

Promoting Public Trust in Public Organizations: Explaining the Role of Public Accountability

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Abstract This paper is aimed at explaining the role of public accountability in promoting public trust in public organizations. Initially a conceptual model was developed. Then, the model was tested empirically in Iran. The result shows that public accountability influences the public trust by improving citizens' satisfaction. In other words, legal, ethical, financial, functional, and utmost political accountability affect public trust through influencing citizens' satisfaction. This study also confirms that changes in social trust, citizens' trust in government, and media will moderate trust in public organizations.

Keywords Public trust · Citizens' satisfaction · Public accountability · Public administration · Public organizations

Introduction

Public trust is important to public officials because it is central for supporting the development and implementation of public policies and, subsequently, for effective, cooperative compliance. Trusted public officials are able to make flexible use of their skills, as well as their discretion and autonomy, to enhance their efficiency, responsiveness, and effectiveness (Gordon 2000). The linkage between public officials and citizens leads to the success and advancement of public affairs, and separation between them results in decline of public managers (Ibne Abu Talib 1996,

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p.531). Therefore, public trust has been a great issue in public administration and political science, and many scholars (Denhard 2002; Herzlinger 1996; Citrin and Green 1996; Putnam 1995; Kim 2005; Miller and Listhaug 1990; Thomas 1998) have focused on public trust as an important issue in government.

According to the literature, various factors affect public trust. Studies also indicate that one of the most important factors creating distrust is “lack of accountability.” On the other hand, most of the previous studies have neglected to present a model of public trust for the public organizations.

The purpose of this research is to design a model for public administration to attract public trust toward public organizations. The major Questions of this research are as follow:

- What factors significantly affect citizens’ trust in public organizations?
- How can citizens’ trust in public organizations be strengthened?
- What are the actual elements of public trust in public organizations?
- How does public accountability affect public trust?
- How does public accountability relate to citizens’ satisfaction?
- What is the relationship between citizens’ satisfaction and public trust?
- How does trust in government, social trust, and media affect public trust?

This research has attempted to explain the relationship among “accountability” (as an independent variable), “citizens’ satisfaction” (as an intervening variable), and “public trust” (as a dependent variable). Furthermore, we have analyzed the effects of three moderate variables of “trust in government,” “social trust,” and “media” on the relation between citizens’ satisfaction and public trust. For this purpose, first, a conceptual model of “public accountability, citizens’ satisfaction, and public trust” was developed to explain public trust in public organizations, then the model was tested empirically in Iran.

The next section of the paper explains the main theoretical foundations. The general model of public trust is presented in Section 2. Section 3 describes research hypotheses and methodology. Moreover, statistical results of the model in Iran are presented in Section 4. Finally, the paper ends with research findings and suggestions.

The review of literature

Trust has both theoretical and practical significance in the study of public organizations. Despite the availability of numerous studies on the importance and applications of trust in organizational life, unfortunately, few studies have been conducted to determine elements affecting public trust (Carnevale and Wechsler 1992). Considering the fact that public trust is what links citizens to public organizations effective public administration will be the end result of this mutual trust (Farazmand 2001; Mishler and Rose 2002; Barnes and Gill 2000; Swindell and Kelly 2000; Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2003; Sims 2001; Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003; Newton and Norris 1999). Thus, public trust has a tremendous effect on the quality of public administration. Trust is one of the most valuable social capitals, and its decline will impose heavy expenditure on the political system. This is why many studies have been conducted in several countries on this important research subject (Sztompka 1996; Ryan 2000; Steen 1996; Kavanagh 1997; Citrin 1974; Barnes and Gill 2000; Holkeri and Nurmi 2002).

Scholarly studies also indicate (e.g., Farazmand 2002; Farazmand 2004; Dalton 2005; Cheena 2005; Blind 2007; United Nations 2007a, b) public trust can promote sound governance in society.

A number of theorists view high performance as the root of trust in government while linking distrust mostly to the poor performance of government. This view explains the importance of quality and reform programs in government. In the performance approach, trust in government is based on two main theories: macro performance theory, which explains variation of trust in different countries as owing to the fluctuations in unemployment, economic growth, inflation, stability of governments, etc. and micro performance theory, which indicates variation in trust is due to the changes in the quality of public services or citizens' attitude toward public services.

