

Formulating a Strategic Management Framework for Addressing Spatial Inequality in Kabul City

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to formulate and empirically validate a strategic management framework for addressing spatial inequality in Kabul City. An applied exploratory mixed-methods design with sequential qualitative and quantitative phases was used. In the qualitative phase, 20 experts in urban planning, urban management, geography, public administration, architecture, sociology, and strategic management were selected purposively and through snowball sampling in Tehran, and semi-structured interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation. The resulting categories and indicators were used to develop a researcher-made questionnaire. In the quantitative phase, 384 academic, managerial, and professional experts were recruited in Tehran through purposive and professional-network sampling. Construct validity was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis, while reliability and convergent validity were evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. Structural equation modeling was then applied to test relationships among the framework components, with $p < .05$ considered statistically significant. Governance and institutional deficiencies significantly increased spatial and infrastructural inequalities ($\beta = 0.487, p < .001$), as did structural and socioeconomic drivers ($\beta = 0.318, p < .001$). Integrated spatial planning ($\beta = 0.337, p < .001$), institutional capacity building ($\beta = 0.291, p < .001$), monitoring and performance management ($\beta = 0.263, p < .001$), and participatory governance ($\beta = 0.214, p < .001$) significantly strengthened strategic management implementation. Strategic management implementation had a strong positive effect on spatial justice outcomes ($\beta = 0.621, p < .001$) and urban cohesion and resilience ($\beta = 0.536, p < .001$). Spatial justice outcomes also significantly enhanced urban cohesion and resilience ($\beta = 0.329, p < .001$). The model explained 61.4% of the variance in spatial and infrastructural inequalities, 68.7% in strategic management implementation, 58.9% in spatial justice outcomes, and 63.2% in urban cohesion and resilience.

Keywords: Spatial inequality; strategic management; spatial planning; urban governance; spatial justice; institutional capacity; Kabul City.

1. Introduction

Spatial inequality is one of the most persistent challenges confronting contemporary cities, particularly in rapidly growing urban regions where population concentration, uneven investment, institutional fragmentation, and unequal access to public resources combine to produce significant disparities among neighborhoods and social groups. Spatial inequality refers not merely to differences in physical location or urban form, but to the unequal territorial distribution of opportunities, services, infrastructure, environmental quality, economic resources, institutional attention, and decision-making power. In this sense, space becomes an important medium through which social and economic inequalities are reproduced and reinforced. Neighborhoods with better accessibility, infrastructure, employment opportunities, public transportation, educational services, healthcare facilities, environmental quality, and administrative support tend to accumulate further advantages, while disadvantaged areas frequently experience cumulative deprivation. This dynamic makes spatial inequality a strategic governance problem rather than a purely technical planning issue. Contemporary spatial planning therefore increasingly emphasizes distributive justice, coordinated governance, institutional capacity, and strategic intervention as essential components of equitable urban development (Magidimisha & Chipungu, 2019; Rocco, 2025).

Strategic spatial planning has emerged as an important framework for responding to complex territorial problems because it moves beyond the preparation of static land-use plans and instead focuses on long-term direction, institutional coordination, stakeholder participation, prioritization, implementation, and adaptive governance. Strategic planning requires public authorities to identify critical spatial challenges, define desired future conditions, select intervention priorities, mobilize institutional resources, and develop mechanisms for monitoring and adjustment. From this perspective, urban space is understood as the outcome of interactions among governmental institutions, markets, communities, infrastructures, and social processes. Albrechts emphasized that strategic spatial planning should be reframed through coproduction, in which planning is not limited to government-led technical decision-making but involves collective construction of spatial strategies among multiple actors (Albrechts, 2013). Such a perspective is especially relevant to contexts characterized by institutional fragmentation and unequal access to

decision-making, because the legitimacy and effectiveness of spatial interventions depend on the ability of planning institutions to coordinate diverse stakeholders and transform shared priorities into implementable actions.

The relationship between spatial planning and public governance has become increasingly prominent in the international literature. Spatial planning is now frequently regarded as an integral component of national and local governance systems rather than an isolated professional activity. Research on territorial planning has shown that spatial planning can function as an institutional mechanism for coordinating sectoral policies, allocating resources, regulating development, and connecting long-term development objectives with territorial implementation (Liu & Zhou, 2021). Similar experiences indicate that national spatial planning can contribute to compact growth, more efficient land use, and stronger alignment between infrastructure policy and settlement patterns when it is supported by coherent governance structures and implementation mechanisms (Yang et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of spatial planning depends not only on the technical quality of plans but also on institutional authority, coordination capacity, policy continuity, and the degree to which plans are integrated with broader systems of public management.

At the urban scale, strategic spatial planning is particularly important where municipalities must simultaneously address population growth, infrastructure deficits, informal development, environmental pressures, socioeconomic inequality, and competing demands for land and public investment. Strategic municipal planning provides a mechanism through which long-term spatial priorities can be translated into operational programs, investment schedules, and institutional responsibilities. Studies of strategic spatial planning and municipal operational planning have demonstrated the importance of linking spatial visions with executable projects, budgeting, organizational responsibilities, and measurable implementation priorities (Ghaed Rahmati et al., 2021; Qaed Rahmati et al., 2021). This connection between strategic planning and operational management is crucial because urban inequalities are rarely reduced through broad policy declarations alone. Effective intervention requires the identification of underserved territories, prioritization of investments, coordination across agencies, allocation of financial and technical resources, and continuous evaluation of whether interventions are producing more equitable outcomes.

Spatial inequality is also strongly associated with unequal access to public goods and services. The distribution of transportation, education, healthcare, sanitation, utilities, green spaces, housing opportunities, and public facilities has major consequences for everyday quality of life and for the ability of residents to participate in economic and social activities. Spatial planning therefore has a direct relationship with distributive justice. A public-goods perspective emphasizes that planning decisions determine who receives access to collective resources, where those resources are located, and how different communities benefit from public investment (Rocco, 2025). Evidence from service-delivery planning likewise demonstrates that spatial planning can either reproduce existing patterns of inequality or function as an instrument for distributive justice, depending on how territorial priorities are defined and implemented (Magidimisha & Chipungu, 2019). In cities characterized by strong center-periphery differences, informal settlements, or highly unequal infrastructure networks, strategic management must therefore incorporate explicit spatial-equity criteria rather than assuming that general urban growth will automatically benefit all districts.

The quality-of-life consequences of spatial planning further reinforce the importance of an equity-oriented perspective. The distribution and quality of housing, infrastructure, environmental amenities, accessibility, employment opportunities, and community facilities influence residents' perceptions of well-being and urban satisfaction. Research on spatial planning and quality-of-life indicators has shown that territorial organization and the availability of urban services are closely associated with differences in living conditions across urban areas (Babakhani et al., 2021). Similarly, physical and social deterioration in historic urban fabrics demonstrates how inadequate investment, declining accessibility, weakened social functions, and insufficient institutional attention can interact to produce localized disadvantage (Fashi et al., 2023). These findings are relevant to spatial inequality because they show that urban deprivation frequently develops through multiple interconnected dimensions rather than through a single shortage of infrastructure. Consequently, effective strategic management must address physical, social, economic, institutional, and environmental dimensions simultaneously.

