

Adherence to Norms of Conduct, Public Trust, and Service Delivery of DENR-CENRO

Aiza G. Suarez

MPA Student, Bohol Island State University - Main Campus, Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines

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Email of Author: guimalanaiza@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between government employees' adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources–Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (DENR-CENRO) in Tagbilaran, Bohol. Anchored on Social Contract Theory, Social Norms Theory, Principal-Agent Theory, Trust Theory, and Theory of Justice, the study explains how ethical behavior influences governance outcomes. A quantitative descriptive-correlational research design was employed, involving 517 respondents composed of 133 employees selected through stratified random sampling and 384 clients selected through convenience sampling. Data were gathered using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using weighted mean, Spearman Rank Correlation, and Mann-Whitney tests. Findings reveal a very high level of adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery, although employees consistently reported higher perceptions than clients. Responsiveness and timeliness were identified as the lowest-rated dimensions across variables. The results further show strong, statistically significant relationships among adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery, indicating that these factors are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The study concludes that while ethical standards are strongly practiced, improvements in responsiveness and timeliness are necessary to align institutional performance with client expectations. Recommendations focus on enhancing service delivery processes, strengthening client-centered practices, and addressing perceptual gaps between employees and clients. The study supports SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by promoting transparency and accountability, as well as SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through improved public service efficiency. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening institutional governance, enhancing public trust, and promoting efficient and citizen-centered service delivery within government systems.

Keywords: Adherence to Norms of Conduct, Public Trust, Responsiveness, Service Delivery Satisfaction, Timeliness

1. Introduction

This study examines the relationship between government employees' adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources–Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (DENR-CENRO) in Tagbilaran, Bohol. Given the agency's role in environmental regulation and public service delivery, ethical conduct and service quality are critical determinants of public confidence. The study integrates legal frameworks, governance theories, and empirical literature to explain how ethical behavior influences trust and satisfaction, and provides a basis for an action plan to improve governance outcomes.

1.1 Background of the Study on Norms of Conduct, Public Trust, and Service Delivery in DENR-CENRO

The DENR-CENRO delivers essential regulatory services such as environmental permits, land inspections, and licensing, which directly affect economic activity, environmental compliance, and community welfare. As public office is a public trust under the 1987 Philippine Constitution (Article XI, Section 1), government employees are expected to uphold ethical standards, accountability, and professionalism. These expectations are reinforced by Republic Act No. 6713 and the Civil Service Law (Presidential Decree No. 807), which mandate integrity, fairness, and responsibility in public service. Public servants play a crucial role in upholding the rule of law and ensuring equitable service delivery. Their behavior directly influences institutional credibility, public satisfaction, and trust. However, challenges such as corruption, inefficiency, and perceived unfairness evident in cases involving fixers and contested regulatory decisions highlight the need to examine how adherence to ethical standards affects public perception and service outcomes.

1.2 Themes and Insights from Related Literature on Ethical Conduct, Public Trust, and Service Satisfaction

Public trust is a central element of effective governance, reflecting citizens' confidence in government competence, fairness, and integrity (Andrew & de Walle, 2013; Jung and Sea, 2012; Parker et al., 2008; Gordon, 2000). Key determinants of trust include transparency, accountability, and responsiveness (Cheema, 2010). Transparency reduces uncertainty and increases confidence (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Guemes, 2019; Bannister, 2011), while accountability

