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**Reconceptualizing Strategy Implementation in Devolved Governance: An Integrated
Governance Systems Perspective**

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Reconceptualizing Strategy Implementation in Devolved Governance: An Integrated Governance Systems Perspective



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Abstract

Purpose: This study reconceptualizes strategy implementation in devolved governance as a mediated governance process rather than a linear administrative function, developing and validating an Integrated Governance Systems Framework that explains how institutional systems, transformational leadership, operational capacity, stakeholder coordination, and sociocultural conditions interact to shape social service delivery outcomes.

Methodology: The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design guided by pragmatism in Isiolo County, Kenya. Quantitative data were collected from 395 household respondents, and qualitative insights from 19 purposively selected key informants, using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using Exploratory Factor Analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analysis, and Structural Equation Modelling (SPSS 29, AMOS 26); qualitative data were analyzed thematically and integrated to explain the contextual mechanisms underlying implementation and service delivery outcomes.

Findings: Strategy implementation operates through mediated, context-dependent pathways rather than the direct effects of isolated factors. Transformational leadership had a weak but significant indirect effect on service delivery through operational capacity ($\beta = 0.117$, $p = .050$). Operational capacity was the central implementation mechanism, significantly predicting education and health outcomes ($\beta = 0.414$, $p < .001$) but not WASH outcomes ($\beta = -0.007$, $p = .900$). Sociocultural factors significantly impacted education and health ($\beta = 0.347$, $p < .001$) and WASH outcomes ($\beta = 0.223$, $p < .001$). This confirmed that effective implementation depends on the interplay of institutional, operational and contextual governance systems.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study contributes to the theory of strategy implementation by developing and validating an Integrated Governance Systems Framework that moves away from linear, leadership-centered explanations to inter-connected governance pathways, by integrating the Institutional, Transformational Leadership, Infrastructure-Led Development, Resource Dependence, Stakeholder, Social Constructionism and Public Value theories. The study recommends improving operational capacity, institutional coordination, infrastructure systems, and sociocultural responsiveness for better citizen-centered public value outcomes.

Keywords: Strategy Implementation, Devolved Governance, Institutional Systems, Operational Capacity, Public Value

JEL Classification Codes: H11, H70, O201

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INTRODUCTION

County governments in Kenya prepare County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) to meet the constitutional requirements for better service delivery to the public. The Controller of Budget (2023) and the Office of the Auditor-General (2022) report implementation gaps in many counties despite the existence of well-articulated development plans. In particular, strategic priorities have not been translated into accessible, reliable and responsive public services. This paradox of implementation is an example of the fact that the real challenge of devolved governance is not so much in the formulation of strategic plans but the effective operationalization of these plans through coordinated governance systems. Hence, there is a need for a better understanding of the governance mechanisms that facilitate the translation of strategic intentions into measurable development outcomes to improve public service delivery.

This is particularly relevant in the context of devolved public administration whereby implementation entails the coordination of several governance actors, institutional arrangements, operational resources and contextual conditions beyond the execution of pre-determined plans (George, 2021; Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Al-Hashimi et al., 2022; Bukoye & Abdulrahman, 2023). They are different from private organizations in that county governments operate in politically contested, institutionally complex, and resource-constrained settings. In that sense, planning, budgeting, implementation and accountability in this institution require continuous interactions between national governments, county administrations, development partners and local communities (George et al., 2019; Peters, 2019; O'Flynn, 2021). Thus, failed implementation is often a symptom of poor governance processes and institutional coordination rather than poor strategic planning as such.

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya created forty-seven county governments and mandated them to implement devolved functions through County Integrated Development Plans (Government of Kenya, 2010, Government of Kenya, 2013). Consequently, devolution has had the effect of increasing citizen engagement, local accountability and decentralized planning. However, national oversight reports still show large disparities in implementation performance across counties. These variations are due to poor coordination of institutions, bottlenecks in operational capacity, gaps in infrastructure and challenges in financial management as supported by the Controller of Budget, (2023) and the Office of the Auditor-General, (2022).

This poses even a more difficult implementation challenges in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) due to geographical dispersion, fiscal dependence, infrastructural constraints and diverse socio-cultural contexts which make it even harder to translate strategic priorities into better public service delivery.

Isiolo County is an example of the challenges of implementation. Being an ASAL County, the County is challenged by infrastructure, administrative capacity, fiscal resources and sociocultural diversity that hinder effective implementation of County Integrated Development Plans despite successive planning cycles (Isiolo County Government CIDP, 2018-2022; Isiolo County Government CIDP, 2023-2027). There has been no sustained public investment and policy interventions to address inequalities in access, reliability and responsiveness of education, health and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services delivery (KNBS, 2023; Kenya Health Sector Performance Report, 2022; WASREB, 2023). In addition, extant literature indicate that implementation outcomes have largely been associated with leadership, infrastructure, resource allocation, stakeholder engagement and organizational capacity (Ali et al., 2021; Lelegwe, 2022; Gikuni, 2023). Yet, most of the literature analyzes these determinants

in isolation, and provides piecemeal accounts of how county governments operationalize strategic intentions into public value in complex devolved governance systems.

Thus, this study conceptualizes strategy implementation in devolved governance as a mediated governance process and not a linear administrative activity. It develops and empirically validates an Integrated Governance Systems Framework that explains how institutional systems, transformational leadership, operational capacity and sociocultural conditions interact to influence social service delivery outcomes in Isiolo County, Kenya. Guided primarily by Institutional Theory and complemented by Transformational Leadership Theory, Infrastructure-Led Development Theory, Resource Dependence Theory, Stakeholder Theory, Social Constructionism Theory and Public Value Theory, the study contributes to strategic management and public administration by moving beyond conventional linear implementation models towards an integrated governance systems perspective that better explains strategy implementation within devolved governance contexts.

Research objective

The study sought to reconceptualize strategy implementation in devolved governance as a mediated governance process by developing and empirically validating an Integrated Governance Systems Framework. Specifically, the study examined the influence of transformational leadership on operational capacity, the mediating role of operational capacity in social service delivery outcomes, and the influence of sociocultural factors within the context of Isiolo County, Kenya.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does transformational leadership influence social service delivery outcomes through operational capacity in Isiolo County's devolved governance system?
2. To what extent does operational capacity predict social service delivery outcomes in devolved governance systems?
3. How do sociocultural factors influence social service delivery outcomes in devolved governance systems?
4. How can strategy implementation in devolved governance be reconceptualized as an integrated, mediated governance system rather than a linear administrative process?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it addresses a critical gap in the extant research on strategy implementation, i.e., accounting for implementation effectiveness by isolated organizational factors rather than interrelated governance mechanisms. The study provides a more integrated understanding of the translation of strategies into public service outputs empirically investigating the linkages between transformational leadership, operational capacity, institutional conditions, and sociocultural responsiveness.

It also has practical value to policymakers and county governments in providing evidence for designing context-sensitive implementation approaches in marginalized and resource-constrained settings. The study contributes to enhancing the devolved governance performance and improving the delivery of education, health and WASH services by validating an Integrated Governance Systems Framework in an ASAL county.

Statement of the Problem

The principal objective of Kenya's devolved system of governance is to improve citizen's well-being through equitable, accessible and responsive public service delivery as stipulated in the Constitution (2010). County governments are constitutionally mandated to deliver key devolved functions including health, Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) as provided under the Fourth Schedule of the Constitution of Kenya (2010). These sectors were selected for this study because they constitute core county government responsibilities and directly influence human development outcomes, particularly within Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs), where geographical, infrastructural and socio-economic challenges intensify service delivery demands (Government of Kenya, 2010; Government of Kenya, 2013).

Despite the existence of institutional frameworks and successive County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), evidence suggests that the principal challenge confronting county governments is not the formulation of development priorities but the effective implementation of strategic plans into measurable public service outcomes. Isiolo County exemplifies this implementation challenge in that successive CIDPs have prioritized improvements in education, health and WASH services yet substantial service delivery gaps persist. In education, primary school enrolment remains at 68% compared with the national average of 82%, secondary school enrolment stands at only 17% compared with the national average of 56%, while adult literacy is 49% against the national average of 86%. Furthermore, the current teacher shortages only add to the challenges of ECDE and secondary teacher-pupil ratios of 1:55 and 1:65 respectively, collectively constraining the provision of quality education services (KNBS, 2023; KDHS, 2022; Koko & Moi, 2024).