Urban spatial inequality is also shaped by transportation and accessibility patterns. Transit-oriented development, infrastructure location, and accessibility to urban centers can substantially influence land and housing markets and may

generate both opportunities and new forms of inequality. Research on transit-oriented development in major Chinese cities has shown that access to transportation networks can affect housing rental prices and spatial development patterns, highlighting the importance of considering distributional consequences when planning transport investments (Su et al., 2021). This is especially important in cities where low-income households are concentrated in peripheral or informal areas, because poor connectivity can limit access to jobs, education, healthcare, and administrative services. Strategic planning that seeks to reduce spatial inequality must therefore integrate land-use planning, transport planning, infrastructure provision, and social policy rather than treating them as separate domains.

The relationship between urban and rural areas also influences spatial inequality, particularly in metropolitan regions experiencing rapid migration and expansion at the urban fringe. Urban-rural connectivity affects employment opportunities, market access, service provision, land transformation, and the spatial distribution of development benefits. Studies of rural entrepreneurship and local sustainable development have demonstrated that stronger rural-urban connections can contribute to local economic development and improve access to wider markets and services (Saeedi et al., 2021). More recent research on urban-rural integration from a spatial-planning perspective has similarly emphasized the importance of coordinated land use, infrastructure systems, ecological protection, and development strategies across urban fringes (Zhang, 2025). These findings suggest that spatial inequality within large cities cannot always be separated from broader regional processes, including migration, peri-urban expansion, informal settlement growth, and uneven metropolitan integration.

Another important dimension of contemporary spatial planning is the increasing emphasis on stakeholder participation and feedback. Strategic planning is more likely to generate legitimate and implementable outcomes when it incorporates the priorities and experiences of affected communities, public agencies, experts, and other stakeholders. Recent work on stakeholder-feedback integration has demonstrated that systematic methods can be used to identify the relative importance and performance of strategic planning priorities, thereby allowing decision-makers to recognize gaps between stakeholder expectations and actual planning outcomes (Ravazzoli et al., 2025). Such approaches are particularly valuable in contexts of spatial inequality, where disadvantaged communities may have

limited institutional representation and where conventional planning processes may fail to capture neighborhood-level needs. Participatory governance can therefore strengthen both the informational basis and the legitimacy of spatial strategies by ensuring that territorial priorities are not defined exclusively through centralized administrative perspectives.

Spatial planning is also increasingly connected to questions of institutional modernization and information capacity. Contemporary planning requires reliable spatial data, digital infrastructure, coordination among administrative databases, geographic information systems, and institutional capacity to analyze and update territorial information. Institutional barriers to digitalization can therefore constrain the ability of planning systems to identify inequalities, monitor changes, and implement evidence-based interventions (Nouri, 2024). This issue is especially important for strategic management because spatial inequality is dynamic; patterns of deprivation, accessibility, population concentration, and infrastructure demand can change rapidly. Without appropriate monitoring systems and institutionalized data-sharing mechanisms, urban authorities may rely on outdated information or fragmented sectoral datasets, reducing the effectiveness of resource allocation and policy evaluation.

The significance of information and monitoring is also apparent in other spatial-planning contexts. Experiences with marine spatial planning have shown that planning systems frequently develop through a combination of existing institutional practices and newly introduced governance mechanisms, and that implementation depends on the ability to coordinate institutional actors while adapting planning procedures to local conditions (Finke et al., 2020). Although marine and urban environments differ substantially, the broader governance lesson is applicable: effective spatial planning cannot simply be transferred as a standardized technical model but must be constructed in relation to existing institutions, administrative capacities, stakeholder relationships, and implementation realities. This is particularly relevant for cities facing political, institutional, and resource constraints, where the formal adoption of planning concepts may not automatically result in practical implementation.

Strategic spatial planning also interacts with place identity, development positioning, and the broader representation of urban territories. Research on place branding within strategic spatial planning indicates that development plans often incorporate narratives and

identities designed to influence how places are perceived, prioritized, and positioned within wider economic and political networks (Oliveira, 2022). A systematic review of this relationship further demonstrates that place branding and spatial planning share concerns regarding long-term vision, stakeholder coordination, identity, competitiveness, and territorial development (Oliveira & Ashworth, 2021). While place branding is not synonymous with spatial justice, these studies highlight the importance of strategic narratives in shaping investment priorities and urban development trajectories. In contexts of inequality, this raises an important concern: strategic visions should not concentrate resources only in highly visible or economically competitive districts while marginalizing peripheral and disadvantaged areas. Equity-oriented strategic management therefore requires a balance between competitiveness, attractiveness, territorial identity, and distributive justice.

The spatial distribution of public services such as education is another important indicator of territorial equity. Educational planning is inherently spatial because the location, accessibility, quality, and capacity of institutions influence opportunities available to different populations. Research examining spatial components in educational policymaking demonstrates the importance of considering territorial characteristics, local values, and environmental conditions when designing educational interventions (Shafiei et al., 2023). At the national level, spatial-planning frameworks for higher education similarly illustrate how education policy can be connected to territorial balance, regional capacity, demographic distribution, and the location of institutions (Ministry of Science Research and Technology, 2020). These examples show that spatial inequality is produced not only through urban infrastructure but also through the territorial organization of sectoral policies. Consequently, a comprehensive urban strategy must coordinate multiple sectors rather than treating service disparities as isolated administrative issues.

Recent spatial-planning research has also emphasized the role of technology, smart development, and spatial analysis in identifying territorial potential and inequality. Spatial analysis of smart tourism development, for example, demonstrates how territorial factors, infrastructure, accessibility, institutional conditions, and local capacities can be systematically evaluated to identify differentiated development potential among locations (Annabestani & Barani Ali Akbari, 2024). Although the substantive field differs from urban inequality, the methodological implication is important: spatially differentiated strategies

are more effective when they are based on place-specific characteristics rather than uniform interventions. A similar logic applies to urban resilience. Research on seismic resilience has shown that different parts of a metropolis may display varying levels of vulnerability and adaptive capacity, requiring geographically differentiated planning and targeted intervention (Mirzajani Naneh Karan, 2026). These studies reinforce the principle that spatial planning should recognize territorial heterogeneity and allocate resources according to differentiated levels of need, vulnerability, and development capacity.

For Kabul City, these issues are particularly significant. The city has experienced rapid demographic expansion, migration, informal urbanization, uneven development, infrastructure pressures, and major disparities among different areas in terms of service provision, accessibility, housing conditions, environmental quality, and institutional attention. Such conditions cannot be adequately addressed through isolated physical projects or conventional land-use regulation alone. They require a strategic management framework capable of connecting the structural causes of inequality with governance arrangements, territorial priorities, institutional capacities, stakeholder participation, implementation mechanisms, and measurable outcomes. The broader spatial-planning literature suggests that successful responses to territorial inequality depend on integrated governance, operational planning, participatory processes, data-driven monitoring, coordinated public investment, and explicit attention to distributive justice (Albrechts, 2013; Liu & Zhou, 2021; Ravazzoli et al., 2025). However, these elements must be adapted to the institutional and socioeconomic realities of Kabul rather than reproduced as generic planning principles.