Some theorists relate distrust to government's workload. Accordingly, managing citizens' expectations is the basic solution to reduce distrust. By workload, we mean that government is unable to fulfill its obligations toward citizens, and therefore, citizens' expectations must be administered (Barnes and Gill 2000; Papadakis 1999).

Sociologically, the existence of distrust culture in society is regarded as the actual root of distrust. For this reason, creation of social capital, mutual trust, social norms, and identity are emphasized by sociologists (Clark and Lee 2001; Burns and Kinder 2000; Kampen et al. 2002).

Approaches based on game and agent–principal theories introduce other viewpoints about trust in government. Game theory considers trust from an economic perspective. Accordingly, the philosophy of agent–principal itself is an indicator of distrust between citizens and government. From this viewpoint, government and citizens are considered as agent and principal, respectively. According to theorists, cooperation and participation between citizens and government are the only way to solve this problem (Harisalo and Stenvall 2002; Mishler and Rose 2002; Muller and Jukam 1977).

Contemplating administrative thoughts expressed in Islamic religious sources, (Ibne Abu Talip 1996; Nabavi 1998; Taghavi 2000; Aliabadi 1998), it can be concluded that the most important factor creating distrust is “administrative detachment” and “the solution to it is the close relation between administrators and citizens.” Table 1 summarizes research views, causes of distrust, citizens' reaction, and the ways of promoting trust in government.

Table 1 Theoretical frameworks for trust (Boukaert and Van de Walle 2003, p. 335, adjusted by authors)

Research views	Diagnosis: reasons for low trust in government	Citizens' reactions	Restoring trust: remedy
Management	Failing performance	Exit/voice/loyalty	Quality services
Public administration	Failing performance because of government overload	Exit/voice/loyalty	Expectation management
Sociology	Distrust & societal discomfort	Exit/voice/loyalty anomie...	Social capital norms, identity
Economy	Principal–agent problems	Cooperation and polarization	Participation and cooperation
Islamic viewpoints	Administrative detachment	Cooperation with officials/ reinforcement of cooperation with public officials	Close linkage between citizens and officials

Considering diverse viewpoints regarding trust in government, if we are to explain public trust in public organizations, we might be able to find variables, including the resolutions proposed by all the five perspectives listed in the table.

In view of the current literature on public trust, it can be said that the most suitable variable may be “accountability” with ethical, legal, financial, performance, and democratic aspects (Jensen 2000). Because of the importance of management theories in the advancement of public administration and the tendency among public organizations toward different performance systems in which the emphasis is on performance as a key cause of trust, we may define a variable named “citizens’ satisfaction” reflecting the high performance of public organization as a result of public accountability. Citizens’ satisfaction can itself be measured by the quality of services. Therefore, public accountability leads to citizens’ satisfaction, and citizens’ satisfaction in turn leads to public trust. For this purpose, accountability as an independent variable and citizens’ satisfaction as an intervening variable were selected. Furthermore, previous studies on the fivefold thought indicate the significant role of three major factors, i.e., “trust in government,” “social trust,” and “media” as moderate variables. Therefore, in the general public trust model, accountability via citizens’ satisfaction influences public trust, and the relationship between citizens’ satisfaction and public trust is moderated by “trust in government,” “social trust,” and “media” (moderate variables Table 2).

In Table 1, five different views can be presented as five different ways to eliminate or reduce distrust. Public service organizations need to design a model by synthesizing these five solutions to earn citizens’ trust. After investigating the theoretical foundations of effective factors on public trust, researchers present a model in which all of the abovementioned five elements are given their appropriate place based on the solutions they provide. They also believe that accountability performs a key role in creation of public trust.

Public satisfaction can be viewed as a major determinant of performance because satisfaction is, in reality, measured by the quality of public services. Accordingly, it is a way to eliminate distrust arising from bad performance. With respect to the studies conducted and the current situation of Iran (based on the exploratory interviews), three factors play outstanding roles in public trust; that is, public trust cannot be created simply through the accountability of public organizations as well as acquiring public satisfaction, because the three moderating variables of “trust in government,” “social trust,” and “media” modify this role. With respect to “accountability” (as independent variable), “satisfaction” (as intervening variable),

Table 2 Types of accountabilities incorporating five-fold theoretical frameworks

Accountability/solutions	Service quality	Managing expectations	Creation of social capital	Participation	Closely linkage between citizens and officials
Ethical accountability	*	*	*		*
Legal accountability		*	*		*
Financial accountability		*	*		*
Performance accountability		*			*
Democratic accountability			*	*	*
Political accountability		*	*	*	*

and “trust in government,” “social trust,” and “media” (as moderate variables), the general theoretical model of this research is developed and presented in the next section of the paper.

