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Editorial Note

The *Journal of Management, Science, Innovation and Technology (JMSIT)* is pleased to present Volume 2, Issue 2, featuring ten articles that collectively contribute to a coherent and timely editorial conversation on how Zimbabwe and comparable contexts can advance development through collaboration, institutional reform, human capital, inclusion, and sustainability. Taken together, the articles show that progress in tourism, procurement, finance, local government, manufacturing, and human resource management depends on systems that are adaptive, ethical, participatory, and resilient.

One clear area of coverage is stakeholder collaboration and shared value creation. The cultural heritage tourism article emphasizes that innovation in heritage-based tourism is no longer the work of a single actor; it requires cooperation among communities, government, investors, and tourism operators. These studies suggest that collaboration is becoming a central development strategy, especially where resources are limited and implementation challenges are complex.

Another major theme is sustainability. Several articles move beyond short-term performance to examine long-term viability in tourism, procurement, industrial renewal, and rural development. The titles on green PPPs, local content, and policy volatility show that sustainability is not only environmental, but also economic and institutional. In unstable policy environments, long-term investment becomes difficult, and the article on industrial renewal highlights how regulatory uncertainty can weaken industrial growth. Human capital and leadership form another strong strand. The articles on emotional intelligence and strategic HR training show growing recognition that organizational performance depends on people as much as structures. Resilient leadership, skills development, and effective training are presented as tools for improving public institutions and local authorities. The dark side of HR analytics adds an important caution: while digital tools can improve decision-making, they also raise concerns about ethics, misuse, and over-reliance on data. This broadens the discussion from efficiency to responsibility.

Financial inclusion and digital adoption also receive attention. The article on women's entrepreneurial performance shows how access to credit can shape business outcomes and strengthen women's participation in economic activity. Likewise, the study on digital payment platform adoption in a rural economy reflects the growing importance of technology in financial access and everyday transactions. These topics show that inclusion is not only a social goal; it is also an economic driver that can expand opportunity in underserved communities.

Overall, the articles cover interconnected areas of development: collaboration, sustainability, leadership, digital transformation, inclusion, and policy stability. Their common message is that development succeeds when institutions are capable, partnerships are purposeful, and people are empowered. In that sense, the collection offers a useful lens on contemporary challenges in Zimbabwe and beyond: building systems that are both productive and fair.

Editor-in-Chief

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The Effect of Financial Inclusion on Women's Entrepreneurial Performance: Analysis of Credit Access in The Zimbabwean Banking Sector

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Abstract

Financial inclusion is a key driver of economic growth and development, and financial institutions must play a role in promoting it. One of the major challenges facing financial institutions, particularly in developing countries, is financial illiteracy. Illiteracy can limit women's ability to access and effectively use financial services and hinder the adoption of technology that drives financial inclusion. Employing a quantitative research approach, data were collected from a sample of 190 women in Mashonaland East through a structured questionnaire. The study aimed to understand how financial inclusion affects women's entrepreneurial endeavours, particularly access to bank loans. The major focus was on assessing how financial illiteracy affects financial inclusion, the influence of financial technology on financial inclusion, the moderating role of age, and the effect of financial inclusion on women's entrepreneurial performance. The findings reveal that financial illiteracy significantly negatively impacts financial inclusion, while financial technology positively influences it. Furthermore, age moderates the relationship between financial inclusion and company performance, with older individuals benefiting more from financial inclusion. The study also confirms that financial inclusion positively affects women's entrepreneurial performance. These results underscore the importance of financial literacy and technology in promoting financial inclusion and enhancing company performance. The study provides valuable insights for policymakers and financial institutions, highlighting the need for targeted financial education programmes and digital banking solutions to improve *financial inclusion and women's entrepreneurial performance. Despite its limitations, including the sample size and cross-sectional design, the study offers a robust foundation for future research and practical interventions in the banking sector.*

Key words: financial literacy, financial inclusion, entrepreneurial performance, credit access, economic growth and development

Introduction

Financial inclusion is vital for economic growth and development, particularly in developing nations. However, a key barrier to achieving broad financial inclusion is low financial literacy, which limits an individual's ability to access, understand, and effectively use financial services. Inadequate financial knowledge affects decision-making related to budgeting, saving, credit and investing, and exposes individuals to financial risks and exclusion (Katnic et al., 2024). As a result, promoting financial literacy has become a strategic priority for financial institutions, the government, and development partners (Goyal & Kumar, 2021).

Africa has witnessed a significant fintech boom, with countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana emerging as innovation hubs. Mobile technologies, particularly mobile money platforms such as M-Pesa and EcoCash, have revolutionised access to financial services, especially in underserved areas. Fintech has expanded access to digital payment, credit, and insurance, helping close the financial inclusion gap (Kousky et al., 2021). However, its full potential is strained by the continent's low financial literacy levels, which average just 32%, with some countries as low as 15% (Elmi et al., 2025).

Improving financial literacy in Africa is critical to empowering individuals and supporting sustainable development. Studies show that a financially informed population is more likely to adopt digital financial services, invest wisely and participate in the informal economy (Lontchi et al., 2022; Udeh et al., 2024). Collaborative efforts involving governments, educational institutions, and financial service providers are needed to close the financial literacy gap and ensure inclusive growth (Kyeyune & Ntayi, 2025).

In Zimbabwe, the adoption of mobile money solutions like EcoCash has transformed how people transact, making financial services more accessible. Fintech has contributed to entrepreneurship and economic inclusion, particularly for unbanked populations (FinScope Consumer Survey, 2022). Despite high mobile penetration (87%), only 63% of Zimbabweans are registered on fintech platforms, reflecting a gap largely driven by financial literacy (ZimStat, 2022).

Surveys reveal that over 60% of Zimbabweans lack basic financial knowledge, which undermines their ability to manage money, access financial products, or avoid exploitation (Ghimire & Dahal, 2024; Mahuni et al., 2025). While the government have taken steps to improve financial literacy through the National Financial Inclusion Strategy (2021), more comprehensive and collaborative efforts are required. Financial institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and educators must work together to deliver accessible financial education and build a more informed and resilient population. Ultimately, improving financial literacy is essential to unlocking the full benefits of fintech, reducing financial exclusion, and achieving inclusive economic growth in Zimbabwe and across Africa.

Theory guiding the study.

Liberal Marxist feminism

When examining and elucidating how capitalist systems oppress women, liberal Marxist feminism proved pertinent (Nazir & Nazir, 2024). According to Kabaya (2018), proponents of liberal Marxist feminism believe that a radical restructuring of the current capitalist economy, where a large portion of women's labour goes unpaid, is the only way to liberate women. The researchers were able to understand better how economic systems affect women's experiences in the informal sector and shape society overall, thanks to historical materialism (Tepe-Belfrage & Steans, 2016).

A category of women involved in what has been referred to as an informal economy has fewer financial opportunities because economic factors determine the prescribed range of services, systems, and institutions that advance capitalist interests. This has the overall effect of depriving them of financial capacity in order to maintain socioeconomic hierarchies. The dualist classification of formal and informal has flaws, according to Bromley (1978), and its continued use may be explained by the concept's applicability to policy recommendations that seem both politically safe and realistic. Marx (1859) recognises that this group of impoverished women has the capacity to organise and take collective action to empower themselves and improve their social and economic opportunities.

Literature review

In the Global Financial Development Report (2014), financial inclusion is defined as "the proportion of individuals and firms that use financial services. It has a multitude of dimensions, reflecting the variety of possible financial services, from payments and savings accounts to credit, insurance, pensions, and securities markets. It can be determined differently for individuals and for firms" (World Bank, 2014). The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) (2016) defined financial inclusion as the effective use of a wide range of quality, affordable and accessible financial services, provided fairly and transparently through formal/regulated entities. Arora (2018) defines financial inclusion as access to credit, savings, and payment services for everyone, for all bankable people and firms, and that inclusive finance does not require that everyone be eligible to use each service. However, they should be able to choose it if desired. Financial inclusion is thus the provision of unlimited access to financial services such as deposits, loans, payment services, money transfer and insurance to people, including the poor and low-income households.

The World Bank (2017) reports a persistent gender gap in the financial system: 72% of men have an account, while only 65% of women do; these statistics have not changed since 2011. According to Ladhari and Leclerc (2013), research conducted across 18 countries shows that men account for 65% of customers in the financial sector. Approximately 35% of adult women worldwide lack an account. Women who are financially excluded face many obstacles when trying to access and utilise financial goods. Among these are inexperience and limited exposure to the financial industry. According to Mpofu (2023), closing the gender gap in financial inclusion is the right thing for countries to do to achieve economic development. The study by Yoganandham et al. (2024) suggests that financial inclusion for African women should capitalise on the unrealised potential of women outside the financial industry. This will allow them to reach their full financial potential and, in turn, create creative solutions to the continent's financial issues. Literature on financial inclusion (Gumbo et al., 2021) shows that discrimination against women (Klasen, 2018) regarding access to formal finance in society may have negative repercussions for society as a whole. As such, policies intended to improve access to formal financial services for women have the potential to raise the economy's growth rate (Andriamahery & Qamruzzaman, 2022).

The reviewed literature also highlights a greater need to assist women financially (Gonçalves et al., 2021) and to educate them on accessing various financial services to ensure these services become valuable to them. Ownership of financial resources will allow women to reduce their vulnerability, marginalisation and financial dependence on their husbands (Ranabahu & Tanima, 2022). This body of literature highlights that closing the gender gap in financial inclusion could have positive effects in smoothing consumption, lowering financial risks and costs, providing security, increasing saving and investment rates, and facilitating new business opportunities (Pahlevan Sharif et al., 2023). Reducing gender financial inclusion can help nations flourish, grow economically, reduce inequality, evolve as businesses and promote social inclusion. According to the UNDP (1995), sub-Saharan African countries lose $95 billion in annual productivity due to their inability to integrate women into their national economies. Growth stalls when impoverished women are unable to work or contribute to the economy.

However, the advantages of women entrepreneurs' access to funding extend far beyond their companies. Saluja et al. (2023) further assert that women's financial inclusion helps combat social marginalisation and improves family wellbeing; when mothers have a degree of control over household finances, their children are less likely to die from malnutrition and more likely to thrive. Furthermore, gender discrimination in access to finance reduces women's economic opportunities inside and outside the home, and as such reduces their bargaining power (Singh & Dash, 2021).

In the case of Zimbabwe, it can be asserted that, while there is widespread support and commitment to increasing women's access to finance across a broad range of stakeholders supporting financial inclusion, there is no common learning agenda or platform for sharing emerging practices and identifying key levers of change needed to bridge the persistent gender gap. Moreover, the lack of traditional collateral, the prevalence of discriminatory property rights and insufficient financial information are at the centre of the capital and credit shortages that women face. As they lack these resources, it is difficult for them to scale up their activities and increase productivity, which is necessary to enter value chains and procurement processes (Awan et al., 2022). Women-run businesses tend to be small and medium-sized enterprises and are underrepresented in business associations, limiting their voice and bargaining power. Overall, the literature consulted shows that gender equality and women's economic empowerment are central to achieving successful and sustainable development. However, the majority of women in many developing countries are still disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of economic opportunities and access to resources due to the patriarchal system. Different forms of gender inequality, such as inequality in access to education and in the labour market, have been associated with lower economic growth.

Research methods

This study is quantitative in nature and used questionnaires for data collection. The analysis in this book chapter is primarily based on a cross-sectional survey of women, which provides detailed information on financial inclusion and includes 190 participants (95 from urban and 95 from rural areas). The data relies on respondents providing details of their financial inclusion. The target population comprises married women entrepreneurs, both formal and informal, in urban and rural areas of Mashonaland East Province. Married women were preferred because they were in a better position and perspective to give valid and truthful information on how the gender gap is encroaching on women's participation and empowerment in accessing financial services. Inferential statistics, descriptive statistics, regression, and correlation analyses were used to analyse the data.

Results and discussion

Major challenges faced by women

Item	**Percentage**
Lack of an identification card	14.8
Tittle deeds	64.3%
Bureaucracy	54.8%
Technophobia	66.8%
Lack of knowledge	63%
Lack of land ownership	58.6%
Financial literacy	11.9%

Source: Author (2025)

Table 1 shows the major challenges women face in securing loans. These challenges highlighted technophobia, as most women fear adopting technologies such as Ecocash and OneMoney. They fear that some people may lie about having made transactions or currency changes, whilst they have not had time to go and make cash outs. Of the 190 respondents, 127 (66.8%) indicated that technophobia affected them, and 63 (33.2%) indicated otherwise. When broken down further, some of the challenges varied. The outstanding issue was a lack of title deeds, with 64.3% concurrence. 63% indicated that challenges related to a lack of knowledge were associated with loan access, whilst another 58.6% of respondents highlighted that bureaucratic and transparency issues stalled progress. Only 14.8% confirmed that challenges of financial exclusion on women were linked to a lack of training, and another 11.9% raised the issue of financial literacy. Literacy can be understood as a source of empowerment in relation to gender issues. Stromquist (2015) views women's empowerment as a process of awareness and capacity building for greater participation, greater power and control over decision-making, and transformative action to produce greater equality between women and men. Due to the gender gap, a lot of women have been marginalised educationally. It is equally and particularly important to recognise that women in colonial Zimbabwe have often been marginalised based on the gender bias that marginalises women (Gumbo et al., 2021). Significant gender disparities existed in Zimbabwe, which resulted in most women not getting an education. Due to this gender marginalisation, many women face more barriers to financial access than men due to lower levels of education and, hence, a lack of formal employment. This disadvantages women in financial inclusion, as they will be unable to open formal bank accounts because they lack the funds to maintain them.

Other challenges raised in the financial exclusion of women include cases of mobility freedom, corruption, nepotism, and harassment by officers, especially in rural areas. The majority of women in Zimbabwe live in rural areas where patriarchal rule is significantly visible, and they are financially excluded due to the distance between their areas and the town where they can open a bank account. According to the study by Pahlevan Sharif et al. (2023), most of the challenges women face are the product of socially constructed gender roles that pervade a people's culture. Women spend 74 per cent of their time on childcare, and Tivers (2024) study reveals that women also do the bulk of the activities associated with childcare. Since they are balancing their businesses and childcare, women are often unable to travel to financial banks, which are far from their homes. Hence, research findings show that mobility issues represent a significant barrier to women's financial inclusion in Zimbabwe. A majority of women interviewed for this study (about mobility issues) pointed out that it is regarded as culturally inappropriate for women to travel to faraway places without the husband's permission, as this is culturally unacceptable. This shows that the majority of women in Zimbabwe are still subjugated mentally, culturally, and economically by men. Women are excluded from their roles in customary activities, thereby preventing them from accessing the outside world (Borah Hazarika & Das, 2021). Therefore, if banks in Zimbabwe were to expand into rural areas, more women would participate in banking services. The banks should also provide platforms to educate and include rural women in the various banking services they offer. By so doing, the banks will financially conscientise rural women, thereby increasing their visibility, accessibility and availability to all categories of women. This study envisions that rural banks can work to reduce women's travel, which is regarded as a major source of conflict within the home, thereby enhancing their financial inclusiveness. This study identified that rural banks may change how the banking and financial sectors address women's financial inclusion to improve their livelihoods. This study shows that educated women in formal employment and women who live in towns and work in the informal sector utilise banking facilities the most.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics summarise the data collected, providing insights into the central tendency and dispersion of the variables studied.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Financial Illiteracy	3.2	0.9
Financial Technology Usage	3.8	0.7
Financial Inclusion	3.5	0.8
Women's investment performance	3.6	0.7

Source: Author (2025)

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 3 indicate that the average levels of financial illiteracy, financial technology usage, financial inclusion, and company performance among the respondents are relatively moderate, with mean scores of 3-4 on a 5-point scale. The standard deviations, ranging from 0.7 to 0.9, indicate moderate variability in respondents' experiences and perceptions regarding these factors. Specifically, financial technology usage has the highest mean (3.8), indicating relatively higher engagement among respondents. In contrast, financial illiteracy has a slightly higher mean (3.2), highlighting an area that may need more attention to improve financial inclusion and women's investment performance.

Inferential statistics

Inferential statistics were used to test hypotheses related to the study objectives, including regression and moderation analyses.

Effect of financial illiteracy on financial inclusion

A regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of financial illiteracy on financial inclusion.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Financial Illiteracy on Financial Inclusion

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Beta	T	P
Financial Illiteracy	-0.45	0.07	-0.35	-6.43	<0.001

Source: Author (2025)

Financial illiteracy has a significant negative effect on financial inclusion (Beta = -0.35, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher financial illiteracy is associated with lower financial inclusion.

Influence of financial technology on financial inclusion

A regression analysis was conducted to determine the effect of financial technology on financial inclusion.

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Financial Technology on Financial Inclusion

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Beta	T	P
Financial Technology Usage	0.52	0.08	0.42	6.50	<0.001

Source: Author (2025)

Financial technology usage positively influences financial inclusion (Beta = 0.42, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher usage is associated with greater financial inclusion.

The moderating role of age on financial inclusion and women's investment performance

A moderation analysis was conducted to explore whether age moderates the relationship between financial inclusion and women's investment performance.

Table 6: Moderation Analysis of Age

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Beta	T	P
Financial Inclusion	0.37	0.06	0.30	6.17	<0.001
Age	0.22	0.05	0.19	4.40	<0.001
Financial Inclusion x Age	0.05	0.02	0.10	2.50	0.013

Source: Author (2025)

Age significantly moderates the relationship between financial inclusion and women's investment performance (Beta for interaction = 0.10, $p = 0.013$), indicating that the positive effect of financial inclusion on women's investment performance is stronger for older respondents.

Effect of financial inclusion on women's investment performance

Table 7: Regression Analysis of Financial Inclusion on Women's Investment Performance

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Beta	T	P
Financial Inclusion	0.60	0.07	0.48	8.57	<0.001

Source: Author (2025)

Financial inclusion has a significant positive effect on company performance (Beta = 0.48, p < 0.001), suggesting that greater financial inclusion enhances company performance.

Discussion of findings with the literature

The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature on the relationships among financial literacy, financial technology, financial inclusion, and company performance.

The negative impact of financial illiteracy on financial inclusion aligns with studies by Khan et al. (2022), who found that low financial literacy is a barrier to financial inclusion. Also, the positive influence of financial technology on financial inclusion is supported by findings from the World Bank (2018), which highlight the role of digital financial services in increasing access to financial systems, particularly in developing countries. Again, the moderating role of age in the relationship between financial inclusion and company performance suggests that older individuals may benefit more from financial inclusion initiatives. This finding is supported by Amari and Anis (2021), who indicate that age can influence the effectiveness of financial inclusion strategies. Finally, the positive effect of financial inclusion on company performance is consistent with studies by Boachie et al. (2023), who found that financial inclusion promotes economic growth and stability, thereby benefiting company performance.

The effect of financial illiteracy on financial inclusion

The study found that financial illiteracy significantly reduces financial inclusion. Specifically, the regression analysis revealed that higher levels of financial illiteracy are associated with lower levels of financial inclusion among banks. This finding aligns with previous research by Lyons and Kass-Hanna (2021), which found that a lack of financial knowledge can prevent individuals from fully participating in the financial system. Our study indicates that addressing financial illiteracy is crucial for improving financial inclusion rates, as it directly influences individuals' ability to understand and utilise financial products and services.

Influence of financial technology on financial inclusion

The data strongly supported the positive influence of financial technology on financial inclusion. The regression results showed that increased usage of financial technology significantly enhances financial inclusion. This aligns with the World Bank (2018) findings, which emphasise the role of digital financial services in expanding access to the financial system, particularly in underserved areas. Banks in Zimbabwe that have integrated digital banking solutions have evidently contributed to greater financial inclusion, making financial services more accessible and convenient for a broader customer base.

The moderating role of age on financial inclusion and women's investment performance

Age was found to moderate the relationship between financial inclusion and women's investment performance. The moderation analysis indicated that the positive effect of financial inclusion on company performance is stronger for older respondents. This finding suggests that age-related factors, such as financial experience and stability, enhance the benefits derived from financial inclusion. Research by Jungo et al. (2024) supports this view, showing that older individuals often have more financial knowledge and stability, which can amplify the positive impacts of financial inclusion on organisational performance.

Effect of financial inclusion on women's investment performance

The study confirmed that financial inclusion positively affects women's investment performance. Regression analysis demonstrated a significant positive relationship between financial inclusion and company performance, indicating that higher levels of financial inclusion are associated with better performance outcomes. This finding is consistent with studies by Boachie et al. (2023), who found that financial inclusion contributes to economic growth and stability, ultimately benefiting financial institutions. Enhanced financial inclusion means more customers access and use financial services, thereby increasing revenue and operational efficiency for the bank.

Implications of Findings

For financial institutions

Financial institutions like banks, microfinance institutions, and non-governmental organisations should prioritise financial literacy programs to enhance financial inclusion. By improving women's financial knowledge, banks can increase engagement with their services, leading to higher customer retention and acquisition. Additionally, leveraging financial technology can further drive financial inclusion, particularly in underserved areas.

For policymakers

Policymakers should create supportive regulatory environments that encourage the adoption of financial technology and promote financial literacy. Initiatives that address both technological and educational barriers can significantly enhance financial inclusion and economic development.

For women

Women can benefit from engaging with financial literacy programs and adopting financial technology tools. Increased financial knowledge and access to digital financial services can empower individuals to make informed financial decisions, leading to improved personal financial management and economic well-being.

Theoretical implications

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by empirically examining the relationships among financial illiteracy, financial technology, age, financial inclusion, and women's investment performance in Zimbabwe's banking sector. It highlights the critical role of financial literacy and technology in enhancing financial inclusion and underscores the moderating effect of age on these relationships. These insights extend current theories of financial inclusion and suggest that future models should incorporate these variables to predict financial behaviour and outcomes better.

Practical implications

For practitioners, especially in the banking sector, the findings underscore the importance of implementing comprehensive financial literacy programs and leveraging financial technology to boost financial inclusion. Banks and other financial institutions should focus on educational initiatives that target financially illiterate populations to improve their understanding of financial services. Additionally, enhancing digital banking platforms can make financial services more accessible, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Recognising the moderating role of age can help tailor these initiatives to different age groups, ensuring that older adults, who may benefit more significantly from financial inclusion, are adequately supported.

Recommendations

Enhance financial literacy programs.

Banks and microfinance institutions should develop and implement comprehensive financial literacy programs tailored to various demographic groups, particularly those with lower educational attainment and younger individuals. Workshops, seminars, and digital learning platforms can be effective in increasing financial knowledge.

Promote financial technology adoption.

To maximise the benefits of financial technology, banks should invest in user-friendly digital platforms and mobile banking services. Ensuring these technologies are accessible and affordable, especially in rural areas, can significantly enhance financial inclusion.

Tailor financial inclusion strategies by age.