Similar implementation gaps are evident in the WASH and health sectors. In WASH, only 46% of schools have reliable water supplies, while approximately 4,000 residents lack access to safe water due to non-functional boreholes and only 18% of the population has access to piped water. Consequently, about 47% of residents depend on unsafe or intermittent water sources (Isiolo County Government, 2023).

In addition, only 45% of rural water points are functional, and improved sanitation coverage remains low at 29% of households (Nyambane et al., 2022; Laolang et al., 2022; WASREB, 2023). Similarly, health service delivery continues to face critical human resource constraints, with an estimated doctor-to-population ratio of 1:17,000, limiting the accessibility and quality of healthcare services. Moreover, variations in facility-based deliveries, immunization coverage and maternal health care utilization indicate the continuing challenges in access, availability and responsiveness of devolved health services (KNBS, 2023; CADP, 2024-2025).

These sectoral challenges are superimposed on challenges of governance and implementation. As at the end of December 2023, Isiolo County has absorbed KSh. 169.1 million of its KSh. 868.2 million development budgets, representing a development expenditure absorption rate of 19 %. The poor performance was attributed to delays in procurement and disbursement of funds which the Isiolo County Fiscal Strategy Paper (2024) attributed to institutional and administrative bottlenecks that constrained implementation. The Auditor-General's Report (2023/2024) further reflects these implementation challenges as only 117 out of the 191 budgeted development projects were completed while 25 were ongoing and 49 had not commenced denying citizens services and goods valued at approximately KSh. 1.31 billion. These findings generally reflect broader concerns in Kenya's devolved system of government

where high recurrent expenditure and poor implementation of development budgets continue to hinder long-term infrastructure investment and service delivery.

Implementation effectiveness is also affected by governance and contextual conditions. For instance, there is still low level of citizen engagement and stakeholder participation which affects accountability, legitimacy and collaborative implementation in county governments (KIPPRRA, 2018; Orina et al., 2023). Governance challenges are compounded by socio-cultural issues such as gender norms, early marriage, female genital mutilation and pastoralist mobility which affect access to and use of education, health and WASH services in Isiolo County whereby within ASAL counties, 22% of girls are married early relative to 12% nationally. More so, in the neighboring counties of Isiolo and Marsabit where the prevalence of FGM among girls is 90-97%, access and use of public services is still determined by socio-cultural factors (Kisiangani et al., 2020; KNBS, 2022; Ministry of Health, 2022).

Although previous studies have examined the influence of transformational leadership, infrastructure, resource allocation, stakeholder engagement and organizational capacity on implementation performance (Ali et al., 2021; Lelegwe, 2022; Gikuni, 2023), these factors have largely been investigated as independent determinants of implementation outcomes. Consequently, existing literature provides limited explanation of how governance mechanisms interact to translate strategic intentions into improved public services, particularly in marginalized ASAL counties. Specifically, insufficient empirical attention has been given to how transformational leadership strengthens operational capacity, how operational capacity mediates the achievement of service delivery outcomes, and how sociocultural conditions shape the effectiveness and contextual relevance of implementation processes. This study develops and validates an Integrated Governance Systems Framework reconceptualizing strategy implementation as a mediated and contextualized governance process in Isiolo County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Strategy implementation within devolved governance is a multidimensional governance process shaped by institutional arrangements, leadership processes, operational capabilities, stakeholder interactions and sociocultural contexts. Operational capacity is the key mechanism within this process that translates strategic intentions into effective service delivery outcomes (George, 2021; Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Peters, 2019). Thus, there is no one theory that adequately explains the dynamics of strategy implementation in county governments.

To avoid conceptual fragmentation and theoretical overcrowding, this study applies an integrated theoretical framework based on Institutional Theory and supported by six complementary theories that explain specific mechanisms influencing strategy implementation. Institutional Theory provides an overarching lens of governance. It looks at the effect of formal rules, institutional norms and governance arrangements on implementation processes. Transformational Leadership Theory is used to explain the mechanisms by which leadership triggers organizational commitment and strategic coordination in this institutional context. Infrastructure-Led Development Theory and Resource Dependence Theory explain how operational capacity is developed through infrastructure investment, resource mobilization and administrative capability. While Stakeholder Theory explains joint governance of multiple actors in implementation.

Social Constructionism Theory explains how sociocultural norms and community interpretations influence the acceptance and utilization of public interventions. Finally, Public Value Theory offers the outcome perspective by explaining how effective implementation must finally improve the welfare of citizens by improving the delivery of social services. These theories together conceptualize strategy implementation as an integrated governance system in which institutional structures, leadership, operational capacity and stakeholder collaboration generate implementation capabilities, while sociocultural factors influence the extent to which these capabilities are translated into improved social service delivery outcomes.

Institutional Theory: Strategic Implementation's Governance Foundations

The main theoretical basis of this study is based on the Institutional Theory as it provides insights into how formal institutions, governance arrangements, regulatory frames and socially accepted norms impact organizational behavior and implementation outcomes. The theory that has been developed by Meyer and Rowan (1977), and extended by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Scott (2004) and Peters (2019), states that organizations operate within institutional environments that influence their legitimacy, decision-making, accountability and organizational performance.

Institutions, as defined by Scott (2004), are based on three mutually reinforcing pillars. The first is the regulatory pillar, which relates to formal rules and legal frameworks. The second is the normative pillar, which is based on the shared professional values and expectations of the organization. Third, there is the cultural-cognitive pillar which consists of taken-for-granted beliefs and routines in organizations that influence behavior. These institutional pillars affect the way organizations develop strategy, allocate resources, coordinate the execution of activities and gain legitimacy as organizations.

This means that organizations with similar strategic plans might have very different implementation results depending on the coordination between institutions, the governance arrangements in place and the organizational capabilities (George, 2021; Backhaus & Vogel, 2022; Al-Hashimi et al., 2022). Institutional Theory is relevant in the context of devolved governance system in Kenya in that, county governments are governed by common constitutional and legislative frameworks that inform the preparation and implementation of County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) (Government of Kenya, 2010; Government of Kenya, 2013). In spite of these common institutional arrangements, counties performance in terms of implementation continues to differ, indicating that formal structures do not necessarily lead to effective implementation. Rather, how well implementation works out is contingent on the intersection of governance conditions, leadership processes, operational capacity and contextual factors (Office of the Auditor-General, 2022; Controller of Budget, 2023). The study therefore positions institutional arrangements as the overarching governance framework that sets the context within which transformational leadership and operational capacity act as the tools for translating strategic intentions into improved service delivery outcomes.

Transformational Leadership Theory – Alignment and Coordination of Strategy

The impact of leaders on organizational performance can be explained by way of the Transformational Leadership Theory in motivating followers and inspiring vision, innovation and commitment to organizational goals (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Riggio & Bass, 2006). Transformational leaders facilitate implementation by aligning members of an organization around strategic priorities, improving communication, promoting collaboration and creating a

shared commitment to achieve public goals. Ongoing coordination is required between county executives, administrators, elected leaders, national government agencies, development partners and local communities to implement within devolved governance systems. Therefore, transformational leadership plays a key role in enabling strategic alignment, improving inter-organizational coordination and increasing institutional collaboration.

Empirical evidence increasingly associates transformational leadership with improved implementation effectiveness, organizational learning and stakeholder engagement within public institutions (Onyango, 2024; Hyera & Rutenge, 2025). Contrary to traditional leadership models, the current study does not conceptualize transformational leadership as a direct predictor of social service delivery but as an enabling governance mechanism. Leadership creates the conditions under which organizations mobilize resources, strengthen administrative systems, coordinate implementation processes and develop operational capacity. Accordingly, the influence of transformational leadership on social service delivery is expected to occur indirectly through operational capacity within the broader institutional environment.

Resource Dependence Theory and Infrastructure-Led Development Theory: Foundations of Operational Capacity

Operational capacity represents the central implementation mechanism within the Integrated Governance Systems Framework. The conceptualization of the framework draws on two theories: Resource Dependence Theory and Infrastructure-Led Development Theory. Together the two theories explain the role of organizational resources and infrastructure on the effective implementation of strategy.

Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) states that organizations rely on financial resources, human capital, technology and inter-organizational relationships to meet strategic goals.