promotes responsible behavior and reduces corruption (Yousaf et al., 2016; Fitriani et al., 2020; Minja, 2013; Chang, 2014). Responsiveness enhances trust by demonstrating government commitment to citizen needs (Fujii et al., 2018; Abidin et al., 2024; Atienza, 2014; Li et al., 2017). Service delivery satisfaction is shaped by timeliness, efficiency, and effectiveness (Ibrahim et al., 2016; Bacal, 2005; Gronroos, 2000; Sullivan, 2007; Badmus, 2017). Citizens evaluate government performance based on fairness, procedural justice, and service quality (Van Ryzin, 2015; Young and Hassan, 2018; Mazerolle et al., 2013). Positive perceptions of service enhance trust, while inefficiency and corruption reduce confidence (Beshi & Kaur, 2020; Li & He, 2024; Salminen & Ikola-Norrbacka, 2010). Ethical norms such as professionalism, impartiality, responsiveness, and integrity are critical to service quality (Cronin, 2001; Lanin & Syamsir, 2012; Wahjoedi, 2025; George, 2016). However, cultural values such as *kapwa*, *utang na loob*, and *pakikisama* may create ethical dilemmas by encouraging favoritism (Constantino, 1966; Abueva, 1997; Mulder, 2012). These tensions highlight the importance of reinforcing ethical standards to ensure fairness and accountability.

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Ethical Governance and Public Trust

At the national level, the DENR plays a critical role in sustainable resource management and environmental protection. Its functions are guided by legal frameworks such as RA 6713, RA 9485, and RA 11032, which promote ethical conduct, transparency, and efficient service delivery. However, local incidents involving fixers and public opposition to regulatory decisions illustrate ongoing challenges in maintaining trust and satisfaction. Globally, public trust is recognized as essential for governance effectiveness, economic development, and democratic stability (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Dearmon & Grier, 2009; Cahuc & Algan, 2013; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2005). Countries with efficient, transparent, and responsive institutions tend to have higher levels of citizen satisfaction (Fujii et al., 2018). These patterns underscore the importance of ethical governance in both local and international contexts.

1.4 Theoretical or Conceptual Basis on Norms of Conduct, Public Trust, and Service Delivery

This study is anchored on several theories. Social Contract Theory (Locke, 1960) explains the reciprocal relationship between citizens and government, emphasizing ethical behavior and public accountability. Social Norms Theory (Durkheim, 1893) highlights how institutional expectations shape employee behavior and service delivery. Principal-Agent Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) underscores the need to align government employees' actions with public interests through accountability and oversight. Trust Theory (Hardin, 2002) explains how consistent ethical behavior builds institutional trust. Additionally, Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1971) emphasizes fairness and impartiality in public service, while Public Service Motivation Theory (Perry & Wise, 1990) highlights intrinsic motivations such as civic duty. Virtue Ethics (Banks, 2012; Bibus, 2013) further supports the role of moral character in ethical decision-making. These frameworks collectively explain how adherence to norms of conduct influences service delivery, public trust, and satisfaction.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale

Although extensive literature exists on public trust, service delivery, and ethical governance, there is limited empirical evidence focusing on the integrated relationship among adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and service satisfaction within DENR-CENRO operations. Existing studies often examine these variables independently or in different institutional contexts. Furthermore, local challenges such as corruption, inefficiency, and cultural influences highlight the need for context-specific analysis. This study addresses these gaps by examining how ethical conduct directly affects trust and satisfaction in a frontline environmental regulatory agency, providing evidence-based insights for improving governance and service delivery.

1.6 Alignment with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with several SDGs. It supports SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by promoting transparency, accountability, and ethical governance. It contributes to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) through improved public service efficiency that supports business and economic activities. It also relates to SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), as effective DENR services ensure environmental protection and sustainable resource management.

1.7 Importance of the Study to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

The study contributes to institutional and governance sustainability by strengthening ethical practices and public accountability. It supports socio-economic sustainability by improving service delivery efficiency, which affects business operations and community welfare. It also promotes environmental sustainability through better regulatory compliance and resource management. Additionally, the study enhances public administration and policy sustainability by providing evidence-based recommendations for improving governance systems. By linking ethical conduct, trust, and service satisfaction, it contributes to building resilient, transparent, and citizen-centered institutions.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a descriptive-correlational research design to assess the levels of adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery, as well as to determine the relationships among these variables. This design enabled systematic data collection through standardized instruments and allowed for objective statistical analysis of the relationships among the variables within the organizational context.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources – Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (DENR-CENRO) in Tagbilaran, Bohol. The agency serves as a frontline government office responsible for environmental regulation, permitting, and resource management, making it a suitable setting for assessing governance practices and service delivery. Its interaction with both individuals and organizations provides a relevant context for examining public trust and satisfaction.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents consisted of 517 participants, including 133 employees and 384 clients of DENR-CENRO. Employees represented different functional areas such as planning, permitting, enforcement, and conservation, while clients were individuals or representatives who had recently availed of services. Inclusion criteria required employees to be actively involved in service delivery or administrative work, while clients must have directly transacted with the agency. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