Financial inclusion initiatives should consider the age demographics of the target population. Older individuals may require different approaches than younger individuals. Customised financial products and services that cater to the needs of different age groups can improve overall financial inclusion and company performance.

Collaborate with the Government and NGOs

Banks should collaborate with government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to promote financial inclusion. Joint efforts can help address regulatory and economic challenges, providing a more holistic approach to financial inclusion.

Limitations of the study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample size of 190 respondents, while adequate for initial insights, may not fully represent the diverse population of women. Future research should consider larger, more diverse samples to enhance generalizability. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to infer causality between the variables. Longitudinal studies would provide more robust evidence of the relationships over time. Finally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, such as social desirability bias, which could affect the accuracy of the findings.

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Structural and behavioral determinants of digital payment platform adoption in a multi-currency rural economy: Evidence from Gutu District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study investigates the determinants of digital payment platform adoption in rural economies, focusing on Gutu District in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, within the context of the country's evolving multi-currency monetary framework. In Zimbabwe, the coexistence of the United States dollar, South African Rand, Botswana pula and the domestically issued gold-backed Zimbabwean currency (ZiG), coupled with constrained circulation of ZiG cash, has elevated digital platforms as the principal medium for local-currency transactions. However, rural communities often face infrastructural and institutional barriers that limit their effective participation in these digital systems. Against this backdrop, the study examines how technological access, cognitive trust, social influence, socio-economic status, and monetary conditions jointly shape digital payment uptake. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed. Primary data were collected from 221 rural households using interviewer-administered structured questionnaires. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was applied to evaluate both direct and mediated relationships among digital access, trust perceptions, social influence, poverty status, and adoption outcomes. The findings reveal that digital infrastructure access constitutes the most significant predictor of adoption, followed by cognitive trust and social influence. While poverty status exhibits a modest negative association with uptake, its influence diminishes where connectivity and system reliability *are strengthened. Importantly, the multi-currency environment emerges as a structural factor influencing adoption patterns: limited availability of ZiG cash increases reliance on digital platforms for local-currency transactions, yet infrastructural gaps and cost barriers restrict rural households from fully engaging in these systems. As a result, many transactions remain anchored in US dollar cash usage, reinforcing rural exclusion from segments of the formal digital economy. Adoption is positively associated with increased utilisation of mobile money services, digital banking, and routine electronic payments, contributing to expanded financial inclusion. However, broader wealth accumulation effects remain moderate. Overall, digital payment uptake in rural Zimbabwe reflects the interaction between technological readiness, trust formation, and monetary structure, rather than income levels alone. The study underscores the importance of strengthening rural connectivity, reducing transaction costs, enhancing interoperability, and aligning monetary policy implementation with rural digital capabilities to advance inclusive financial development.*

Keywords: Digital payment platforms; financial inclusion; mobile money; multi-currency systems; rural technology adoption.

Introduction

Rural economies continue to trail urban areas in financial inclusion, even as digital payment platform technologies have expanded rapidly across the globe and fundamentally altered how individuals, households, and firms conduct transactions and engage with financial services (Mhlanga, 2025; Ngonyani, 2022). Digital payment platforms such as mobile money services and digital banking offerings now constitute core components of contemporary financial systems, offering speed, convenience, and enhanced security in transactions (Demirgüç-Kunt, Klapper, Singer & Ansar, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Despite these global advances, rural uptake in Zimbabwe remains comparatively limited, even as urban adoption accelerates. This divergence persists notwithstanding sustained regulatory efforts by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ), particularly under the National Financial Inclusion Strategy II (RBZ, 2022, 2025). By 2024, approximately 45% of adults in Zimbabwe were formally banked, yet rural women, young people, and informal sector participants continued to experience disproportionate exclusion (RBZ, 2025). The widening contrast between urban progress and rural stagnation raises important questions regarding the structural and behavioural drivers underlying digital payment disparities and ongoing financial exclusion in rural communities (Mhlanga, 2025; Ngonyani, 2022).

Financial inclusion which is commonly understood as equitable access to affordable, suitable, and sustainable financial services is widely regarded as a foundational element of poverty reduction and inclusive economic development (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2022; Zins & Weill, 2016). Evidence from emerging economies suggests that expanded financial access can alleviate multiple dimensions of deprivation (Lee, Lou & Wang, 2023). Affordable and reliable financial services contribute to increased household savings, improved income smoothing, and asset accumulation, thereby strengthening the capacity of vulnerable households to transition out of poverty (Peng & Mao, 2023; Rubio & Leon, 2025). Across sub-Saharan Africa, the adoption of digital financial services has produced uneven outcomes. While mobile money platforms have broadened access to remittances, savings products, and short-term credit thereby enhancing resilience and welfare in many contexts (Dzogbenuku, Amoako, Kumi & Bonsu, 2022; Suri & Jack, 2016) their benefits have not been uniformly distributed. Kenya's M-Pesa experience illustrates the transformative potential of digital payments in lowering transaction costs and deepening rural financial access (Suri, Aker, Batista, Callen, Ghani, Jack & Sukhtankar, 2023; Suri & Jack, 2016), yet similar levels of impact have not consistently materialized across other African rural settings.

A growing body of scholarship documents persistent rural–urban gaps in digital payment adoption. Rural communities frequently confront structural impediments, including weak telecommunications infrastructure, limited digital literacy, relatively high transaction fees, and low confidence in formal financial institutions (Ong, Yusri & Ibrahim, 2023; Siagian, Tarigan, Basana & Basuki, 2022; Wu & Peng, 2024). International development organizations emphasize that narrowing this divide is essential for building inclusive digital economies and achieving sustainable development objectives (GSMA, 2024; World Bank, 2023). In Zimbabwe, these challenges are compounded by distinctive monetary and institutional arrangements. The diffusion of digital payments in Zimbabwe has largely been shaped by regulatory interventions rather than purely market-driven forces. The country operates within a multi-currency framework in which the United States dollar, the South African Rand and Botswana Pula circulates alongside the domestically issued gold-backed Zimbabwean currency (ZiG). While US dollars remain relatively accessible through banking channels and diaspora remittances, the physical availability of ZiG notes and coins has been intentionally constrained through policy measures limiting cash circulation. Consequently, digital platforms have become the primary medium for ZiG-denominated transactions. This shift has unfolded unevenly. Urban populations have adapted more readily to digital ZiG payments, whereas rural communities often struggle to meet the technological, infrastructural, and institutional prerequisites for sustained digital usage. As a result, many rural transactions, which are dominantly under the informal sector, continue to rely on physical cash and, in some cases, barter arrangements, with the US dollar functioning as the dominant transactional currency (Sibanda, Kuzakwacho, Moyo & Nhliziyo, 2025; Mutale, 2024).

Such structural conditions restrict rural participation in local currency digital transactions and limit households' ability to exploit potential cost efficiencies within a multi-currency environment. Limited access to US dollar cash in rural areas also increases the cost of acquiring appropriate denominations, thereby intensifying financial vulnerability. Several explanations have been advanced to account for this pattern of rural digital exclusion. Cultural inclinations toward physical money, driven by a desire for tangible security and oversight, continue to impede the transition to a cashless ecosystem (Nyika, 2024). Persistent infrastructural deficits particularly unstable mobile network coverage and unreliable electricity supply has been found to further constrain continuous engagement with digital platforms (Simatele & Maciko, 2022). Additional barriers include relatively high transaction costs, weakened consumer trust, and gaps in digital ecosystem development (Barugahara, 2021; Chikweche, Chaora & Cross, 2023). These obstacles persist despite the existence of domestic payment infrastructure, including Zimswitch's ZIPIT system, multiple mobile money providers (EcoCash, Telecash, Omari, Innbucks and OneMoney), and money transfer agencies that facilitate linkages between banked and unbanked users (Mutale, 2024; Ntini, Ndlovu, Shava, Charumbira & Sibanda, 2022; Svotwa, Makanyeza & Wealth, 2023).

Departing from prior research, this study explicitly incorporates the structural implications of Zimbabwe's multi-currency regime and monetary policy environment into the analysis of rural digital payment adoption. It argues that limited rural participation in formal financial systems cannot be explained solely by income constraints or individual preference. Rather, adoption patterns are embedded within a monetary structure that privileges US dollar cash transactions while simultaneously promoting ZiG-based digital payments. Building on earlier frameworks (Mhlanga, 2025), the study integrates digital access, cognitive trust, social influence, and socio-economic conditions into a unified analytical model tailored to rural Zimbabwe. Consistent with findings by Chamboko (2024) and Kaiser and Barstow (2022), infrastructural inadequacies and elevated operating costs are identified as fundamental constraints that restrict engagement with savings mechanisms, credit facilities, and efficient payment systems.

By isolating the behavioural implications of a dual-currency system, the study advances understanding of how macro-monetary arrangements shape digital payment adoption in rural contexts. This perspective clarifies why Zimbabwe's rural economy remains predominantly US dollar cash-based, why ZiG-denominated digital transactions are limited, and why overall rural digital uptake remains subdued (Siagian et al., 2022; Wu & Peng, 2024). Incorporating these institutional complexities enhances the policy relevance of the findings, particularly for strategies aimed at financial inclusion, poverty reduction, and rural economic transformation within evolving monetary environments (Subramaniam & Masron, 2025; Svotwa et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to expand access to secure, affordable, and user-oriented digital financial services in underserved rural regions (Simatele & Mbedzi, 2021; Svotwa et al., 2023). It aligns with broader international policy agendas advocating the strategic use of financial technologies to address poverty and social marginalization (Ouechtati, 2020; World Bank, 2021) and supports progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to poverty reduction and inequality (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). In doing so, the study deepens insight into the interconnections between digital technology adoption, financial inclusion, and rural development across sub-Saharan Africa (Subramaniam & Masron, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

The expansion of digital payment platforms is commonly interpreted through established technology adoption frameworks, particularly the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis & Davis, 2003). These models emphasize cognitive determinants such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, and social influence as central predictors of technology uptake. Empirical research on digital financial services consistently finds that individuals are more willing to engage with digital payment systems when they view them as beneficial, uncomplicated to operate, and socially endorsed within their reference groups.

Although TAM and UTAUT have been widely applied and empirically supported across various contexts, their explanatory strength weakens in rural financial environments. In such settings, decisions to adopt digital platforms are shaped not only by individual perceptions but also by broader structural conditions. Poverty levels, limited infrastructure, fragile institutional frameworks, and entrenched socio-cultural practices exert substantial influence over adoption behaviour (Nyathi & Mutale, 2025; Mutale, 2024). These realities constrain the predictive adequacy of perception-centered models and suggest the need for a more context-sensitive analytical approach.

Rural environments present structural and social complexities that conventional adoption theories do not fully capture. Weak telecommunications networks, unreliable electricity supply, limited digital capabilities, and collective decision-making norms often diminish the predictive precision of TAM and UTAUT in such contexts (Chamboko, 2024; Nyathi & Mutale, 2025). Consequently, digital payment adoption in rural areas reflects the interaction between individual attitudes and enabling or constraining economic and institutional conditions, rather than perceptions alone. To address these limitations, scholars increasingly advocate integrating traditional adoption frameworks with perspectives drawn from market failure theory, financial innovation literature, and development economics. Such theoretical synthesis offers a more robust lens for understanding the structural and behavioural drivers of digital financial inclusion in rural economies.

Empirical Literature Review

Cognitive considerations play a central role in shaping digital payment adoption. Within established technology acceptance frameworks such as TAM and UTAUT, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are regarded as foundational determinants of behavioural intention (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Recent empirical studies continue to validate the relevance of these constructs in payment adoption contexts, demonstrating that perceived usefulness and ease of use remain significant predictors of digital payment adoption across developing economies

(Addae, Ahmed, Ofori, Abubakari & Sharma, 2025; Narang, Jain, & Sarma, 2025). More recent evidence further confirms that these cognitive factors influence users' attitudes and behavioural intentions toward fintech services, reinforcing their continued applicability in contemporary digital payment ecosystems (de Andrade, 2025; Muromba, Keeni & Fuyuki, 2025).

In rural Zimbabwe, uptake tends to increase when users experience tangible benefits, including reduced travel time, lower transaction expenses, and fewer bureaucratic procedures (Ntini et al., 2022). Furthermore, Trust closely intertwined with perceptions of usefulness is of paramount importance in rural contexts, where skepticism toward formal financial institutions may persist. Confidence in system reliability, transaction security, and the integrity of service providers significantly shapes willingness to engage with digital payment platforms (Simatele, 2024). Conversely, apprehensions related to fraud, technical malfunction, or financial loss have been shown to dampen adoption intentions (Ngonyani, 2022; Nyarugwe, Maibvisira & Mudzurandende, 2012).

Adoption behaviour is further conditioned by individual socio-economic attributes. Educational attainment and digital literacy influence users' competence in navigating digital interfaces, underscoring the need for targeted training and capacity-building initiatives in rural communities (Ngware, 2024). Income levels also affect perceptions of affordability; transaction fees and service charges can discourage frequent use among low-income households, even where access is technically available (Ozili, 2024). Demographic factors introduce additional variation. Younger individuals often display greater receptiveness to digital innovations, whereas women may encounter structural and cultural barriers that limit both access to platforms and sustained engagement (Ngware, 2024; Zeka & Alhassan, 2024).

A substantial body of research links financial inclusion to improved welfare outcomes, poverty reduction, and broader economic participation. Studies by Nnoje, Doris, and Ogochukwu (2024) and Ofoeda et al. (2024) demonstrate that expanded access to financial services strengthens household resilience and enhances economic integration. Digital financial systems can promote inclusivity by lowering transaction costs and mitigating geographic isolation (Osabutey & Jackson, 2024; Sadok, 2021). Social dynamics also shape adoption patterns. Peer influence, endorsements from community leaders, and familial networks frequently act as catalysts for digital financial engagement in rural areas (Ong et al., 2023). Such patterns reflect collectivist norms prevalent in many sub-Saharan African societies, where financial decisions are often embedded within social relationships rather than made in isolation.

Institutional and systemic conditions further affect adoption outcomes. Service reliability, system quality, and responsive customer support contribute positively to user satisfaction and continued platform usage (Simatele & Mbedzi, 2021). Interoperability is particularly critical in environments characterized by multiple service providers. In Zimbabwe, initiatives such as the Zimswitch network have facilitated cross-platform transactions and expanded financial connectivity (Mutambisi & Chavunduka, 2023). Nonetheless, fragmented service provision, inconsistent standards, and limited integration across platforms continue to impede seamless user experiences (Putrevu & Mertzanis, 2024).

Public policy and regulatory frameworks also play a decisive role in shaping digital adoption trajectories. Measures that enhance transparency, protect consumers, and regulate pricing structures tend to strengthen public confidence and encourage sustained usage (Ofoeda et al., 2024). Experiences from India's Digital India initiative illustrate how coordinated investments in infrastructure development and digital literacy can significantly expand rural financial access (Parvin & Panakaje, 2022). In low-literacy settings, incentive-driven awareness campaigns have proven effective in encouraging initial experimentation with digital tools (Swaminathan et al., 2019). However, scholars caution against equating rising digital transaction volumes with meaningful economic empowerment. Evidence suggests that in many rural contexts, digital financial activity primarily supports short-term consumption smoothing and remittance transfers rather than long-term asset accumulation (Li et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2024). More substantial poverty reduction effects appear to be associated with access to digital credit and investment products, rather than payment services alone (Peng & Mao, 2023).

The examined literature indicates that the adoption of digital payments in rural areas is influenced by a complex interaction of cognitive, individual, environmental, organizational, and regulatory factors. Although perceived utility, trust, affordability, and social influence are primary motivators, structural facilitators such as infrastructure, availability, interoperability and governmental backing are also essential. The evidence indicates that adoption alone does not inherently lead to poverty alleviation unless accompanied by supportive financial services and conducive institutional frameworks. Comprehensively addressing these interconnected characteristics is critical for enhancing digital payment uptake and attaining significant financial inclusion in rural sub-Saharan Africa.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design grounded in a survey approach to examine the determinants of digital payment platform adoption and their implications for financial inclusion in rural Zimbabwe. The methodology outlines the procedures followed in the development of the research instrument, sampling strategy, data collection, and analytical techniques. A structured questionnaire was designed based on established constructs from technology adoption and financial inclusion literature, ensuring content validity and alignment with the study objectives. The instrument was pre-tested to enhance clarity, reliability, and contextual relevance before full-scale data collection.

The study was conducted in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, over the period 2023–2024. Gutu Rural District was purposively selected as the focal area because it reflects many of the structural characteristics common to rural Zimbabwe. The district is characterized by relatively high poverty incidence, limited proximity to formal financial institutions, reliance on subsistence farming, and substantial engagement in informal economic activity (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT], 2022). Research by Ncube (2024) pointed out that although mobile phone ownership has increased steadily, persistent infrastructural and network connectivity challenges in rural Zimbabwe remain. These contextual features make Gutu District an appropriate setting for examining the determinants of digital payment platform uptake and assessing their implications for inclusive rural development.

The study was anchored in a post-positivist paradigm and adopted a quantitative research strategy to explore relationships between observable indicators and underlying latent constructs. A survey design was implemented, enabling empirical testing of hypothesized associations at a single point in time. This design was suitable for examining adoption drivers and behavioural outcomes using structured and measurable variables.

The sample size for this study was determined using the Slovin (1960) formula, which provides a simplified approach for estimating sample size in studies involving large populations where limited prior information on population behaviour is available. The formula is expressed as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

where *n* represents the required sample size, *N* denotes the total population size, and *e* is the margin of error. For this study, population figures were obtained from the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT, 2022), which reports a total population of 208,160 in Gutu District, of which 71,465 individuals fall within the economically active age group (20–60 years). This economically active population was considered the appropriate sampling frame, thus $N = 71{,}465$. Assuming a margin of error of 7% ($e = 0.07$), the calculated sample size was:

$$n = \frac{71{,}465}{1 + 71{,}465(0.07)^2} \approx 204$$

To account for potential non-response, incomplete questionnaires, and other field-related contingencies, the sample size was adjusted upward to 221 respondents. This adjustment enhances representativeness and reduces the risk of sampling error while remaining feasible within the logistical constraints of rural fieldwork. Furthermore, the final sample size falls within the acceptable range for multivariate statistical analysis, as recommended in methodological literature, where sample sizes between 200 and 500 are considered adequate for reliable estimation in regression-based and structural models (Meyer, 2018; Noordzij et al., 2010).

The questionnaire captured demographic characteristics, income sources, patterns of payment usage, perceptions of digital platforms, and factors associated with adoption decisions. Prior to full-scale data collection, a pilot study was conducted in a ward outside the sampled clusters to assess instrument clarity and consistency. Feedback from the pilot phase informed refinements to question wording, sequencing, and overall structure, thereby strengthening validity and reliability. Data collection took place over a four-month period within the 2023–2024 timeframe, with trained enumerators administering questionnaires in households, marketplaces, and community meeting points. Secondary sources including financial inclusion reports, policy publications, and relevant scholarly literature were utilised to provide contextual background and support interpretation of empirical results.

Data analysis was performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). This technique was selected due to its suitability for exploratory and predictive modelling, its capacity to estimate complex relationships involving multiple latent variables, and its robustness in situations where multivariate normality assumptions may not be fully satisfied (Hair & Alamer, 2022). The analytical framework consisted of five latent constructs, defined as follows:

$$\text{DigitalAccess} = \beta_1\text{PhoneAccess} + \beta_2\text{Network} + \beta_3\text{MobileDeviceOwnership} \quad (1)$$

$$\text{PovertyStatus} = \alpha_1\text{Education} + \alpha_2\text{Income} + \alpha_3\text{AssetScore} + \alpha_4\text{IncomeSource} \quad (2)$$

$$\text{CognitiveTrust} = \omega_1\text{EaseOfUse} + \omega_2\text{Accessibility} + \omega_3\text{Security} \quad (3)$$

$$\text{SocialInfluence} = \delta_1\text{Convenience} + \delta_2\text{Recommendation} + \delta_3\text{MerchantAcceptance} \quad (4)$$

$$\text{AdoptionOutcome} = \theta_1\text{MobileMoneyUse} + \theta_2\text{MobileBankingUse} + \theta_3\text{EasierSavings} \quad (5)$$

Partial Least Squares estimations were performed for the five latent variables. The Energy Test of Multivariate Normality indicated multivariate normality was not upheld (E = 2.5098, $p < 0.001$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis of normality. This outcome further validated the application of PLS-SEM, owing to its resilience against non-normal data distributions.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measuring model was assessed for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Table 1 indicates that composite reliability (CR) values exceeded the required level of 0.70, while average variance extracted (AVE) values topped 0.50 for all constructs, with the exception of WealthStatus. This verifies adequate reliability and convergent validity for DigitalAccess, CognitiveTrust, SocialInfluence, InitialAdoption, and ContinuousUse. Discriminant validity was confirmed by the Fornell–Larcker criterion and Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratios, whereas variance inflation factor (VIF) values under 3 suggested an absence of multicollinearity issues.

The subpar performance of income-based metrics illustrates the multifaceted and non-monetary aspects of poverty in rural Zimbabwe, where asset ownership and livelihood security can provide a more accurate representation of economic position than reported income.

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	CR	AVE	Interpretation
DigitalAccess	0.893	0.735	Reliable, convergent validity established
CognitiveTrust	0.893	0.735	Reliable, convergent validity established
SocialInfluence	0.827	0.617	Reliable, convergent validity established
InitialAdoption	0.756	0.611	Reliable, convergent validity established
ContinuousUse	0.795	0.660	Reliable, convergent validity established
WealthStatus	0.224	0.266	Reliability and validity concerns

Structural Model and Mediation Analysis

The structural model results (Table 2) demonstrate that DigitalAccess ($\beta = 0.528$), CognitiveTrust ($\beta = 0.256$), and SocialInfluence ($\beta = 0.238$) are significant predictors of InitialAdoption. Initial Adoption significantly influences Continuous Use ($\beta = 0.489$), hence affirming its mediation function. Mediation study indicates that InitialAdoption is the principal conduit through which access, trust, and social influence lead to prolonged platform utilization.

Nonetheless, ContinuousUse does not serve as a significant predictor of WealthStatus ($\beta = 0.155$), indicating that although digital payment adoption behaviors are adequately elucidated ($R^2 = 0.55$ for InitialAdoption and $R^2 = 0.45$ for ContinuousUse), their direct impact on socio-economic advancement is constrained ($R^2 = 0.15$ for WealthStatus).