A critical gap therefore exists between the recognition of spatial inequality as a multidimensional urban problem and the availability of an integrated strategic management framework specifying how its structural, institutional, spatial, and managerial dimensions should be addressed in Kabul. Existing studies have contributed important insights into strategic spatial planning, municipal operational planning, public-goods distribution, quality of life, institutional digitalization, accessibility, resilience, stakeholder participation, rural-urban integration, and territorial governance (Babakhani et al., 2021; Nouri, 2024; Su et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2024). Nevertheless, these contributions are generally concentrated on individual dimensions of spatial development or on contexts with governance and institutional conditions different from those

of Kabul. A context-sensitive framework is therefore required to identify the principal drivers of spatial inequality, determine how governance and institutional deficiencies shape these inequalities, specify the strategic-management mechanisms necessary for intervention, and clarify the pathways through which implementation can lead to spatial justice, social cohesion, and greater urban resilience.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to formulate and empirically validate a strategic management framework for addressing spatial inequality in Kabul City.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed an applied, exploratory mixed-methods design with a sequential qualitative–quantitative approach to formulate and validate a strategic management framework for addressing spatial inequality in Kabul City. The qualitative phase was conducted to identify the principal dimensions, determinants, strategic mechanisms, implementation requirements, and expected consequences associated with the management of spatial inequality, while the quantitative phase was used to examine the relationships among the identified dimensions and to assess the empirical adequacy of the proposed framework. The study population consisted of university faculty members, urban and regional planning specialists, municipal and public-sector managers, researchers in urban governance and spatial development, and professional experts with sufficient academic or practical knowledge of Kabul’s spatial structure, urban inequality, metropolitan governance, housing, infrastructure distribution, land-use planning, or urban development policy. Participants were recruited in Tehran because of the accessibility of Afghan urban-development specialists, researchers, postgraduate scholars, and professionals with direct knowledge of Kabul’s planning and governance conditions who were residing, studying, or professionally active in Tehran at the time of the study. In the qualitative phase, 20 experts were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Eligibility criteria included holding at least a master’s degree in urban planning, urban management, geography, regional planning, public administration, strategic management, architecture, sociology, or a closely related discipline; having at least five years of relevant academic, research, administrative, or professional experience; and demonstrating sufficient familiarity with the spatial, institutional, socioeconomic, and governance conditions of Kabul City. Interviews continued

until theoretical saturation was reached and no substantively new concepts or categories emerged from the data. In the quantitative phase, 384 participants were recruited using purposive and professional-network sampling from relevant academic, research, administrative, and expert communities in Tehran. The sample size was considered adequate for multivariate structural modeling and for testing the measurement and structural components of the proposed strategic framework. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of the objectives of the study, the confidentiality of the information provided, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. No personally identifiable information was included in the analytical dataset, and the collected information was used exclusively for research purposes.

Data were collected using a semi-structured expert interview protocol in the qualitative phase and a researcher-developed questionnaire in the quantitative phase. The interview protocol was prepared after reviewing the conceptual literature related to spatial inequality, urban governance, strategic urban management, spatial justice, unequal access to services, land-use distribution, infrastructure provision, socioeconomic segregation, informal settlement development, institutional coordination, and urban policy implementation. The interview questions were designed to explore experts' perceptions of the major manifestations and underlying causes of spatial inequality in Kabul, the institutional and managerial factors contributing to unequal spatial development, the environmental and socioeconomic conditions affecting the distribution of urban opportunities, the capabilities and weaknesses of existing urban governance arrangements, the strategic interventions required to reduce inequality, the mechanisms needed for implementation, and the anticipated social, economic, spatial, and governance outcomes of an effective management framework. Interviews were conducted individually and continued until conceptual saturation was achieved. With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The researcher-developed questionnaire used in the quantitative phase was constructed directly from the categories, subcategories, and indicators extracted from the qualitative analysis. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, representing strongly disagree, to 5, representing strongly agree. The preliminary questionnaire was examined by a panel of academic and professional experts to assess its clarity, relevance, comprehensiveness, and consistency with the conceptual

domain of strategic management and spatial inequality. Content validity was assessed through expert judgment, and items considered ambiguous, repetitive, or insufficiently representative of the identified constructs were revised or removed before final administration. Construct validity was evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis, while convergent validity was assessed using standardized factor loadings and average variance extracted. Discriminant validity was assessed by examining the distinctiveness of the latent constructs and their intercorrelations. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability coefficients, with values of 0.70 or higher considered acceptable. The final instrument incorporated the major domains emerging from the qualitative phase, including structural and socioeconomic drivers of spatial inequality, deficiencies in urban governance and institutional coordination, unequal distribution of infrastructure and public services, spatial and environmental disparities, strategic planning capacities, participatory and interinstitutional management mechanisms, strategic interventions, implementation requirements, and expected outcomes of reducing spatial inequality in Kabul City.

Qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately and subsequently integrated to develop the final strategic management framework. In the qualitative phase, the interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis with a systematic coding procedure involving initial coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretation of relationships among the extracted concepts. The transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data, after which meaningful statements related to the causes, manifestations, management mechanisms, strategic requirements, and consequences of spatial inequality were identified and assigned initial codes. Conceptually similar codes were compared and consolidated into subcategories, and the subcategories were subsequently organized into broader thematic categories representing the principal components of the proposed strategic management framework. Constant comparison was used throughout the analysis to refine category boundaries, identify conceptual relationships, and eliminate redundant codes. To enhance the credibility and dependability of the qualitative findings, coding decisions and thematic interpretations were reviewed repeatedly, and selected findings were evaluated through expert review to ensure consistency between the extracted themes and the participants' perspectives. The qualitative findings were then converted into measurable constructs and

indicators for the quantitative phase. Quantitative data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics, assessment of the measurement model, and evaluation of the structural model. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to characterize the participants and summarize the distribution of questionnaire responses. The distributional properties of the data and potential multicollinearity among predictor variables were also examined before structural analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis was applied to determine whether the observed indicators adequately represented their corresponding latent constructs. Measurement-model adequacy was evaluated using factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and discriminant-validity criteria. Structural equation modeling was subsequently employed to examine the direct relationships among the identified dimensions and to determine the relative influence of structural, socioeconomic, institutional, governance, infrastructural, and managerial factors on strategic responses to spatial inequality. Model adequacy was assessed using commonly accepted fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio, root mean square error of approximation, comparative fit index, Tucker-Lewis index, and standardized root mean square residual. Standardized path coefficients, critical ratios or t-values, and significance levels were used to evaluate the hypothesized relationships, with a significance level of $p < .05$ adopted for statistical inference. The qualitative themes and quantitative structural relationships were finally integrated to formulate the strategic management framework, in which the principal drivers of spatial inequality were linked to institutional and contextual conditions, strategic management mechanisms, implementation strategies, and expected outcomes. This integration made it possible to move beyond the identification of individual urban inequalities and to develop a coherent management-oriented framework explaining how coordinated governance, equitable resource allocation, participatory planning, institutional capacity building, spatially targeted interventions, and continuous monitoring can contribute to reducing spatial inequality in Kabul City.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative phase included 20 experts with substantial academic, managerial, planning, or professional experience relevant to urban development, strategic management, spatial planning, and Kabul-related urban issues. Of these participants, 15 were men and 5 were women. Their mean age was 44.65 years ($SD = 7.82$), with ages ranging from 33 to 61 years. Regarding educational qualifications, 14 participants held doctoral degrees and 6 held master's degrees. The participants had an average of 16.30 years of relevant professional or academic experience ($SD = 6.47$). Their disciplinary backgrounds included urban and regional planning, urban management, geography and spatial planning, public administration, architecture, sociology, and strategic management. The quantitative phase included 384 participants. Of the total respondents, 253 (65.9%) were men and 131 (34.1%) were women. The mean age was 39.72 years ($SD = 8.64$). In terms of age distribution, 58 participants (15.1%) were younger than 30 years, 126 (32.8%) were between 30 and 39 years, 132 (34.4%) were between 40 and 49 years, and 68 (17.7%) were 50 years or older. Regarding educational attainment, 92 participants (24.0%) held a master's degree and 292 (76.0%) held a doctoral degree or were doctoral-level researchers or professionals. The mean professional experience of respondents was 12.83 years ($SD = 6.71$). With respect to professional background, 112 participants (29.2%) were university faculty members or academic researchers, 96 (25.0%) were urban planners or urban-management specialists, 74 (19.3%) were public-sector or municipal managers, 57 (14.8%) were architects, geographers, or spatial-development specialists, and 45 (11.7%) were professionals from related socioeconomic, governance, or policy fields. Overall, the demographic structure demonstrated that the quantitative sample was composed predominantly of experienced and highly educated respondents with sufficient professional familiarity to evaluate the strategic, institutional, spatial, and managerial dimensions of inequality in Kabul City.

