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Good Corporate Governance, Credit Risk Management, and NPLs: A Systematic Review of Rural Banking

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Abstract**:** *This study systematically reviews empirical evidence on the relationships between Good Corporate Governance (GCG), credit risk management, and non-performing loans (NPLs), with implications for global rural banks. Guided by PRISMA 2020, the review searched Scopus using five complementary search strategies and applied quantitative empirical inclusion criteria. Following screening and deduplication, 13 studies were retained in the preliminary synthesis, pending final verification of eligibility and screening records. A qualitative thematic synthesis examined governance mechanisms, credit risk management practices, their interrelationships, and implications for rural banking. The findings reveal mixed governance effects: some board and audit committee characteristics are associated with lower NPLs, whereas other mechanisms exhibit adverse, insignificant, or context-dependent relationships. Risk-management evidence links internal ratings-based approaches to lower aggregate NPLs and risk-manager involvement to lower individual loan default rates; these outcomes are distinct. These outcomes are distinct and should not be treated as equivalent. Overall, GCG and credit risk management do not uniformly reduce NPLs; their relationships with credit quality depend on specific mechanisms, institutional contexts, implementation, and outcome measures. The review identifies priorities for future research, including integrated governance–risk management models, stronger causal identification, improved measurement of implementation quality, and broader empirical investigation across rural banking systems. The findings should be interpreted cautiously pending final verification of study eligibility and screening records.*

Keywords: non-performing loans; Good Corporate Governance; credit risk management; corporate governance; rural banks; systematic literature review

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INTRODUCTION

Banking institutions support economic activity through financial intermediation, although their lending activities expose them to credit risk. Non-performing loans (NPLs) indicate deteriorating asset quality, which can weaken profitability, constrain lending capacity, and threaten financial stability (Anwar et al., 2025; Erdinç & Gurov, 2016; Lee et al., 2022). The occurrence of NPLs is influenced by both external economic conditions and internal banking practices, particularly borrower assessment, lending decisions, loan monitoring, and problem-loan management. Good Corporate Governance (GCG) provides oversight and accountability through mechanisms such as board composition, board independence, and audit committees, while credit risk management complements these mechanisms through borrower screening, credit assessment, loan approval, portfolio monitoring, and risk control. Nevertheless, the existence of governance structures and formal risk-management policies does not necessarily guarantee improved credit outcomes, as their effectiveness depends on implementation and institutional conditions. Empirical findings remain mixed, with some studies associating stronger governance with lower NPLs, while others report adverse, insignificant, or context-dependent relationships (Adegboye et al., 2020; Hakimi, Boussaada, et al., 2025; Hakimi, Saidi, et al., 2025; Hossain et al., 2025). Similarly, credit risk-management practices may improve credit outcomes, although the findings vary according to the measures employed and the research settings (Berg, 2015; Erdinç & Gurov, 2016). Furthermore, aggregate NPL ratios should be distinguished from individual loan defaults and broader credit-quality indicators because these measures capture different dimensions of credit risk. These inconsistencies highlight the need to synthesize existing evidence on specific governance mechanisms and risk-management practices while accounting for differences in institutional contexts, outcome measurements, and research designs. This issue is particularly relevant to rural banks, as the applicability of findings from commercial banks and broader international samples remains uncertain. Previous research focusing on rural banks also emphasizes the importance of examining NPLs in relation to lending practices, credit risk, and financial performance within this specific institutional setting (Anwar et al., 2025). Accordingly, this systematic literature review addresses the following research question: How are Good Corporate Governance and credit risk management associated with NPL mitigation, and what research priorities emerge for global rural banks? To address this question, the review aims to synthesize empirical findings, identify consistent and conflicting relationships, and highlight methodological and contextual gaps in the existing literature. Its contribution lies in distinguishing governance mechanisms from operational risk-management practices, critically evaluating their reported relationships with credit quality, and identifying priorities for future research on rural banking. The remainder of this article presents the conceptual background, methodology, results and thematic synthesis, discussion, and conclusions.

