected operational budget	Institutional theory: financial sustainability is essential for long-term monitoring capacity
Thematic Domains	Three static domains: Family Welfare, Youth Values and Employment, Living Standards	Original domains retained and deepened; plus Mental Health, Gender Equality, Digital Society, Environmental Sustainability, Labour Markets	Methodological adaptability: indicators must reflect evolving social realities and national priorities
Indicator System	138 static indicators; no revision mechanism; unamended since 2014	Dynamic, participatory indicator revision process; scheduled periodic review; sub-indicator development within domains	EIP and adaptive governance: methodological currency is essential for policy relevance
Data Infrastructure	No centralized system; reliant on fragmented ministerial data; no formal sharing protocols	Integrated national social data platform; formal inter-agency data sharing mandates; harmonized data standards	Data governance: interoperability and stewardship are foundations of analytical capacity
Strategic Alignment	Disconnected from Oman Vision 2040; no alignment with SDGs; retrospective monitoring only	Explicit programmatic alignment with Vision 2040 and SDG monitoring; foresight and scenario analysis integrated	Adaptive governance: anticipatory orientation enables forward-looking policy support

Table 5. Thematic analysis summary: themes, sub-themes, and evidence.

Theme	Key Sub-themes	Participants	Illustrative Evidence	Relevant RQ
T1: Institutional Instability and Fragmented Ownership	Administrative transfers Mandate ambiguity Loss of institutional memory	All (P1–P10)	"The Observatory was moved … without a clear justification … resulting in repeated restarts rather than cumulative progress" (P4)	RQ1, MRQ
T2: Funding Insecurity and Weak Human-Resource Capacity	Irregular funding cycles Short-term staffing Specialized expertise deficit	P2, P5, P6, P8, P10	"Without a dedicated team, every attempt to revive the Observatory depended on temporary arrangements" (P2)	RQ1
T3: Indicator Obsolescence and Methodological Rigidity	Static 2014 indicators Thematic coverage gaps Insufficient sub-indicator depth	All (P1–P10)	"They were designed for a social reality that no longer exists" (P3)	RQ2, MRQ
T4: Data Fragmentation and Access Barriers	Siloed ministerial data Absence of sharing frameworks No integrated data infrastructure	P1, P2, P5, P8, P10	"Data was often treated as institutional property rather than a national resource" (P10)	RQ2
T5: Mutually Reinforcing Institutional–Methodological Constraints	Institutional weakness blocks methodological reform Methodological obsolescence erodes institutional support Cyclic stagnation dynamic	P4, P7, P3, P9	"The Observatory became caught in a cycle where structural weakness and methodological stagnation fed into each other" (P4)	RQ3, MRQ
T6: Expert Recommendations for Reform	Institutional independence Participatory indicator revision Vision 2040 alignment Foresight integration	All (P1–P10)	"Independence is not a luxury it is the precondition for credibility" (P3)	RQ4

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study generate several analytically significant insights that extend and deepen the existing international literature on social observatory governance. Rather than rehearsing the empirical content of the preceding section, this discussion interprets the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, situates the Omani case within a comparative perspective, and derives implications for theory and practice.

1. INSTITUTIONAL INSTABILITY AS THE PRIMARY DRIVER OF OBSERVATORY STAGNATION

Institutional instability (i.e., multiple sequential breaks in institutional continuity; the redefinition of mandates; and changes in institutional "ownership") is shown in this research to be the key causal factor leading to stagnation in observatories. This finding aligns with findings of OECD [13] and Moreno and Mantilla [1], who identified governance arrangements and stable institutional mandates as two critical

factors influencing the effectiveness of observatories. Notably, however, the Omani example provides additional theoretical insight by demonstrating that institutional instability is not merely an impediment to administration but can function as a systematic means of destroying the necessary prerequisites for successful observatory operations: institutional memory, methodological consistency, the development and maintenance of stakeholder relationships, and political authority.