Table 1

Qualitative Categories and Components of the Strategic Management Framework for Addressing Spatial Inequality

Main category	Subcategory	Representative indicators	Number of initial codes	Percentage of coded references
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Structural and socioeconomic drivers	Poverty and income polarization	Concentration of low-income households, unequal purchasing power, unemployment, livelihood insecurity	38	9.5
Structural and socioeconomic drivers	Informal urbanization	Expansion of informal settlements, insecure tenure, unregulated peripheral development	34	8.5
Structural and socioeconomic drivers	Population pressure and migration	Rapid population growth, internal displacement, rural-to-urban migration, demographic concentration	29	7.3
Governance and institutional deficiencies	Fragmented urban governance	Overlapping responsibilities, weak interagency coordination, institutional competition	41	10.3
Governance and institutional deficiencies	Weak planning and implementation capacity	Inconsistent plans, limited enforcement, discontinuity of urban policies	36	9.0
Governance and institutional deficiencies	Limited accountability and transparency	Weak monitoring, nontransparent decision-making, unequal administrative responsiveness	27	6.8
Spatial and infrastructural inequalities	Unequal access to urban services	Disparities in education, healthcare, sanitation, transport, utilities, and public facilities	43	10.8
Spatial and infrastructural inequalities	Unequal infrastructure investment	Spatial concentration of investment, insufficient peripheral infrastructure, delayed upgrading	37	9.3
Spatial and infrastructural inequalities	Land-use and connectivity disparities	Uneven accessibility, fragmented road networks, poor integration of peripheral districts	28	7.0
Strategic management mechanisms	Integrated spatial planning	Priority zoning, territorial targeting, coordinated investment programming	24	6.0
Strategic management mechanisms	Participatory governance	Community participation, stakeholder consultation, neighborhood-level decision-making	20	5.0
Strategic management mechanisms	Institutional capacity building	Data systems, managerial training, organizational coordination, technical capacity	18	4.5
Strategic management mechanisms	Monitoring and performance management	Spatial indicators, inequality monitoring, performance evaluation, corrective feedback	14	3.5
Expected outcomes	Improved spatial justice	More equitable access to urban opportunities, services, infrastructure, and resources	6	1.5
Expected outcomes	Urban cohesion and resilience	Reduced territorial exclusion, stronger social integration, improved institutional responsiveness	5	1.3
Total			400	100.0

The qualitative analysis generated 400 initial coded references that were progressively consolidated into 15 subcategories and five overarching conceptual domains. The largest proportion of coded references was associated with unequal access to urban services, accounting for 10.8% of all coded material, followed by fragmented urban governance at 10.3%, poverty and income polarization at 9.5%, unequal infrastructure investment at 9.3%, and weak planning and implementation capacity at 9.0%. These findings indicate that spatial inequality in Kabul was perceived by experts as a multidimensional phenomenon produced through the interaction of socioeconomic disadvantage, rapid and largely uncontrolled urbanization, institutional fragmentation, and unequal territorial distribution of infrastructure and services. Importantly, the experts did not interpret spatial inequality merely as a physical or locational problem. Rather, they consistently linked the unequal spatial distribution of opportunities to weaknesses in governance, policy implementation, institutional accountability, and allocation of public resources. Informal urbanization and population pressure

were also identified as major structural mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced, particularly where rapid growth occurs without corresponding expansion of transport, public utilities, educational facilities, healthcare services, and formal land-management systems. The strategic-management component of the findings emphasized integrated spatial planning, participatory governance, institutional capacity building, and continuous monitoring as the principal mechanisms through which spatial disparities could be systematically reduced. Although the categories relating to expected outcomes produced fewer coded references than causal and strategic categories, they occupied a central position in the final conceptual interpretation because the experts consistently described spatial justice, social cohesion, institutional responsiveness, and urban resilience as the intended consequences of coordinated strategic intervention. The qualitative findings therefore supported a framework in which structural and socioeconomic drivers and governance deficiencies create or intensify spatial and infrastructural inequalities, while strategic management mechanisms operate as the principal

means for altering these relationships and producing more equitable urban outcomes.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Convergent Validity of the Study Constructs

Construct	Number of items	Mean	SD	Standardized factor loading range	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Structural and socioeconomic drivers	10	4.18	0.56	0.71–0.88	0.912	0.928	0.566
Governance and institutional deficiencies	11	4.24	0.53	0.73–0.90	0.926	0.939	0.585
Spatial and infrastructural inequalities	10	4.31	0.51	0.75–0.91	0.934	0.945	0.633
Integrated spatial planning	7	4.26	0.55	0.74–0.89	0.901	0.921	0.626
Participatory governance	6	4.09	0.62	0.72–0.87	0.887	0.914	0.640
Institutional capacity building	6	4.15	0.58	0.73–0.88	0.894	0.918	0.651
Monitoring and performance management	5	4.07	0.64	0.76–0.90	0.889	0.919	0.694
Strategic management implementation	8	4.22	0.54	0.74–0.92	0.923	0.939	0.660
Spatial justice outcomes	7	4.34	0.50	0.77–0.93	0.931	0.945	0.711
Urban cohesion and resilience	6	4.20	0.57	0.75–0.90	0.909	0.929	0.687

As shown in Table 2, the respondents generally assigned high scores to all dimensions incorporated into the proposed strategic management framework, with mean values ranging from 4.07 to 4.34 on the five-point response scale. Spatial justice outcomes received the highest mean score ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.50$), indicating strong agreement among respondents that more equitable access to urban services, infrastructure, opportunities, and public resources should constitute the primary outcome of strategic intervention. Spatial and infrastructural inequalities also received a high mean score ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.51$), demonstrating widespread recognition of unequal service provision, infrastructure distribution, accessibility, and spatial connectivity as central manifestations of inequality in Kabul. Governance and institutional deficiencies were rated similarly highly ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.53$), reinforcing the qualitative finding that institutional fragmentation and weaknesses in planning and implementation are perceived as major contributors to unequal urban development. The psychometric characteristics of the measurement model were satisfactory across all constructs. Standardized factor loadings ranged

from 0.71 to 0.93, and therefore all observed indicators exceeded the commonly accepted minimum criterion of 0.70 or approached it closely. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.887 for participatory governance to 0.934 for spatial and infrastructural inequalities, while composite reliability coefficients ranged from 0.914 to 0.945. These coefficients indicate a high degree of internal consistency among the indicators measuring each latent construct. Average variance extracted values ranged from 0.566 to 0.711, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50 for all constructs and confirming acceptable convergent validity. The highest AVE was observed for spatial justice outcomes ($AVE = 0.711$), followed by monitoring and performance management ($AVE = 0.694$) and urban cohesion and resilience ($AVE = 0.687$). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the indicators derived from the qualitative phase formed reliable and convergently valid measurement dimensions and provided adequate empirical support for proceeding with the evaluation of the structural relationships within the proposed framework.