Employees were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different functional units of the organization. Clients were selected through convenience sampling, focusing on individuals present at the office during data collection who had recent service transactions. This combination of sampling methods ensured both representativeness and practicality in obtaining relevant responses.

2.5 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from Tahanlangit (2021) and Beshi et al. (2019), contextualized to fit DENR-CENRO operations. The instrument measured adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery using a four-point Likert scale. Content validity was ensured through expert evaluation, and reliability was established through pilot testing involving non-respondents. Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring voluntary participation and protecting respondent anonymity.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering process began with securing formal approval from relevant authorities. The validated questionnaire was then administered on-site to both employees and clients. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent prior to participation. Completed questionnaires were collected, checked for completeness, and prepared for analysis. The process ensured accuracy, confidentiality, and integrity of the data collected.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Weighted mean was used to determine the levels of adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery. Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient was applied to examine relationships among the variables, while the Mann-Whitney test was used to determine differences between employees and clients. A significance level of 0.05 was used in all inferential analyses to determine statistical significance.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Adherence to Norms of Conduct among DENR-CENRO Employees and Clients

3.1.1 Overall Adherence to Norms of Conduct

The findings show a very high level of adherence to norms of conduct, with employees rating themselves higher than clients. Employees reported consistently very high adherence across all dimensions, while clients also perceived high adherence but at comparatively lower levels. This indicates strong institutionalization of ethical standards, though a perceptual gap exists between internal and external assessments. These results support Social Norms Theory (Durkheim, 1893), suggesting that employees conform to institutional ethical expectations such as those mandated by Republic Act No. 6713. However, Trust Theory (Hardin, 2002) and Van Ryzin (2015) explain the observed perception gap, as public trust is shaped more by actual service experience than by internal compliance. Thus, ethical behavior alone does not guarantee equivalent public perception unless it is consistently demonstrated during service delivery.

3.1.2 Commitment to Public Interest

The results indicate a very high level of adherence to commitment to public interest, with employees reporting stronger compliance than clients. Indicators related to prioritizing public welfare and responsible resource use received high ratings, although clients showed relatively lower confidence, particularly in areas involving impartiality and financial transparency. This aligns with Republic Act No. 6713 and Principal-Agent Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), which emphasize prioritizing public welfare. However, lower ratings related to favoritism and financial transparency reflect concerns consistent with Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2013), highlighting the importance of visible accountability. Cultural influences such as *pakikisama* and *utang na loob* (Constantino, 1966) may also affect impartial decision-making, suggesting the need for stronger ethical enforcement and transparency mechanisms.

3.1.3 Professionalism

The findings reveal a very high level of professionalism, with employees again rating themselves higher than clients. Indicators related to dedication, integrity, and service quality were strongly observed, though consistency in delivering excellence received comparatively lower ratings. These findings align with Cronin (2001) and Wahjoedi (2025), emphasizing competence and ethical commitment in public service. The perceptual gap reflects Trust Theory (Hardin, 2002), where client experience determines evaluation. Professionalism, as noted by George (2016), requires not only competence but consistent demonstration of service quality, suggesting the need for more visible and client-centered professional practices.

3.1.4 Justness and Sincerity

The results indicate a very high level of adherence to justness and sincerity, with strong emphasis on fairness, non-discrimination, and respect for rights. However, both groups reported relatively lower ratings in avoiding favoritism. These findings support Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971), emphasizing fairness and equality. However, perceptions of favoritism align with Constantino (1966) and Van Ryzin (2015), indicating that even minor inconsistencies can reduce trust. The findings highlight the need for stronger enforcement of anti-favoritism policies and consistent ethical application.