The conceptual model

With respect to the literature, a general conceptual model can be proposed to explain the relationship between accountability and public trust. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model.

Research hypotheses and methodology

Research hypotheses

On the basis of research hypotheses, an empirical test is conducted. The research hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Public accountability affects trust by creating a feeling of satisfaction in citizens toward public services.

H1a: Legal accountability influences public trust via affecting satisfaction.

H1b: Ethical accountability influences public trust through affecting satisfaction.

H1c: Financial accountability influences public trust through affecting satisfaction.

H1d: Performance accountability has an impact on public trust through affecting satisfaction.

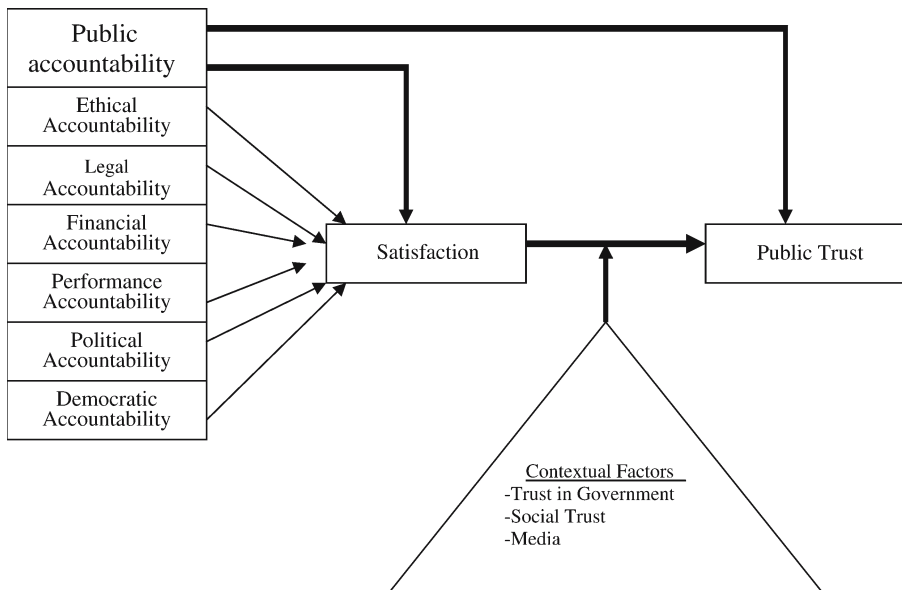


Fig. 1 The conceptual model

- H1e: Democratic accountability has an effect on public trust through affecting satisfaction.
- H1f: Political accountability impacts on public trust through affecting satisfaction.
- H2: Social trust modifies the relation between citizens' satisfaction and public trust toward public services.
- H3: Citizens' trust in government modifies the relation between citizens' satisfaction and trust toward public services.
- H4: Media modifies the relation between citizens' satisfaction and public trust toward public services.

Research methodology

This is naturally a fundamental research. Statistical population consisted of all citizens who lived in the 22 districts in Tehran. Out of 6,755,845 populations, 1,437 samples were selected based on the Morgan Table. After classification of total population, samples from each classified groups were selected based on a random sampling method.

As shown in Tables 3, 4, and 5, the independent variable of "accountability" has been tested by 21 questions, the intervening variable of "satisfaction" was checked by 21 questions, and the moderating variables of "trust in government," "social trust," and "media" were examined by 32 questions. Trust in government, social trust, and media in turn were measured by 10, 8, and 14 questions, respectively. To measure the dependent variable of "public trust," one direct question was designed. Tables 3, 4, and 5 show the dimensions and the indicators of the independent, the dependent, the modifying variables, and the intervening variables.