Adequate and fair transfers, locally generated revenue, technical expertise, information systems and partnerships with development actors are needed by county governments for effective delivery of devolved services. Hence, governance arrangements that improve the mobilization, coordination and utilization of resources, enhance operational capacity and improve implementation performance (Controller of Budget, 2023);

Infrastructure-Led Development Theory emphasizes that sustainable development depends upon adequate physical, technological and administrative infrastructure capable of supporting economic and social transformation (Aschauer, 1989; Calderón & Servén, 2010). Devolved governance infrastructure includes schools, health facilities, water facilities, information technologies and administrative platforms to enable service delivery.

County governments therefore prioritize infrastructure investment through successive County Integrated Development Plans because implementation effectiveness depends substantially upon the availability and quality of implementation infrastructure (Isiolo County Government CIDP, 2018–2022; Isiolo County Government CIDP, 2023–2027). Infrastructure alone, however, does not guarantee implementation success.

Collectively, these theories conceptualize operational capacity as the organizational capability through which institutional arrangements and transformational leadership are translated into effective implementation. Thus, operational capacity mediates the relationship between governance processes and social service delivery outcomes through the integration of financial resources, infrastructure, administrative systems, human capital and technological capabilities.

Stakeholder Theory: Governance Through Collaboration

Stakeholder Theory, developed by Freeman (1984), argues that the success of any organization depends on identifying and actively engaging those individuals and groups who either affect or are affected by the decisions made within an organization. Strategy implementation in public administration is a continuous interaction between government agencies, citizens, civil society organizations, development partners and political actors whose collective actions influence implementation outcomes.

Kenya's devolved governance framework provides for institutionalization of citizen participation in planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring (Government of Kenya, 2010; Government of Kenya, 2013). Meaningful stakeholder engagement improves the legitimacy, accountability, responsiveness and collective ownership of development programmes by organizations (Bryson et al., 2014; Muwonge et al., 2022).

Instead of a procedural requirement of stakeholder participation, the study conceptualizes stakeholder collaboration as a dynamic governance mechanism co-constituting implementation processes between government institutions and communities. Through continued discussion, shared learning and teamwork in problem solving, implementation strategies can become more attuned to the priorities and actual conditions of the local community. The qualitative data results confirmed the relevance of stakeholder engagement as a contextual governance mechanism that affected the implementation process.

Social Constructivism Theory- Sociocultural Responsiveness

The Social Constructionism Theory states that social realities are constructed through shared meanings, cultural values and collective interpretations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The outcomes of implementation are thus not just a function of administrative procedures but also of how communities read, interpret and respond to government interventions.

This is especially true in ASAL counties where the uptake and use of public services are largely determined by cultural practices, religious beliefs, pastoralist livelihoods, gender relations and traditional social structures. Hence, the sociocultural conditions may facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of implementation despite the huge institutional investments (Karama, 2021; Nyambane et al., 2022).

The Social Constructionism Theory serves as the foundation for understanding the sociocultural factors as a contextual governance mechanism that influences the degree to which governance interventions are accepted, adopted, and translated into better service delivery outcomes in this study. Instead of functioning as a stand-alone implementation driver, sociocultural factors affect the effectiveness of leadership, operational capacity and institutional arrangements by influencing their alignment with community values, norms and lived realities.

Public Value Theory – The Outcome Perspective

The normative basis for assessing implementation outcomes is the Public Value Theory proposed by Moore (1995). This theory states that the primary mission of public organizations is to generate value by increasing the welfare of citizens. Unlike traditional public administration approaches, which focus on procedural compliance, Public Value Theory assesses government performance by the extent to which public institutions enhance citizens' quality of life (Moore, 1995; O'Flynn, 2021).

Within devolved governance, effective strategy implementation should therefore result in improved accessibility, reliability and responsiveness of public services. Accordingly, this study operationalizes public value through social service delivery outcomes measured across education, health and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services. Accessibility reflects citizen's ability to obtain services without geographical, financial or social barriers; reliability refers to the consistency and continuity of service provision; while responsiveness reflects the capacity of county governments to respond effectively to citizen's needs.

Theoretical Synthesis

The seven theories collectively provide a coherent explanation of strategy implementation within devolved governance. Institutional Theory is the overarching theory as it accounts for the effect of governance structures and institutional arrangements on implementation processes. Transformational Leadership Theory explains how leaders develop strategic alignment and organizational commitment. The development of operational capacity through infrastructure, resources and administrative capability is explained by the Infrastructure-Led Development Theory and the Resource Dependence Theory. Stakeholder Theory focuses on collaborative governance between the different actors involved in the implementation process. Social Constructionism Theory explains how sociocultural contexts influence the acceptance and use of implementation. While, Public Value Theory specifies the outcomes that are desired from a successful implementation.

In contrast, these theories do not act as separate explanations, but rather they together conceive strategy implementation as a single governance process. The process is comprised of institutional arrangements that establish the governance context, transformational leadership that increases operational capacity, operational capacity that converts strategic intentions into service delivery results, stakeholder collaboration that improves coordination, and sociocultural factors that define the acceptance and relevancy of public interventions.

This integrated perspective forms the foundation of the Integrated Governance Systems Framework developed and empirically tested in this study.

Conceptual Framework

Strategy implementation is conceptualized as an integrated governance process involving transformational leadership, operational capacity, institutional conditions, stakeholder cooperation and sociocultural responsiveness and their impacts on social service delivery outcomes. The framework departs from conventional implementation models that assume a linear relationship between strategic plans and performance outcomes. It argues that implementation effectiveness is produced through interlinked governance pathways operating in a wider institutional environment. Strategy implementation is thus interpreted as a continuous process of alignment among leadership actions, organizational capabilities, stakeholder relationships and community realities.

In the framework, transformational leadership is the strategic alignment mechanism that drives implementation through enhanced coordination, commitment and organizational direction. But its effects on service delivery outcomes are usually mediated by operational capacity, the mechanism by which strategic intentions are translated into the ability to implement them in practice. Operational capacity is the ability of county governments to translate plans into services through the availability of adequate resources, infrastructure, human capability, information systems and administrative support.

The framework thus identifies operational capacity as the principal conduit through which governance inputs affect social service delivery outcomes. The Governance and Contextual Layer is the broader environment in which implementation occurs. This level is where stakeholder collaboration interfaces with sociocultural responsiveness. It signals the active role of actors of governance and community contexts in the successful process of implementation. Stakeholder collaboration and sociocultural responsiveness are interrelated and are part of an adaptive process. Engagement of stakeholders allows government institutions to understand community values, expectations, social norms, and barriers to service utilization. Such knowledge improves sociocultural responsiveness through the adaptation of programmes to local realities. In contrast, the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration is influenced by the socio-cultural conditions that affect trust, participation, acceptance and community ownership of public interventions.

Therefore, the outcomes of strategy implementation are not the work of individual factors but the interaction of multiple governance mechanisms. The Integrated Governance Systems Framework suggests that successful implementation happens when institutional arrangements enable transformational leadership, leadership enhances operational capacity, operational systems support service delivery, and stakeholder engagement aligns interventions with sociocultural realities, thus producing public value outcomes.