Although the administrative transfers to which the Omani Social Observatory was subject were structurally analogous to those documented in the Latin American context (where governance instability combined with actor exclusion from participation monitoring systems resulted in similarly disrupted institutional continuities) [4], there are significant differences between these examples. Unlike many countries in Latin America, the Omani system does not include competitive party alternation leading to elections. Rather than election cycles, the Omani administrative reorganization led to the lack of an institutionally empowered advocate for the preservation of its institutional interests. These findings suggest that observatory protections must be included within the institutional design at inception in governance settings without regular electoral competition.

The mutually reinforcing relationship between institutional instability and methodology stagnation identified in Theme 5 represents the most original contribution of this research. Although previous studies have addressed both issues individually [13], they have not examined the nature of this relationship. In particular, they did not address how each issue supports and sustains the other, creating a cycle of stagnation. DiMaggio and Powell [6] identified this process as institutional isomorphism, driven by coercive pressure and uncertainty. Specifically, organizations experiencing institutional instability will rely on existing methods (rather than developing new ones) due to fear of failure when adopting innovative methodologies; conversely, the adoption of stagnant methodologies reduces the political appeal needed to support institutional reforms.

2. DATA GOVERNANCE FAILURE AS A STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT

The lack of effective data governance outlined in the findings is particularly significant to consider when examining how this can represent an unexplored dimension of the stagnation dilemma, which has not received sufficient focus within the literature on the social observatory. The experience of Oman illustrates that even if well-developed indicator frameworks are designed appropriately, they will be analytically inert without a proper data infrastructure. In addition to the fragmented nature of ministerial data systems, the lack of formally established protocols governing interagency information exchange, and the cultural view of administrative data as being owned by institutions all work together to inhibit observatories' ability to integrate multiple streams of social data into meaningful long-term analyses.

The OECD's [3] framework for a data-driven public sector is better suited to interpreting the Omani case because it cautions against treating data governance primarily as a technical matter. Oman's experience confirms this argument: while technical solutions, such as data integration platforms, are necessary to facilitate data sharing, they remain insufficient without complementary governance reforms. These reforms should establish mandatory requirements for interagency data sharing, define institutional roles, such as data stewards, and introduce accountability mechanisms to ensure compliance. Without these governance arrangements, even technically competent aspects of the Observatory's initial design could not operate effectively.

3. THE CASE FOR PARTICIPATORY AND ADAPTIVE OBSERVATORY MODELS

The expert recommendations documented in Theme 6 converge strongly on a participatory, adaptive model of observatory governance that aligns closely with emerging international best practice. The endorsement of participatory indicator revision processes involving academia, civil society, and professional research communities reflects the broader shift in the social observatory literature from expert-led, top-down monitoring to co-produced, stakeholder-inclusive social knowledge generation [21].

The case for participatory governance in the Omani context is both principled and pragmatic. Principled, because co-production of social knowledge with diverse stakeholders generates more contextually relevant indicators and enhances the legitimacy of observatory outputs among policymakers and the public.

Pragmatic, because participatory governance distributes ownership of the Observatory across multiple institutional actors, reducing the vulnerability to the single-institution transfers that have repeatedly disrupted the Observatory's continuity. A multi-stakeholder governance board, as recommended by several participants, would create structural incentives for a range of actors to invest in the Observatory's sustainability reducing the dependence on any single ministerial patron.

The call for foresight integration positioning the Observatory as an anticipatory rather than merely retrospective institution is particularly significant in the context of Oman Vision 2040. National development visions of this ambition and time-horizon require not only monitoring of current conditions, but analytical support for strategic planning under conditions of uncertainty. An observatory equipped with scenario analysis and trend identification capabilities would directly address this need, transforming the Observatory from a passive data repository into an active strategic intelligence platform for the Omani state.

4. CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

4.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the theoretical literature on social observatories by: (i) establishing the mutual reinforcement of institutional instability and methodological stagnation as a distinct analytical mechanism that explains observatory failure more completely than either institutional or methodological analysis alone; (ii) integrating institutional theory, data governance scholarship, and evidence-informed policymaking into a composite framework applicable to observatory analysis in developing and middle-income country contexts; and (iii) demonstrating the relevance of path dependency in explaining the lock-in of obsolete indicator frameworks under conditions of institutional instability.