Table 3 Dimensions and indicators of independent and dependent variables

Concept	Dimensions	Indicators
Accountability (independent variable)	Ethical accountability	(1) Lack of cumbersome bureaucracy and formalities, (2) guiding citizens, (3) commitment to Islamic values, (4) lack of nepotism and bribery. (5) Response to citizens' requests, (6) availability of administrators and employees, (7) respectful behavior to citizens, (8) providing necessary information to citizens, (9) fulfilling promises, (10) attempting to solve citizens' problems, (11) number of requests for getting services
	Legal accountability	(1) Effective execution of law and regulations, (2) providing citizens with required information about laws and regulations at the expected time
	Democratic accountability	(1) Citizen's participation in organizational affairs, (2) citizens' participation in the election of the administrators
	Financial accountability	(1) Presenting annual budget information to the citizens, (2) providing information on financial savings
	Performance accountability	(1) Presenting annual performance information to citizens, (2) providing information about the achievements of government
	Political accountability	(1) Response to the questions of peoples' representatives in councils, (2) response to the printed questions of the press
Public trust (dependent variable)		(1) How much do you have trust toward four selected public organizations

Table 4 Dimensions and indicators of moderate variables

Concept	Dimensions	Indicators
Trust in government (moderate variable)		(1) Close relation and intimacy to government, (2) compatibility of governmental politics with citizen's values, (3) the rate of government high performance in solving citizens' problems, (4) governmental influence on citizens, (5) citizens' perceptions with regard to governmental efforts to solve their problems, (6) citizens' perceptions about mutual relations between government and citizens, (7) justice in paying attention to all citizens, (8) justice in providing services, (9) citizens' opinion about their influence on government, (10) government attention to average and poor people
Social trust (moderate variable)	Communication to citizens	(1) Honesty of government to people, (2) no prejudgment of people as being dishonest, (3) trust toward people without any prior acquaintance, (4) trust to people, (5) conveying a truthful conception
	Communication with law enforcement organizations	(1) Presence of law enforcement agency (police)
Trust in media (moderate variable)	Communication with colleagues	(1) No misuse in competition, (2) no conception of exploiting others or situations in cooperation
	Newspaper	(1) The usage rate of national left newspapers, (2) the usage rate of national right newspapers, (3) the usage rate of foreign newspapers
	Radio and television	The usage rate of: (1) national radio, (2) national television channel 1, (3) national television channel 2, (4) national television channel 3, (5) national television channel 4, (6) national television channel 5, (7) national television channel 6, (8) intranet, (9) foreign radios, (10) foreign televisions, (11) Internet

Table 5 Dimensions and indicators of intervening variables

Concept	Dimensions	Indicators
Satisfaction (intervening variable)	Cost of services	(1) Cost of utilized services, (2) terms of payment for service costs, (3) process of payment for service costs, (4) payment period for service costs
	Communications	(1) Response to citizens' questions, (2) providing citizens with necessary information, (3) transparency of forms and regulations, (4) administrators behavior to employees
	Access to services and facilities	(1) Suitable place to present services, (2) the ways of receiving services, (3) suitable installation of signs for guiding citizens, (4) suitable timing and providing on time service
	Citizens trust to services	(1) Commitment to governmental standards and policies, (2) fulfilling promises, (3) providing necessary and required services, (4) minimum defects in providing services
	Responsiveness to citizens	(1) Number of requests to receive services, (2) justice in service distribution, (3) waiting time to receive services, (4) modesty and curtsy of employees and administrators

Validity and reliability of the questionnaire

The questionnaire of this research, with the exception of its accountability part, has been adopted from Van de Walle's (2004) standard questionnaires, and the questions of the social trust have been adopted from Yamaguchi and Yamaguchi's (1994) standard questionnaires. To test the validity of the questionnaires, 50 questionnaires were distributed among citizens of various districts of Tehran. Then, the data were gathered and analyzed by SPSS software. To measure the reliability of the questionnaire, Chronbach alpha was calculated. Chronbach alpha value for the questionnaires was nearly 0.90.

Data collection

During the interview with 365 randomly selected citizens, we asked citizens which of the public organizations have more effect on their lives. Their responses were put to content analysis. The results are summarized in Table 6. On the basis of data analysis, four of the most important public organizations that, according to the citizens' views, had much more influence on their lives were selected.

Data analysis methods

In the data analysis stage, descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used. The statistical techniques that were applied for data analysis were Chronbach alpha method (to determine the reliability of the questionnaire), binominal test (to test research hypotheses), least significant difference test, analysis of variance test, Spearman correlation test, path analysis method, and Friedman and good fitness tests.