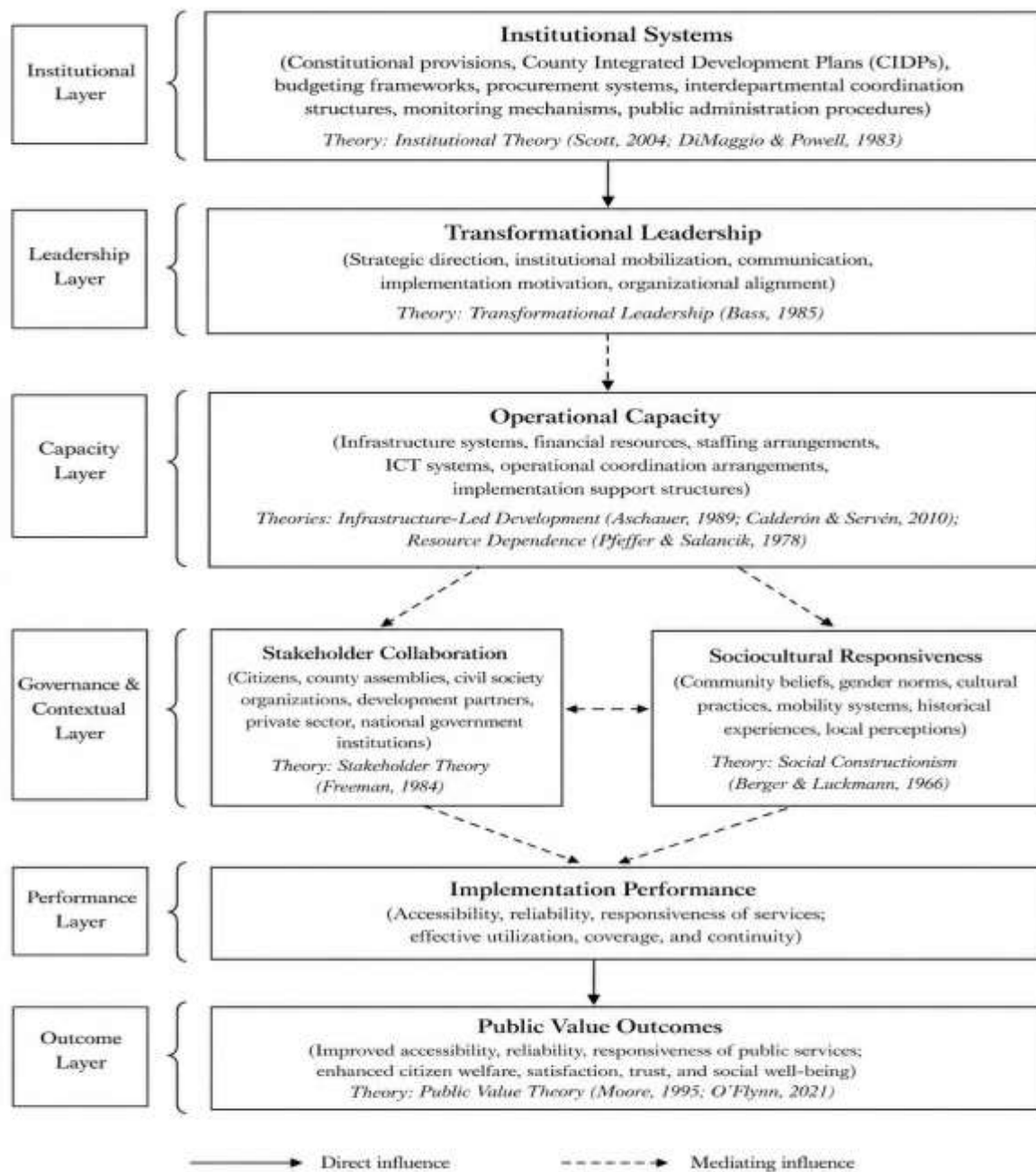


Figure 1: Integrated Governance Systems Framework for Strategy Implementation in Devolved Governance

Source: Researcher (2026)

Empirical Review

A systematic review of academic literature published between 2019-2025 provided an empirical basis of the Integrated Governance Systems Framework. The review emphasizes the importance of transformational leadership, operational capacity (physical infrastructure and strategic resource allocation), stakeholder engagement and sociocultural moderating conditions for the performance of the public sector and social services delivery.

Transformational Leadership as a Driver of Operational Capacity

Rather than treating leadership as a direct determinant of service outcomes, this section synthesizes evidence for its role in building the operational capacity through which outcomes are produced. Recent empirical study found transformational leadership to be a major antecedent of public sector organizational effectiveness and success. Transformational leaders help in execution by expressing a common vision, motivating their labour force, stimulating creativity, as well as enhancing collaboration and commitment to the institution in different organizational settings (Alhosani & Ahmad, 2024; Hansen et al., 2019; Katywa & Strydom, 2021). However, recent researches increasingly strongly indicate that the influence of transformational leadership on organizational performance is mediated through some intermediate organizational processes such as employee empowerment, knowledge sharing, organizational learning, adaptive capacity and institutional coordination (Al Hussein et al., 2021; Alhosani & Ahmad, 2024; Tan et al., 2024) instead of directly affecting organizational performance.

Research in public administration, local government, higher education and organizational settings indicates that transformational leadership contributes to innovation, employee performance and service quality, by creating enabling organizational environments, rather than acting as an independent predictor of performance (Budiman, 2022; Hansen et al., 2019; Katywa & Strydom, 2021). Research has indicated positive correlations of different strength and significance between transformational leadership and organizational results in institutional contexts in the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Denmark, Indonesia, Iraq, Namibia, South Africa and Kenya (Al Hussein et al., 2021; Alhosani & Ahmad, 2024; Atiku et al., 2023; Budiman, 2022; Hansen et al., 2019; Njiiri et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2024). Positive organizational culture, sufficient resources and efficient administrative procedures will make transformational leadership more successful. This suggests that the success of leadership is dependent on the capabilities of the organization in its whole and not only on the actions of leaders (Al Hussein et al., 2021; Atiku et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2024).

However, despite all the empirical evidence there exist several contradictions in the literature. Several studies have shown that transformational leadership has a strong positive impact on organizational performance and public service delivery. Other research, however, suggests that only some leadership traits continue to be important when contextual and organizational variables are considered. However, there are studies that proved that transformational leadership style alone is not sufficient to explain the successful implementation of programs, especially in resource-poor public organizations in complex institutional environments (Daud et al., 2022; Odeh et al., 2023).

Empirical research on decentralized governance is lacking, however, there is evidence that transformational leadership is an independent predictor of organizational performance (Mosa, 2017). The conventional vision of leadership does not make sense of the complex procedures

of governance which are employed to transform strategic aim into efficient delivery of public services. However, there has been little research to date on the interaction of leadership, institutional governance systems, operational capacity and contextual factors that can affect the success of implementation (Atiku et al., 2023; Daud et al., 2022; Njiiri et al., 2021). The growing empirical evidence suggests that transformational leadership is indeed a governance competence that enables, but its effectiveness depends on the institutional and operational systems in which leadership decisions are embedded. This view offers the basis for reconceptualizing leadership as one element of an integrated governance system rather than the primary driver of plan execution.

Operational Capacity as the Engine of Public Value

Building on this leadership foundation, operational capacity is the mechanism through which governance inputs are converted into citizen-facing public value. Empirical evidence has repeatedly suggested that the success of public strategies is not only a function of leadership, but also of the operational capacity of the institutions that implement them. Operational capacity is demonstrated within the framework of devolved governance systems by the availability of physical infrastructure, financial resources, human capital, administrative systems and institutional coordination necessary to translate strategic intentions into public service outcomes. Research in the education, health, water and local government domains (Albreiki et al., 2019; Kapologwe et al., 2020; Zondi & Qwabe, 2022) have demonstrated that such operational capabilities are the fundamental determinants of service access, dependability and responsiveness.

The existing empirical literature has largely focused on infrastructure and resource allocation as separate determinants of implementation effectiveness. Research on infrastructure consistently reveals that investments in schools, health facilities, water systems, transport networks and digital infrastructure enhance citizens' access to public services if there is effective maintenance and institutional governance (Al Shawabkeh et al., 2022; Emily & Muyengwa, 2021; Kapologwe et al., 2020; Kayiwa et al., 2020; Zondi & Qwabe, 2022). Likewise, research on resource allocation has shown that sufficient financial resources, strategic budgeting, human resource capacity, procurement systems, and institutional accountability are key to organizational performance and service delivery outcomes (Audrey et al., 2025; Edow & Muturi, 2024; Mandeha et al., 2025; Miombe et al., 2024; Wamalwa et al., 2025).

But more and more empirical studies have demonstrated that the two governance capabilities are not independent implementation factors, but interdependent. In particular, investment in infrastructure will not improve service delivery without the physical and technological infrastructure, finance, skills, maintenance systems and administrative support. Different other studies have shown that resources are not a guarantee for public good (Audrey et al., 2025; Emily & Muyengwa, 2021; Wamalwa et al., 2025; Zondi & Qwabe, 2022).

There is evidence from governance studies that institutional coordination, fiscal autonomy, budgeting systems and political accountability are key in resource mobilization and provision of infrastructure for implementation (Edow & Muturi, 2024; Gasparyan, 2021; Gomes et al., 2022; Engefu & Kinyua, 2021). In spite of this growing convergence, the empirical literature still treats infrastructure and resource allocation as conceptually distinct constructs, not reflecting the synergistic interdependencies by which they jointly influence implementation

effectiveness. This fragmented view offers only a partial description of the way county governments convert strategic plans into concrete public services.