Conceptual Background

Non-performing loans (NPLs) represent an important indicator of deteriorating credit quality and are influenced by macroeconomic conditions, borrower characteristics, and bank-specific lending practices (Adegboye et al., 2020). Their measurement requires careful interpretation because changes in NPL ratios may result from actual credit deterioration, loan restructuring, write-offs, or differences in loan classification practices. Furthermore, aggregate NPL ratios are conceptually distinct from individual loan defaults and other credit-quality indicators, as each measure captures different aspects of lending risk and repayment performance (Berg, 2015; Erdinç & Gurov, 2016). Therefore, this review distinguishes direct evidence concerning NPLs from findings based on related credit-quality outcomes to

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ensure that the interpretation of empirical relationships remains consistent with the indicators examined in each study. Good Corporate Governance (GCG) refers to the structures and processes through which organizations are directed, supervised, and held accountable. In banking institutions, its relevant mechanisms include board composition, board independence, meeting frequency, audit committees, and executive incentives, which may strengthen institutional oversight, improve accountability, and enhance the supervision of lending activities. Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that the relationships between individual governance mechanisms and NPLs vary across institutional settings and governance characteristics, with findings reporting negative, positive, or statistically insignificant associations (Adegboye et al., 2020; Hakimi, Boussaada, et al., 2025; Hakimi, Saidi, et al., 2025; Hossain et al., 2025). These variations suggest that governance mechanisms should be examined individually rather than treated as uniformly effective instruments for reducing NPLs, particularly because their effectiveness may depend on institutional arrangements, the quality of implementation, and the broader banking environment. Credit risk management encompasses the processes of identifying, assessing, monitoring, and controlling risks arising from lending activities. Its principal practices include borrower screening, credit assessment, collateral evaluation, loan approval, portfolio monitoring, and problem-loan management, which collectively support the prevention and control of credit deterioration. Existing empirical evidence suggests that internal ratings-based approaches are associated with lower aggregate NPLs (Erdinç & Gurov, 2016), while the involvement of risk managers in lending decisions can contribute to reducing individual loan defaults (Berg, 2015). However, these findings should be interpreted according to the specific credit-risk indicators and institutional settings examined, as improvements in individual loan repayment performance do not necessarily translate directly into reductions in aggregate NPL ratios. Moreover, the adoption of formal risk-management policies alone does not guarantee better credit outcomes because their effectiveness depends on implementation, institutional capacity, and the consistency of monitoring and control procedures. Governance and credit risk management represent complementary but conceptually distinct dimensions of banking operations. Governance establishes the institutional framework for oversight, supervision, and accountability, whereas credit risk management translates these responsibilities into operational procedures and controls governing lending activities. Although existing studies examine governance mechanisms and risk-management practices as relevant factors influencing credit quality, their combined effects on NPLs remain insufficiently established (Adegboye et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2025). Governance mechanisms may influence credit quality directly through lending oversight and decision-making or indirectly by supporting the implementation and effectiveness of internal risk controls. Nevertheless, potential mediation, moderation, and combined causal relationships between governance and credit risk management should not be presumed unless they have been explicitly examined and empirically tested. Consequently, understanding how these two dimensions interact remains an important research priority, particularly for rural banking institutions operating under different institutional and operational conditions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) to identify, screen, and synthesize empirical evidence on GCG, credit risk management, and NPLs, following PRISMA 2020 principles (Page et al., 2021). Rather than conducting bibliometric analysis, it examines study characteristics, governance mechanisms, risk-management practices, research methods, and credit-quality outcomes. Findings are synthesized by direction and

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statistical significance, considering differences in outcome measures and institutional contexts.

Literature Search Strategy

Scopus was used as the principal database. Five complementary search strategies targeted NPLs and credit quality (Query 1), corporate governance (Query 2), risk management (Query 3), their integration (Query 4), and rural banking (Query 5). The queries combined relevant keywords using Boolean operators and were applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords.

The five searches retrieved 13,959 records in total before deduplication. Because the searches overlap, the total represents records retrieved rather than unique studies. Because the queries overlapped, this total does not represent unique studies. The search strategy was designed to capture empirical evidence on governance, credit risk management, and NPL mitigation. The final review should verify search dates, database filters, query-specific counts, and exported records to ensure reproducibility.

Table 1. Scopus Search Strategies

Search query	Search focus	Records retrieved
Q1	NPLs and credit quality	9,777
Q2	Corporate governance	324
Q3	Risk management	3,696
Q4	Integration of GCG and risk management	58
Q5	Rural banking	104
Total	Records before deduplication	13,959

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were eligible if they were English-language, peer-reviewed quantitative empirical articles examining governance mechanisms and/or risk-management practices in relation to NPLs or related credit-quality outcomes in banking. Articles also had to provide sufficient information on research context, variables, methods, and findings.