Table 3

Correlations and Discriminant Validity among the Latent Constructs

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Structural and socioeconomic drivers	0.752									
Governance and institutional deficiencies	0.614	0.765								
Spatial and infrastructural inequalities	0.673	0.701	0.796							

Integrated spatial planning	0.462	0.531	0.548	0.791						
Participatory governance	0.391	0.508	0.471	0.586	0.800					
Institutional capacity building	0.428	0.576	0.502	0.613	0.604	0.807				
Monitoring and performance management	0.405	0.552	0.489	0.595	0.567	0.632	0.833			
Strategic management implementation	0.498	0.628	0.611	0.704	0.658	0.691	0.672	0.812		
Spatial justice outcomes	0.487	0.571	0.633	0.652	0.603	0.628	0.646	0.738	0.843	
Urban cohesion and resilience	0.436	0.544	0.598	0.621	0.579	0.601	0.619	0.701	0.744	0.829

The correlation and discriminant-validity results presented in Table 3 indicate theoretically coherent and statistically meaningful relationships among the study constructs. The strongest correlation was observed between spatial justice outcomes and urban cohesion and resilience ($r = 0.744$), suggesting that improvements in the equitable distribution of urban opportunities and resources are closely associated with greater social integration, institutional responsiveness, and capacity to cope with urban pressures. Strategic management implementation was strongly correlated with spatial justice outcomes ($r = 0.738$), integrated spatial planning ($r = 0.704$), urban cohesion and resilience ($r = 0.701$), and institutional capacity building ($r = 0.691$), indicating that strategic implementation constitutes an integrative mechanism linking planning, organizational capacity, governance, and desirable urban outcomes. Spatial and infrastructural inequalities showed substantial correlations with governance and institutional deficiencies ($r = 0.701$) and structural and socioeconomic drivers ($r = 0.673$), providing empirical support for the proposition that unequal urban conditions are not independent spatial events but are strongly associated with broader institutional and

socioeconomic processes. At the same time, none of the interconstruct correlations approached a level that would indicate problematic conceptual redundancy. The square root of AVE for every construct, reported on the diagonal, exceeded its correlations with all other constructs. For example, the square root of AVE for strategic management implementation was 0.812, which was greater than its strongest correlation with spatial justice outcomes ($r = 0.738$), while the square root of AVE for spatial justice outcomes was 0.843, exceeding its correlation with urban cohesion and resilience ($r = 0.744$). These results confirm acceptable discriminant validity and indicate that the dimensions included in the framework measure conceptually distinct yet related aspects of the strategic management of spatial inequality. The pattern of relationships also supports the theoretical sequence derived from the qualitative phase, whereby structural and governance deficiencies are associated with spatial inequality, and strategic-management mechanisms are positively associated with the implementation capacity necessary to generate equitable spatial outcomes.

Table 4

Structural Model Results for the Proposed Strategic Management Framework

Structural path	Standardized coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
Structural and socioeconomic drivers $\rightarrow$ Spatial and infrastructural inequalities	0.318	6.84	<0.001	Supported
Governance and institutional deficiencies $\rightarrow$ Spatial and infrastructural inequalities	0.487	9.76	<0.001	Supported
Structural and socioeconomic drivers $\rightarrow$ Governance and institutional deficiencies	0.352	7.11	<0.001	Supported
Governance and institutional deficiencies $\rightarrow$ Strategic management implementation	-0.226	4.59	<0.001	Supported
Spatial and infrastructural inequalities $\rightarrow$ Strategic management implementation	0.284	5.83	<0.001	Supported
Integrated spatial planning $\rightarrow$ Strategic management implementation	0.337	7.24	<0.001	Supported
Participatory governance $\rightarrow$ Strategic management implementation	0.214	4.91	<0.001	Supported
Institutional capacity building $\rightarrow$ Strategic management implementation	0.291	6.38	<0.001	Supported
Monitoring and performance management $\rightarrow$ Strategic management implementation	0.263	5.74	<0.001	Supported
Strategic management implementation $\rightarrow$ Spatial justice outcomes	0.621	13.42	<0.001	Supported
Strategic management implementation $\rightarrow$ Urban cohesion and resilience	0.536	11.08	<0.001	Supported
Spatial justice outcomes $\rightarrow$ Urban cohesion and resilience	0.329	7.03	<0.001	Supported

The structural model results presented in Table 4 provide strong empirical support for the proposed strategic management framework. Governance and institutional deficiencies exerted the strongest direct effect on spatial and

infrastructural inequalities ($\beta = 0.487$, $t = 9.76$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that fragmented governance structures, limited interinstitutional coordination, inadequate implementation capacity, and weak accountability