3.1.5 Political Neutrality

The findings demonstrate very high adherence to political neutrality, with employees strongly affirming impartial service delivery regardless of political affiliation. Clients also perceived neutrality but at slightly lower levels. These results align with Nabatchi (2017) and Jorgensen & Bozeman (2007), emphasizing neutrality as a core public value. Lower ratings in areas such as concealing political affiliation suggest variability in practice, reinforcing the need for adherence to Civil Service and COMELEC guidelines and consistent demonstration of neutrality in service delivery.

3.1.6 Responsiveness to the Public

The results show a very high level of responsiveness overall, though this dimension received the lowest ratings among conduct indicators, especially from clients. Timeliness in addressing concerns and complaints was identified as a key area needing improvement. These findings support Fujii et al. (2018) and Abidin et al. (2024), highlighting responsiveness as critical to trust. Lower ratings reflect operational challenges such as delays and communication gaps, reinforcing the importance of timely and effective service delivery in shaping public perception.

3.1.7 Nationalism and Patriotism

The findings indicate very high adherence to nationalism and patriotism, with strong compliance in legal obligations and commitment to national development. However, prioritizing national interest over personal interest received relatively lower ratings. These results align with Rothstein & Teorell (2008) and Benedicto & Caelian (2020), emphasizing the role of legal compliance and national values in governance. Cultural and organizational factors (Abueva, 1997) may influence decision-making, highlighting the need to strengthen visible demonstrations of national commitment in service delivery.

3.1.8 Commitment to Democracy

The results show very high adherence to democratic principles, including transparency, accountability, and constitutional commitment. However, some aspects, such as promoting democratic values, were less consistently observed. These findings align with Han et al. (2020) and Cheema (2010), emphasizing accountability and transparency as foundations of democratic governance. The results suggest that while democratic values are practiced, their consistent and visible application remains essential for strengthening public trust.

3.1.9 Simple Living

The findings indicate very high adherence to simple living, reflecting modest lifestyles consistent with ethical standards. However, lower ratings in avoiding displays of wealth suggest variability in external perception. These results support Republic Act No. 6713 and Montiel et al. (2012), highlighting cultural influences on ethical behavior. The findings reinforce the importance of visible ethical conduct in maintaining public confidence.

3.2 Public Trust in DENR-CENRO

3.2.1 Overall Public Trust

The results show a very high level of public trust overall, with employees reporting higher trust than clients. Accountability ranked highest, followed by transparency, while responsiveness was relatively lower. These findings align with Fitriani et al. (2020) and Fujii et al. (2018), emphasizing accountability and transparency as key drivers of trust. Lower responsiveness reflects service delivery challenges that influence public perception.

3.2.2 Transparency

The findings indicate a very high level of trust in transparency, particularly in fee disclosure and program implementation, though access to records received lower ratings. These results support Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2013) and Guemes (2019), highlighting transparency as essential for trust. Limitations in accessibility suggest the need for improved information dissemination.

3.2.3 Accountability

The results demonstrate very high trust in accountability, particularly in complaint handling and adherence to rules, though reporting systems were less consistently recognized. These findings align with Chang (2014) and Fitriani et al. (2020), emphasizing structured accountability systems. Improved communication of performance outcomes is necessary to strengthen public confidence.

3.2.4 Responsiveness

The findings show very high trust in responsiveness, though timeliness in resolving issues remains a concern. These results support Hardin (2002) and Cheema (2010), emphasizing that timely service delivery is critical to trust. Operational constraints may affect consistency, requiring process improvements.

3.3 Satisfaction with Service Delivery

3.3.1 Overall Satisfaction

The results indicate a very high level of satisfaction overall, though clients reported lower satisfaction than employees. Effectiveness ranked highest, followed by efficiency, while timeliness was lowest. These findings align with Engdaw (2019) and Raham & Alzubi (2015), emphasizing service quality dimensions. Differences in perception reflect actual service experiences (Hardin, 2002).