Table 2. Direct and Indirect Effects

Pathway	Effect	Interpretation
DigitalAccess → InitialAdoption	0.528	Strong, significant
CognitiveTrust → InitialAdoption	0.256	Moderate, significant
SocialInfluence → InitialAdoption	0.238	Moderate, significant
InitialAdoption → ContinuousUse	0.489	Strong mediator
ContinuousUse → WealthStatus	0.155	Weak, not significant
DigitalAccess → ContinuousUse (indirect)	0.258	Strong mediation
DigitalAccess → WealthStatus (indirect)	0.040	Very weak mediation
CognitiveTrust → ContinuousUse (indirect)	0.125	Weak mediation
SocialInfluence → ContinuousUse (indirect)	0.116	Weak mediation

Results Presentation and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were employed to characterize respondents and outline the socio-economic and digital background of the sample. Table 1 indicates that the sample consisted of 56.6% male and 43.4% female participants. The age distribution was quite equitable, with the highest percentages in the 18–24 years (22.6%) and 45–54 years (22.2%) groups. The educational attainment in the rural context was notably high, with over 83% of respondents possessing at least secondary education, indicating a foundational capability for digital participation.

Table 1. Demographic details of sampled rural dwellers (n = 221)

		Frequency	Percent
Age	18-24	50	22.6
	25-34	33	14.9
	35-44	47	21.3
	45-54	49	22.2
	55 and above	42	19.0
Gender	Male	125	56.6
	Female	96	43.4
Educational background	No formal Education	14	6.3
	Primary Education	22	10.0
	Secondary Education	96	43.4
	Tertiary Education	89	40.3
Digital payment usage for a month recall	Only Cash, no digital payment	24	10.9
	Only digital, no cash payment	19	8.6
	More digital, less cash payments	94	42.5
	More cash, less digital payments	84	38.0

Payment usage patterns suggest a shifting rural economy. While 42.5% of respondents indicated a greater reliance on digital payments compared to cash, a significant portion (38.0%) stuck in using cash more frequently, and 10.9% depended only on cash. The coexistence of digital and cash transactions highlights partial acceptance instead of complete digital replacement.

Digital Payment Platform Usage

Table 2 presents the distribution of usage across different digital payment platforms. Mobile money services dominate the rural digital landscape, with more than three-quarters of respondents reporting active use. Mobile banking follows at 59.7%, indicating moderate engagement relative to mobile money. In contrast, the uptake of point-of-sale (POS) payments, e-commerce transactions, and cryptocurrency remains comparatively low.

These patterns suggest that mobile-based solutions, particularly those aligned with routine, day-to-day transactions constitute the core of rural digital finance. More advanced or infrastructure-intensive platforms, however, have yet to gain meaningful traction within the rural context.

Table 2. Platform usage

		Number of respondents	**Percent**
Digital payment usage for a month recall	Only Cash, no digital payment	24	10.9
	Only digital, no cash payment	19	8.6
	More digital, less cash payments	94	42.5
	More cash, less digital payments	84	38.0

Digital payment platform by type.

	Yes	No
Do you use Mobile Money	74.70	25.30
Do you use Mobile Banking?	59.70	40.30
Do you use eCommerce	18.60	81.40
Do you use POS machine payments	21.70	78.30
Do you use Cryptocurrencies(e.g.,Bitcoin)	10.90	89.10

Sources of Income

Table 3 illustrates the diversification of rural livelihoods. Salaried employment (59.7%) and agricultural operations (36.2%) constituted the principal income sources, augmented by informal channels including remittances from relatives and friends, casual labor, and donor assistance. This income framework illustrates both formal and informal financial streams, highlighting the importance of adaptable, cost-effective digital payment solutions that can accommodate irregular and minor transactions.

Table 3. Sources of income

	Yes	No
I get income from farming activities	36.20	63.80
I get income from salaried work	59.70	40.30
I get income from relatives and friends	18.10	81.90
I get income from donor funding	4.10	95.90
I get income from piece jobs	17.20	82.80

Perceived Importance of Adoption Attributes

The perspectives of respondents regarding issues affecting digital payment utilization are illustrated in Table 4. Dependable internet connectivity, low transaction costs, device affordability, and system usability were assessed as highly significant. While security concerns were somewhat less prioritized than other traits, they remained significant, suggesting that trust-related issues continue to be relevant. These data indicate that adoption decisions are mostly influenced by affordability, infrastructural reliability, and user-friendliness, rather than technological innovation.

Table 4. Rating of factor importance in usage

	Most Important	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Least Important
Reliable and stable internet connectivity	30.80	25.80	22.20	10.40	10.90
Easy to use and intuitive user interfaces	22.70	30.50	24.10	13.60	9.10
Availability of local support and assistance for digital platform usage	26.70	24.90	27.10	11.80	9.50

Low cost or no transaction fees	28.50	25.80	22.60	13.10	10.00
Trustworthy and secure digital payment systems	29.40	21.70	17.60	19.90	11.30
Accessible and affordable mobile devices	27.10	25.30	25.30	11.80	10.40
Incentives or rewards for using digital payment platforms	29.40	23.50	25.80	8.60	12.70
Integration with local businesses and service providers	28.50	28.10	20.80	12.20	10.40

Measurement Model Assessment

Prior to estimating the structural relationships, the measurement model was assessed to establish reliability and validity. As reported in Table 5, the constructs representing Digital Access, Cognitive Trust, Social Influence, and Adoption Outcomes demonstrated strong factor loadings on their respective latent variables, supporting satisfactory indicator reliability. Digital Access was effectively captured through measures of smartphone ownership, network reliability, and device availability. Similarly, Cognitive Trust was adequately represented by perceptions of ease of use, accessibility, and system security.

In contrast, the Poverty Status construct exhibited weaker measurement performance. Asset ownership emerged as the most stable and informative indicator, while income-based measures contributed less consistently to the construct. This outcome reflects the complex and context-specific nature of poverty in rural settings. Despite these measurement limitations, the construct was retained in the model to account for structural economic constraints that may influence adoption behaviour.

Table 5. Measurement model results

Construct	Indicator	Loading (β)	p-value
Digital Access	Smartphone Access	0.75	< .001
	Reliable Network	0.80	< .001
	Mobile Device Ownership	0.80	< .001
Poverty Status	Education	0.23	< .05
	Income	-0.10	<.970
	Asset Score	-0.80	< .001
	Income Source	-0.20	<.054
Cognitive Trust	Ease of Use	0.84	< .001
	Accessibility	0.74	< .001
	Security	0.71	< .001
Social Influence	Convenience	0.63	< .001
	Recommendation	0.78	< .001
	Merchant Acceptance	0.56	< .05
Adoption Outcomes	Mobile Money Use	0.82	< .001
	Mobile Banking Use	0.79	< .001
	Payment Usage	0.76	< .001
	Easier Savings	0.81	< .001

Note. All loadings >0.60 indicate strong reliability, except for Poverty Status indicators which showed weaker performance, particularly Income and Income Source (non-significant).

Structural Model Results

Table 6 reports the structural model estimates. The results show that Digital Access constitutes the most influential predictor of platform uptake, with Cognitive Trust and Social Influence also exerting meaningful positive effects. In contrast, Poverty Status displays a small and statistically non-significant negative association with adoption, suggesting that infrastructural readiness and trust-enhancing factors outweigh income considerations in shaping participation decisions.

Furthermore, platform adoption exhibits a significant positive relationship with all examined usage outcomes, including mobile money usage, engagement with mobile banking services, transaction frequency, and savings-oriented activities. These findings indicate that adoption operates as a central conduit through which access conditions and trust perceptions translate into sustained interaction with digital financial services.

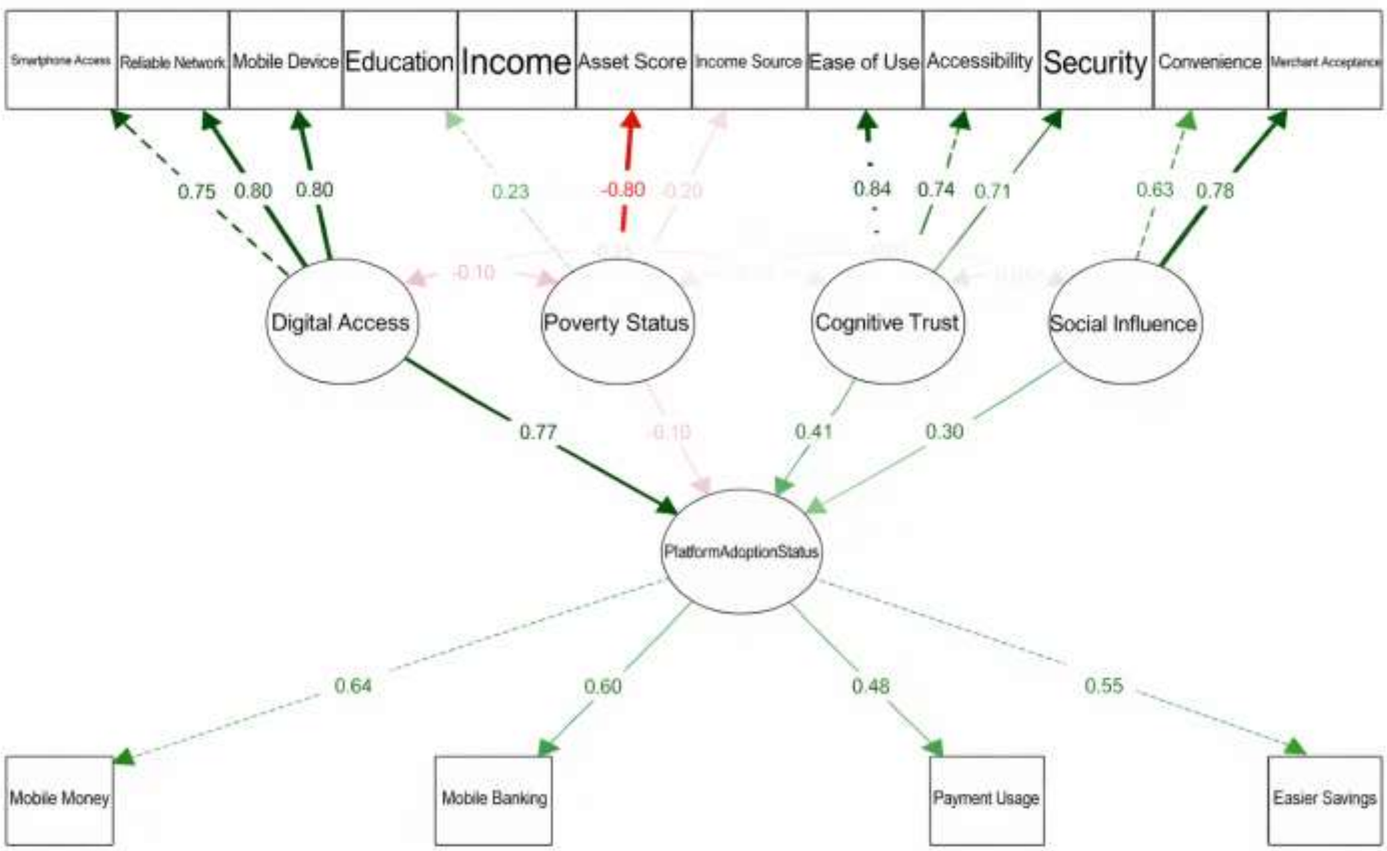
Table 6. Structural equation model results

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value	Significance
Digital Access → Platform Adoption	0.77	< 0.001	***
Cognitive Trust → Platform Adoption	0.41	0.012	**
Social Influence → Platform Adoption	0.30	0.027	**
Poverty Status → Platform Adoption	-0.10	0.186	n.s.
Platform Adoption → Mobile Money Use	0.64	< 0.001	***
Platform Adoption → Mobile Banking	0.60	< 0.001	***
Platform Adoption → Payment Usage	0.48	0.004	**
Platform Adoption → Easier Savings	0.55	< 0.001	***

Note. ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.05$; n.s. = not significant. Fit indices: $\chi^2/df < 3.0$; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.048; SRMR = 0.042.

Model evaluation metrics demonstrate adequate explanatory capability and overall model suitability. Figure 1 illustrates the validated structural linkages, emphasizing the relative strength of routes across categories and affirming the relevance of Digital Access and Adoption inside the model.

Figure 1. Structural Equation Model of Digital Payment Platform Adoption



Summary of Findings and Implications

The findings of this study provide important insights into the dynamics of digital financial inclusion in rural contexts. Contrary to dominant expectations in the literature, the results reveal that while digital payment adoption is positively influenced by factors such as digital access, cognitive trust, and social influence, its relationship with poverty outcomes is more complex. In particular, the negative association observed between digital payment usage intensity and household income suggests that increased usage may reflect economic necessity rather than improved welfare. Thus, these finding challenges conventional assumptions that digital financial inclusion directly translates into poverty reduction. Instead, it supports the argument that digital platforms in rural settings are often utilised as coping mechanisms for managing financial constraints, including receiving remittances and facilitating low-value transactions.

The results demonstrate that uptake of digital payment platforms in rural Zimbabwe is driven primarily by access to reliable infrastructure and the presence of cognitive trust, with social influence acting as an additional reinforcing factor. Although poverty constrains participation to some extent, its effect is comparatively weaker than broader systemic and institutional determinants. Following adoption, users show increased engagement with digital financial services, particularly in relation to routine transactions and savings-oriented practices.

These outcomes underscore the necessity of integrated policy approaches that simultaneously strengthen rural infrastructure, cultivate user trust, and reduce transaction-related costs. Without addressing these foundational conditions, digital payment systems risk remaining underutilized, even in contexts where mobile phone penetration is relatively high.

From a practical and policy standpoint, the results demonstrated that expanding access to digital payment platforms alone is insufficient to achieve meaningful poverty reduction. Policymakers should complement digital financial initiatives with targeted interventions aimed at enhancing income-generating capacity, financial literacy, and digital skills among rural populations. For financial service providers, the findings point to the importance of designing inclusive products that go beyond facilitating transactions to supporting savings, investment, and productive economic activities. In multi-currency environments such as Zimbabwe, ensuring affordability, interoperability, and trust in digital platforms remains critical for deepening financial inclusion.From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the digital financial inclusion literature by integrating behavioural and structural determinants within a unified empirical framework. By incorporating variables such as cognitive trust, social influence, and socio-economic capability, the study extends traditional technology adoption models and demonstrates their applicability within rural, resource-constrained environments. Importantly, the findings highlight the limitations of relying solely on adoption metrics as indicators of financial inclusion success, suggesting the need for models that distinguish between transactional usage and transformative economic impact.

This study is subject to several limitations that provide avenues for future research. First, the use of cross-sectional data limits the ability to capture dynamic changes in digital payment adoption and its long-term effects on poverty outcomes. Future studies could employ longitudinal data to examine causal relationships over time. Second, while this study focuses on rural Zimbabwe, comparative studies across different regions or countries would provide deeper insights into contextual variations in digital financial inclusion. Third, future research could explore additional dimensions such as financial literacy, institutional trust, and behavioural biases to further enrich the understanding of digital adoption patterns. Finally, qualitative approaches may complement quantitative findings by providing deeper insights into user experiences and motivations.

Conclusion

This study examined the determinants of digital payment platform uptake in rural Zimbabwe, drawing on survey evidence from Gutu District. The findings reveal that digital access constitutes the most influential driver of adoption, highlighting the importance of mobile phone ownership, reliable network coverage, and supportive technological infrastructure. Cognitive trust shaped by perceptions of ease of use, accessibility, and system security emerges as a significant predictor of behavioural intention. In addition, social influence, manifested through peer recommendations and merchant acceptance, reinforces adoption decisions within rural communities. Although poverty status exhibits a modest negative association with uptake, the relatively small magnitude of this effect suggests that improvements in infrastructure and trust-building mechanisms can partially offset income-related constraints.

Results from the structural model further indicate that adoption of digital payment platforms is associated with increased use of mobile money services, digital banking, routine electronic transactions, and savings-oriented practices. These patterns suggest that digital platforms function not merely as transactional instruments but as gateways to broader financial participation. While direct effects on wealth accumulation appear limited in the short term, the observed behavioural shifts point to gradual strengthening of transactional capacity and incremental progress toward financial inclusion in rural settings.Overall, the evidence underscores that digital payment adoption in rural economies is shaped by an interplay of technological readiness, institutional conditions, and social dynamics rather than by income levels alone. Advancing inclusive rural digital finance therefore requires integrated interventions that expand infrastructure, reduce transaction costs, strengthen consumer confidence, and enhance digital literacy. By situating adoption within the structural realities of rural livelihoods, this study offers empirically grounded insights to inform policy formulation and practical strategies aimed at developing inclusive digital financial ecosystems in emerging economies.

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Local Content and Sustainable Procurement in the AFCFTA Era

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Abstract

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers major opportunities for economic integration, industrialisation, and sustainable development across Africa. However, these opportunities are limited by weak local content development and overreliance on imports in public procurement systems. This study examines the role of local content and sustainable procurement in promoting inclusive growth under the AfCFTA framework. Using a qualitative approach based on policy analysis, document review, and stakeholder interviews, the study identified key opportunities and challenges affecting implementation. The findings show that effective local content policies and sustainable procurement practices can promote industrial growth, employment creation, competitiveness, and regional value chains. However, weak institutions, poor policy enforcement, corruption, and limited procurement skills remain major barriers. The study concludes that strengthening local content policies, harmonising procurement regulations, investing in capacity building, and promoting regional cooperation are essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive economic transformation under AfCFTA.

Keywords: Local Content, Sustainable Procurement, AfCFTA, Economic Integration, Policy Frameworks, Inclusive Growth

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2021, represents one of the most ambitious initiatives for regional economic integration in Africa's history. The agreement brings together more than 50 African countries into a single market aimed at promoting intra-African trade, industrialization, economic diversification, and sustainable development through the reduction of tariffs and trade barriers (UNECA, 2022;). Despite Africa possessing abundant natural resources and a growing consumer market, the continent continues to experience low levels of intra-African trade compared to other regions of the world. Many African economies remain heavily dependent on imported manufactured goods and external supply chains, resulting in limited domestic industrial growth, unemployment, and persistent trade imbalances. These structural weaknesses raise concerns about whether African countries are adequately prepared to benefit from the opportunities created by AfCFTA.

One of the major challenges affecting African economies is the limited integration of local industries into procurement and production systems. In many countries, procurement practices continue to favour imported goods and foreign suppliers, reducing opportunities for local firms to participate in national and regional markets (OECD, 2016). This dependence on imports weakens local manufacturing capacity, limits technology transfer, and constrains employment creation, especially among youth and small-scale entrepreneurs. As AfCFTA promotes market liberalization and increased competition, countries without strong local content strategies risk becoming markets for foreign products rather than beneficiaries of industrial development and value addition. The absence of effective procurement systems that prioritise local participation therefore presents a significant developmental problem.

In response to these challenges, local content policies and sustainable procurement have emerged as important strategies for promoting inclusive economic growth. Local content refers to policies and practices designed to increase the participation of domestic firms, labour, and resources in economic activities and procurement systems. Sustainable procurement, on the other hand, involves procurement processes that consider economic, social, and environmental impacts while promoting long-term development goals (Testa et al., 2016). These approaches have the potential to stimulate industrialisation, create employment, strengthen regional value chains, and promote environmental sustainability. However, the implementation of sustainable procurement across many African countries remains constrained by weak institutional frameworks, corruption, poor policy enforcement, and inadequate technical skills (Walker & Phillips, 2009).

Zimbabwe faces similar challenges as it seeks to position itself within the AfCFTA framework. While the country has significant potential in sectors such as manufacturing, mining, agriculture, and construction, local industries continue to struggle against imported products and limited access to procurement opportunities (African Development Bank, 2023). Balancing trade liberalisation with the protection and development of domestic industries has become a critical policy issue. Without deliberate procurement policies that promote local content and sustainability, Zimbabwe may fail to fully benefit from AfCFTA's economic opportunities. This situation highlights the need for strategies that align procurement systems with industrial development goals and regional integration priorities.

Against this background, the present study explores the role of local content and sustainable procurement in promoting inclusive growth under the AfCFTA framework. Using qualitative methods such as policy analysis, document review, and interviews with procurement professionals and policymakers, the study examines the opportunities, challenges, and best practices associated with integrating local content into procurement systems. The research contributes to policy discussions on economic integration and sustainable development by providing insights that can assist Zimbabwe and other African countries in leveraging AfCFTA for long-term socio-economic transformation.

Literature Review

Local Content Development in Africa

Local content development refers to the deliberate use of domestic resources including labour, materials, technology, and capital in production and procurement processes to stimulate local economic growth (OECD, 2016). Across Africa, governments have increasingly recognised that local content policies are crucial for economic diversification, industrial upgrading, and employment creation. In Nigeria, for example, the oil and gas sector's local content legislation has significantly increased domestic participation, allowing local firms to provide goods and services previously dominated by foreign companies (World Bank, 2020). Similar initiatives in South Africa and Ghana demonstrate the potential of local content frameworks to enhance industrial capacity while fostering skills development.

Zimbabwe, in particular, faces challenges in translating policy rhetoric into tangible outcomes for local industries. Studies indicate that while procurement regulations encourage local participation, enforcement remains weak due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and lack of technical capacity (African Development Bank, 2023). The result is a recurring pattern in which foreign suppliers dominate contracts, and local suppliers struggle to compete effectively. Addressing these gaps requires integrating local content policies directly into public and private procurement processes, ensuring compliance through monitoring mechanisms and incentives.

Beyond economic objectives, local content development also has social implications. By prioritising domestic suppliers and labour, local content policies promote wealth distribution, reduce unemployment, and empower small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (UNCTAD, 2022). However, some scholars caution that without strategic implementation, local content can lead to protectionism, inefficiency, and market distortions, particularly if domestic firms lack the capability to meet international standards (UNECA, 2021). Hence, careful policy design and capacity-building are central to achieving sustainable local content outcomes.

Regional integration under AfCFTA presents both opportunities and challenges for local content development. On the one hand, the liberalised trade environment encourages cross-border procurement and market expansion for local firms (UNECA, 2022). On the other hand, it exposes domestic industries to competition from more advanced African economies, potentially undermining weaker local suppliers. Studies suggest that harmonised regional policies, coupled with targeted support programs for SMEs, are essential for balancing these dynamics and ensuring that local content strategies complement continental integration (African Development Bank, 2019).

In conclusion, local content development in Africa is a multifaceted strategy that links economic, social, and industrial objectives. Its success depends on robust policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and alignment with regional trade agreements such as AfCFTA. Effective integration of local content into procurement processes can drive industrialisation, employment, and inclusive growth, while mitigating the risks of dependency on imports and foreign suppliers (OECD, 2016).

Sustainable Procurement in Africa

Sustainable procurement is defined as the acquisition of goods, services, and works that achieve value for money while considering environmental, social, and economic impacts (Testa et al., 2016). It reflects a shift from traditional procurement, which focuses solely on cost and efficiency, to a broader framework emphasising responsibility, ethics, and long-term impact. In Africa, sustainable procurement is increasingly recognised as a tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) (Walker & Phillips, 2009).