Table 6 Name of public organizations and the frequency of the citizens

Row	Name of public organizations	Frequency of citizens
1	Police	85 persons
2	Municipality	65 persons
3	Post	59 persons
4	Public hospitals	58 persons
5	Schools	20 persons
6	Tax department	17 persons
7	Water and Sewage system	11 persons
8	Health care	10 persons
9	Universities	10 persons
10	Social security	8 persons
11	Water supply	7 persons
12	Registration department	5 persons
Total		356 persons

Table 7 Covariance matrix

	Accountability		Satisfaction		Public trust		Modifying variable	
Accountability			ρ 63.9%	α 0	ρ 44.2%	α 0	ρ 58%	α 35%
Citizens' satisfaction	ρ 63.9%	α 0			ρ 69.3%	α 0	ρ 92%	α 01%
Public trust	ρ 44.2%	α 0	ρ 69.3%	α 0			ρ 99%	α 0
Moderating variables	ρ 58%	α 35%	ρ 92%	α 01%	ρ 99%	α 0		

ρ Interrelated coefficients, α significant level

Statistical results and findings

Results of statistical analysis are presented in Table 7, Fig. 2, and Table 8.

Table 9 reveals the priorities of sixfold accountabilities in selected public organizations.

Findings and suggestions

We have developed a general model of public trust in public organizations and tested it empirically in Iran. In this model, the independent variable was “accountability” (with ethical, legal, financial, performance, democratic, and political aspects), the intervening variable was “citizens’ satisfaction,” and the modifying variables were “trust in government,” “social trust,” and “media.” To gather the data, questionnaires were used. Analyzing the statistical data, we found that luckily high percentage of

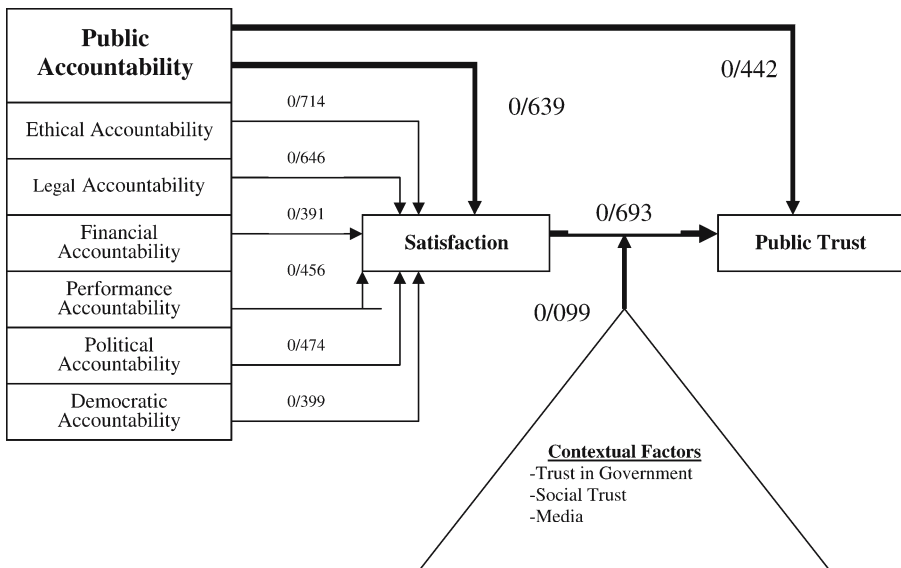


Fig. 2 Results of empirical test

Table 8 Results of hypotheses tests

Row	Research hypotheses	Rejected/accepted
1	H1	Accepted
2	H1a	Accepted
3	H1b	Accepted
4	H1c	Accepted
5	H1d	Accepted
6	H1e	Accepted
7	H1f	Accepted
8	H2	Accepted
9	H3	Accepted
10	H4	Accepted

citizen (97%) had been customers of these organizations previously, at least for once. The following are the findings of the test model in the four selected organizations:

- The study showed that among 1,342 respondents, 69% were between the age group of 20–30 years and more than 70% of them had university degrees. It was found that the relation between accountability and citizens' satisfaction and also between citizens' satisfaction and public trust were 63.9% and 69.3%, respectively. While direct relation between accountability and public trust was 44.2%, less than the result of the process-oriented relation (69.3%). This value shows that the model of public trust is a process model. Moreover, moderate variables have influenced and modified the relationships between citizens' satisfaction and public trust. Accordingly, it can be stated that the proposed model has been verified strongly.
- Ninety-four percent of citizens believed that the rate of accountability in these four organizations were low; that is, with the binominal test and at 95% confidence level, it can be said that the majority of respondents believed the rate of accountability of public service organizations is low. On the other hand, Friedman analysis shows that legal accountability is ranked number one, whereas other accountabilities (ethical, financial, performance, democratic, and political) are lower ranked. According to the empirical results, it can be noted that citizens' attitudes toward ethical, financial, and performance accountabilities are not as high.

Table 9 Six fold accountabilities and their mean ranks

Row	Kinds of accountability	Mean rank	Final rank
1	Legal	4.92	1
2	Ethical	4.53	2
3	Financial	2.69	4
4	Performance	3.02	3
5	Democratic	2.26	6
6	Political	2.59	5

Total responses=1,342
 Test/sq. km=2,483,945
 Independent level=5
 Significant level=0

- Due to lack of or low citizens' participation in public organizations, it becomes evident that citizens do not consider democratic and political accountabilities as important, and thus, they are placed in the lowest ranks.
- Likewise, the percentage of citizens unsatisfied with public services was 77%, a much higher value compared to those satisfied with public services (23%). In other words, based on binominal test and at 95% confidence level, more than 50% of respondents were not satisfied with public services.
- Undoubtedly, media plays an important role in forming public opinion. Research findings show that 67.5% of citizens believe that the most important source of their information is international media and 61.5% of them read left newspapers. In addition, about 85% of citizens believe that they prefer national television channel. However, in view of the fact that gossip market in Tehran grows through internet and satellite day by day, therefore, their trust in government has been influenced, as well.
- The percentage of citizens who had little trust toward the four selected organizations was 13%. On the basis of the binominal test, it can be said that, at 95% confidence level, more than 50% of respondents show low trust toward these organizations.

In light of these research results and to improve accountability in public organizations, the following suggestions are provided:

Legal accountability

- Execution of a comprehensive master plan to find the causes of people's dissatisfaction with the legal system and, in effect, to improve legal accountability in the public organizations
- Adopting a "managerial approach" to modify the "political approach" in managing public services
- Providing citizens with legal education via radio, television, and other mass media and setting up public legal advisory centers to make citizens familiar with rules and regulations
- Revising existing laws from an administrative point of view to boost fairness

Ethical accountability

- Paying more attention to ethical issues in the educational programs aimed at public administrators
- Developing strategies to prevent and fight corruption in public organizations
- Developing ethical principles for managers and civil servants working in public organizations

Financial accountability

- Defining transparent financial guidelines
- Designing tools for self-assessment of financial transparency

- Revising the existing bidding and auction processes in public organizations
- Presenting awards to highly economic and efficient public organizations with large amount of yearly savings.

Performance accountability

- Designing hard performance accountability (efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, quality, etc.) and soft performance accountability (satisfaction, trust, equity) systems in public organizations.

Political accountability

- Reinforcement of monitoring and controlling the role of city councils as citizens' representative in regional public organizations
- Holding of public meetings at regional and local levels in order for the city councils' the representatives and parliament members to engage citizens and handle their problems.

Democratic accountability

- Encouraging citizens' involvement and participation for making macro decisions in public organizations
- Promoting the rate of citizens' direct involvement in important public organizations' decisions that significantly affect their lives
- Developing a comprehensive framework for citizens' participation in the administration of public organizations.

Promoting satisfaction

- Designing an efficient system for evaluation of public organizations
- Designing an Iranian citizens' satisfaction index
- Designing an indigenous total quality system for the Iranian public organizations.

Strengthening the role of media in building public trust

- Providing the people with pertaining and accurate information, in a timely fashion via media in regard to governmental activities, thus, gaining public trust and support.

Consolidation strategies of social trust

- Setting cultural policies to restore the values that have been transformed after defense war in the country
- Developing a national education document for the country in which trust toward others is emphasized in the instructional materials and programs

- Developing cultural policies for radio and television programs to consolidate social capital, which ultimately will increase public trust in society.

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