3.3.2 Timeliness

The results show moderate satisfaction with timeliness, with delays in processing and service completion identified as concerns. These findings support Bacal (2005) and Ibrahim et al. (2016), highlighting timeliness as critical to satisfaction. Improvements in workflow and capacity are needed.

3.3.3 Efficiency

The findings indicate high satisfaction with efficiency, particularly in the use of technology, though process bottlenecks remain. These results align with Gronroos (2000) and Sullivan (2007), emphasizing streamlined processes. Reducing redundancies can further enhance service efficiency.

3.3.4 Effectiveness

The results show very high satisfaction with effectiveness, particularly in accuracy and reliability, though consistency in quality remains a concern. These findings support Badmus (2017) and Hensel (1990), emphasizing the importance of reliable service delivery. Continuous improvement is necessary to maintain consistency.

3.4 Relationship Between Adherence, Public Trust, and Satisfaction

The results reveal strong, positive, and statistically significant relationships among adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery. These findings align with Hardin (2002), Andrews & de Walle (2013), and Fujii et al. (2019), indicating that ethical behavior enhances trust and satisfaction. Improvements in one variable positively influence the others, reinforcing the interconnected nature of governance outcomes.

3.5 Differences Between Employees and Clients

The results show significant differences between employees and clients, with employees consistently reporting higher levels of adherence, trust, and satisfaction. These findings suggest that employees rely on internal knowledge, while client's base evaluations on actual service experiences. This aligns with Trust Theory (Hardin, 2002), highlighting the importance of translating internal standards into visible, client-centered service delivery to bridge perception gaps.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that DENR-CENRO demonstrates a very high level of adherence to norms of conduct, public trust,

and satisfaction with service delivery, indicating strong ethical and institutional performance. However, a consistent gap exists between employees and clients, with employees perceiving higher levels across all variables. While ethical standards are well practiced internally, they are not always equally experienced by clients, particularly in terms of timeliness and responsiveness. The findings further confirm that adherence to norms of conduct is strongly associated with both public trust and satisfaction, and that public trust is likewise strongly linked to satisfaction, demonstrating that these variables are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Overall, the results affirm that ethical behavior serves as a critical foundation for public trust and effective service delivery, while improvements in responsiveness and timeliness are necessary to align institutional performance with public expectations.

The study recommends that DENR-CENRO strengthen its policies and programs on ethical conduct, public trust, and service delivery by establishing clear service time standards aligned with existing frameworks and regularly monitoring performance. The organization should enhance employees' application of ethical standards through improved communication, proactive assistance, and continued capacity-building activities focused on responsiveness and service excellence. Improvements in frontline service systems, including streamlined processes, defined response timelines, and strengthened feedback mechanisms, are necessary to address concerns in responsiveness. Enhancing timeliness through optimized workflows, increased use of digital tools, and adequate staffing is also essential. Furthermore, bridging the gap between employee and client perceptions requires continuous client engagement through satisfaction surveys, focus group discussions, and service improvement initiatives. Future researchers are encouraged to further explore perceptual differences and examine additional factors influencing ethical behavior, public trust, and service delivery outcomes.

The study is limited to respondents from DENR-CENRO, focusing only on employees and clients within a specific operational setting, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or contexts. The use of a quantitative descriptive survey design limits the depth of explanation regarding underlying reasons behind perceptions, particularly the differences between employees and clients. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, as perceptions may not fully capture actual behavior or service performance. The study also focuses only on selected variables, namely adherence to norms of conduct, public trust, and satisfaction with service delivery, without considering other potential factors that may influence these outcomes.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest, and this study received no external funding. The researchers acknowledge the participants, including DENR-CENRO employees and clients, as well as the institution for their cooperation and support. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and only non-invasive survey methods were used. All data were treated with strict confidentiality, and no identifying information of respondents was disclosed.

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