Despite its recognized importance, the adoption of sustainable procurement in African economies remains uneven. Many governments lack clear guidelines, enforcement mechanisms, or incentives for organizations to prioritize sustainability in procurement decisions. For example, in Ghana, sustainable procurement policies exist but are largely aspirational, with limited practical implementation in public tenders (UNEP, 2017). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, procurement regulations encourage local sourcing but do not adequately integrate environmental and social considerations, leaving gaps in achieving sustainable development objectives (African Development Bank, 2023).

A key challenge to sustainable procurement is the limited technical capacity and awareness among procurement professionals. Many organizations lack personnel trained in environmental management, social impact assessment, or life-cycle costing, making it difficult to implement sustainability standards effectively (Testa et al., 2016). Additionally, corruption and political interference often distort procurement decisions, further undermining the goals of sustainable procurement. These issues highlight the need for capacity building, institutional strengthening, and the establishment of clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Notwithstanding these challenges, best practices are emerging in Africa. South Africa, for instance, has integrated sustainability into public procurement through the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act, which incentivises suppliers meeting environmental and social criteria (Bolton, 2006). Similarly, Kenya's Green Procurement Strategy encourages government departments to prioritise eco-friendly products and services, fostering a culture of sustainability across sectors. These cases demonstrate the potential of sustainable procurement to create market opportunities for responsible suppliers while promoting economic and environmental resilience.

Overall, sustainable procurement in Africa presents a strategic tool for linking economic growth with social and environmental objectives. For AfCFTA-era economies, embedding sustainability into procurement processes ensures that trade liberalization does not compromise local development, environmental integrity, or social equity (Walker & Phillips, 2009). By combining local content and sustainability principles, African countries can transform procurement into a driver of inclusive and responsible economic development.

AfCFTA and Procurement

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to create a single continental market for goods and services, harmonizing trade rules, and promoting regional value chains (UNECA, 2022). While its primary focus is trade liberalisation the implications for procurement are significant. By expanding market access, AfCFTA encourages competition, efficiency, and industrial upgrading, but it also presents challenges for domestic industries that are not adequately prepared to compete with firms from more advanced economies (African Development Bank, 2019).

Procurement under AfCFTA can act as a strategic instrument for local economic development if guided by policies emphasizing local content inclusion. Regional governments can incorporate AfCFTA rules into procurement regulations to stimulate domestic industries while complying with trade liberalization commitments. Studies highlight that without such integration, liberalized trade could exacerbate inequalities, allowing foreign suppliers to dominate local markets and crowd out domestic SMEs (UNECA, 2021).

Several African countries have initiated measures to align procurement with AfCFTA. In Ethiopia, for instance, procurement policies are being restructured to support domestic firms and SMEs, ensuring they can participate in regional supply chains (UNEP, 2017). Similarly, South Africa emphasizes regional supplier development and capacity-building programs in its public procurement framework. These examples illustrate that procurement strategies can be harmonized with AfCFTA to balance trade openness with local economic development objectives.

However, achieving this alignment is complex. Policymakers must navigate tensions between trade liberalization and industrial protection, particularly in countries with fragile industrial bases like Zimbabwe. Institutional weaknesses, limited data on local suppliers, and inadequate regulatory frameworks can undermine the effectiveness of procurement as a tool for local development (African Development Bank, 2023). Consequently, a deliberate policy approach is required, integrating local content, sustainability, and AfCFTA compliance to maximize developmental impact.

In conclusion, procurement under AfCFTA offers both opportunities and risks. When strategically implemented, it can foster local industry growth, regional value chain integration, and inclusive economic development. Conversely, neglecting local content and sustainability principles can lead to increased dependency, job losses, and social inequities, highlighting the critical role of policy coherence and institutional capacity (UNECA, 2022).

Challenges to Local Content and Sustainable Procurement

Despite the potential benefits of local content and sustainable procurement, African economies face significant challenges in operationalizing these concepts. One major challenge is institutional weakness, where fragmented agencies, unclear mandates, and lack of coordination hinder effective implementation (Walker & Phillips, 2009). In Zimbabwe, for instance, multiple government bodies oversee procurement, industrial policy, and trade regulation, often resulting in inconsistent enforcement and limited accountability (African Development Bank, 2023).

Corruption and governance issues present another barrier. Procurement processes are often subject to political influence, bribery, and favoritism, which compromise local supplier participation and undermine sustainability goals (OECD, 2016). Weak monitoring and enforcement mechanisms allow foreign suppliers to bypass local content requirements, reducing the developmental impact of procurement activities. These challenges indicate that policy design alone is insufficient; strong institutional capacity and transparency are critical for success.

A further challenge is the lack of skills and technical expertise in sustainable procurement. Many procurement professionals in Africa are not trained in integrating environmental and social considerations into procurement decisions (Testa et al., 2016). This skills gap limits the ability of organizations to implement green procurement, assess lifecycle costs, or engage local suppliers effectively. Addressing this requires targeted capacity-building initiatives and professional development programs.

Market constraints and infrastructure limitations also hinder local content development. Poor access to finance, inadequate industrial infrastructure, and limited technology adoption restrict the ability of local SMEs to compete with larger foreign firms (UNCTAD, 2022). This gap is particularly pronounced in sectors such as manufacturing and construction, which are critical for inclusive economic growth. Governments must therefore complement procurement policies with supportive industrial and financial policies to enable local firms to participate meaningfully.

In sum, while local content and sustainable procurement offer significant potential, their implementation is constrained by institutional weaknesses, governance issues, skill gaps, and market limitations. Overcoming these challenges requires integrated policy frameworks, capacity building, and targeted support for domestic industries to ensure that AfCFTA's promises translate into tangible developmental outcomes.

Best Practices and Lessons

African countries and international experiences provide valuable lessons on integrating local content and sustainability in procurement. Globally, the European Union's Green Public Procurement framework demonstrates how procurement can incentivise environmentally and socially responsible suppliers while promoting innovation and local value creation (Walker & Brammer, 2021; Testa et al., 2016). Similarly, ASEAN countries have successfully linked procurement to industrial upgrading, fostering domestic supplier networks and regional value chains (UNEP, 2017).

Within Africa, Nigeria's oil and gas local content policy and South Africa's Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act exemplify practical measures that enhance domestic participation and promote sustainability. These policies combine regulatory mandates with incentives, training programs, and monitoring mechanisms, providing a balanced approach that encourages compliance while building local capacity.

Regional cooperation under AfCFTA also offers opportunities for cross-border learning and harmonization. By aligning procurement standards, certification processes, and sustainability criteria across countries, African economies can create larger, integrated markets that benefit domestic suppliers and reduce trade frictions (African Development Bank, 2019). Such harmonization ensures that local content policies do not conflict with continental trade commitments while promoting shared developmental goals.

Capacity building emerges as a recurring best practice. Training procurement professionals, establishing technical support centers, and engaging industry associations enhance the ability of local firms to participate in procurement processes effectively (UNCTAD, 2022). Additionally, transparency and accountability mechanisms, such as digital procurement platforms and open tendering, strengthen trust in the system and improve compliance with local content and sustainability objectives.

In conclusion, best practices highlight the importance of policy coherence, capacity building, incentives, and regional coordination in advancing local content and sustainable procurement. By adopting these lessons, African economies, including Zimbabwe, can leverage AfCFTA to stimulate industrialization, promote inclusive growth, and ensure that procurement contributes to long-term sustainability (OECD, 2016; UNECA, 2022).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study of local content and sustainable procurement under the AfCFTA framework can be anchored in multiple theoretical perspectives to provide a robust analytical foundation. Institutional theory emphasizes the role of formal rules, regulations, and social norms in shaping organizational behavior (Scott, 2022). Within the African procurement context, institutional theory explains how government policies, AfCFTA regulations, and industry standards influence procurement decisions and the adoption of local content practices. By examining the institutional pressures and incentives, this theory helps to understand why some organizations comply with local content and sustainability mandates, while others may circumvent them due to weak enforcement or resource constraints.

Sustainable Development Theory was popularized by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) through the Brundtland Report titled Our Common Future, published in 1987. The theory defines sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). The theory emerged in response to growing concerns over environmental degradation, social inequality, and unsustainable economic growth patterns worldwide. It argues that long-term development can only be achieved when economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection are pursued simultaneously and in a balanced manner.

The theory is built around three pillars: economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Economic sustainability focuses on promoting long-term economic growth, industrialization, productivity, and efficient use of resources. In procurement, this involves supporting local industries, encouraging innovation, and promoting value addition through local content policies. Social sustainability emphasizes social equity, employment creation, poverty reduction, human rights, and improved living standards. Within procurement systems, this includes promoting fair labor practices, supporting local communities, and creating opportunities for small and medium enterprises. Environmental sustainability focuses on protecting natural resources, reducing pollution, minimizing waste, and encouraging environmentally responsible production and consumption practices. Sustainable procurement therefore seeks to ensure that procurement activities contribute positively to all three dimensions of development.

The relevance of Sustainable Development Theory to this study lies in its emphasis on balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives within procurement systems under the AfCFTA framework. The theory supports the argument that procurement should not only focus on acquiring goods and services at the lowest cost but should also promote local industrial growth, employment creation, social inclusion, and environmental responsibility. In the context of AfCFTA, the theory helps explain how sustainable procurement and local content policies can contribute to inclusive economic transformation by strengthening domestic industries while ensuring responsible and sustainable use of resources. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how African countries, including Zimbabwe, can align procurement practices with broader sustainable development goals under regional economic integration.

Economic Integration Theory was primarily propounded by Béla Balassa in 1961 through his influential work *The Theory of Economic Integration*. Balassa explained economic integration as a process by which countries remove trade barriers and coordinate economic policies in order to increase trade, improve market efficiency, and stimulate economic growth. The theory identifies different stages of integration, including free trade areas, customs unions, common markets, economic unions, and complete economic integration. Economic Integration Theory argues that regional cooperation enables countries to benefit from expanded markets, specialization, economies of scale, and increased competitiveness.

The major variables of the theory include trade liberalization market access, regional cooperation, industrial competitiveness, and economic efficiency. Trade liberalization involves reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers to encourage the free movement of goods and services among member states. Market access refers to the ability of firms to participate in larger regional markets beyond their national boundaries. Industrial competitiveness focuses on the capacity of domestic industries to compete effectively within integrated regional markets. Economic efficiency is achieved through specialization, improved resource allocation, and increased production opportunities resulting from regional cooperation.

The relevance of Economic Integration Theory to this study lies in its explanation of how the AfCFTA can promote economic growth and industrial development through expanded regional trade and cooperation. The theory helps explain the opportunities created by AfCFTA for African businesses to access larger markets and participate in regional value chains. However, the theory also highlights the risks associated with trade liberalization, particularly for weaker domestic industries that may struggle to compete with firms from more industrialized economies. In relation to this study, Economic Integration Theory supports the need for local content policies and sustainable procurement strategies that protect and strengthen local industries while participating in regional trade integration. The theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how African countries, including Zimbabwe, can balance trade liberalization with domestic industrial development and inclusive economic growth under the AfCFTA framework.

Based on these theoretical underpinnings, the conceptual framework of this study posits that AfCFTA-driven trade liberalization interacts with national procurement policies, local content requirements, and sustainability principles to influence inclusive growth outcomes. In this framework, local content policies mediate the relationship between AfCFTA integration and domestic industrial development, while sustainable procurement ensures that economic gains do not compromise social or environmental objectives. Institutional capacity, governance, and enforcement mechanisms serve as moderating factors that determine the effectiveness of procurement strategies in achieving intended developmental outcomes.

AfCFTA trade liberalization serves as the exogenous variable influencing procurement decisions and market dynamics. Local content policies act as a mediator, guiding the extent to which domestic suppliers participate in procurement. Sustainable procurement practices ensure that procurement activities promote environmental stewardship and social equity. Finally, inclusive growth represents the ultimate dependent variable, reflecting economic expansion that benefits local communities, creates employment, and promotes sustainable development. Institutional capacity and governance are key moderating factors that determine whether policies translate into actionable outcomes (African Development Bank, 2023).

By combining these theoretical perspectives, the framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how procurement can be leveraged as a strategic tool in the AfCFTA era. It emphasizes that achieving inclusive growth requires an integrated approach that aligns trade liberalization, local content development, sustainability, and institutional capacity. This framework forms the basis for analyzing qualitative data collected through policy documents, interviews, and industry reports, guiding the study's interpretation of opportunities, challenges, and best practices.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, focusing on an in-depth exploration of local content and sustainable procurement practices under the AfCFTA framework. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for this study because they allow for a nuanced understanding of policy frameworks, institutional practices, and stakeholder experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The research emphasizes policy analysis, document review, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to capture insights on opportunities, challenges, and best practices in integrating local content and sustainability into procurement. This approach aligns with the study's objective of producing actionable recommendations for Zimbabwe and other African economies.

Policy and document analysis formed the first component of data collection. Relevant policies, procurement guidelines, legislative instruments, and AfCFTA implementation reports were systematically reviewed to identify existing frameworks, regulatory gaps, and areas for improvement (Bowen, 2022). Government procurement regulations from Zimbabwe, regional trade agreements, and sector-specific industrial policies were examined. Document analysis provided a foundation for understanding the formal structures that govern local content and sustainable procurement, as well as the alignment or misalignment between national and continental trade frameworks.

The second component involved semi-structured interviews with experts in procurement, policymakers, industry associations, and private sector firms involved in AfCFTA implementation. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with relevant experience and knowledge of local content and sustainable procurement practices (Bryman, 2021). Interviews explored themes such as policy effectiveness, institutional challenges, capacity constraints, and innovative practices. This method enabled the collection of rich qualitative data, capturing perspectives that may not be evident from policy documents alone.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved coding interview transcripts and policy documents to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were organized around opportunities for local content integration, challenges in sustainable procurement, and best practices for aligning procurement strategies with AfCFTA objectives. The use of thematic analysis enabled a systematic interpretation of qualitative data, linking empirical findings to the study's conceptual framework and theoretical underpinnings.

Finally, the study acknowledged limitations and ethical considerations. Limitations include potential biases in self-reported interview data, limited generalizability beyond the selected organizations, and the dynamic nature of AfCFTA policy implementation. Ethical measures were strictly adhered to, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and anonymizing sensitive data. These precautions ensured the integrity of the research while maintaining stakeholder trust and the credibility of the findings.

In summary, the research methodology provides a robust framework for exploring how local content and sustainable procurement can be effectively integrated under AfCFTA. By combining document analysis with expert interviews and thematic analysis, the study generates comprehensive insights into policy gaps, institutional challenges, and practical strategies for promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development in African procurement systems.

The population of this study comprised key stakeholders involved in procurement, trade policy, industrial development, and AfCFTA implementation in Zimbabwe and selected African institutions. The target population included government procurement officials, policymakers from ministries responsible for trade and industry, representatives from regulatory authorities, procurement professionals, private-sector firms, manufacturing associations, industry experts, and representatives from regional trade and business organizations. These stakeholders were considered appropriate for the study because they possess relevant knowledge and practical experience regarding local content policies, sustainable procurement practices, and regional trade integration under the AfCFTA framework.

The study adopted a qualitative sample size of approximately 20–25 participants selected from the identified stakeholder groups. The sample size was considered sufficient because qualitative research emphasizes depth, quality, and richness of information rather than statistical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Participants were selected based on their expertise, experience, and direct involvement in procurement systems and AfCFTA-related activities. The study employed purposive sampling as the primary sampling technique to deliberately identify individuals with specialized knowledge relevant to the research topic. In addition, snowball sampling was utilized to identify additional participants through referrals from initial respondents, particularly experts and policymakers who were not easily accessible. The combination of purposive and snowball sampling enhanced the reliability and comprehensiveness of the data collected by ensuring that knowledgeable and experienced participants contributed meaningful insights to the study.

Findings and Discussion

Opportunities for Local Content under AfCFTA

The study indicates that the AfCFTA provides significant opportunities to promote local content across African economies. By creating a single continental market of over 1.3 billion people, AfCFTA allows local suppliers to scale production and access new markets beyond their national borders (UNECA, 2022). For Zimbabwean firms, this presents a chance to increase market share, enhance competitiveness, and participate in regional value chains. Stakeholders emphasized that local content policies, when integrated into procurement strategies, can stimulate domestic industries and encourage innovation.

Interviews revealed that government procurement is a critical lever for promoting local content. Participants noted that tender requirements emphasizing local labor, materials, and technology could incentivize firms to source domestically (UNCTAD, 2022). This aligns with global evidence showing that procurement policies with embedded local content provisions contribute to industrial development, skills transfer, and employment generation (World Bank, 2020).

Regional cooperation under AfCFTA also enhances knowledge sharing and capacity building among local firms. Several respondents highlighted that collaborations with regional industry associations and trade networks enable local suppliers to meet international standards and compete in cross-border tenders. This supports findings from Ghana and Nigeria, where regional integration has strengthened supplier capabilities and promoted intra-African trade (UNEP, 2017).

Furthermore, local content integration in procurement fosters value retention within national economies. Instead of capital outflows through imports, funds are circulated domestically, boosting employment, technology adoption, and SME growth. This multiplier effect is essential for economies like Zimbabwe, where industrialization and job creation are strategic development goals (African Development Bank, 2023). Respondents emphasized that linking local content to AfCFTA trade opportunities can transform procurement into a developmental tool rather than a routine administrative function.

Finally, opportunities extend to sectoral diversification. Key sectors such as agro-processing, construction, and renewable energy stand to benefit from local content integration, enabling domestic firms to upgrade technology, improve production processes, and expand regional market participation. Stakeholders argued that this could accelerate inclusive growth by creating employment across both skilled and unskilled labor segments (UNECA, 2021). In sum, AfCFTA offers a platform for leveraging procurement to strengthen local industries and promote sustainable economic development.

Challenges in Integrating Sustainable Procurement

Despite the opportunities, the study identified several challenges to embedding sustainability in procurement. A dominant issue is institutional weakness, where fragmented agencies, inconsistent enforcement, and lack of technical capacity hinder implementation (Walker & Phillips, 2009). Interviewees noted that many government departments lack clear guidance on how to operationalize sustainable procurement, leading to superficial compliance or reliance on traditional cost-based decision-making.

Corruption and political interference also emerged as key obstacles. Participants described cases in which procurement decisions favoured politically connected firms, bypassing local-content or sustainability requirements. Such practices undermine policy objectives and reduce the developmental impact of procurement (OECD, 2016). Weak monitoring mechanisms exacerbate the problem, making it difficult to track compliance or evaluate environmental and social outcomes.

Another challenge is the skills gap among procurement professionals. Respondents highlighted limited training in life-cycle costing, environmental impact assessment, and supplier evaluation for sustainability criteria. This aligns with prior studies indicating that lack of technical competence is a major barrier to effective sustainable procurement in African countries (Testa et al., 2016). Without capacity building, even well-intentioned policies fail to achieve intended outcomes.

Financial constraints further limit the adoption of green procurement. Sustainable products and services are often perceived as more expensive, discouraging their integration into public tenders, particularly in resource-constrained economies like Zimbabwe (African Development Bank, 2023). Participants suggested that government incentives, subsidies, or cost-benefit communication could encourage sustainable procurement practices without overburdening budgets.

Lastly, the liberalized trade environment under AfCFTA poses a challenge for local sustainability initiatives. While open markets provide opportunities for growth, they also expose domestic firms to competition from more advanced African suppliers who may have better environmental standards or economies of scale. This tension highlights the need for policies that balance competitiveness with sustainability and local content priorities (African Development Bank, 2019).

Best Practices and Lessons from Regional and Global Experiences

The study identified several best practices that could guide local content and sustainable procurement in Africa. Globally, the European Union's Green Public Procurement framework demonstrates that procurement can incentivise environmentally and socially responsible suppliers while promoting innovation (Testa et al., 2016). By setting clear sustainability criteria and monitoring compliance, the EU has created a market advantage for green suppliers while promoting long-term social and environmental goals.

Within Africa, Nigeria's local content legislation in the oil and gas sector illustrates effective integration of domestic supplier requirements with capacity-building initiatives (World Bank, 2020). South Africa's Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act similarly incentivises suppliers who meet environmental, social, and industrial participation standards, combining regulatory mandates with technical support (Bolton, 2006). These examples emphasise the importance of clear guidelines, monitoring mechanisms, and complementary capacity-building programs.

Regional coordination under AfCFTA also offers lessons. Participants highlighted that aligning procurement standards and certification processes across countries facilitates cross-border trade while promoting local content. Harmonised policies reduce trade frictions, improve transparency, and expand market access for domestic suppliers (African Development Bank, 2019). Such approaches are particularly relevant for Zimbabwe, where aligning national policies with regional frameworks is critical for leveraging AfCFTA.

Capacity building emerged as another key lesson. Training procurement professionals, engaging industry associations, and creating supplier support programs strengthen the ability of local firms to compete in regional markets (UNCTAD, 2022). Respondents emphasized that technical assistance, workshops, and mentorship can bridge knowledge gaps and promote sustainable procurement adoption.

Finally, transparency and digital procurement platforms enhance compliance and efficiency. Participants noted that open tendering systems and e-procurement solutions reduce corruption, increase accountability, and make it easier to integrate sustainability criteria. This aligns with global best practices, where technology-supported procurement enhances policy adherence and maximises developmental impact (Walker & Phillips, 2009).

Policy Implications for Zimbabwe and Africa

The findings highlight the critical need for policy coherence to maximize the developmental potential of AfCFTA. Zimbabwe and similar economies must align national procurement frameworks with local content policies, sustainability standards, and AfCFTA trade commitments (African Development Bank, 2023). Policies should balance trade liberalization with protective measures for domestic industries, ensuring that local SMEs are competitive in both domestic and regional markets.

Institutional capacity strengthening is essential. Ministries, regulatory agencies, and procurement units must coordinate effectively to enforce local content and sustainability requirements. Interviewees stressed the importance of capacity-building programs, monitoring mechanisms, and transparent reporting as central to improving policy outcomes (UNCTAD, 2022). Weak institutions undermine even well-designed policies, highlighting the need for governance reforms.

Financial and incentive structures also require attention. Governments can provide tax incentives, subsidies, and preferential financing to local suppliers that comply with sustainability and local-content standards. Such mechanisms reduce barriers to participation, particularly for SMEs, and encourage adoption of green technologies (UNEP, 2017). The alignment of fiscal policies with procurement objectives amplifies developmental impact.

Regional collaboration under AfCFTA is another critical policy implication. Harmonized procurement standards, certification processes, and technical support across countries reduce barriers for domestic suppliers and expand their market access. This coordination enhances competitiveness while maintaining sustainability and local content priorities (African Development Bank, 2019). Zimbabwe can benefit by actively participating in regional policy forums and industry networks.