Hence, the existing studies give limited understanding of integrated operational systems that facilitate effective strategy implementation in devolved governance. Thus, there is emerging evidence in support of the view of operational capacity as a higher order governance capability that brings together infrastructure readiness, strategic resource allocation and administrative capability with institutional coordination into a unified implementation mechanism. Reconceptualizing these complementary governance functions as a single construct of operational capacity allows us to better understand how county governments translate strategic priorities into accessible, reliable and responsive public services. The integrated perspective is a key contribution of the present study and is the core implementation pathway within the proposed Integrated Governance Systems Framework.

Methodologically, this study models Operational Capacity as a second-order construct, formatively composed of three first-order dimensions i.e sectoral infrastructure, strategic resource allocation, and administrative capability which jointly constitute the construct. Each dimension is reflectively measured by its respective indicators, while the higher-order construct represents a formative Type II reflective-formative specification. Based on this conceptualization, the study advances the following hypotheses:

H₁: Transformational leadership has a significant positive effect on operational capacity in devolved governance systems.

H₂: Operational capacity has a significant positive effect on social service delivery outcomes in devolved governance systems.

H₃: Operational capacity significantly mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and social service delivery outcomes in devolved governance systems.

H₄: Sociocultural factors have a significant positive effect on social service delivery outcomes in devolved governance systems.

Stakeholder Engagement and Social Service Delivery

Stakeholder involvement is universally acknowledged as an important governance mechanism to improve the implementation of public policies and development programmes. In devolved governance systems effective stakeholder engagement enhances the institutional legitimacy, increases transparency and accountability, promotes better coordination between government agencies and nonstate actors, and fosters community ownership of public interventions. There is strong empirical evidence that the effective engagement of citizens, civil society organizations, development partners and local leaders results in improved planning, implementation and monitoring of development programmes (Adom & Simatele, 2021; Coleman et al., 2019; Karimi et al., 2020; Matu et al., 2020; Nyawira et al., 2021).

Research also suggests that collaborative governance facilitates governments to harness local knowledge, improve resource utilization, increase policy legitimacy and improve service delivery outcomes (Kimanzi & Ngugi, 2022; Sheppard & Beck, 2022; Zwane & Matsiliza, 2022). Empirical evidence also indicates that stakeholder engagement is often more consultative than truly collaborative and that this constrains the ability of engagement to impact implementation decisions and project outcomes (Adom and Simatele, 2021; Masefield et al., 2021). Thus, although stakeholder participation is acknowledged as a core practice of

governance its direct impact on implementation effectiveness differs by institutional and contextual settings.

Few studies have examined stakeholder engagement in devolved governance as part of a wider governance system interacting with leadership, institutional capacity and contextual conditions. Instead, the existing literature largely views stakeholder engagement as a standalone participatory mechanism without sufficiently unpacking its role in strategy implementation in complex governance settings. Thus, stakeholder engagement is more a governance tool to reinforce institutional legitimacy, trust and coordination, than a direct predictor of implementation outcomes. This perspective positions stakeholder engagement as a hypothesized antecedent governance mechanism reinforcing institutional legitimacy, trust, and coordination rather than a standalone predictor of service delivery outcomes in its own right, and it is treated as such throughout the theoretical model.

The Moderation Role of Sociocultural Context in ASAL Environments

Finally, the strength of these governance pathways is not uniform across contexts in that sociocultural conditions in ASAL settings shape whether operational capacity translates into realized public value. There is an increasing amount of empirical evidence that suggests that the implementation of strategy is not only dependent on institutional and organizational capabilities, but also on the sociocultural environments in which governance processes are embedded. Cultural values and religious beliefs, gender norms, traditional practices, livelihood systems, and community perceptions are sociocultural factors that influence citizens' interpretation, access, and use of public services and consequently the effectiveness of government interventions (Ajayi et al., 2023; Galoji, 2024; Li et al., 2021).

To develop implementation strategies for effective governance interventions, it is necessary to understand local socio-cultural realities as demonstrated in the education, health and community development sectors. On the contrary, programmes that have failed to consider community perceptions, social norms and cultural practices have been linked to poor participation, public acceptance and implementation outcomes even when the institutional capacity and resources are adequate (Kahindi et al., 2024; Leitemu & Gitonga, 2019; Mwakima et al., 2025). The results have shown that the success of implementation is not only dependent on the services provided by governments but also the perception and response of communities to these interventions.

While the role of sociocultural factors is increasingly acknowledged, they have tended to be examined as contextual factors affecting particular sectors (e.g., health, education or community development) rather than as governance conditions affecting the implementation of strategy across public institutions.

Additionally, there are limited studies that have investigated the moderating role of sociocultural factors in explaining how leadership and operational capacity are transformed into public service delivery outcomes in devolved governance systems. As such, the existing literature provides little insight into how the sociocultural conditions facilitate or inhibit the effectiveness of implementation.

The emerging evidence suggests that sociocultural factors operate as contextual governance conditions shaping the effectiveness of implementation processes rather than directly determining service delivery outcomes. Hence, this study treats sociocultural factors as a moderating construct that influences the relationship between governance mechanisms and

social service delivery, thus contributing to existing empirical literature beyond direct effect models towards a more integrated view of strategy implementation within devolved governance.

Research Gaps

The empirical literature has made considerable progress in explaining the determinants of strategy implementation and public service delivery. However, there are four major gaps. First, the empirical studies consider transformational leadership, infrastructure, resource allocation, stakeholder engagement and sociocultural factors as independent predictors of organizational performance, rather than integrated governance mechanisms in an integrated implementation system (Al Husseini et al., 2021; Edow & Muturi, 2024; Karimi et al., 2020). As such, little attention has been paid to understanding how these governance capabilities combine to influence strategy implementation in devolved public sector contexts.

Second, although operational resources and infrastructure have been consistently identified as important implementation enablers, empirical studies still conceptualize these constructs separately. The ad hoc approach misses their functional interdependence. This partly explains how county governments translate strategic goals into accessible, reliable and responsive public services (Emily & Muyengwa, 2021; Wamalwa et al., 2025; Zondi & Qwabe, 2022).

Third, sociocultural conditions as moderators have received less empirical attention than other moderators in the strategic management and public administration literature. The studies have paid less attention to governance factors that influence the effectiveness of strategy implementation in the devolved systems of government than the contextual factors such as socio-cultural factors in the sectors of education and health care (Ajayi et al., 2023; Leitemu & Gitonga, 2019; Li et al., 2021).

Finally, methodological limitations apply to the existing literature. Most studies are limited to single theory perspectives, cross sectional quantitative designs or isolated organizational variables and therefore are not able to capture the complexity of strategy implementation in devolved governance environments. Few studies have combined multiple complementary governance theories with mixed methods evidence to construct and empirically test a comprehensive governance systems model that can explain implementation effectiveness. The present study addresses these gaps by reconceptualizing strategy implementation as an integrated governance process in which transformational leadership, operational capacity, stakeholder legitimacy, and sociocultural responsiveness operate within broader institutional systems to influence social service delivery outcomes.

This study contributes to the literature on strategic management and public administration by developing and empirically validating the Integrated Governance Systems Framework, using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, to provide a more holistic explanation of strategy implementation in devolved governance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researcher used a pragmatic research philosophy and a mixed-method explanatory sequential design to investigate strategy implementation and social service delivery outcomes in a devolved governance context. The mixed-method approach was appropriate as the study aimed to establish statistical relationships among governance constructs as well as explain the

institutional, operational and sociocultural mechanisms through which implementation outcomes are produced.

The quantitative component used a descriptive correlational design to explore relationships between transformational leadership, operational capacity, sociocultural factors and social service delivery outcomes. The qualitative component complemented the quantitative findings by looking at the governance experiences, implementation processes and contextual realities that affected implementation of strategy in Isiolo County.

The study was conducted in Isiolo County, Kenya, selected as an appropriate research setting because of its characteristics as an Arid and Semi-Arid Land (ASAL) county with ongoing challenges of implementation related to infrastructure, resource constraints, fiscal dependence, administrative capacity and sociocultural diversity. These features provided a useful background to study the interaction of governance systems on strategy implementation outcomes in marginalized devolved settings.

The study focused on three main sectors of public services, namely education, health, and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH). These sectors were chosen because they represent important aspects of public value creation and are a direct reflection of citizens' experiences regarding the accessibility, reliability and responsiveness of services.