Conceptual papers, qualitative studies, literature reviews, duplicate records, and studies lacking an empirically tested relationship with relevant credit outcomes were excluded. Studies focusing solely on bank performance or financial distress without a meaningful link to credit quality were also excluded.

Outcomes were classified as direct NPL evidence when measured using aggregate NPL ratios, or as related evidence when examining individual loan defaults or broader loan-quality indicators. Institutional contexts were coded separately to distinguish findings across banking systems and avoid assuming that results from other institutions necessarily apply to rural banks.

Screening and Selection Procedure

Study selection followed four stages: identification, deduplication, title-and-abstract screening, and eligibility assessment. The five Scopus queries retrieved 13,959 records. After removing 3,959 initial duplicates, 10,000 records remained. Title-and-abstract screening excluded 7,810 records, leaving 2,190. A further 46 duplicate EIDs were removed, resulting in 2,144 records for subsequent assessment. Of these, 2,131 records were excluded, leaving 13 studies in the preliminary synthesis. These counts must be reconciled with the screening log and full-text eligibility records.

The selection counts must be reconciled with the Scopus exports and screening log before finalizing the PRISMA flow diagram. Full-text eligibility, study characteristics, outcome definitions, and statistical findings should also be verified against the original articles.

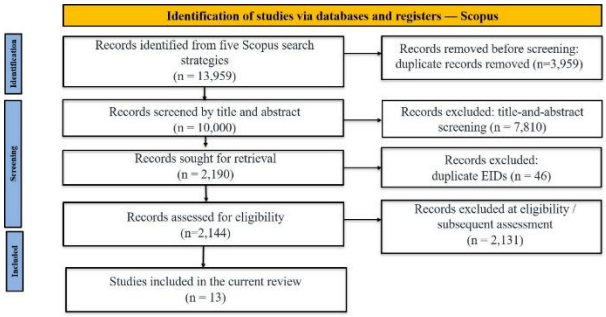


Figure 1. Prisma

Data Extraction and Methodological Assessment

A structured framework was used to extract study characteristics, research methods, institutional contexts, governance and risk-management factors, and key findings (Table 2). The synthesis distinguished aggregate NPL measures from related credit-quality outcomes and recorded the direction and statistical significance of reported relationships.

Methodological assessment considered research design, variable measurement, sample adequacy, analytical

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methods, and potential endogeneity or reverse causality. Unverified study details were flagged, and interpretations were qualified where evidence was insufficient.

Synthesis Approach

A qualitative thematic synthesis examined four themes: governance mechanisms and NPLs, credit risk management and NPLs, their interrelationship, and implications for global rural banks. Studies were compared by context, variables, methods, outcome measures, and findings, classified as negative, positive, insignificant, mixed, or context-dependent associations with NPLs. Related credit-quality outcomes were distinguished from aggregate NPL measures. The synthesis also considered endogeneity, reverse causality, and other factors that limit causal interpretation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

The 13 studies provisionally included in this review cover diverse banking systems and employ various quantitative methods, including panel regression, Generalized Method of Moments (GMM), instrumental-variable approaches, and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). These studies examine different corporate governance mechanisms, such as board composition, audit committees, ownership structures, and executive incentives, alongside credit risk-management practices, including internal ratings-based approaches and risk-manager involvement in lending decisions. The reviewed studies differ in institutional contexts, analytical methods, sample characteristics, and credit-quality measurements, which limits their direct comparability. Consequently, their findings should be interpreted according to the specific governance mechanisms, risk-management practices, and credit-quality outcomes examined rather than being generalized into a single overall effect of Good Corporate Governance (GCG) and credit risk management on non-performing loans (NPLs).

Governance Mechanisms and NPLs

The reviewed studies indicate that the relationship between Good Corporate Governance (GCG) and non-performing loans (NPLs) varies according to the governance mechanisms examined and the institutional settings in which banks operate. Some studies suggest that stronger governance structures and more effective board oversight are associated with lower NPLs. Adegboye et al. (2020), for example, report a negative association between an overall corporate governance index and NPLs in Nigerian banks, indicating that stronger governance may contribute to improved credit quality. Similarly, Nurkhin et al. (2024) find that GCG scores and independent commissioners are associated with lower NPLs among Indonesian commercial banks. Evidence concerning board independence is also reported by Hakimi, Saidi, et al. (2025), who identify a negative association between board independence and NPLs in banks across MENA countries. Furthermore, Badru et al. (2026) find that higher proportions of non-executive directors and female representation on audit committees are associated with lower NPLs, suggesting that board diversity and independent oversight may contribute to stronger monitoring of lending activities.