Finally, policy design must integrate inclusive growth and SDG principles. Local content and sustainable procurement should aim to create employment, promote industrial upgrading, and advance environmental stewardship. Interviewees emphasized that the ultimate goal of procurement policies under AfCFTA should not be limited to trade compliance but should actively contribute to long-term socio-economic development (UNECA, 2021). Policies that are comprehensive, coherent, and enforced are likely to yield significant benefits for both domestic economies and the continent at large.

Alignment with Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development Goals

The study reveals that local content and sustainable procurement have direct implications for inclusive growth and SDG achievement. By prioritizing domestic suppliers and labor, procurement policies generate employment opportunities, reduce income inequality, and stimulate local industrialization (UNCTAD, 2022). Respondents emphasized that procurement is not merely administrative but a strategic tool for social and economic transformation.

Sustainable procurement aligns closely with SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) by ensuring that economic activities are environmentally sound and socially equitable (Testa et al., 2016). Interviewees highlighted that integrating sustainability criteria into procurement encourages suppliers to adopt green technologies, improve labor conditions, and minimize environmental degradation, creating long-term benefits for communities.

The AfCFTA framework enhances these outcomes by enabling regional supply chain integration. Local suppliers can expand into new markets while maintaining domestic employment and sustainability standards. Stakeholders noted that cross-border trade under AfCFTA presents opportunities for scaling production, technology transfer, and regional collaboration, all of which support inclusive growth objectives (African Development Bank, 2019).

However, misalignment between policy goals and institutional capacity can undermine these benefits. The study found that when procurement practices prioritize cost over local content or sustainability, the developmental impact is significantly reduced. This highlights the importance of strong governance, monitoring, and capacity-building programs to ensure that procurement delivers on SDG targets and inclusive growth goals (Walker & Phillips, 2009).

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that procurement, when strategically designed, can serve as a powerful instrument for achieving inclusive economic development, environmental stewardship, and regional integration. Local content and sustainable procurement, aligned with

AfCFTA regulations and SDG principles, provide a pathway for African countries, including Zimbabwe, to harness trade liberalization for sustainable, equitable growth.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the first recommendation is to strengthen institutional frameworks for procurement in Zimbabwe and other African countries. Effective local content and sustainable procurement require well-coordinated regulatory bodies with clear mandates and oversight mechanisms. Establishing a central procurement authority or strengthening existing institutions can ensure consistent enforcement of local content requirements, monitor compliance, and provide guidance to government departments and private firms (African Development Bank, 2023). Institutional capacity must also include mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and digital monitoring to minimize corruption and enhance policy adherence.

Second, the study recommends integrating local content into AfCFTA-aligned procurement policies. Policymakers should ensure that tender documents, procurement guidelines, and regulatory frameworks explicitly specify local content requirements, including the use of domestic labor, materials, and technology. In addition, policies should offer incentives for domestic suppliers, such as preferential scoring, tax breaks, or access to finance, to encourage compliance and strengthen local industry competitiveness (OECD, 2016). Aligning these policies with AfCFTA obligations ensures that trade liberalization complements, rather than undermines, domestic development objectives.

Third, capacity building and professional development for procurement practitioners is critical. The study found significant skills gaps in integrating sustainability and local content criteria into procurement processes. Training programs, workshops, and mentorship initiatives can equip procurement officers with knowledge in environmental impact assessment, life-cycle costing, and supplier evaluation (Testa et al., 2016). Strengthening technical competence will enable organizations to implement sustainable procurement effectively, ensuring that economic, social, and environmental goals are met.

Fourth, governments should establish financial and technical support mechanisms for local suppliers. Many SMEs face challenges in meeting quality standards, accessing technology, or competing with larger regional firms. Providing subsidies, grants, or preferential financing can lower entry barriers, promote industrial upgrading, and enhance the capacity of domestic suppliers to participate in AfCFTA-driven markets (UNEP, 2017). Technical assistance, such as supplier development programs, certification support, and mentorship, will also help firms comply with sustainability and local content standards, boosting overall market competitiveness.

Fifth, the study recommends regional harmonization and collaboration under AfCFTA. Countries should coordinate procurement standards, sustainability criteria, and certification procedures to facilitate cross-border trade and enable domestic firms to compete effectively in regional markets (African Development Bank, 2019). Collaborative initiatives, such as joint industry associations, regional supplier development programs, and knowledge-sharing platforms, can enhance local content integration, strengthen supply chains, and ensure sustainable procurement practices are consistently applied across member states.

Finally, monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement should be embedded into procurement practices. Governments and organizations must establish robust frameworks for assessing compliance with local content and sustainability requirements, measuring economic, social, and environmental outcomes, and refining policies accordingly. Utilizing digital tools, dashboards, and reporting mechanisms can improve transparency, accountability, and data-driven decision-making (UNCTAD, 2022). Continuous evaluation ensures that procurement strategies remain responsive to evolving market conditions and AfCFTA dynamics, thereby maximizing developmental impact.

Conclusion

This study has examined the critical role of local content and sustainable procurement in maximizing the developmental benefits of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The findings highlight that procurement is not merely an administrative or cost-driven function but a strategic tool for economic transformation. By integrating local content policies and sustainability principles, African economies can stimulate domestic industrial development, create employment, and enhance competitiveness within regional markets. The study underscores that these interventions are particularly relevant for Zimbabwe, where industrialization and inclusive growth remain central national priorities.

The research demonstrates that AfCFTA provides significant opportunities for local firms to access regional markets, participate in value chains, and benefit from knowledge transfer. Local content requirements embedded in procurement processes can ensure that domestic industries capture economic value, retain employment, and benefit from skills development. However, the findings also emphasize that these opportunities are contingent upon strong institutional frameworks, effective enforcement mechanisms, and professional capacity in procurement. Without such structures, the potential for inclusive economic growth may be undermined, with foreign suppliers dominating local markets.

Sustainable procurement emerges as a complementary strategy that aligns procurement practices with environmental, social, and economic objectives. By incorporating sustainability criteria into tendering and supplier evaluation, governments and firms can promote environmentally responsible production, fair labor practices, and long-term socio-economic benefits. The study found that a lack of skills, weak monitoring, and financial constraints often hinder sustainable procurement in African countries. Addressing these challenges requires targeted capacity-building programs, financial incentives, and technological support for local suppliers and procurement professionals.

The study also highlights the importance of regional coordination under AfCFTA. Harmonized procurement standards, certification processes, and supplier development initiatives can facilitate cross-border trade while protecting domestic industries and promoting sustainability. Lessons from Nigeria, South Africa, and the European Union demonstrate that combining regulatory mandates with capacity-building, incentives, and transparent monitoring systems yields effective results. For Zimbabwe and similar economies, active participation in regional frameworks and alignment of national policies with AfCFTA provisions are essential for maximizing developmental outcomes.

In conclusion, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on procurement, local content, and sustainable development in Africa. It provides evidence that strategically designed procurement policies can advance inclusive growth, strengthen domestic industries, and ensure that AfCFTA's liberalized trade environment benefits local communities. The research reinforces the notion that integrating local content and sustainability into procurement is not optional but necessary for achieving equitable and long-term socio-economic development. Policymakers, industry stakeholders, and regional organizations must act collaboratively to harness procurement as a lever for industrialization, employment generation, and sustainable development across the continent.

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Bridging Sustainability Gap: Opportunities and Barriers for Green Public-Private Partnerships in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Green Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are gaining traction as collaborative mechanisms for advancing sustainable energy goals in developing economies. In Zimbabwe, however, the institutional environment poses both opportunities and constraints to the effective implementation. This study investigates how the regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars of Zimbabwe's institutional landscape influence the development of green PPPs in the energy sector, using Institutional Theory as an analytical lens. A structured survey was administered to 120 purposively selected stakeholders from government agencies, private energy firms, NGOs, and donor organizations in Harare Metropolitan Province. The survey employed a 5-point Likert scale to assess stakeholder perceptions across institutional dimensions. Findings reveal that while there is strong conceptual support for green PPPs, challenges such as weak regulatory enforcement, inter-sectoral mistrust, and a lack of shared sustainability values continue to hinder collaboration. Prior experience with PPPs was identified as a key factor influencing stakeholder readiness to engage. The study recommends policy interventions aimed at fostering trust, aligning institutional norms, and strengthening the regulatory framework to support sustainable energy partnerships.

Key words: Green public-private partnerships, Energy, Opportunities, Barriers, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Zimbabwe faces persistent and deepening energy challenges marked by erratic electricity supply, underinvestment in infrastructure, and a heavy dependence on aging thermal plants and hydropower sources increasingly threatened by climate variability (IEA, 2020; Howells, Dzvimbo, and ZETDC, 2023; Bryant, 2025; Matiashe, 2025). These energy deficits have disrupted industrial productivity, constrained service delivery, and stifled broader economic development. Paradoxically, Zimbabwe is endowed with abundant renewable energy potential—particularly in solar, small hydropower, and biomass resources that remain largely untapped due to systemic and structural constraints.

In response to growing energy insecurity and global imperatives for sustainable development, Zimbabwe introduced the National Renewable Energy Policy (NREP) in 2019, a framework aimed at scaling up renewable energy adoption and encouraging private sector participation (Minister of Energy and Power Development, 2019; Moyo and Mutasa, 2020; DLA Piper, 2022; Dube and Makumbe, 2022). Among the strategic instruments promoted in the policy are Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) collaborative arrangements between government entities and private investors designed to finance, construct, and operate critical infrastructure. When aligned with environmental and social objectives, these partnerships evolve into Green PPPs, offering a pathway to close infrastructure investment gaps while advancing climate resilience and long-term sustainability goals.

Despite these ambitions, the practical implementation of Green PPPs in Zimbabwe's energy sector remains limited, fragmented, and slow, with few operational examples to date. This persistent gap between policy intent and actual outcomes suggests that technical and financial constraints alone do not sufficiently explain the underperformance of Green PPPs. Instead, the failure to realize sustainable energy partnerships points to deeper, more systemic institutional barriers.

This study employs Institutional Theory as a conceptual lens to investigate these barriers and opportunities. Institutional theory posits that the success or failure of complex initiatives such as PPPs is shaped not only by market forces or financial viability but by the broader institutional environment in which actors operate (Scott, 2001). This environment consists of three interconnected pillars: regulative, normative, and cognitive institutions (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995; Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012). The regulative dimension includes formal rules, policies, and enforcement mechanisms. The normative dimension reflects the values, expectations, and social obligations that guide organizational behavior. The cognitive dimension captures shared understandings, beliefs, and cultural assumptions. These institutional dynamics spanning formal structures, stakeholder expectations, and cultural perceptions create both opportunities and constraints that critically influence the success of sustainable energy partnerships.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both policy and academic discourse. Practically, the study offers insights for government agencies, energy developers, investors, and development partners seeking to navigate or support PPP initiatives. Strategically, it aligns with Zimbabwe's national development goals including Vision 2030 and the NREP as well as international commitments under frameworks such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. Academically, it fills a critical gap in literature at the intersection of sustainability, infrastructure finance, and institutional theory in developing country contexts, particularly within Sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately, the research aims to support a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable energy future for Zimbabwe by deepening understanding of the institutional pathways that can unlock the full potential of Green PPPs.

Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to assess how institutional factors affect the development of green Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in Zimbabwe's energy sector. Grounded in Institutional Theory, the study applies the theory's three-pillar framework regulative, normative, and cognitive to evaluate how formal rules, social expectations, and shared beliefs influence stakeholder perceptions of PPP viability.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 120 stakeholders in Harare Metropolitan Province. The survey instrument consisted of items grouped under six themes: demographics, regulative institutions, normative influences, cognitive factors, perceived opportunities, and barriers to implementation. Most items utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), allowing for the quantification of stakeholder attitudes and institutional perceptions. Normative questions explored value alignment, collaboration culture, and stakeholder commitment, while cognitive items addressed trust, understanding of PPP mechanisms, and readiness for private sector involvement in green infrastructure projects.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants with relevant expertise in PPPs, infrastructure development, energy policy, and sustainability. The sample included respondents from government bodies, energy companies, donor organizations, NGOs, and academia. Gender distribution was 62% male and 38% female, with strong female participation from NGOs and academic institutions. Over 70% of participants held postgraduate qualifications in fields such as engineering, public administration, and environmental science. Nearly 60% had more than ten years of experience in energy or infrastructure sectors, and 65% had direct involvement in PPPs, particularly in renewable energy initiatives. This expertise provided a well-informed basis for assessing institutional influences on green PPPs.

Analysis and Discussion of Results (or Findings)

This section presents a detailed analysis and discussion of the research findings, structured around the three interconnected pillars of Institutional Theory: regulative, normative, and cognitive institutions. These pillars serve as a conceptual framework for examining the institutional opportunities and barriers affecting the development of green public-private partnerships (PPPs) within Zimbabwe's energy sector. The analysis draws on stakeholder survey responses, interpreted through the lens of each institutional pillar, to explore how regulatory frameworks, social norms, and shared beliefs shape behavior, decision-making, and collaboration across sectors. By aligning the empirical data with Institutional Theory, this section offers critical insights into the institutional dynamics that support or constrain the implementation of green PPPs aimed at addressing energy insecurity and promoting sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

Responses to Regulative Institutions Survey Questions

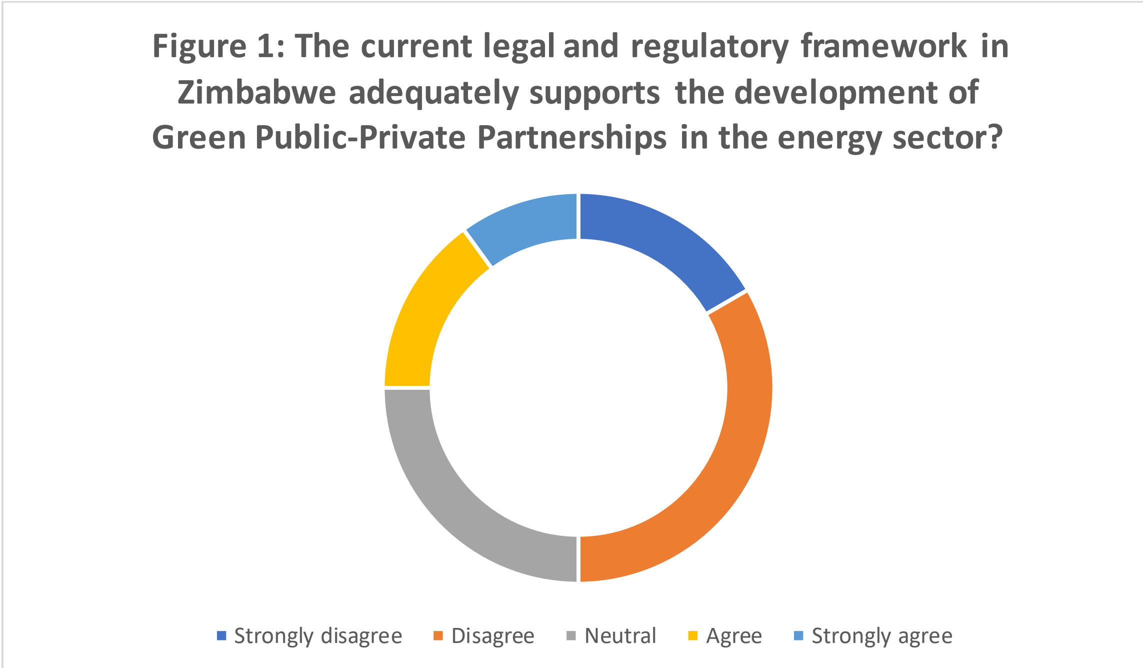
1. **Response to the question:** The existing legal and regulatory framework in Zimbabwe provides sufficient support for the development of green energy Public-Private Partnerships?

The survey results offer a revealing glimpse into stakeholder perceptions of the current legal and regulatory framework supporting Green Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in Zimbabwe's energy sector (See Figure 1). With 50% of respondents either strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the statement that the existing framework is adequate, there is a clear indication of widespread skepticism. This suggests that many stakeholders perceive the current legal environment as either outdated, ineffective, or insufficiently supportive of sustainability-focused initiatives. The dissatisfaction may stem from challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited enforcement, or the absence of tailored policies that specifically facilitate green energy investments through PPPs.

A significant portion of respondents (25%) selected a neutral position, which introduces an important layer of interpretation. This neutrality may signal a lack of awareness or understanding of the existing regulatory framework, particularly its relevance to green PPPs in the energy sector. It may also reflect a perception that while certain policies or structures are in place, they are either underdeveloped or not being implemented in practice. Such a stance suggests the need for better policy communication and stakeholder engagement to clarify the role and effectiveness of current legal instruments.

Conversely, only 25% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, indicating relatively low confidence in the ability of existing policies to enable successful green PPPs. This limited optimism highlights a lack of trust in current government support mechanisms, possibly informed by past experiences or an absence of clear, actionable guidelines. It also underscores the broader challenge of aligning public policy with the specific requirements of green investment, which often demand more flexible, forward-looking, and incentivized regulatory approaches.

Taken together, these responses underscore a pressing need for policy reform, institutional strengthening, and increased stakeholder collaboration. The government may need to review and adapt the current PPP legal framework to explicitly incorporate sustainability goals and green financing principles. Additionally, enhancing policy transparency and building institutional capacity will be crucial in fostering confidence among private sector partners. These steps are essential for bridging the sustainability gap and unlocking the potential of green PPPs as a viable strategy for energy development in Zimbabwe.



Source: Researcher (2025)

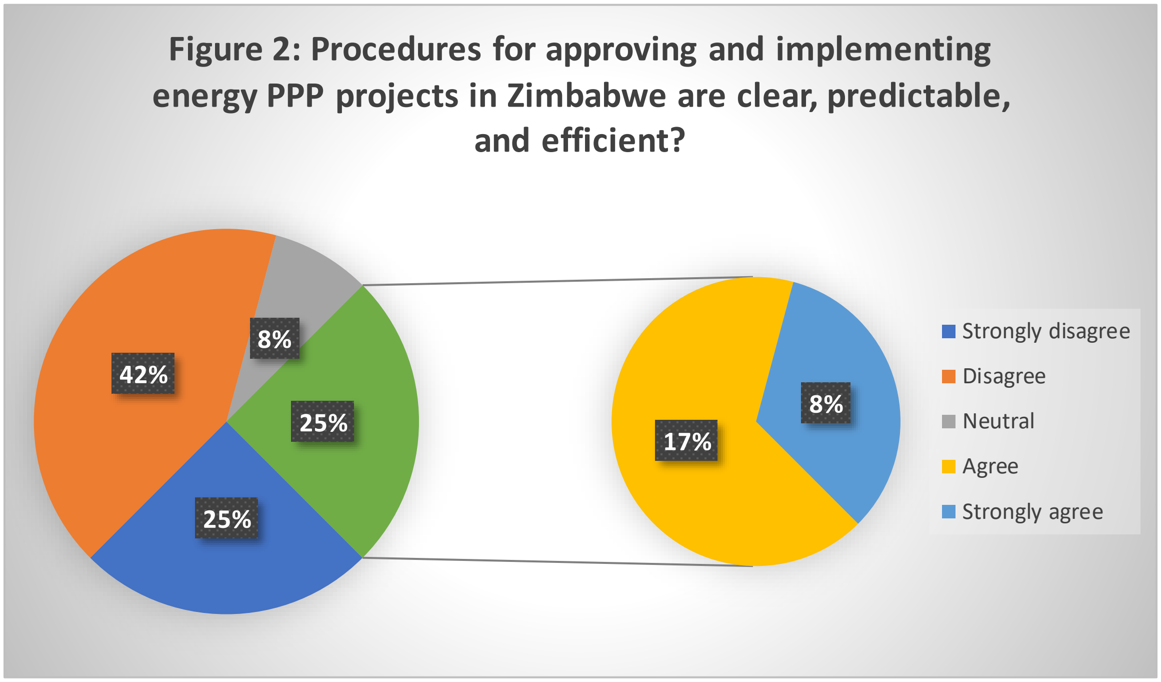
2. **Response to the question:** Procedures for approving and implementing energy PPP projects in Zimbabwe are clear, predictable, and efficient?

The responses to the statement, "Procedures for approving and implementing energy PPP projects in Zimbabwe are clear, predictable, and efficient," paint a concerning picture regarding regulatory transparency and administrative efficiency in the context of green energy (PPPs), Public-Private Partnerships (See Figure 2). With 30 respondents strongly disagreeing and 50 disagreeing, a striking 66.7% of the sample expresses dissatisfaction with current procedural clarity and effectiveness. This suggests that the regulatory environment is perceived as opaque, unpredictable, and possibly burdensome, making it difficult for stakeholders to navigate the approval and implementation processes. Such perceptions raise red flags about institutional capacity and the user-friendliness of regulatory systems governing green PPPs in the country.

The low level of confidence in regulatory efficiency can have serious implications for the success of green energy PPPs. Efficient and transparent procedures are foundational for encouraging long-term private sector investment. When processes are perceived as overly complex, inconsistent, or slow, they introduce risks and uncertainties that deter private actors. This sentiment is reinforced by the limited number of respondents only 25% who indicated agreement or strong agreement with the statement. The results suggest that private entities may struggle with delays, unclear requirements, or shifting regulations when attempting to participate in Zimbabwe's energy PPP projects, particularly those involving sustainable or innovative technologies.

The 8.3% of respondents who selected "neutral" may reflect a lack of direct experience with the procedures or uncertainty about how the system operates in practice. This small portion also indicates that while some stakeholders may not be directly affected, the overwhelming majority who do have experience or insights perceive a lack of procedural integrity. It further emphasizes the importance of not only reforming administrative processes but also improving communication and outreach around existing policies and approval mechanisms. Making processes more transparent and user-oriented could improve perceptions and real-world experiences.

Ultimately, these findings reveal a critical barrier to private sector confidence in Zimbabwe's green energy PPP landscape. Predictability and procedural efficiency are key pillars for attracting and retaining private investment, particularly in high-risk sectors like energy. The strong negative sentiment expressed in the survey indicates a need for urgent regulatory reforms to streamline approval processes, reduce administrative bottlenecks, and build a transparent, rules-based framework. Addressing these issues will not only enhance trust but also stimulate private sector participation, which is essential for bridging Zimbabwe's sustainability gap in the energy sector.



Source: Researcher (2025)

3. **Response to the question:** There is strong enforcement of energy policies and PPP agreements by regulatory bodies such as ZERA?

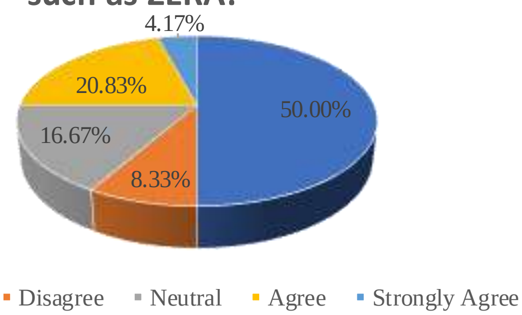
The responses to the statement, "There is strong enforcement of energy policies and PPP agreements by regulatory bodies such as ZERA," reveal significant concerns about the institutional capacity and credibility of Zimbabwe's regulatory authorities in the energy sector (See Figure 3). With 70 out of 120 respondents equivalent to 58.3%, indicating disagreement or strong disagreement, there is a prevailing perception that enforcement mechanisms are weak or inconsistently applied. This suggests that key institutions, particularly the Zimbabwe Energy Regulatory Authority (ZERA), may lack the operational effectiveness, authority, or resources required to uphold energy policy standards and ensure compliance with PPP agreements.