Target Population and Sampling Technique

The target population comprised residents and relevant governance actors engaged in the implementation of strategy and delivery of public services in Isiolo County. The quantitative population comprised of county residents who benefited from education, health and WASH services while the qualitative population comprised of county officials, sector administrators and other stakeholders directly involved in the implementation of the County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP).

The quantitative sample size was determined using the Yamane sampling formula which was 399 targeted respondents. A proportionate sampling technique was used to ensure representation from the three sub-counties within the county and major service sectors, thus allowing the study to capture diverse citizen experiences on service accessibility, reliability and responsiveness. For the qualitative component, 21 key informants were purposively selected based on their knowledge, professional experience and direct involvement in county planning, implementation and service delivery processes.

It brought together county officials, sector administrators, community representatives, civil society actors and other governance stakeholders who shared contextual understanding on institutional arrangements, operational challenges, relationships between stakeholders, and sociocultural influences on implementation. The study employed a mix of probability-based quantitative sampling and purposive qualitative selection to produce statistically generalizable patterns, but also to provide in-depth explanations of governance processes and contextual influences that shape strategy implementation outcomes.

Respondents and Data Quality

The study achieved a high response rate of 395 completed questionnaires out of the targeted 399 respondents. Response rate was 99 per cent, the high rate of participation improved the representativeness of the quantitative results and reduced concerns about non-response bias. Data collection was hybrid approach using trained local enumerators and digital data collection

via google forms. The approach provided the ability to incorporate respondents with different literacy levels, and allowed for efficient, accurate and timely data capture. The quantitative respondents were sampled from the three sub-counties of Isiolo, Garbatulla and Merti. The sample had geographical spread including respondents from urban (35.2%), peri-urban (25.8%) and rural (39.0%) areas. The gender distribution was fairly even with 51.4% of the respondents being male and 48.6% female. Similarly, 75.4% of the respondents had stayed in Isiolo County for more than ten years, which suggests familiarity with local government processes and social service delivery experiences.

For the qualitative component, 19 of the 21 key informants targeted participated (90% response rate). Participants were selected from different sectors including education, health, WASH, county administration, civil society, religious leadership, youth and women leadership and community leadership. This diversity added value to the qualitative component by providing multiple perspectives on institutional systems, operational capacity, stakeholder collaboration, and sociocultural influences on implementation outcomes.

Data Collection Procedure

Primary data were obtained through structured questionnaires and semi-structured key informant interviews. The quantitative questionnaire consisted of five-point Likert scale items measuring transformational leadership, operational capacity, sociocultural factors and social service delivery outcomes. Measurement items were developed from existing theory and empirical literature and adapted to the context of devolved governance. The questionnaire measured citizens' perceptions of service accessibility, reliability, and responsiveness as indicators of public value outcomes. Qualitative interviews were undertaken to explore governance structures, implementation processes, resource availability, institutional coordination, stakeholder participation and sociocultural factors influencing service delivery outcomes. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review authorities and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) Kenya. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and responsible handling of research information.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was done by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29 and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) version 26. Prior to statistical analysis, data were coded, cleaned, screened, and assessed for assumptions. Descriptive statistics were used to explain the characteristics of the respondents and to examine patterns in study variables. Measurement constructs' internal consistency was determined using Cronbach's alpha during reliability analysis. Construct validity was evaluated using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) by looking at factor loadings, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE).

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships between transformational leadership, operational capacity, sociocultural factors and social service delivery outcomes. SEM was appropriate because the study model comprised multiple latent constructs, and it was used to examine the direct and indirect relationships of the Integrated Governance Systems Framework. The measurement model was assessed by CFA and the structural model was assessed by path coefficients, significance levels and mediation effects. To improve the stability of the estimates and to test the mediating effect of operational capacity

in the relationship between transformational leadership and social service delivery outcomes, bootstrapping with 5000 resamples was used.

The governance model is complex and the study setting is contextual, so multiple fit indices were considered for interpreting the fit of the model, rather than a single threshold. This approach was appropriate since the implementation processes in devolved ASAL contexts are a complex of institutional, operational and sociocultural dynamics that can bring in contextual variations in empirical relationships.

Qualitative data were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis guided by the Integrated Governance Systems Framework and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The analysis focused on institutional arrangements, transformational leadership, operational capacity, stakeholder collaboration, and sociocultural influences shaping strategy implementation and social service delivery outcomes. The qualitative findings were integrated with the quantitative results to explain the contextual mechanisms underlying the observed relationships. A joint-display approach was used to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings. SEM findings were compared to developing qualitative themes to explain significant relationships, contextualize unexpected findings, and interpret complex implementation dynamics. Qualitative evidence was used to explain contextual variation including the non-significant relationship between operational capacity and WASH outcomes and measurement challenges related to stakeholder engagement in a relational pastoralist governance context.

RESULTS

Construct Reliability and Validity Analysis

Reliability and validity of the measurement constructs were evaluated before estimating the structural model. The reliability analysis was performed using Cronbach's alpha and the construct validity was tested using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). This assessment was necessary to determine whether the observed indicators were valid measures of the underlying governance constructs in the Integrated Governance Systems Framework. The reliability test indicated that there is an acceptable internal consistency between the major constructs. The reliability of Transformational Leadership was found to be good ($\alpha = 0.829$).

The reliability of Social Service Delivery was found to be excellent ($\alpha = 0.930$). The reliability of Sociocultural Factors was found to be acceptable ($\alpha = 0.755$) confirming its appropriateness as a contextual governance construct. However, the construct of Stakeholder Engagement revealed relatively low reliability ($\alpha = 0.560$), indicating instability of measurement among its indicators. Additional Confirmatory Factor Analysis revealed weak factor loadings and poor structural stability for stakeholder engagement as a direct quantitative path in the structural model.

Table 1: Reliability, Validity, and Construct Refinement Summary

Construct	Reliability & Validity Metrics	Final Interpretation within Framework
Transformational Leadership	$\alpha = .829$; CR = .773; AVE = .557	Indirect enabling governance mechanism
Sectoral Infrastructure	$\alpha = .851$; KMO = .937	Integrated into Operational Capacity
Resource Allocation	$\alpha = .805$; KMO = .888	Integrated into Operational Capacity
Stakeholder Engagement	$\alpha = .560$; weak CFA stability	Excluded from SEM path; retained as conceptually relevant
Sociocultural Factors	CR = .755; AVE = .609	Contextual governance filter / moderator
Social Service Delivery	$\alpha = .930$	Public value outcomes construct

Source: Researcher (2026)

The standardized factor loadings of the indicators of the higher-order operational capacity construct (sectoral infrastructure $\beta = 0.632$ – 0.884 ; resource allocation $\beta = 0.799$ – 0.887) were high, reaffirming the empirical validity of the integration of infrastructure and resource allocation into a unified operational capacity construct. This finding lends support to the systems-based view put forward in this article, where implementation outcomes are contingent on interdependent governance capabilities that work in concert rather than as standalone implementation factors, and that implementation effectiveness is contingent on the overall operational systems underpinning strategy execution rather than on individual resource or infrastructure inputs.

Some interesting theoretical and contextual implications have emerged from the refinement process of the construct. The standardized quantitative measure for Stakeholder Engagement ($\alpha = 0.560$) did not work, indicating that in marginalized, pastoralist communities like Isiolo, citizen participation is highly informal and relational. These community dynamics are not captured by standard Likert-scale administrative survey instruments in non-Western contexts.

Qualitatively, the gap was complemented by findings from key informants, who revealed that stakeholder engagement is not a direct administrative cause of physical project completion but rather a critical mechanism for building community trust and political legitimacy. Thus, stakeholder engagement was not entered as a direct pathway in the SEM model but is conceptually included in the Integrated Governance Systems Framework as a necessary layer of legitimacy.

Structural Equation Modelling Results

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships between transformational leadership, operational capacity, sociocultural factors and social service delivery outcomes. The findings empirically support the proposition of the study that the implementation of strategy in devolved systems of governance is a question of interconnected governance pathways and not isolated direct effects. The final structural model showed that implementation effectiveness arises from the interaction of leadership mechanisms, operational capabilities and contextual governance conditions. Transformational leadership indirectly

affected implementation by enhancing operational capacity, and operational capacity and sociocultural responsiveness were significantly associated with service delivery outcomes. The results support the Integrated Governance Systems Framework by showing how the implementation results are generated through coordinated governance mechanisms located in institutional and contextual environments.