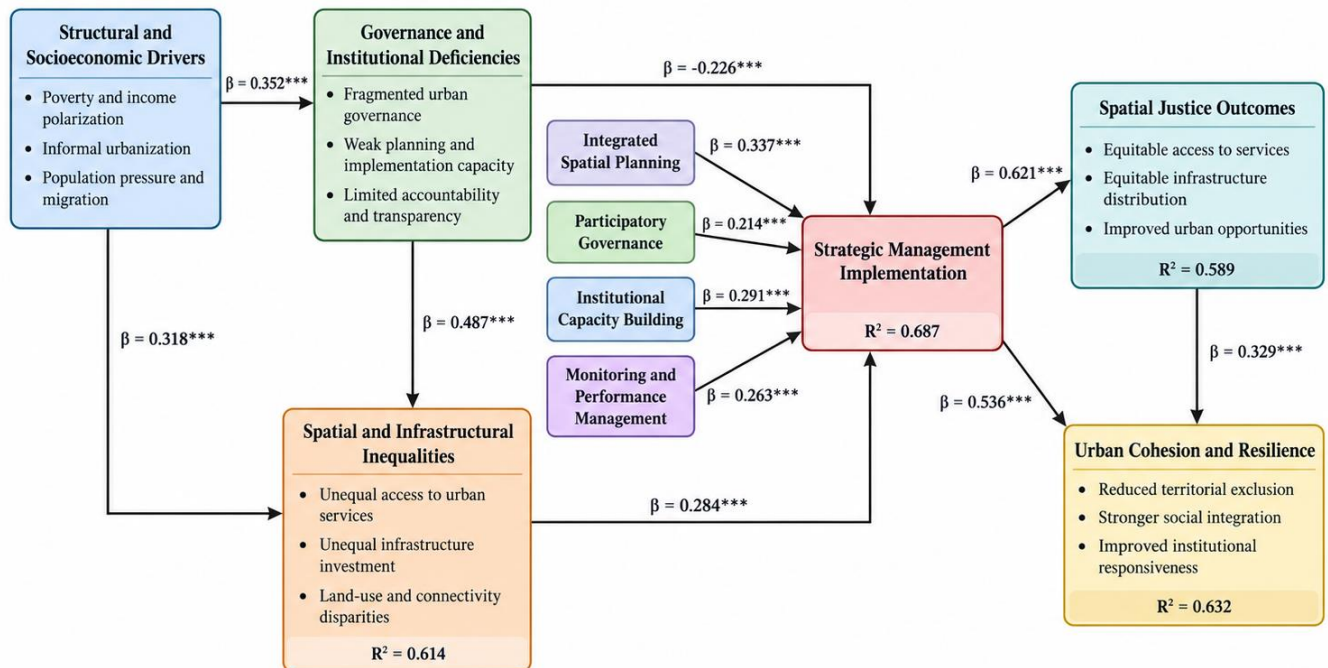
mechanisms play a particularly important role in producing and sustaining unequal territorial development. Structural and socioeconomic drivers also had a significant positive effect on spatial and infrastructural inequalities ($\beta = 0.318$, $t = 6.84$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that poverty, socioeconomic polarization, informal urbanization, migration, and demographic pressures directly intensify unequal access to services and infrastructure. Structural and socioeconomic pressures additionally influenced governance and institutional deficiencies ($\beta = 0.352$, $t = 7.11$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that rapidly changing socioeconomic and demographic conditions may further strain already limited planning and administrative capacities. Governance deficiencies had a significant negative effect on strategic management implementation ($\beta = -0.226$, $t = 4.59$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that institutional fragmentation and weak administrative coordination reduce the ability of urban authorities to implement coherent spatial-equity policies. In contrast, spatial and infrastructural inequalities positively predicted the need for and activation of strategic management responses ($\beta = 0.284$, $t = 5.83$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that greater recognition of spatial disparities increases the perceived necessity for coordinated intervention. Among the strategic mechanisms, integrated spatial planning had the strongest positive effect on strategic management implementation ($\beta = 0.337$, $t = 7.24$, $p < 0.001$), followed by institutional capacity building ($\beta = 0.291$, $t = 6.38$, $p < 0.001$), monitoring and performance management ($\beta = 0.263$, $t = 5.74$, $p < 0.001$), and participatory governance ($\beta = 0.214$, $t = 4.91$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that effective implementation depends simultaneously on spatial targeting, strengthened institutional capacities, systematic performance monitoring, and meaningful stakeholder involvement. The strongest structural relationship in the model was the effect of strategic management implementation on spatial justice outcomes ($\beta = 0.621$, $t = 13.42$, $p < 0.001$), showing that coordinated strategic action can substantially improve the equitable distribution of

services, infrastructure, accessibility, and urban opportunities. Strategic management implementation also had a strong positive effect on urban cohesion and resilience ($\beta = 0.536$, $t = 11.08$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, spatial justice outcomes positively influenced urban cohesion and resilience ($\beta = 0.329$, $t = 7.03$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that more equitable urban development contributes indirectly to reduced territorial exclusion, stronger social integration, and greater institutional and community resilience.

Model-fit indices demonstrated that the proposed structural framework adequately represented the observed data. The chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio was 2.18, which was below the recommended upper threshold of 3.00. The root mean square error of approximation was 0.056, the standardized root mean square residual was 0.049, the comparative fit index was 0.951, and the Tucker-Lewis index was 0.944. The goodness-of-fit index was 0.923 and the adjusted goodness-of-fit index was 0.908. These values collectively indicate good overall model fit. The model explained 61.4% of the variance in spatial and infrastructural inequalities, 68.7% of the variance in strategic management implementation, 58.9% of the variance in spatial justice outcomes, and 63.2% of the variance in urban cohesion and resilience. The relatively high coefficients of determination demonstrate that the framework possesses substantial explanatory capacity and that the combination of structural, institutional, spatial, and strategic-management variables provides a coherent account of the processes through which urban inequality is generated and may subsequently be addressed. The results further demonstrate that the proposed framework should not be interpreted as a simple linear planning model. Instead, it represents a strategic management system in which socioeconomic and governance pressures interact to create spatial disparities, while integrated planning, organizational capacity, participatory mechanisms, and performance monitoring jointly increase the capacity for coordinated implementation and the achievement of spatially equitable outcomes.

Figure 1

Final Strategic Management Framework for Addressing Spatial Inequality in Kabul City



The final framework synthesized the qualitative and quantitative findings into a coherent sequence of causal conditions, strategic mechanisms, implementation processes, and urban outcomes. At the causal level, structural and socioeconomic pressures, including poverty, income polarization, migration, demographic growth, informal settlement expansion, and livelihood insecurity, were positioned alongside governance and institutional deficiencies as the principal sources of spatial inequality. Governance and institutional deficiencies occupied a central position within the model because they both directly intensified spatial and infrastructural inequalities and constrained the implementation of corrective strategies. Unequal access to public services, infrastructure investment, transport connectivity, utilities, healthcare, education, public spaces, and formal urban opportunities constituted the principal observable expressions of spatial inequality. The strategic-management layer of the framework consisted of four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: integrated spatial planning, participatory governance, institutional capacity building, and monitoring and performance management. Integrated spatial planning represented the strongest strategic mechanism and emphasized territorial prioritization, coordinated land-use planning, spatial targeting of investments, and redistribution of infrastructure resources toward underserved areas. Participatory

governance represented the incorporation of neighborhood communities, professional groups, civil society, and relevant public institutions into decision-making processes. Institutional capacity building emphasized organizational coordination, managerial competence, technical expertise, data availability, and the ability to translate policy into implementation. Monitoring and performance management incorporated spatial indicators, performance benchmarks, inequality mapping, regular evaluation, and corrective feedback mechanisms. These strategic components collectively strengthened strategic management implementation, which emerged as the central operational mechanism through which the framework generated its outcomes. Effective strategic implementation had its strongest influence on spatial justice, followed by a substantial effect on urban cohesion and resilience. The framework therefore indicates that reducing spatial inequality in Kabul requires more than isolated infrastructure projects or short-term administrative actions. It requires a coordinated strategic management architecture that simultaneously addresses structural pressures, institutional fragmentation, inequitable spatial allocation, implementation capacity, participatory legitimacy, and continuous performance evaluation. In this model, spatial justice functions both as a direct outcome of strategic

implementation and as an additional pathway through which greater social cohesion and urban resilience can be achieved.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to formulate and empirically validate a strategic management framework for addressing spatial inequality in Kabul City. The findings indicated that spatial inequality should be understood as the outcome of an interconnected system of structural, socioeconomic, institutional, spatial, and managerial factors rather than as a narrowly physical or infrastructural problem. The qualitative results identified five overarching domains: structural and socioeconomic drivers, governance and institutional deficiencies, spatial and infrastructural inequalities, strategic management mechanisms, and expected outcomes. The quantitative results subsequently confirmed the reliability and validity of these dimensions and supported the structural relationships among them. In particular, governance and institutional deficiencies exerted the strongest direct effect on spatial and infrastructural inequalities, while structural and socioeconomic drivers also had a significant positive effect. At the same time, integrated spatial planning, institutional capacity building, monitoring and performance management, and participatory governance all contributed positively to strategic management implementation. Strategic management implementation, in turn, had a strong positive effect on spatial justice outcomes and urban cohesion and resilience. Taken together, these findings indicate that reducing spatial inequality in Kabul requires a coordinated strategic management system capable of simultaneously addressing the causes of inequality, the weaknesses of governance structures, the uneven distribution of urban resources, and the institutional capacity required for implementation.