However, the effectiveness of governance mechanisms is not uniform across studies. Hakimi, Saidi, et al. (2025) report that although board independence, female representation, and remuneration are associated with lower NPLs, board size, board tenure, and CEO duality are associated with higher NPLs. Similarly, Hakimi, Boussaada, et al. (2025) identify a positive association between board-member compensation and NPLs, while board-specific skills moderate this relationship, with differences across regional contexts. These findings suggest that executive incentives and board capabilities may influence governance effectiveness differently depending on institutional arrangements and regional characteristics. In contrast, Kartika et al. (2022) report that audit committee characteristics,

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CEO duality, and independent commissioners do not have statistically significant direct effects on NPLs, indicating that the formal presence of governance structures does not necessarily translate into measurable improvements in credit quality. Other findings also highlight potential adverse governance-related relationships, as Lee et al. (2022) identify positive associations between directors' share collateralization, related-party transactions, and NPLs, suggesting that potential conflicts of interest and weaknesses in governance practices may contribute to increased credit risk.

Evidence concerning audit committee characteristics and board oversight also demonstrates considerable variation. Badru et al. (2026) report that non-executive representation and female participation are associated with lower NPLs, whereas financial expertise and committee size are statistically insignificant. Hossain et al. (2025) find that board meeting frequency and audit committee size significantly predict NPLs, although the direction of these relationships requires confirmation from the full text. Meanwhile, Kartika et al. (2022) identify no statistically significant direct relationship between the examined audit committee characteristics and NPLs. Nurkhin et al. (2024) also report that board of directors' meeting frequency is associated with higher NPLs, while board of commissioners' meeting frequency is statistically insignificant. These variations indicate that the frequency of board meetings and the formal composition of audit committees may not adequately represent the actual quality of institutional oversight and monitoring.

Furthermore, governance effectiveness appears to depend on bank size and institutional characteristics. Tarchouna et al. (2017) report that corporate governance is associated with lower NPLs in smaller banks, although its ability to constrain excessive risk-taking is less consistent among medium-sized and large banks. Similarly, Tarchouna et al. (2022) demonstrate that the relationship between governance and loan quality varies across bank-size categories, indicating that governance mechanisms may operate differently depending on institutional scale, liquidity conditions, and lending practices. These findings reinforce the argument that governance effectiveness should not be generalized across all banking institutions. Moreover, the observed relationships do not necessarily establish causality because governance arrangements may also change in response to deteriorating credit quality.

Overall, the empirical evidence indicates that GCG may contribute to NPL mitigation, but its effectiveness depends on the specific governance mechanism, institutional characteristics, and implementation practices. Independent oversight, board diversity, and overall governance quality demonstrate potentially beneficial relationships with credit quality in several studies, whereas board compensation, board size, tenure, CEO duality, and certain governance-related practices produce mixed or adverse findings. These results address the review question by demonstrating that governance mechanisms are relevant to NPL mitigation but do not provide uniformly positive outcomes. They also highlight the importance of examining how governance arrangements operate within global rural banks, where institutional characteristics, organizational structures, and lending practices may differ from those of larger commercial banks.

Credit Risk Management and NPLs

The reviewed studies identify two credit risk-management practices associated with improvements in credit quality, namely the adoption of internal ratings-based (IRB) approaches and the involvement of risk managers in loan origination. Erdinç and Gurov (2016), using dynamic panel-data GMM estimation across European banking systems, find that greater adoption and intensity of IRB approaches are associated with a statistically significant decrease in aggregate NPLs during the post-crisis period. This finding suggests that more structured and systematic credit-risk assessment approaches may strengthen banks' ability to evaluate borrower creditworthiness, identify potential credit deterioration, and control lending risks. In a different institutional setting, Berg (2015) examines approximately 75,000 retail mortgage applications and reports

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that risk-manager involvement in loan origination is associated with a relative reduction of more than 50% in individual loan default rates. The study employs regression discontinuity, instrumental-variable, and difference-in-differences approaches, providing evidence of the importance of independent risk assessment and risk-manager participation in lending decisions.