Only 25% of respondents expressed agreement or strong agreement, indicating limited confidence in the current enforcement capacity of regulatory institutions. This lack of assurance is critical, as strong enforcement is a cornerstone of functional public-private partnerships, particularly in high-investment sectors like energy. Weak enforcement can lead to contract breaches, implementation delays, and a lack of accountability all of which undermine trust between public and private stakeholders. When regulatory bodies are perceived as ineffective enforcers, the risk associated with green PPP investments increases, thereby discouraging private sector involvement and jeopardizing project sustainability.

The 20 respondents who remained neutral (16.7%) may reflect either uncertainty about ZERA's actual enforcement performance or a lack of direct experience with how enforcement is carried out. Regardless, the combined effect of low confidence and ambivalence reinforces the need for regulatory agencies to not only strengthen enforcement practices but also to make their oversight roles more visible and transparent. Improved communication about policy implementation, performance tracking, and accountability measures could help build credibility and reshape stakeholder perceptions over time.

These findings underscore a fundamental institutional challenge in Zimbabwe's green PPP framework: the credibility of regulatory enforcement. For green energy PPPs to thrive, institutions like ZERA must be perceived as authoritative, impartial, and consistent in applying the rules. This calls for strategic investments in institutional strengthening, legal empowerment, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at equipping regulatory agencies with the tools and autonomy they need. Enhancing the enforcement capabilities of such bodies will be crucial to boosting investor confidence, ensuring policy compliance, and ultimately narrowing Zimbabwe's sustainability gap in the energy sector.

Figure 3: There is strong enforcement of energy policies and PPP agreements by regulatory bodies such as ZERA?



Source: Researcher (2025)

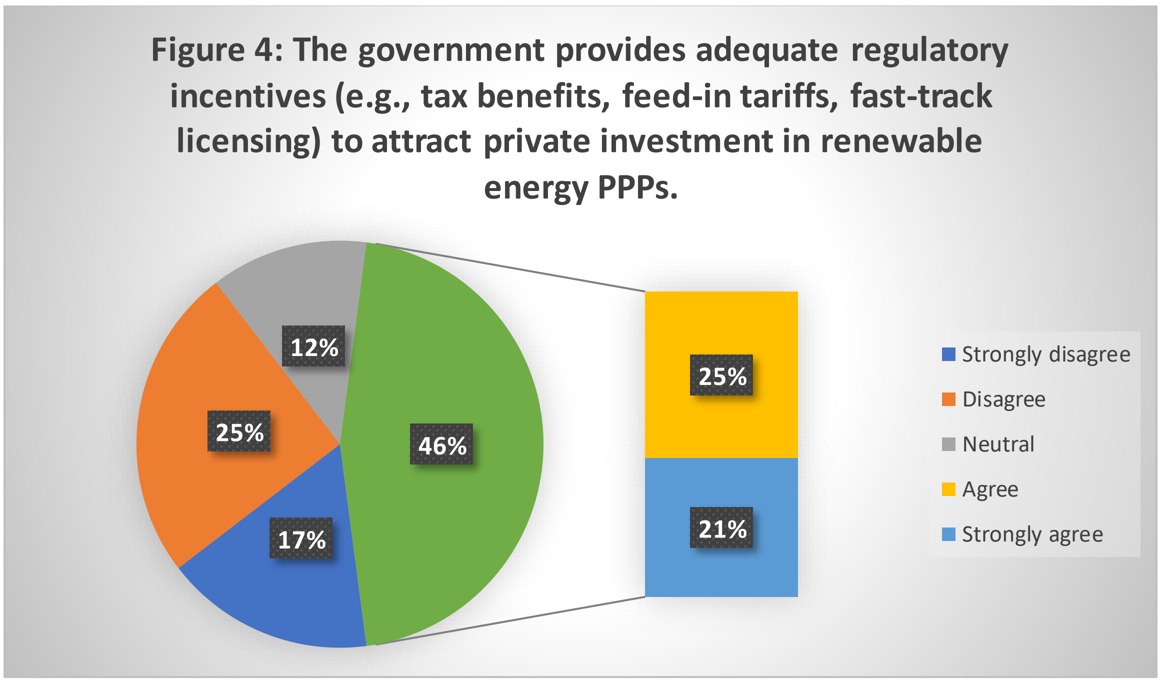
4. **Response to the question:** The government provides adequate regulatory incentives (e.g., tax benefits, feed-in tariffs, fast-track licensing) to attract private investment in renewable energy PPPs?

The responses to the statement, "The government provides adequate regulatory incentives (e.g., tax benefits, feed-in tariffs, fast-track licensing) to attract private investment in renewable energy PPPs," present a more balanced but still nuanced view of Zimbabwe's incentive landscape (See Figure 4). While a combined 55 respondents (45.8%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, a significant 50 respondents (41.7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This near-even split suggests that many stakeholders recognize the provision of regulatory incentives, but their adequacy, accessibility, or effectiveness remains contested. The diversity of views points to inconsistency in the application or awareness of such incentives across the energy sector.

The positive responses reflect an encouraging recognition of government efforts to introduce incentives that support renewable energy investments through Public-Private Partnerships. The presence of such tools whether tax breaks, feed-in tariffs, or streamlined licensing demonstrates some level of policy responsiveness to the unique needs of private investors in the clean energy space. For the 25% of respondents who strongly agreed, this likely indicates tangible benefits from government schemes. It also suggests that the policy framework may be improving or at least shows potential in attracting green investments, particularly where such incentives have been effectively communicated or applied.

However, the fact that over 40% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed indicates that many stakeholders still perceive significant gaps in the design, delivery, or reliability of these incentives. This may reflect inconsistencies in implementation, limited coverage across technologies or regions, or bureaucratic hurdles that reduce the attractiveness of the incentives in practice. In some cases, private sector actors may find these incentives too weak, delayed, or unclear to justify their investment risk. This reinforces the importance of not just having incentives in place, but ensuring they are well-structured, efficiently administered, and aligned with the evolving needs of investors in the renewable energy space.

The 12.5% of respondents who selected a neutral position may indicate a lack of familiarity with the incentive frameworks or uncertainty about their practical impact. This signals a need for better stakeholder communication and more transparent dissemination of information about available benefits. Overall, while the presence of some regulatory incentives is acknowledged, the mixed responses highlight an opportunity for the Zimbabwean government to enhance and better institutionalize these tools. Strengthening the predictability, accessibility, and implementation of regulatory incentives will be key to fostering greater private sector confidence and unlocking the full potential of green PPPs in the energy sector.



Source: Researcher (2025)

Responses to Normative Institutions-Survey Questions

1. **Response to the question:** There is a strong alignment between the values of public and private sector stakeholders regarding the importance of sustainable energy development?

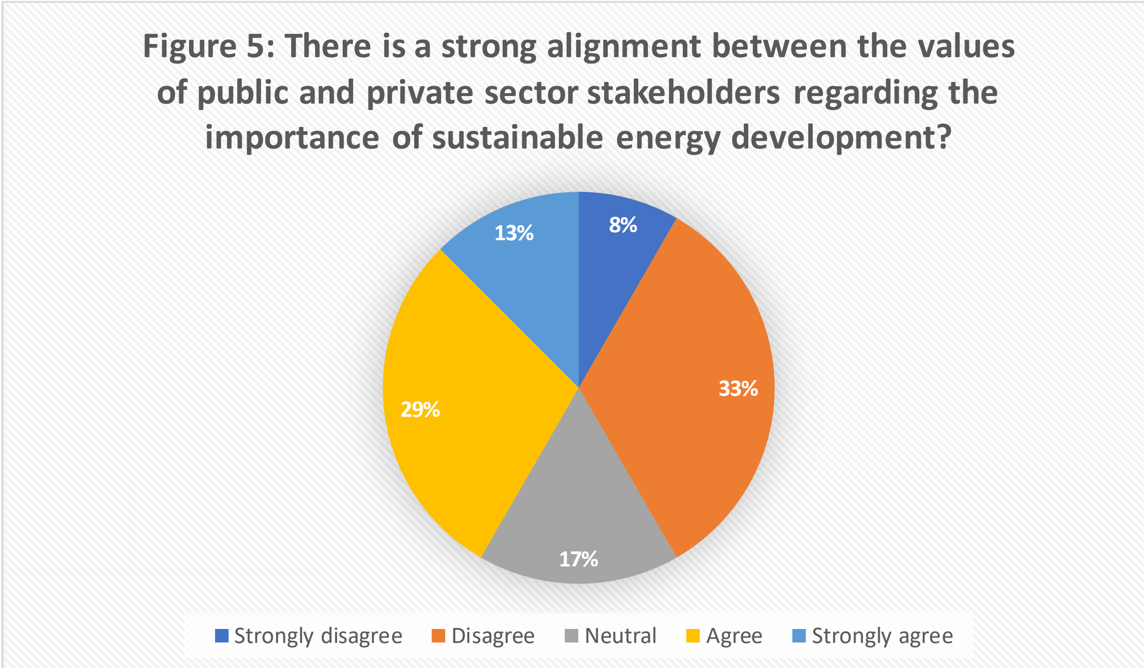
The survey results reveal a significant perception gap among stakeholders concerning the alignment of values between the public and private sectors in promoting sustainable energy development in Zimbabwe (See Figure 5). Out of 120 respondents, only 35 (29.2%) agreed and 15

(12.5%) strongly agreed with the statement, indicating that just over 40% of respondents perceive a positive alignment of values. In contrast, a combined total of 50 respondents (10 strongly disagree and 40 disagree) representing 41.7% expressed a negative view. This near-even split underscores a fragmented perception regarding normative convergence, which is crucial for the cooperative dynamics in public-private partnerships (PPPs).

The high level of disagreement suggests that many stakeholders do not perceive shared normative commitments to sustainability between sectors. This misalignment may stem from differing institutional cultures, policy priorities, or strategic interests between public bodies and private enterprises. Public institutions may prioritize regulatory compliance and public welfare, while private actors could be more driven by profitability and return on investment. Such divergent values can create tension, limit trust, and hinder the momentum of green PPP initiatives, particularly in sectors like energy that require long-term collaboration and joint risk management.

Neutral responses, accounting for 16.7% of the sample (20 respondents), further reflect uncertainty or ambiguity about value alignment. This group may represent stakeholders with limited engagement in PPPs or insufficient visibility into inter-sector dynamics. Their neutrality highlights the need for improved communication and transparency between partners, as well as broader stakeholder involvement in the early stages of green project planning. Normative institutions rely on shared expectations and beliefs; when those expectations are unclear or inconsistent, cooperation tends to weaken, and project cohesion suffers.

Overall, the data illustrate a critical challenge for green PPPs in Zimbabwe's energy sector: the lack of clearly perceived normative alignment across stakeholders. To bridge the sustainability gap, there must be deliberate efforts to foster mutual understanding, co-create sustainability values, and embed these values into both policy frameworks and operational practice. Strengthening normative institutions through stakeholder dialogues, co-designed sustainability goals, and value-based leadership could enhance collaboration and drive momentum for successful green energy partnerships in the country.



Source: Researcher (2025)

2. **Response to the question:** Stakeholder expectations (e.g., from communities, NGOs, and investors) positively influence collaboration in green public-private energy projects?

The responses to this question reflect a divided perspective on the influence of external stakeholder expectations on collaboration within green public-private partnerships (PPPs) in Zimbabwe's energy sector (See Figure 6). Out of 120 respondents, 50 (41.7%) disagreed and 5 (4.2%) strongly disagreed with the statement, suggesting that nearly half the participants do not believe that expectations from communities, NGOs, or investors meaningfully drive cooperation. In contrast, 25 (20.8%) agreed and 20 (16.7%) strongly agreed, indicating that slightly over one-third of respondents do perceive a positive role for external normative pressures in facilitating collaborative outcomes.

The predominance of disagreement suggests that many stakeholders may feel that normative pressures from external groups are either too weak or inconsistently applied to influence decision-making or partnership behavior. In Zimbabwe's context, where public-private cooperation in energy projects often faces political, economic, and structural barriers, the voices of civil society, local communities, and even international donors may not be fully integrated into PPP planning or implementation. This gap could reflect a disconnect between stakeholder engagement strategies and actual influence, pointing to a need for more structured mechanisms that channel stakeholder expectations into practical collaborative frameworks.

The 20 neutral responses (16.7%) reflect a level of uncertainty or disengagement regarding the role of stakeholder expectations. This may indicate that some respondents are not directly exposed to stakeholder feedback or that the influence of these external actors is not clearly visible in their organizational interactions. Normative institutional theory emphasizes the power of shared norms and legitimacy pressures in shaping organizational behavior; thus, ambiguity in this area could suggest an underdeveloped normative institutional environment in which stakeholder voices are present but not impactful.

Overall, the data indicates that while some respondents recognize the value of stakeholder expectations in promoting collaboration, a substantial portion do not view them as effective drivers of cooperation in green PPPs. This has important implications for policy and practice. Strengthening the role of external normative institutions through formalized stakeholder engagement processes, transparent reporting mechanisms, and responsiveness to community and investor concerns could enhance trust and legitimacy. In turn, this could foster more cohesive and inclusive collaboration across sectors, which is essential for bridging the sustainability gap in Zimbabwe's energy landscape.

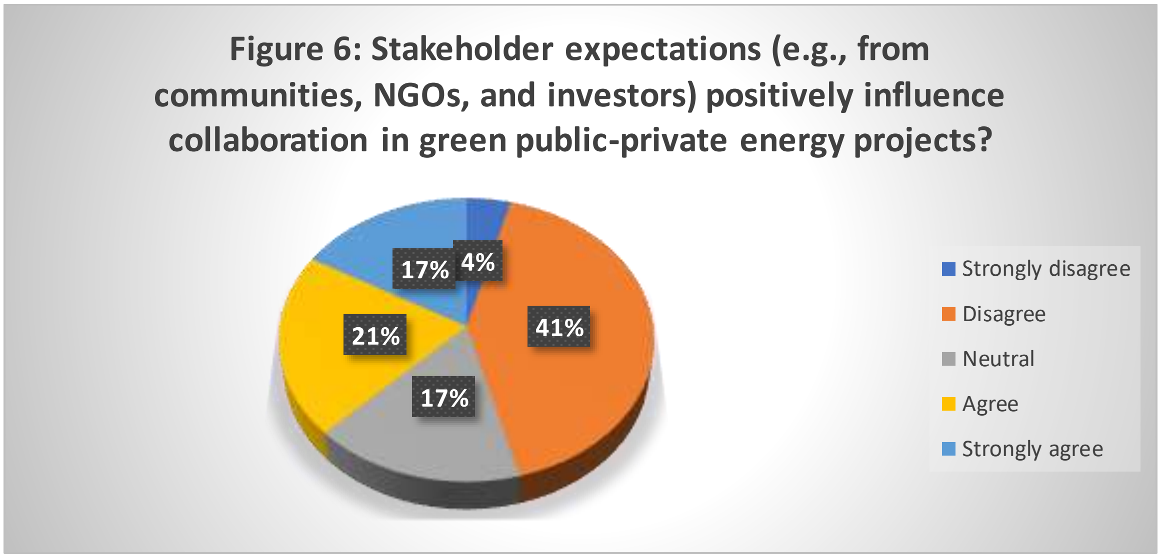


Figure 6: Stakeholder expectations (e.g., from communities, NGOs, and investors) positively influence collaboration in green public-private energy projects?

Source: Researcher (2025)

3. **Response to the question:** Norms of transparency and mutual accountability are widely upheld by both public and private partners in green energy partnerships?

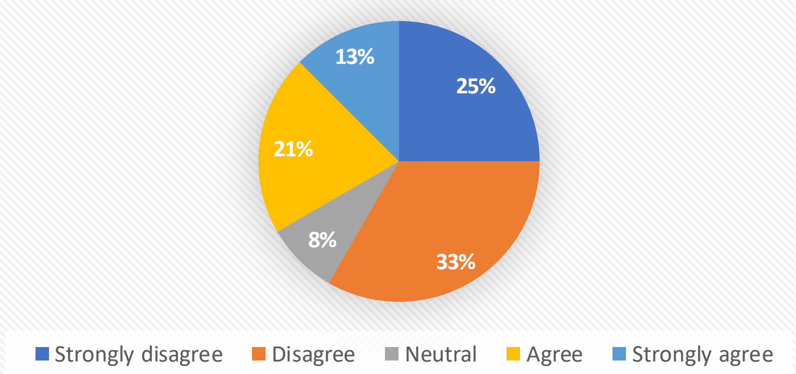
The survey findings reveal a notable skepticism regarding the normative expectations of good governance, specifically transparency and mutual accountability within green public-private partnerships in Zimbabwe's energy sector (See Figure 7). Out of 120 respondents, a majority expressed negative perceptions: 30 respondents (25%) strongly disagreed and 40 (33.3%) disagreed that such norms are widely upheld. This means nearly 60% of stakeholders question the extent to which both public and private partners adhere to expected standards of openness and shared responsibility. These perceptions suggest that normative institutions supporting good governance may be underdeveloped or inconsistently applied, potentially eroding trust between actors and undermining partnership effectiveness.

The relatively small proportion of respondents who agreed (25 or 20.8%) or strongly agreed (15 or 12.5%) with the statement underscores the limited confidence in the institutional culture surrounding green PPPs. When normative frameworks such as those promoting transparency, participatory decision-making, and mutual accountability are not robustly upheld, the willingness of stakeholders to engage in long-term partnerships may diminish. This absence of shared governance norms can lead to asymmetries in power, information, and responsibility, which can compromise the collaborative ethos that green energy partnerships require.

Neutral responses (10 or 8.3%) were minimal, indicating that most participants held clear opinions on the issue. The data suggests that the perception of weak normative governance structures is not merely due to a lack of information or indifference but is likely grounded in experiential or contextual realities. This divide in stakeholder perceptions could point to uneven experiences across different partnerships, where some may have benefitted from stronger governance frameworks while others encountered opaque or unilateral decision-making processes. Such inconsistencies make it harder to establish sector-wide expectations of conduct and may further discourage private sector involvement in green energy initiatives.

Ultimately, the limited presence of strong normative expectations appears to be a significant barrier to effective cooperation in Zimbabwe's green PPP landscape. Norms act as social contracts that shape behavior beyond formal rules; when these norms are absent or contested, cooperation is weakened. Addressing this gap will require deliberate institutional reforms that embed principles of transparency and mutual accountability into policy frameworks, contractual agreements, and operational practices. Without these reforms, green PPPs risk becoming transactional rather than transformational falling short of their potential to bridge Zimbabwe's sustainability gap.

Figure 7: Norms of transparency and mutual accountability are widely upheld by both public and private partners in green energy partnerships?



Source: Researcher (2025)

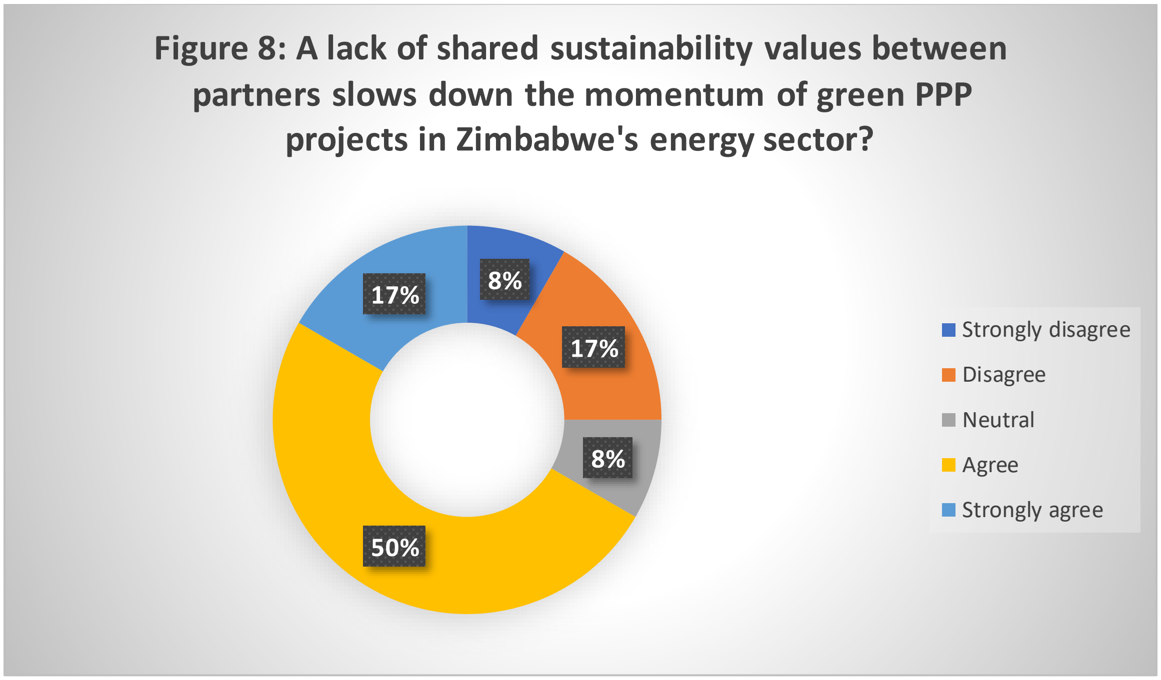
4. **Response to the question:** A lack of shared sustainability values between partners slows down the momentum of green PPP projects in Zimbabwe's energy sector?

The survey results indicate a strong perception that normative misalignment particularly in sustainability values significantly hinders the momentum of green PPP projects in Zimbabwe's energy sector (See Figure 8). A total of 60 respondents (50%) agreed and 20 (16.7%) strongly agreed that the lack of shared sustainability values between public and private partners slows project progress. This dominant view (66.7% of respondents) underscores a serious concern among stakeholders that conflicting priorities, divergent environmental commitments, or inconsistent definitions of "sustainability" are contributing to delays or inefficiencies in project implementation.

Conversely, only 10 respondents (8.3%) strongly disagreed and 20 (16.7%) disagreed with the statement, suggesting a smaller group of stakeholders do not perceive normative divergence as a major impediment. Meanwhile, 10 respondents (8.3%) were neutral, indicating limited uncertainty or a perception that value misalignment may not be universally applicable across all projects. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority affirming the issue points to a systemic problem—where collaborative efforts are undermined by incompatible visions for sustainability, often rooted in differing institutional cultures or economic priorities.