Table 2: Key Structural Relationships in the Final SEM Model

Structural Path	β	p-value	Interpretation
Transformational Leadership → Operational Capacity	.117	.050	Weak but significant enabling effect
Operational Capacity → Service Delivery (Education & Health)	.414	< .001	Strong positive implementation effect
Operational Capacity → Service Delivery (WASH)	-.007	.900	Not significant
Sociocultural Factors → Service Delivery (Education & Health)	.347	< .001	Significant contextual influence
Sociocultural Factors → Service Delivery (WASH)	.223	< .001	Significant contextual influence

Source: Researcher (2026)

The structural estimates show that operational capacity is a crucial implementation mechanism for translating governance intentions into service delivery outcomes. Transformational leadership has a weak direct effect on operational capacity, but it is still important as an enabling mechanism for coordination, resource mobilization and institutional alignment. Besides, sociocultural factors also significantly impacted the outcomes of service delivery across sectors. Thus, the effectiveness of implementation is not a function of administrative ability alone but also the degree of the interventions' alignment to the realities in the communities.

Transformational Leadership and Operational Capacity Pathway

The results of SEM revealed that transformational leadership significantly predicted operational capacity ($\beta = .117$, $p = .050$). The effect size was small, but the finding suggests that leadership helps improve implementation effectiveness by strengthening the internal capabilities necessary to carry out the work. These results challenge conventional leadership-centered views assuming the direct influence of leaders on organizational outcomes. Rather, the results imply that leadership works through enabling conditions to enhance governance systems' capacity to implement strategic priorities.

Transformational leadership contributes to strategic direction, coordination of actors, organizational commitment and resource mobilization but these efforts result in measurable service outcomes only if supported by adequate operational systems. The finding supports the theoretical position of the study that leadership needs to be understood as an embedded governance mechanism rather than an independent driver of service delivery performance. Within a context of devolved governance, the effectiveness of leadership is influenced by the institutional arrangements, resource availability, administrative systems and stakeholder relations that impact on the capacity to convert strategic intentions into public value outcomes.

Operational Capacity as the Core Implementation Pathway

The strongest implementation pathway from the structural model that significantly predicted education and health service delivery outcomes was operational capacity ($\beta = .414$, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that the extent to which county governments can turn strategic plans into actual services largely depends on the availability of implementation capabilities such as infrastructure, financial resources, human capacity, information systems and administrative support.

The findings support the Infrastructure-Led Development Theory and Resource Dependence Theory empirically, and imply that physical and organizational capabilities are important for successful implementation. Strategic plans may set priorities and policy intentions but, without sufficient operational systems, these may not translate into better public services. This interpretation was supported by findings from the qualitative component of the study where the key informants cited infrastructure limitations, staffing shortages, resource constraints, maintenance challenges and administrative bottlenecks as important barriers affecting implementation performance in Isiolo County. These findings demonstrate that governance intentions are linked to public value creation through the critical mediation of operational capacity. Sectoral Differences and Context-Specific Implementation Pathways The results of the SEM revealed significant sectoral differences in the effect of implementation mechanisms on service delivery outcomes. Operational capacity was a strong predictor of education and health service delivery outcomes, but not a significant predictor of WASH outcomes ($\beta = -0.007$, $p = .900$).

This unexpected relationship is shed an important light in the qualitative results. Key informants said that delivery of WASH services in Isiolo County is characterized by high participation of non-state actors, including development organizations, humanitarian agencies, private water providers and community-managed water systems. Thus, WASH outcomes are shaped by a wider governance network than the operational structures of county government alone. The lack of a significant operational capacity effect in WASH therefore does not necessarily indicate weak implementation capacity. Instead, it represents the governance arrangements specific to the sector in which the services are provided.

This finding supports the study's argument that the pathways to strategy implementation are context-dependent and cannot be explained by uniform administrative models across service sectors.

Sociocultural Factors and Service Delivery Outcomes

Sociocultural factors were found to be a significant influence on service delivery outcomes in both sectoral pathways. Results revealed robust effects on education and health outcomes ($\beta = .347$, $p < .001$) and WASH outcomes ($\beta = .223$, $p < .001$). Empirically, these findings have supported the Social Constructionism Theory as implementation outcomes are socially embedded processes influenced by community meanings, values and behavioral patterns. Cultural practices, religious beliefs, gender relations, livelihood patterns and community perceptions of government interventions influence service use in ASAL settings such as Isiolo County. It suggests that technical investments and administrative capacity may not be a sufficient condition for implementation success. Public actions, rather, have meaningful results when socially accepted, culturally appropriate and in line with community expectations.

Sociocultural responsiveness is thus a contextual governance mechanism that determines how much strategic interventions are converted into citizen value.

SEM Model Fit and Explanatory Power

The final SEM had an acceptable fit of the model and provided empirical support to the Integrated Governance Systems Framework. The model has a large number of latent constructs and represents complex governance relationships in a dynamic social environment, therefore, multiple fit indices were used.

Table 3: Final SEM Model Fit and Variance Explained

Model Fit Indicator	Value	Interpretation
CFI	.906	Acceptable fit
TLI	.890	Marginal fit
RMSEA	.086	Reasonable approximation
PCFI	.776	Acceptable parsimony
PNFI	.753	Acceptable parsimony
R ² Education & Health	.412	Moderate explanatory power
R ² WASH	.483	Moderate explanatory power

Source: Researcher (2026)

The fit of the model was acceptable, with a Comparative Fit Index (CFI =.906) above the threshold recommended for an acceptable fit and a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI =.890) near the acceptable range for complex social science models. The value of RMSEA of. 086 was a hair over the desired cut off of .080 but in the ballpark of reasonable approximation.

The relatively higher RMSEA might be indicative of the difficulty of modeling governance processes in an ASAL devolved context that is characterized by institutional uncertainty, resource constraints, dispersed populations and varying socio-cultural situations. These contextual factors may add further variation unaccounted for by standardized structural relationships.

Hence, while minor model refinement may be possible, the overall fit statistics suggest that the proposed framework provides a theoretically coherent and empirically acceptable explanation of strategy implementation dynamics. The model was moderately able to explain the variance in the outcome of education and health service delivery (41.2%) and WASH outcomes (48.3%). These findings indicate that the framework is identifying important governance mechanisms influencing implementation outcomes, yet other contextual factors may also impact service delivery performance. The SEM findings validate the Integrated Governance Systems Framework, as the strategy implementation process in a devolved governance setting is best understood as a governance process that is mediated and context-dependent. Thus, effectiveness of implementation is not a result of individual governance factors acting in isolation, but rather of the alignment of leadership mechanisms, operational capacity, stakeholder relationships, institutional conditions and sociocultural responsiveness.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study examined strategy implementation in devolved governance systems by developing and validating an Integrated Governance Systems Framework that conceptualizes

implementation as a mediated, interconnected and context-dependent governance process rather than a linear translation of strategic plans into service delivery outcomes. The findings demonstrate that transformational leadership primarily functions as an enabling governance mechanism by strengthening operational capacity rather than directly determining social service delivery outcomes. Transformational leadership had a significant influence on operational capacity, suggesting that leadership effectiveness is contingent on the existence of supportive implementation systems that can translate strategic intentions into action.

Operational capacity and education and health service delivery outcomes emerged as the key implementation pathway. Findings from the study show that the availability of infrastructure, financial resources, human capacity, information systems and administrative coordination collectively influence the ability of county governments to implement strategic priorities effectively. This suggests that implementation failures are often attributable to weaknesses in operational systems rather than deficiencies in strategic planning. The study also demonstrated that implementation mechanisms differ across service sectors.

While operational capacity was a significant determinant of education and health outcomes, it had no significant influence on WASH outcomes. This finding suggests that WASH service delivery is shaped by sector-specific governance arrangements, greater dependence on external development partners and community-managed systems, infrastructure-intensive investments, and environmental conditions that extend beyond the county government's operational capacity. These findings highlight the need for sector-specific implementation approaches that are responsive to differences in governance structures, resource requirements and institutional contexts.