These findings suggest that structured credit-risk assessment and independent risk-manager involvement may improve lending quality and reduce credit-related losses. Nevertheless, the two studies examine different outcome measures and analytical levels, which means their findings should not be directly equated. Erdinç and Gurov (2016) focus on aggregate NPLs at the banking-system level, whereas Berg (2015) examine individual loan default rates within a retail mortgage setting. Furthermore, the current synthesis does not establish direct empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of early warning systems, post-disbursement monitoring, and loan recovery practices. Consequently, further research is necessary to examine how these operational risk-management mechanisms influence default prevention, NPL formation, and the resolution of existing problem loans, particularly in global rural banking institutions.

Integrating Governance and Risk Management

Good Corporate Governance and credit risk management represent complementary but conceptually distinct dimensions of banking operations. Governance establishes institutional oversight, accountability, and supervisory responsibilities, whereas credit risk management translates these responsibilities into operational procedures for identifying, assessing, monitoring, and controlling credit exposure. The reviewed evidence suggests that both dimensions are relevant to credit quality, although their relationships with NPLs are not equally established. Adegboye et al. (2020), for instance, find that corporate governance and banking regulation are separately associated with lower NPLs. However, banking regulation should not be interpreted as an internal credit risk-management practice because the reported findings do not establish a specific operational risk-management mechanism.

Other reviewed studies predominantly examine governance mechanisms or credit risk-management practices separately. Consequently, the available empirical evidence does not sufficiently establish whether credit risk management mediates the relationship between GCG and NPLs or whether stronger governance enhances the effectiveness of internal risk-management practices. Governance may directly influence credit quality through lending oversight and accountability or indirectly support the implementation of operational risk controls by strengthening institutional supervision. Similarly, risk-manager involvement may improve the quality of lending decisions when supported by appropriate governance arrangements. Nevertheless, these potential relationships remain propositions rather than established empirical conclusions because mediation, moderation, and combined causal effects have not been sufficiently demonstrated in the reviewed studies. Future research should therefore develop and empirically test integrated models to determine whether governance directly influences credit quality, facilitates the implementation of risk controls, or strengthens the involvement of risk managers in lending decisions, particularly within global rural banks.

Methodological and Contextual Research Gaps

The synthesis of the reviewed studies identifies several methodological and contextual gaps that require further investigation. First, the existing literature provides limited integration of GCG and credit risk management within a single empirical framework. Most studies examine governance mechanisms or operational risk-management practices separately, making it difficult to determine their combined relationships with NPLs (Berg, 2015; Erdinç & Gurov, 2016; Adegboye et al., 2020). Future research should develop integrated models that examine how governance structures and credit risk-management practices jointly relate to credit quality and NPL mitigation.

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Second, empirical findings concerning board characteristics remain inconsistent. Relationships involving board independence, remuneration, board composition, meeting frequency, and CEO duality vary across institutional settings and research designs (Hakimi, Boussaada, et al., 2025; Hakimi, Saidi, et al., 2025; Nurkhin et al., 2024). Similarly, audit committee findings differ according to committee composition, size, meeting frequency, and financial expertise (Badru et al., 2026; Hossain et al., 2025; Kartika et al., 2022). These inconsistencies indicate the need to distinguish formal governance structures from actual oversight effectiveness and to examine individual governance mechanisms rather than treating GCG as a uniform construct.

Third, differences in credit-quality outcome measurements present challenges for cross-study comparisons. Berg (2015) examines individual loan defaults, whereas Erdinç and Gurov (2016) investigate aggregate NPLs at the banking-system level. Because these indicators represent different analytical levels and dimensions of credit risk, future research should clearly distinguish loan-level default outcomes from bank-level and system-level NPL measurements. In addition, methodological differences across the reviewed studies, including GMM estimation, instrumental-variable approaches, and quasi-experimental designs, indicate varying capacities to address endogeneity and support causal interpretation (Berg, 2015; Erdinç & Gurov, 2016; Adegboye et al., 2020). Future studies should therefore strengthen their identification strategies, justify instrumental variables, and transparently report robustness checks and diagnostic tests.