One of the most important findings was the strong effect of governance and institutional deficiencies on spatial and infrastructural inequalities. This result suggests that spatial inequality in Kabul is not merely a consequence of demographic pressure, poverty, or uncontrolled physical expansion, but is also closely connected to the way urban institutions coordinate, allocate resources, make decisions, and implement plans. Fragmented governance, weak implementation capacity, limited accountability, and inadequate coordination among responsible organizations appear to intensify unequal patterns of service and infrastructure distribution. This interpretation is consistent with the broader literature on strategic spatial planning,

which emphasizes that planning outcomes are strongly conditioned by governance structures and institutional relationships. Strategic spatial planning has been described as a process that requires interaction, coordination, and coproduction among multiple actors rather than isolated decision-making by a single administrative body (Albrechts, 2013). Similarly, spatial planning has been linked to national governance systems and the ability of institutions to coordinate territorial development across sectors (Liu & Zhou, 2021). The present findings therefore reinforce the argument that spatial inequality cannot be effectively reduced unless institutional fragmentation is addressed alongside physical and socioeconomic disparities.

The importance of governance capacity is further supported by studies emphasizing the relationship between spatial planning and institutional modernization. The significant negative effect of governance and institutional deficiencies on strategic management implementation indicates that even well-designed strategies may fail if institutions lack coordination, technical capacity, transparency, or data-sharing mechanisms. This finding aligns with evidence that institutional barriers can significantly constrain the digitalization and modernization of spatial-planning systems (Nouri, 2024). In the context of Kabul, where the management of rapid urban growth requires continuous information, territorial monitoring, and interagency coordination, such institutional limitations may reduce the capacity to target disadvantaged areas accurately and to evaluate the outcomes of interventions. The findings also correspond with experiences from other forms of spatial planning in which effective implementation has depended on the ability to adapt governance structures and existing institutional practices rather than relying exclusively on formal planning procedures (Finke et al., 2020). Accordingly, institutional reform should be regarded as an integral component of spatial-equity policy rather than as a separate administrative issue.

The results also showed that structural and socioeconomic drivers had a significant positive effect on spatial and infrastructural inequalities. Poverty, income polarization, migration, informal urbanization, and population pressure were among the principal factors identified in the qualitative phase, and their significance was confirmed through the structural model. This result indicates that spatial inequality emerges from the concentration of social and economic disadvantage in particular territories. Areas that experience rapid demographic growth or informal development often face infrastructure deficits, weaker

access to services, and lower levels of formal investment. This interpretation is consistent with research emphasizing the importance of urban-rural and peripheral connectivity in shaping local development opportunities. Studies of rural entrepreneurship and sustainable local development have shown that stronger rural-urban connections can improve economic opportunities and territorial integration (Saeedi et al., 2021). Likewise, research on urban-rural integration from a spatial-planning perspective demonstrates that fragmented development at urban fringes can be reduced through coordinated infrastructure, land-use, and development strategies (Zhang, 2025). These studies support the present finding that structural and spatial processes should be addressed together, especially in urban regions characterized by migration, peripheral growth, and uneven access to economic opportunity.

The strong relationship between spatial and infrastructural inequalities and broader governance and socioeconomic conditions also confirms that unequal service distribution is a central manifestation of spatial injustice. In the qualitative phase, unequal access to urban services generated the largest share of coded references, while in the quantitative phase spatial and infrastructural inequalities received one of the highest mean scores. This indicates that respondents considered disparities in infrastructure, utilities, transport, public facilities, and urban accessibility to be among the most visible consequences of inequality in Kabul. This finding is strongly aligned with the distributive-justice perspective in spatial planning, which emphasizes that the territorial allocation of public goods is a fundamental determinant of urban equity (Rocco, 2025). It is also consistent with the argument that spatial planning has an important role in ensuring distributive justice in service delivery (Magidimisha & Chipungu, 2019). The findings therefore suggest that spatial justice in Kabul should be operationalized through measurable improvements in access to services, infrastructure distribution, and urban opportunities rather than remaining an abstract normative objective.

The results concerning integrated spatial planning are particularly important. Among the strategic mechanisms, integrated spatial planning had the strongest positive effect on strategic management implementation. This suggests that reducing spatial inequality requires a planning approach capable of coordinating land use, infrastructure, transportation, housing, public investment, and service delivery across different districts and administrative sectors. The significance of integrated planning is consistent with

research on strategic spatial planning and municipal operational planning, where the alignment of long-term spatial visions with concrete implementation programs has been identified as essential for achieving development objectives (Ghaed Rahmati et al., 2021; Qaed Rahmati et al., 2021). It also corresponds with international evidence that national spatial planning can promote more coordinated and compact patterns of growth when supported by appropriate governance arrangements (Yang et al., 2024). For Kabul, this means that individual sectoral projects are unlikely to be sufficient unless they are embedded within a coherent territorial strategy that explicitly prioritizes disadvantaged areas.

The importance of integrated planning is further reinforced by findings from studies of urban quality of life and physical-social urban decline. Spatial planning has been shown to influence quality-of-life conditions through the territorial distribution of infrastructure, housing, accessibility, and environmental amenities (Babakhani et al., 2021). Research on the physical and social pathology of historic urban areas has similarly demonstrated how physical deterioration, weak services, and social decline can become mutually reinforcing (Fashi et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with the multidimensional structure identified in the present study. In Kabul, spatial inequality is unlikely to be reduced through investment in a single sector because disadvantaged areas often experience overlapping deficiencies. Integrated planning is therefore necessary to coordinate physical upgrading with social services, connectivity, environmental improvements, and institutional support.

Participatory governance was also found to contribute significantly to strategic management implementation. Although its standardized effect was smaller than that of integrated spatial planning and institutional capacity building, the relationship remained statistically significant and substantively important. This result supports the view that effective spatial strategies require the participation of communities, professional groups, civil society, and relevant institutions. Such participation can improve the identification of local needs, increase the legitimacy of planning decisions, and reduce the risk that investments are concentrated in politically or economically favored areas. The result is consistent with the coproduction perspective in strategic planning, which emphasizes collaborative decision-making and the involvement of multiple actors in the production of spatial strategies (Albrechts, 2013). It is also supported by research showing that systematic

stakeholder-feedback mechanisms can help identify differences between the importance assigned to planning priorities and their actual performance (Ravazzoli et al., 2025). In the context of Kabul, participatory governance may therefore provide an important mechanism for incorporating neighborhood-level inequalities into metropolitan decision-making.

Institutional capacity building also exerted a substantial positive effect on strategic management implementation. This finding indicates that the success of a spatial-equity strategy depends not only on the content of plans but also on the technical, organizational, and managerial capacities of the institutions responsible for implementation. Skilled personnel, reliable data, organizational coordination, managerial competence, and the ability to monitor spatial change all appear necessary for translating strategic priorities into effective interventions. The importance of these capacities is consistent with studies showing that the effectiveness of spatial planning depends on the institutional ability to integrate information, coordinate actors, and manage territorial development (Liu & Zhou, 2021; Nouri, 2024). The finding also has important implications for the design of a strategic management framework in Kabul: institutional development should not be treated as an indirect supportive activity, but as a core strategic component that directly affects implementation capacity.