4.2 Empirical Contribution

Empirically, this study provides the first systematic, evidence-based account of the Omani Social Observatory's institutional history, grounded in the testimony of its founding practitioners. The documentary reconstruction of the Observatory's administrative trajectory, combined with the thematic analysis of expert perspectives, generates an empirically rich account of a governance failure that has not previously been subjected to academic scrutiny. The study demonstrates the analytical value of qualitative institutional reconstruction a methodological approach that can generate insights unavailable through either documentary analysis or stakeholder survey alone.

4.3 Policy Contribution

The study's policy contribution is anchored in the reform framework presented in Table 4, which synthesizes expert recommendations into a coherent, evidence-based program for revitalizing the Observatory. The proposed framework addresses institutional governance, data infrastructure, methodological adaptability, participatory design, and strategic alignment simultaneously reflecting the study's core finding that these dimensions are systemically interdependent and must be reformed concurrently. The alignment of the reform framework with Oman Vision 2040 and the SDGs provides a politically credible basis for institutional advocacy.

4.4 Limitations

Several limitations affect the interpretation of these results. The sample size of ten participants, while sufficient for analysis, is too small for generalization. All belong to the Observatory's founding generation, possibly limiting reflection of how current decision-makers and users perceive the Observatory. Recall bias may affect results due to reliance on participants' memory over up to ten years. Limited access to documents hindered triangulation of interview data. Additionally, being an Oman-specific study, results may not apply to other GCC or developing countries with similar institutions, so caution is advised.

4.5 Directions for Future Research

The findings open several productive directions for future research. Comparative studies examining observatory governance across GCC countries including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar would illuminate whether the institutional patterns documented in Oman represent a region-specific governance syndrome

or context-particular failures. Survey-based research with a broader population of policymakers, data users, and civil society actors would complement and extend the expert-centred evidence generated in this study. A systematic mapping of the Observatory's original 138 indicators against the priorities of Oman Vision 2040 and the SDG monitoring framework would provide the empirical foundation for a participatory indicator revision process. Finally, Delphi studies or co-design workshops that engage diverse stakeholders in developing a revised indicator framework would translate the reform principles identified in this study into concrete operational proposals.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This research found that the Omani Social Observatory, created to support evidence-based decision-making, failed to grow or evolve since 2014 due to governance issues. Interviews with ten founders and a model combining Institutional Theory, Data Governance, and Evidence-Informed Policymaking revealed that poor governance, frequent administrative changes, limited funding, unorganized data, and lack of stakeholder participation hindered its development into the intended adaptive evidence platform.

The study identifies a cycle where institutional instability hampers methodological innovation, which in turn weakens governance legitimacy, requiring simultaneous action to break it. The proposed reform framework, based on institutional autonomy, stakeholder engagement, dynamic indicators, data infrastructure, and alignment with Oman Vision 2040, addresses this challenge. While focused on Oman, the findings have broader implications for social observatories in developing and middle-income countries, as many face similar issues of governance instability, data fragmentation, indicator obsolescence, and exclusion from policy-making. These structural vulnerabilities lack of mandates, stable funding, and multi-stakeholder ownership suggest that the reform principles could be adapted for similar organizations across the GCC and beyond.

In addition to representing an obligation (i.e., an imperative) to create the evidence base needed to provide a foundation for understanding and adaptively governing a rapidly changing society, Oman Vision 2040 presents an opportunity to establish an evidence-gathering infrastructure capable of providing high-quality, continuously updated social knowledge that is essential for implementing the knowledge-driven governance called for in Vision 2040. A critical component of fulfilling this obligation is reviving the Omani Social Observatory as an adaptive, participative, and forward-looking evidence-generating platform. The revitalization of the Social Observatory is not merely a peripheral administrative issue it is a foundational condition for the knowledge-based governance demanded by Vision 2040.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors of this study declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Relevant data can be made available upon request from the authors.

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