Fourth, the reviewed literature provides limited rural-bank-specific evidence because most studies focus on commercial banks, listed banks, or broader banking systems. Consequently, the direct applicability of existing findings to rural banking institutions remains uncertain. Rural banks may operate under different institutional arrangements, organizational capacities, lending structures, and borrower characteristics, requiring empirical investigations that explicitly account for these conditions. Fifth, direct evidence concerning selected operational credit risk-management practices remains limited. The two studies identified in this synthesis primarily examine IRB approaches and risk-manager involvement in lending decisions rather than directly establishing the effects of early warning systems, post-disbursement monitoring, and loan recovery practices (Berg, 2015; Erdinç & Gurov, 2016). Future research should investigate how these operational mechanisms influence loan defaults, NPL formation, and the recovery of problem loans.

Finally, governance effectiveness remains context-dependent, particularly across different bank sizes and regional environments (Tarchouna et al., 2017, 2022; Hakimi, Boussaada, et al., 2025; Hakimi, Saidi, et al., 2025). These findings suggest that institutional characteristics, regulatory conditions, and organizational scale may influence the relationship between governance and credit quality. Therefore, future empirical studies should examine the interaction between bank size, regional context, regulatory environments, and individual governance mechanisms while also assessing the actual implementation of governance and risk-management practices. Addressing these research gaps through integrated theoretical frameworks, stronger empirical identification strategies, and context-specific investigations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of NPL mitigation and provide a stronger evidence base for improving credit quality in global rural banking institutions..

Discussion

This review indicates that Good Corporate Governance (GCG) and credit risk management are relevant to NPL mitigation, but their relationships with credit outcomes vary across mechanisms and institutional settings. The findings do not support the assumption that all governance arrangements or risk-management practices consistently reduce NPLs.

Governance evidence is mixed. Board oversight and audit committee characteristics are associated with lower NPLs in some studies

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(Adegboye et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2025), whereas other studies report adverse, insignificant, or context-dependent relationships (Hakimi, Boussaada, et al., 2025; Hakimi, Saidi, et al., 2025; Kartika et al., 2022). These differences suggest that governance effectiveness depends on specific mechanisms and their implementation. Moreover, observed associations do not necessarily indicate causation, as governance arrangements may respond to deteriorating credit quality.

Risk-management findings provide complementary evidence. Erdinç & Gurov (2016) associate internal ratings-based approaches with lower aggregate NPLs, while Berg (2015) finds that risk-manager involvement reduces individual loan defaults. However, these outcomes are not equivalent, and the findings cannot establish that all risk-management practices have similar effects.

Integrating governance and risk management is therefore an important research direction. Governance may establish accountability for lending decisions, while risk management translates oversight into operational controls. Nevertheless, the reviewed evidence does not establish a tested mediation pathway through which governance improves NPL outcomes by strengthening risk management. This relationship requires direct empirical investigation.

Credit outcomes are also shaped by external conditions, including regulation, macroeconomic circumstances, and borrower characteristics. These factors should be considered when assessing governance and risk-management effectiveness. Methodologically, future studies should define NPL measures precisely, distinguish formal structures from implementation quality, and address endogeneity and reverse causality through appropriate research designs.

For global rural banks, the findings offer candidate mechanisms for further investigation rather than definitive conclusions. Much of the current evidence comes from commercial banks and broader banking samples; its applicability to rural banks remains uncertain. Future research should test how governance arrangements, operational credit controls, and institutional characteristics jointly relate to NPLs.

Overall, this review contributes by distinguishing mechanism-specific findings from broader assumptions about governance and risk management. Stronger evidence requires integrated empirical models, clearly defined credit outcomes, and research conducted in the institutional settings to which the conclusions are intended to apply.

CONCLUSIONS

This systematic literature review synthesizes evidence on the relationships between Good Corporate Governance (GCG), credit risk management, and non-performing loans (NPLs), focusing on implications for global rural banks. The findings show mixed governance effects: some board and audit committee characteristics are associated with lower NPLs, while others exhibit adverse, insignificant, or context-dependent relationships. Risk-management evidence associates internal ratings-based approaches with lower aggregate NPLs and risk-manager involvement with lower individual loan default rate. Overall, GCG and credit risk management do not uniformly reduce NPLs. Their effectiveness depends on specific mechanisms, institutional contexts, implementation, and outcome measures. Although governance and risk management are complementary, their combined effects and causal pathways remain insufficiently established

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