These findings suggest that normative misalignment is more than just a theoretical concern; it has practical consequences that are felt throughout the lifecycle of green PPP projects. When partners lack a common understanding of environmental goals, the result is often project delays, misallocation of resources, or diluted impact. Public actors may emphasize regulatory compliance and long-term environmental protection, while private partners may prioritize short-term returns and cost-efficiency. Without harmonization of values, decision-making becomes contested, trust is eroded, and the cooperative synergy necessary for PPP success weakens.

To bridge this normative gap, intentional alignment efforts must be prioritized through stakeholder dialogue, joint planning, and the integration of shared sustainability benchmarks into contractual and operational frameworks. Establishing platforms for value convergence such as codes of conduct, sustainability compacts, or third-party facilitation, can create a common ground from which both sectors can operate more effectively. Ultimately, fostering a shared normative foundation will not only accelerate the pace of green energy development but also enhance the resilience and legitimacy of PPPs as tools for sustainable transformation in Zimbabwe's energy sector.



Source: Researcher (2025)

3.3 Responses to Cognitive Institutions-Survey Questions

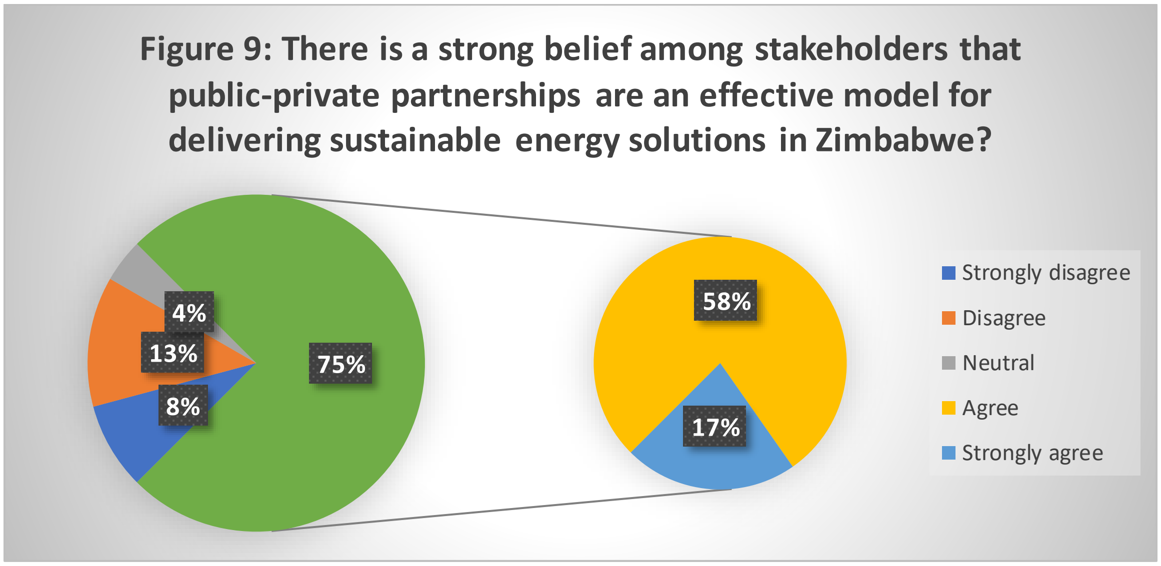
1. **Response to the question:** There is a strong belief among stakeholders that public-private partnerships are an effective model for delivering sustainable energy solutions in Zimbabwe?

The survey findings suggest a strong and positive cognitive orientation among stakeholders toward the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in delivering sustainable energy solutions in Zimbabwe (See Figure 9). Of the 120 respondents, a significant majority 70 (58.3%) agreed and 20 (16.7%) strongly agreed with the statement, indicating that nearly three-quarters of respondents hold a favorable belief in the efficacy of PPPs for green energy implementation. This positive perception is critical, as it reflects a shared mental model that PPPs can serve as a viable mechanism for advancing sustainability objectives in the energy sector.

Only a small fraction of respondents 10 (8.3%) strongly disagreed and 15 (12.5%) disagreed expressed skepticism regarding the effectiveness of PPPs. These figures suggest that while some doubts remain, they are relatively limited in comparison to the overall positive sentiment. The minimal number of neutral responses (5 or 4.2%) further underscores that stakeholders have relatively clear and defined beliefs on this issue, rather than being uncertain or indifferent. This clarity can be instrumental in shaping policy consensus and mobilizing multi-sectoral commitment around PPP-driven green energy initiatives.

The strong belief in PPP effectiveness as revealed by the data signals a favorable cognitive institutional environment. Such cognitive alignment supports collaborative energy development by reducing ideological friction and reinforcing mutual expectations of success. When stakeholders both public and private share the belief that PPPs are capable of delivering tangible results, it fosters openness to cooperation, risk-sharing, and long-term commitment. This belief also lays the groundwork for smoother negotiation processes and more coordinated project planning, all of which are essential for the success of green PPPs.

However, it is important to recognize that belief alone does not guarantee success. While cognitive institutions shape perceptions and readiness to engage, they must be matched by enabling normative and regulatory frameworks. The positive belief in PPPs must be reinforced through practical evidence such as transparent governance, consistent outcomes, and measurable sustainability impacts to maintain stakeholder confidence over time. If well-leveraged, the current belief system presents a strategic opportunity for Zimbabwe to expand and deepen green PPPs as part of its broader energy transition strategy.



Source: Researcher (2025)

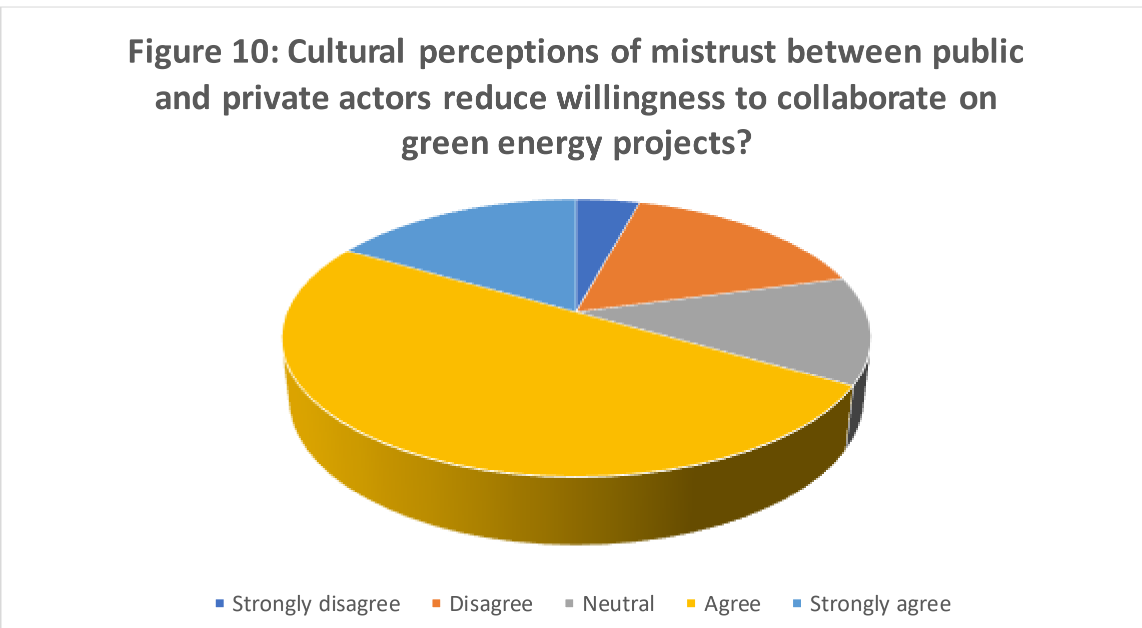
2. **Response to the question:** Cultural perceptions of mistrust between public and private actors reduce willingness to collaborate on green energy projects?

The survey results reveal a strong perception among stakeholders that cultural mistrust between public and private actors hampers collaboration on green energy projects (See Figure 10). A combined 80 out of 120 respondents (66.7%) either agreed (60 or 50%) or strongly agreed (20 or 16.7%) that such mistrust reduces willingness to engage in partnerships. This dominant view highlights the presence of deep-seated cognitive barriers, rooted in historical experiences, perceived institutional failures, or ideological differences, which continue to shape the attitudes and behaviors of key actors in the PPP space.

On the other hand, a smaller but notable group of respondents expressed a more optimistic view. Twenty respondents (16.7%) disagreed and 5 (4.2%) strongly disagreed with the statement, suggesting that for a minority of stakeholders, mistrust is either not prevalent or not perceived as a significant impediment to collaboration. Meanwhile, 15 respondents (12.5%) selected neutral, possibly reflecting uncertainty or varied experiences across different projects. This diversity in responses indicates that while mistrust is widespread, it may not be uniformly experienced or perceived across the energy sector.

Cultural perceptions of mistrust whether based on actual interactions or inherited organizational narratives can significantly impair partnership formation and project progress. When private actors doubt the transparency or commitment of public institutions, or when government entities view private sector motives with suspicion, the result is a reluctance to share information, align objectives, or commit long-term resources. These perceptions shape not only attitudes but also practical decisions, such as risk allocation, negotiation strategies, and stakeholder engagement, ultimately weakening the potential of green PPPs to deliver impactful energy solutions.

To mitigate these cognitive barriers, deliberate efforts must be made to build trust through consistent and transparent engagement, performance-based collaboration models, and inclusive dialogue platforms. Addressing the root causes of mistrust such as inconsistent regulatory enforcement, lack of accountability, and opaque procurement practices can gradually reshape stakeholder perceptions. Cultivating a culture of cooperation grounded in mutual respect and shared sustainability values is essential for unlocking the full potential of PPPs as drivers of green energy transformation in Zimbabwe.



Source: Researcher (2025)

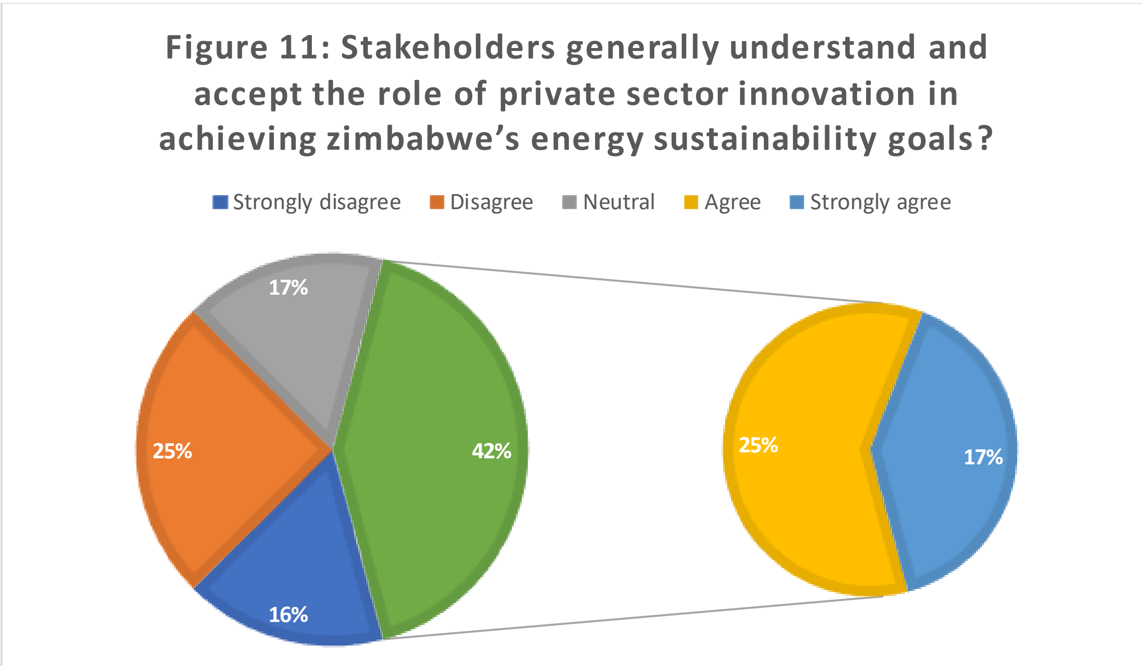
3. **Response to the question:** Stakeholders generally understand and accept the role of private sector innovation in achieving Zimbabwe's energy sustainability goals?

The survey results present a divided view among stakeholders regarding the private sector's role in advancing energy sustainability in Zimbabwe (See Figure 11). While 30 respondents (25%) agreed and 20 (16.7%) strongly agreed that stakeholders generally understand and accept the importance of private sector innovation, a nearly equal proportion expressed the opposite view. Specifically, 20 respondents (16.7%) strongly disagreed and 30 (25%) disagreed with the statement, suggesting that a significant number of stakeholders are either skeptical of or unconvinced by the private sector's contribution to green innovation. The 20 neutral responses (16.7%) further illustrate a lack of consensus or clarity on this issue, reflecting cognitive fragmentation across the stakeholder landscape.

This lack of alignment in mental models may stem from historical dynamics in Zimbabwe's public-private relations. Limited exposure to successful PPP models, distrust of profit-driven motives, or underappreciation of the private sector's technical capacity could all contribute to this hesitancy. Where public institutions have traditionally dominated infrastructure and energy development, the private sector's role may still be viewed with caution or misunderstanding. Such fragmented perceptions can obstruct collaboration, as they create uncertainty about the roles, expectations, and contributions of private partners in energy transition efforts.

The implications of this cognitive gap are considerable. When stakeholders do not share a common understanding of the value that private sector innovation brings such as technological expertise, efficiency gains, and alternative financing green PPPs risk becoming unbalanced or underutilized. Misaligned beliefs can lead to resistance in policy design, difficulties in joint decision-making, and weak political support for innovation-led initiatives. This hinders the development of a coherent, long-term strategy to leverage the private sector's capabilities in achieving Zimbabwe's energy sustainability goals.

Bridging this cognitive divide requires strategic communication, capacity building, and exposure to best practices in private sector–driven green innovation. Public institutions must actively promote and institutionalize the private sector's role in energy sustainability through inclusive policy dialogues, joint innovation platforms, and performance-based partnerships. Over time, these efforts can help align stakeholder mental models, build mutual respect, and foster a more enabling environment for innovation-led public-private collaboration. Establishing a shared vision will be essential to accelerating Zimbabwe's sustainable energy agenda through effective green PPPs.



Source: Researcher (2025)

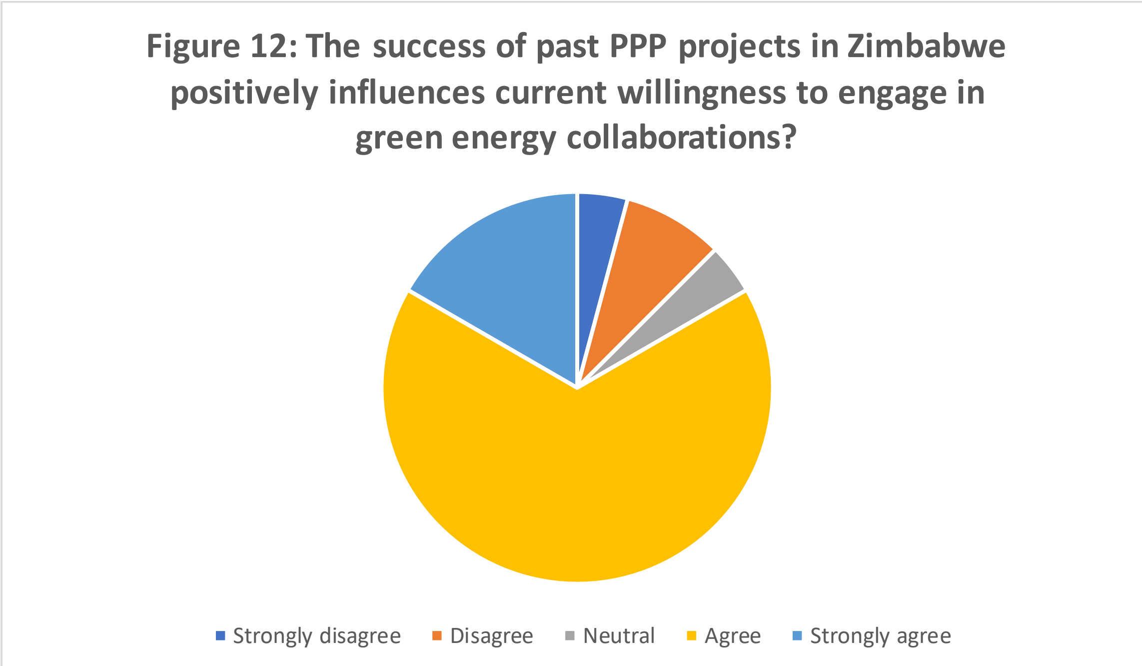
4. **Response to the question:** The success of past PPP projects in Zimbabwe positively influences current willingness to engage in green energy collaborations?

The survey data indicate a strong belief among stakeholders that the perceived success of past public-private partnerships (PPPs) positively influences their current willingness to engage in green energy collaborations (See Figure 12). A total of 80 respondents (66.7%) agreed with the statement, and an additional 20 (16.7%) strongly agreed. This overwhelming majority 83.4% reflects a high level of cognitive reinforcement, where past positive experiences with PPPs are shaping present attitudes toward future partnerships. Such cognitive framing is a powerful driver of behavior, suggesting that stakeholders who have witnessed or been part of successful PPP models are more likely to trust and support new collaborations in the green energy sector.

Conversely, only a small portion of respondents expressed doubt: 5 (4.2%) strongly disagreed and 10 (8.3%) disagreed with the statement. These minority views could reflect isolated negative experiences, project-specific failures, or limited involvement in PPPs altogether. The neutral responses (5 or 4.2%) indicate that only a few stakeholders are unsure or ambivalent, further emphasizing the dominant perception that successful past projects foster present willingness to collaborate. This general alignment points to a form of cognitive path dependency, where prior success sets the tone for future engagement and perceived feasibility.

This data suggests that cognitive institutions particularly belief systems shaped by experiential learning play a critical role in driving support for green PPPs. When stakeholders see evidence that collaboration can deliver results, their readiness to commit time, resources, and political capital increases. In practical terms, successful past PPPs act as cognitive reference points or mental shortcuts that reduce perceived risks and uncertainty associated with new partnerships. This effect not only bolsters stakeholder confidence but also contributes to the institutionalization of PPPs as a legitimate and reliable model for energy sustainability.

To maintain and build on this positive cognitive framing, the government and its partners need to document, communicate, and replicate past PPP successes. Creating case studies, conducting stakeholder reviews, and highlighting key lessons learned can reinforce belief in the model and encourage broader participation. Furthermore, embedding mechanisms for transparency and accountability in current and future PPPs will help sustain stakeholder trust and prevent disillusionment. By leveraging the momentum generated by past achievements, Zimbabwe can strengthen its foundation for scaling up green energy collaborations through well-structured public-private partnerships.



Source: Researcher (2025)

Conclusions

This study set out to explore the cognitive, normative, and regulatory institutional dimensions influencing the implementation of green public-private partnerships (PPPs) in Zimbabwe's energy sector, under the title "Bridging the Sustainability Gap: Opportunities and Barriers for Green Public-Private Partnerships in Zimbabwe." The central problem identified was the persistent sustainability gap in the country's energy development, which continues to be hampered by structural, cultural, and institutional misalignments between public and private actors. Grounded in Institutional Theory, the study examined how deeply embedded beliefs, values, and rules—especially those related to cognitive institutions influence perceptions, trust, and willingness to collaborate in green energy PPPs.

Using a quantitative survey methodology with a 5-point Likert scale, data were collected from 120 stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in energy and PPP projects. The findings revealed a strong belief in the potential effectiveness of PPPs as a model for delivering sustainable energy solutions, suggesting a generally favorable cognitive environment. However, the results also highlighted significant cognitive and normative barriers particularly cultural mistrust between sectors and a lack of shared sustainability values which reduce the momentum and cohesion necessary for successful green PPPs. Importantly, the perceived success of past PPP projects emerged as a powerful cognitive driver that positively influences current engagement readiness, emphasizing the importance of experiential learning in shaping future cooperation.

Implications for Practice

The study offers actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers. While belief in PPP effectiveness is encouraging, more needs to be done to institutionalize trust and align stakeholder values. Structured, transparent engagement platforms that promote regular dialogue, clarify roles, and build mutual respect across sectors are essential. Furthermore, documenting and sharing lessons from successful PPPs can reinforce positive perceptions and encourage broader participation. Policymakers should also consider embedding private-sector innovation into formal policy mechanisms through green investment incentives, co-creation platforms, and targeted capacity-building programs to address the perceptual and institutional gaps that inhibit collaboration.

Implications for Theory

The findings contribute to Institutional Theory by demonstrating how the cognitive pillar particularly perceptions shaped by experience and inter-sectoral trust plays a central role in influencing engagement in green PPPs. This supports and extends the theory's emphasis on how institutional logics, norms, and beliefs govern actor behavior, especially in resource-constrained, trust-deficient contexts like Zimbabwe. The results suggest that Institutional Theory may be particularly well-suited for analyzing complex sustainability collaborations in developing countries, where informal norms and experiential learning are just as critical as formal regulations. Future studies might build on this by integrating Institutional Theory with behavioral or trust-based frameworks to further explain PPP dynamics in similar contexts.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research should explore regulatory institutional factors in greater depth—particularly how legal frameworks, procurement procedures, and political risk perceptions shape the enabling environment for green PPPs. Comparative studies between Zimbabwe and other Southern African countries could yield valuable insights into how regulatory alignment (or its absence) affects partnership scalability and sustainability outcomes. Understanding these regulatory dynamics will be crucial for transitioning from isolated pilot projects to system-wide green energy transformation.

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The Dark Side of Human Resource Analytics: A Systematic Integrative Review

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Abstract

Advances in information technology are ushering in a new era of human resource analytics and data-driven decision-making in the corporate world. Organizations increasingly turn to human resource analytics to enhance human resource management practices such as reward management, performance appraisals, and employee well-being. This improvement in information technology has raised expectations among various management practitioners and experts and fostered a very optimistic outlook on human resource analytics. Using human resource analytics to manage people, on the other hand, poses many challenges and ethical implications. This paper investigates the risks of applying human resource analytics based on a PRISMA-guided systematic integrative review. Following established guidelines for systematic reviews, a transparent and reproducible search strategy was implemented across Emerald Insights, Taylor & Francis Online, and grey literature sources, with clearly justified inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigor. Two theories, the talent analytics maturity model and the technology acceptance model, form the conjectural structure for this paper to attain theoretical triangulation for the study. Inclusion criteria for the utilised articles included not more than five years old, articles in the English Language only, relevance to challenges/ethical issues in human resource analytics, full text-articles, business/social sciences articles, and only scholarly articles. The rejection criteria adopted were sources irrelevant to the study topic, sources more than 5 years old, sources not in English, pure science articles, and non-scholarly articles. The investigation identifies five challenges. Failure to diligently consider the unique aspects of human resource analytics can lead to unintended consequences such as techno-stress, invasion of workplace privacy, regulatory *challenges, political challenges, bias, and discrimination. The review also revealed a lack of both qualitative and quantitative empirical studies. Not many organizations have advanced human resource analytics capabilities. The researcher suggests mixed-method and longitudinal empirical studies for each observed theme. Such studies provide a clear picture of the trends and patterns of human resource analytics challenges. Possible strategies for the menacing challenges can be found when empirical evidence is abundant.*

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Human Resource Analytics, People Analytics, Talent Analytics, Workforce Analytics.