Monitoring and performance management were likewise positively associated with strategic management implementation. This result underscores the need for continuous spatial assessment rather than one-time planning. Because inequality changes over time, strategic management requires indicators that can detect emerging disparities, measure the territorial impact of investments, and provide feedback for corrective action. This finding is compatible with spatial-analysis approaches that emphasize the use of geographically differentiated indicators to identify local capacities and development needs (Annabestani & Barani Ali Akbari, 2024). It also corresponds with resilience research showing that different areas of a city can exhibit substantially different levels of vulnerability and adaptive capacity, requiring targeted and continuously updated interventions (Mirzajani Naneh Karan, 2026). Accordingly, monitoring should be integrated into the management framework as an iterative process through which planning priorities are regularly reassessed.

Another major finding was the strong effect of strategic management implementation on spatial justice outcomes. This was the strongest relationship in the structural model,

indicating that the coordinated implementation of planning, participation, capacity building, and monitoring can make a substantial contribution to the equitable distribution of urban resources and opportunities. This result reinforces the argument that strategic planning is meaningful only when it leads to operational changes in resource allocation and service distribution. The finding corresponds with the distributive-justice literature, where spatial planning is viewed as a mechanism for influencing the location and accessibility of public goods (Magidimisha & Chipungu, 2019; Rocco, 2025). It also supports the rationale behind spatial planning in sectoral domains such as education, where territorial distribution affects access and opportunity (Ministry of Science Research and Technology, 2020; Shafiei et al., 2023). In Kabul, strategic implementation should therefore be judged not only by whether plans are completed, but by whether measurable disparities between urban areas are actually reduced.

The findings also showed that strategic management implementation had a strong positive effect on urban cohesion and resilience, while spatial justice outcomes independently contributed to greater cohesion and resilience. This pattern indicates that more equitable access to urban resources can generate broader social and institutional benefits. When disparities in services, infrastructure, and accessibility are reduced, residents may experience lower territorial exclusion, stronger social integration, and greater confidence in urban institutions. The relationship between spatial justice and resilience is consistent with research emphasizing the territorial differentiation of urban vulnerability and the need for spatially targeted resilience planning (Mirzajani Naneh Karan, 2026). It is also conceptually consistent with studies showing that stronger territorial integration and connectivity contribute to more sustainable development patterns (Saeedi et al., 2021; Zhang, 2025). Thus, spatial justice should not be understood solely as an end state; it may also function as a pathway toward more cohesive and resilient urban systems.

The findings have additional implications for how development priorities are framed in strategic plans. Strategic spatial planning often includes concerns related to place positioning, attractiveness, and competitiveness, but these goals can potentially conflict with equity if public investment becomes concentrated in already advantaged areas. Research on place branding in strategic spatial planning shows that spatial strategies frequently incorporate long-term narratives regarding place identity, development positioning, and investment priorities (Oliveira, 2022;

Oliveira & Ashworth, 2021). The present findings suggest that, in Kabul, such development-oriented strategies should be explicitly balanced against spatial-justice criteria. Strategic management should ensure that efforts to improve the city's attractiveness or economic performance do not reinforce center-periphery disparities or reduce investment in disadvantaged districts.

The results also have implications for transport and accessibility planning. Although transportation was not modeled as a separate latent construct, unequal connectivity was included within spatial and infrastructural inequalities and emerged as an important qualitative indicator. Previous research has shown that transit-oriented development and transport accessibility can influence housing values and spatial patterns of opportunity (Su et al., 2021). This supports the present interpretation that connectivity is not merely a mobility issue but a fundamental element of spatial equity. In Kabul, improvements in public transport and road accessibility should therefore be prioritized in areas where poor connectivity restricts access to employment, education, health services, and other urban opportunities.

Overall, the findings support a strategic management interpretation of spatial inequality in which structural pressures, governance weaknesses, and territorial disparities interact dynamically. The framework extends beyond conventional physical planning by positioning governance reform, institutional capacity, participation, monitoring, and implementation as essential mechanisms for achieving spatial justice. This orientation is consistent with contemporary spatial-planning scholarship, which increasingly treats planning as a governance process rather than as a purely technical exercise (Albrechts, 2013; Liu & Zhou, 2021). The explanatory power of the structural model further suggests that the proposed framework captures a substantial proportion of the processes through which inequality is produced and can potentially be mitigated. Its central implication is that spatial inequality in Kabul cannot be effectively addressed through fragmented projects or isolated sectoral interventions; instead, it requires an integrated, territorially sensitive, institutionally coordinated, participatory, and continuously monitored strategic management approach.

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, although the study focused substantively on Kabul City, the expert participants were recruited in Tehran, and therefore the findings reflect the perspectives of professionals and researchers with knowledge of Kabul rather than a sample

drawn directly from residents and administrative actors currently operating within all districts of the city. Second, the quantitative phase relied on a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish temporal or causal changes in spatial inequality and strategic-management effectiveness. Third, the study relied primarily on expert judgments and questionnaire-based measures rather than integrating objective geospatial indicators, administrative service-delivery data, household-level socioeconomic information, or longitudinal investment records. Fourth, the proposed framework was validated as a general city-level model and did not explicitly compare the intensity and causes of inequality among individual districts or neighborhoods. Finally, institutional, political, and socioeconomic conditions in Kabul may change over time, and therefore the relative importance of the framework components may also vary across different planning periods.

Future research should expand the framework through direct empirical investigation within Kabul City and should include residents, municipal officials, community representatives, planners, service providers, and vulnerable population groups from different districts. Longitudinal research would be especially valuable for determining whether improvements in strategic management are followed by measurable reductions in spatial disparities over time. Future studies should also integrate geographic information systems, remote sensing, accessibility analysis, spatial autocorrelation, and neighborhood-level indicators to map the geographic distribution of inequality more precisely. Multi-level modeling could be used to distinguish individual, neighborhood, district, and city-level determinants of spatial inequality. Comparative research involving Kabul and other rapidly growing cities in Afghanistan or neighboring countries could further assess the transferability of the proposed framework. Additional studies may also test mediating and moderating mechanisms, such as institutional trust, administrative decentralization, fiscal capacity, citizen participation, political stability, or digital planning capacity, to clarify under what conditions strategic-management interventions are most effective.

From a practical perspective, urban authorities should use the proposed framework as a basis for integrating spatial-equity objectives into municipal and metropolitan decision-making. Priority should be given to identifying underserved districts through transparent spatial indicators and linking these indicators directly to budgeting, infrastructure investment, and service-delivery decisions. Institutional

coordination mechanisms should be strengthened so that planning, transportation, housing, utilities, education, health, and environmental agencies operate within a shared strategic framework rather than through disconnected sectoral programs. Community participation should be institutionalized at neighborhood and district levels to ensure that local needs are incorporated into investment priorities. Administrative and technical capacity should be strengthened through staff training, spatial-data systems, performance indicators, and systematic monitoring procedures. Finally, strategic plans should include measurable equity targets, implementation responsibilities, timelines, and feedback mechanisms so that progress in reducing spatial inequality can be continuously assessed and corrective action can be taken when disparities persist.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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