Sociocultural factors emerged as important determinants of service delivery outcomes, demonstrating that implementation effectiveness depends not only on administrative capacity but also on community realities. In Isiolo County, values, norms, religious beliefs, gender relations, language, pastoral mobility patterns, and lived experiences influenced how communities perceived, accessed, and sustained public interventions. Qualitative findings showed that barriers such as restrictive gender norms, resistance to change, language differences, and mobility challenges affected service uptake, while culturally responsive approaches, engagement of local leaders, and flexible service delivery mechanisms enhanced acceptance. These findings confirm that strategy implementation is a socially embedded process requiring governance systems that integrate operational capacity with sociocultural responsiveness to achieve sustainable public value outcomes.

Conclusion

The study concludes that strategy implementation within devolved governance should be understood as an integrated governance system involving the interaction of institutional arrangements, transformational leadership, operational capacity, stakeholder relationships and sociocultural conditions. The evidence challenges linear and leadership-centered explanations of implementation by demonstrating that strategic intentions generate public value only when supported by effective operational and contextual systems. The study contributes theoretically by advancing the Integrated Governance Systems Framework, which extends existing strategy implementation literature beyond fragmented determinant-based approaches.

The framework draws on Institutional Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, Infrastructure-Led Development Theory, Resource Dependence Theory, Stakeholder Theory,

Social Constructionism Theory and Public Value Theory to explain the interaction of multiple governance mechanisms to influence service delivery outcomes within devolved and resource-constrained environments. The findings further demonstrate that county governments require differentiated implementation strategies that strengthen operational capacity, align leadership practices with institutional systems, and incorporate sociocultural realities within service delivery planning. Consequently, improving public value outcomes in devolved governance requires not only effective strategic planning but also the development of adaptive governance systems capable of converting plans into sustainable citizen-centered outcomes.

Recommendations

Theoretical Recommendations

Future research on strategy implementation should move away from isolated variables to integrated governance models that examine the interaction of institutional, operational, leadership, relational and sociocultural mechanisms over time.

More attention should be paid to mediated and context-dependent pathways of governance factors on implementation outcomes. Future research should also explore the generalizability and explanatory power of the Integrated Governance Systems Framework in other governance contexts such as non-ASAL counties, urban jurisdictions and other decentralized systems.

Practical Recommendations

Strengthening Operational Capacity

County governments should focus on strengthening the operational systems needed to implement strategic priorities. This includes aligning CIDPs with realistic infrastructure needs, predictable sources of financing, adequate human resource, functional information systems and administrative support structures. Because operational capacity has such a strong effect on education and health outcomes, investment in execution capability should become a central component of county strategy implementation.

Promoting Systems-Enabled Leadership

County executives need to move to systems-enabled leadership, not leadership as articulators of vision. Strategic intentions need to be translated into measurable service outcomes through greater institutional co-ordination, accountability mechanisms, inter-departmental collaboration and alignment of resources.

Embedding Sociocultural Responsiveness in Implementation Design

County governments should establish mechanisms to incorporate community knowledge, cultural practices, pastoral mobility patterns, gender dynamics and local service utilization behaviours in the design and implementation of programmes.

The results show that the sociocultural responsiveness impacts the degree to which public interventions generate meaningful citizen value. Future operational design should therefore incorporate localized, qualitative-sensitive measures of sociocultural responsiveness that capture community-level realities more accurately than standardized indicators alone. Such measures would enable county governments to design interventions that are culturally appropriate, socially accepted, and more sustainable.

Developing Sector-Specific Implementation Strategies

County governments should not apply the same implementation model across all service sectors. Education, health and WASH operate in different institutional and resource environments and implementation strategies should reflect sector specific realities. More attention to external partnerships, community-managed systems and environmental factors in WASH interventions is needed as service outcomes can be outside of the direct county administrative control.

Policy Recommendations

National and county policymakers should revise implementation monitoring systems to focus on public value outcomes rather than mere administrative compliance. Evaluation frameworks should measure citizens' experiences of service accessibility, reliability and responsiveness, alongside conventional financial and administrative indicators. Policy frameworks for devolved governance should provide for enhanced coordination mechanisms between county departments, county assemblies, national government agencies, development partners and community actors. Better coordination is needed to reduce fragmentation and improve the continuity of implementation efforts.

Resource allocation policies should aim at strengthening operational capacity in marginalized ASAL counties where infrastructure gaps, geographical spread and administrative constraints are major challenges to implementation. Local governance systems need predictable finance and technical support and focused capacity-building interventions.

In general, there is a need to move from leadership-centered reforms to integrated governance reforms that bring institutions, operational capabilities, stakeholder relationships and sociocultural realities together around public value creation to improve service delivery in devolved governance.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to take into account when interpreting the findings of the study. First, sociocultural factors were measured by validated indicators and qualitative data. However, the standardized measures may not reflect the complexity of local community contexts. Second, as this is a cross-sectional study, there are limitations to making causal inferences or to examining change in implementation over time. The study was carried out in an ASAL setting, in Isiolo County, thus the findings may not be generalized to other county or governance settings. Future research should apply the Integrated Governance Systems Framework in other contexts using longitudinal designs.

Areas for Further Research

Future research should use longitudinal designs to examine the development of governance systems over time and the change in mediated implementation pathways at different stages of strategy implementation. Comparative studies of a number of counties with different socioeconomic and institutional characteristics would go a long way in establishing whether the Integrated Governance Systems Framework holds in non-marginalized ASAL contexts. Future research should focus on developing localized, qualitative-sensitive measures of sociocultural responsiveness that integrate community narratives, cultural practices, mobility patterns, and social norms into implementation assessment frameworks. Such measures would provide county governments with better tools for designing and evaluating public programmes in context. Future research exploring why operational capacity is not a significant predictor of WASH outcomes should consider the role of external actors, environmental conditions,

financing structures and alternative governance arrangements in shaping sector performance. Finally, research should look into better ways to measure stakeholder engagement so that this important governance mechanism can be more reliably incorporated into future integrated governance models.

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Appendix 1. Traditional Linear Conceptual Framework

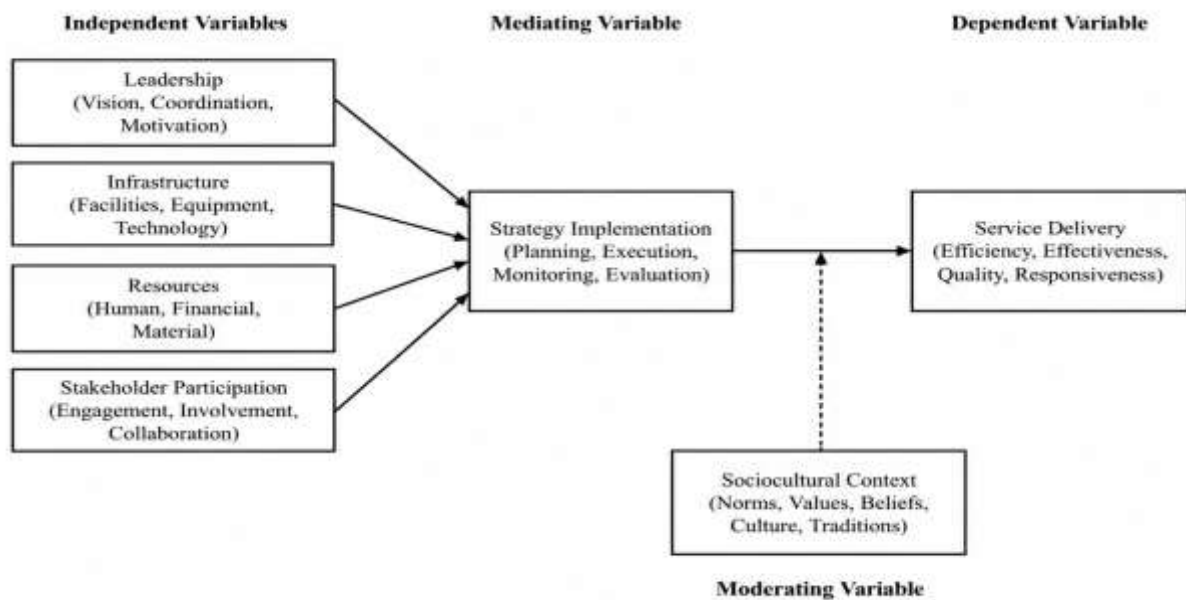


Figure 2: Traditional Linear Conceptual Framework

Source: Researcher (2026)