Introduction

Human resource analytics (HRA) is a systematic process of aggregating and analyzing human resource information to improve an organization's workforce operations (Edwards & Edwards, 2016). Collected human resource (HR) data is linked with organizational aims to determine how HR initiatives contribute to overall strategic business goals (Gebejes & Khokhlova, 2022). Said differently, HR analytics is a new technique for managing the organizational workforce facilitated by artificial intelligence (Fitz-enz & Mattox, 2014). This aspect involves data-driven, evidence-based decision-making to align people and business strategies within an organisation (Giermindl *et al*., 2021). In sum, human resource analytics today is regarded as an enabler of business efficiency, effectiveness, objectivity, and transparency by both practitioners and researchers (ibid). Even though various organisations have routinely collected data, HR analytics is a specialized form of analytics. It provides direction and useful insights into company operations, whether private or public-sector-oriented (Gebejes & Khokhlova, 2022). Through HRA, questions such as what the cost of hiring is, how long it takes to hire new employees, and the patterns in employee turnover can be answered (Polyakova *et al*., 2020). Thus, possible guesswork in company operations can be avoided.

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HR analytics in practice

Large volumes of high-quality human resource data are collected and analyzed to evaluate strategic HR practices such as performance management, recruitment, and training (Gebejes & Khokhlova, 2022). It therefore implies that employee profile data, salary and promotion history, demographics, turnover, absenteeism, engagement, and training can be typical data sets collected in an organization. The data collection leads to the measurement stage, where data is continually measured against a set standard. In precise terms, this is the HR metrics application stage. In this case, key metrics to monitor include organizational performance metrics (absenteeism, turnover rate, and recruitment). Other essential metrics include operations, monitored through data that determine the effectiveness and efficiency of day-to-day HR procedures and staff headcount (Collmann & Matei, 2016; Gebejes & Khokhlova, 2022). Taking stock of the total number of people working in the organization at any given time is a crucial metric that enables managers to account for permanent, temporary, and stand-by staff. Knowledge of the organization enables analysis of how people can accomplish business goals, more efficient cost estimation, and healthier financial management. Furthermore, there is a process-optimization metric that combines data from the two aforementioned metrics to identify areas for improvement. These key metrics lead us to the analytical stage, where results from metric reporting are used to identify patterns and trends that impact organizational operations.

Depending on the organization's desired outcome, analytical methods can be descriptive, predictive, or prescriptive (Edwards & Edwards, 2016). In simple terms, descriptive analytics is concerned with questions such as "what happened" in the organization, based on data drawn from metrics and past workforce activities. Predictive analytics is all about answering questions like "What will happen next?", while prescriptive analytics attempts to answer questions like "How should organizational leaders and people practitioners act?" Clear policies and procedures are formulated to avoid future business challenges.

HRA seeks to advance the idea of measurement in human resource practices that Fredrick Winslow Taylor propounded in the 19th century. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that Taylor's scientific management had problems associated with treating people as machines in the workplace (Michale & Stephen, 2020). Human relations among the organizational workforce were thought to be nonexistent, as the main focus was on

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achieving high organizational production. Equally, the rapid advance in artificial intelligence still carries the same connotations of moral and ethical challenges as did the scientific management concept. This is because treating employees in the workplace as equivalent to other quantifiable data objects, such as goods and money flows, is an underestimation of human complexity (Gal *et al*., 2020). Consequently, this would persuade organizations and managers to rely on human resource analytics in a biased, unbalanced way, resulting in grave operational challenges.

A careful analysis of some cited scholarly findings (Espegren & Hugosson, 2025; Mukuze *et al*., 2022) in this paper indicates that few organizations have adopted human resource analytics to the last step (prescriptive analytics). Most organizations in the corporate world have not adopted up-to-date levels due to various inhibiting factors related to both humans and organizations(Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021). It is at the descriptive analytics stage that most ethical disputes occur, because there is no clear framework for selecting what can be measured and retained. Descriptive analytics as a measurement tool, like many other people measurement techniques, has significant limitations that practitioners must seriously consider. This data analytical stage describes what is happening(Samson & Bhanugopan, 2022). Thus, it can be labeled a blunt instrument that lacks insight and analyzes the relationship between a couple of variables in the organization. It is impossible to learn why an organization has high staff turnover using descriptive analytics, since this tool can only display organizational events as they occur. A complete understanding of organizational reports and events requires running the full range of analytics to fully understand the operational situation. This technique can yield incorrect business insights when metrics are poorly selected and data quality is poor. Erroneous calculations can occur, and data duplication is possible because there is no clear-cut distinction between the custodians of workforce data (Thakur *et al*., 2024). Indeed, this underestimation of human complexity poses some moral and ethical challenges (Boudreau & Cascio, 2017). Therefore, this paper seeks to provide a critical overview of the challenges associated with human resource analytics, given the advances in technology in modern-day operations. This was done by answering the following question: "What are the challenges of human resource analytics to organizations and employees in the workplace"? Thus, uncovering such challenges helps expand the frontiers of knowledge in human resource analytics.

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Literature Review

Theoretical framework

This section addresses critical theories appropriate to the study, focusing on defining the subject matter correctly, identifying key constructs, and connecting the researcher to extant knowledge. Accordingly, two theories (the talent analytics maturity model and the technology acceptance model) form the conjectural structure for this paper to attain theoretical triangulation for the study.

Talent Analytics Maturity Model

The model was propounded by Bersin (2014) and assumes that organizations adopt human resource analytics through different stages, from the first stage right up-to the fourth and last stage. The model results from both qualitative and quantitative research conducted to better understand talent analytics on an ongoing basis (Bersin *et al*., 2014). Different business organizations have many files in their custody as they tirelessly gather essential data on recruitment, such as qualifications, age, marital status, and other employment demographics, for planning purposes. Training and development records and turnover rates are also essential indicators of human resource practices that entities meticulously track. This and other data related to different human resources facets can be analyzed with business process data to understand different business relationships and make predictions. This would eventually lead to better business performance and strategic realization of goals. Bersin (2014) contends that talent analytics uses measurement and logical reasoning to identify, develop, and refine an organization's human resources. The Talent Analytics Maturity model demonstrates the four stages an organisation goes through as it evolves from a tactical, non-strategic function into a fully integrated value-add business process. This is a valuable model for different organizations, as it provides a snapshot of the organization's adoption of human resource analytics and areas that need improvement. Only some organizations, representing ten percent of the studied organizations, have adopted the highest level of prescriptive analytics, and many are practicing the people measurement concept at the primary level (Bersin *et al*., 2014).

The talent analytics maturity model was chosen for this study because it provides a crucial framework for understanding that the ethical challenges of HRA are not static but may

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manifest differently at different levels of organisational analytical maturity. This model allows the study to contextualize challenges, acknowledging that an organisation at the descriptive analytics stage may face different privacy and data governance issues than one employing prescriptive analytics. By using this model, the review can move beyond a simplistic view of HRA challenges to consider how the very purpose and sophistication of data use can create unique ethical dilemmas. Consequently, it helps to explain why the literature reports a range of issues, from basic data duplication to complex algorithmic bias, as organisations progress through the models' four stages.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The researcher chose the Technology Acceptance Model as the second theory to better explain the study problem in this article. The model was propounded by Davis in 1989, as cited by Marikyan and Papagiannidis (2023). Three primary factors make up the critical assumptions of this model, thus perceptual experience of technology utility, the ease of use, and behavioral intent. The theory has other associated factors, such as attitude and actual system usage, but all are derived from the identified three parent factors.

Perceptual usefulness refers to a situation in which individual employees in an organization believe that using a new information system would enable them to complete work projects on time and with minimal errors.

Ease of use refers to the extent to which the intended user of an information system believes there will be no hassles in using it. People would certainly develop a negative attitude towards an information system if there were no good interface and many access rights were required.

Behavioral intention is the factor that leads business-people to use the organization's information system, and it is usually influenced by the general mental attitude of the intended users of the system. The intended users' attitude is usually influenced by external factors beyond the establishment. Factors such as age and gender were found to either positively or negatively affect the decision to use an information system in an organization (Thakur *et al*., 2024). An employee's age plays an essential role in the adoption of technology in organizations. There are possible challenges of skills obsolescence in the elderly workforce born outside the internet age, as compared to younger

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generations(Samson & Bhanugopan, 2022). Younger generations have the upper hand in technology adoption because they were born into a digital world and are eager to learn. Elderly employees have eyesight problems that prevent them from using new technologies (Espegren & Hugosson, 2025). Female employees are, in most cases, relegated to reproductive duties in social life, which often results in less access to technology than their male counterparts. The theory, a three-step procedure, assumes that the way a technology information system is designed triggers the mental reactions of intended users. Thus, expected users start to see the system as either easy to use or very useful in their duties (Davis, 1993). Operational challenges associated with the new information system will lead to resentment and eventual sabotage of the system. The Technology Acceptance Model is of great importance to this study, as it shifts the focus from organisational outcomes of human resource analytics to individual user perceptions, which can be a source of its "dark side." The model's core constructs, such as perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, are directly linked to emergent themes, such as techno-stress, which arises when employees find a new system difficult to use or threatening to their job security. Furthermore, the TAM helps explain the political challenges and resistance to HRA, as a perceived lack of usefulness or a negative attitude towards the technology can lead to organisational "mudslinging games" and data hoarding, as identified in the findings. By grounding the employee's psychological and behavioural responses to HRA in the Technology Acceptance Model, the paper provides a deeper explanation for these human-centric challenges.

Empirical evidence literature review

Espegren and Hugosson's (2023) study discovered the challenges and benefits of adopting human resource analytics in organizations. Specifically, it was observed that the ability of individual employees and possession of numerical skills determine the rate and level of human resource analytics adoption. A lack of professional knowledge and business acumen affects communication skills, trust, and buy-in from relevant business stakeholders. Organizational culture and structure were noted as other stumbling blocks, especially when there is bureaucracy and an unfavourable organizational culture. Leadership support was noted to be positively influencing the adoption and utilization of human resource analytics.

It is possible to make data-driven strategic decisions and achieve strategic plans using human resource analytics. Occasionally, prescriptive analytics of human resource data would be conducted, as noted in the literature identified in the study(Espegren &Hugosson, 2023). A modest agreement on the utility of human resource analytics was observed. Some scholars and management practitioners believe it has the potential to improve organizational performance, while others remain unconvinced(Wang *et al*., 2024). Only some organizations have supportive measures in place to support people's measurement concepts. Numerical skillfulness and training were found to be lacking among HRM professionals (Hamza *et al*., 2023). On the other hand, Saxena *et al*.'s (2022) study revealed that the adoption and acceptance of HR analytics are not easy accomplishments. Certainly, the interested entity should thoroughly prepare its workforce to meet the demands of technological change by providing material support and impactful training. Well-trained organisational staff will have the right attitude towards new work processes. Mukuze *et al*. (2022) found that human resource analytics was yet to be fully adopted in state universities in Zimbabwe. The expected people practitioners do not have the skills and associated knowledge to properly utilize HRA. There was notable resistance to change and a need for more management support. Nevertheless, HRA adoption and reporting were observed at the first step of descriptive analytics. Over the past few years, the literature on human resource analytics has grown rapidly, but most research has focused on what analytics is and how it works (Peeters *et al*., 2020). Past research (Falletta & Combs, 2021; Krishna & Verma, 2025; Wang *et al*., 2024) on this subject portrayed a positive picture of the adoption of human resource analytics across different organizations. It was observed that an organization could improve efficiency and effectiveness, people's realization, and business strategic goals (Wang *et al*., 2024). The general picture that emerges from a scrutiny of the aforesaid research indicates that there is a low uptake of human resource analytics in organizations due to various personal and organizational factors, and that few empirical studies have been conducted. Scholars use different terms to define human resource analytics, indicating that the field is still evolving. Examples of labels in use include talent analytics (Alam *et al*., 2026), workforce analytics (Qamar & Samad, 2022), people analytics (Polzer, 2022), and human resource intelligence (Falleta, 2014). From another angle, Wang *et al*. (2024) and Marler and Boudreau (2017) used the terms human capital analytics and human resource analytics, respectively. Undoubtedly, the point of convergence for all these labels is a measurement of human endeavor in organizational production processes. Against this backdrop, this researcher adopted the term human resource analytics. None of the above-identified past research (except Gal *et al*., 2020) addressed the ethical issues associated with human resource analytics in organizations. Instead, the vast majority of cited past research focused on the adoption and use of HRA across different organizations, which is a different problem. Therefore, this researcher seeks to advance the field by critically analyzing what is known about HR Analytics and the possible operational challenges associated with the practice.

Methods

The researcher used an integrative review to synthesize human resource analytics data from various research designs to reach an all-encompassing and reliable conclusion on the subject matter (Dhollande *et al*., 2021). Also called an orderly critical review, it is a scholarly survey of what other researchers have done in one's area of study. What is unique about this research method is that secondary data is gathered and critically evaluated, and research findings are combined. Orderly critical reviews are designed to provide an all-encompassing, thorough overview of contemporary explanations and evidence from published investigations, whether quantitative or qualitative (Siddaway *et al*., 2019). An integrative review was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of Kutcher and LeBaron (2022). Yusuf *et al*. (2024) note that integrative reviews offer a credible and transparent way to study a business issue. In this case, human resource analytics is a trending subject matter in both business circles and academia. Moreover, this methodology has empirical support from published works (Falletta &Combs, 2020; Giermindl *et al*., 2021).

Therefore, a literature review was conducted to avoid duplication. Key search terms used were the dark side of HR analytics, ethical issues in human resource analytics, challenges with people analytics, and artificial intelligence in human capital analytics. Literature published within the past five years was also used to add credibility and substantiate the authoritativeness of this paper's contention (Smart, 2020). Since the researcher was using the integrative review methodology on a relatively new topic, it was reasonably assumed that using recent data sources and references would improve the quality and strength of the research evidence. Old sources have the notable challenge of not being sufficiently scrutinized and approved by other scholars. The other reason for maintaining recent sources is that older sources and their claims can be overtaken by changes, especially in technology. Thus, recent literature can serve as evidence of current knowledge. Drawing on scholarly advice (Bramer *et al*., 2017; Kutcher & LeBaron, 2022), two databases (Emerald Insights and Francis & Taylor Online) were used to gather relevant information on the subject. Data were organized, evaluated, analyzed, and synthesized to reach a conclusion (Oermann & Knafl, 2021;Toronto & Remington, 2020). Emerald Insights and Francis & Taylor Online search yielded 120 answers in this regard. On the same note, the World Wide Web was used to search for gray literature on ethical issues in human resource analytics, yielding 14 results. In this paper, grey literature sources simply mean information sources got from world wide web and found outside of other known indexed publishing houses. It can be information files from academia, government, and business reports. This is vital information to consider because all the aforesaid organisations post their verified information in the public domain for transparency and accountability. In practice, key professionals would have verified the authenticity of the information posted online. In this regard, grey literature enabled the researcher to connect with a diverse range of authors and organisations. The content therein can address emerging research areas that commercial publishers do not. The Emerald Insights database was chosen for its specialization in management and human resource management research, which are the core disciplinary areas of this investigation. The database is renowned for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals that have published seminal works on HR analytics, information systems, and technology management, which are essential for understanding the intersection of Artificial Intelligence and human resource practices. Taylor and Francis Online was chosen as the second database for its extensive social science coverage, including over 2,500 journals, including The International Journal of Human Resource Management, which has featured critical debates on people analytics ethics. The data base complement Emerald by providing access to journals with different editorial perspectives, reducing the risk of missing relevant studies due to publication bias. The World Wide Web search was also used because human resource analytics is a rapidly evolving field, where

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cutting-edge debates often first appear in industry reports, conference proceedings, and white papers before formal journal publication. Including grey literature enables methodological triangulation, allowing the researcher to compare and contrast findings from different source types, enhancing the credibility of the synthesised results.

Inclusion criteria explanation and justification

Not more than five years: human resource analytics and AI technologies evolve rapidly, and limiting to recent publications ensures that findings reflect current ethical debates. Older sources risk referencing obsolete systems.

Articles in English: English is a predominant language in international business and management research. The researcher's proficiency in English ensures accurate interpretation and synthesis of findings without translation-related errors.

Relevance to HR analytics challenges: the study sought to understand the dark side of HR analytics, and including only articles that address challenges, risks, or ethical dilemmas ensures a direct contribution to answering the research question and maintaining focus.

Full-text articles: full access to articles is essential for quality appraisal, extracting significant findings, and verifying methodological rigour. Abstracts alone cannot provide sufficient detail for meaningful synthesis.

Business or social sciences articles: Human resource analytics operates at the intersection of business management and social sciences. Limiting to these disciplines ensures relevance while excluding pure technical or engineering perspectives that lack organisational context.

Non-scholarly articles: Opinion pieces without empirical grounding, blog posts, and promotional context from software vendors and unverified online sources lack the methodological rigour and peer validation necessary for inclusion in a systematic academic review.

Exclusion criteria explanation and justification

Irrelevant to the study topic:articles focusing solely on the technical implementation of HR analytics software, general big data applications without an HR context, or purely positive accounts without critical examination do not address the research question and would introduce irrelevant evidence.

More than five years old sources: The rapid pace of technological change means pre-2018 literature may describe HR analytics practices that are no longer representative.

Not in English language:Non-English articles could not be accurately interpreted or critically appraised, and including them would risk misinterpretation and compromise the validity of the results.

Pure science articles:articles from disciplines like data science, computer engineering, or statistics typically lack the organisational behaviour, ethical, and human-centric perspectives central to this investigation.

Non-scholarly articles:Unverified online sources lack the methodological rigour and peer validation necessary for inclusion in a systematic academic review.

The PRISMA diagram (Figure 1) below outlines how articles were selected for the ensuing appraisal and synthesis.

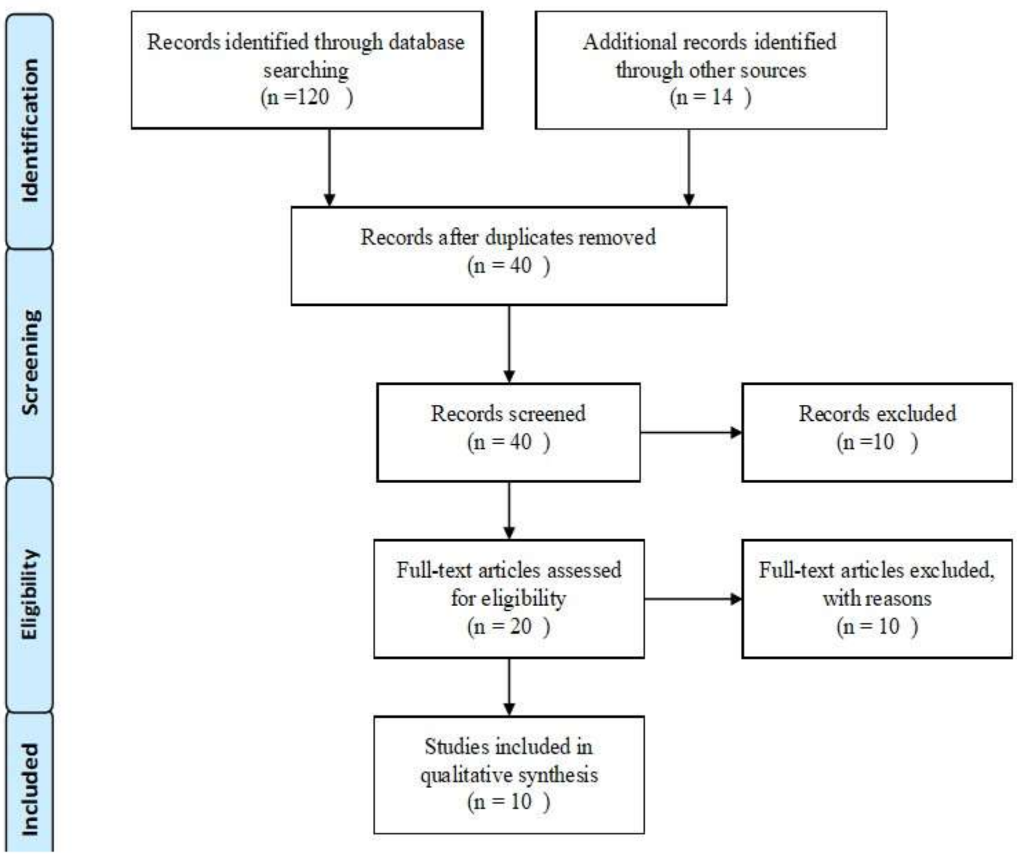

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

Source: Own research (2025)

PRISMA Flow Process

Figure one above is a PRISMA four-phase flow diagram documenting the review process. Number one is the identification phase: Emerald Insights search (n=62), Taylor & Francis Online search (n=58), and grey literature search (n=14). The second step was the screening phase, where duplicates were removed (n=12), and titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria (n=122; n=87 excluded based on apparent irrelevance). The third step was the eligibility phase, where full-text articles were assessed for eligibility (n=35) and excluded for various reasons. The key reasons were focus on technical implementation only (n=12), purely positive or benefits-focused (n=8), and insufficient depth in ethical dimensions (n=5). The last step was the inclusion phase, where studies included in the qualitative assessment was done (n=10). Data were organised, evaluated, analysed, and synthesised to reach a conclusion (Toronto & Remington, 2020; Oermann & Knafl, 2021).

Findings

Ten sources were identified and included in the final qualitative synthesis. Thematic analysis followed. Recurring themes were identified from the scholarly survey and as directed by the research question. Five emergent themes from the ten source articles were then conceptualized in accordance with the research question in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Emergent Themes

Subject matter	**Rubric**	**Writer**	**Year of Publication**
Techno-stress, erosion of workplace privacy, regulatory and political flip sides.	Exploring the dark side of electronic human resource management: Towards a new PROMPT model	Behl *et al*.	2022

Bias and discrimination, erosion of workplace privacy, the regulatory flip side, transparency, and fairness	The ethics of people analytics: risks, opportunities, and recommendations	Tursunbayeva and Pagliari	2021
Erosion of workplace privacy	The HR analytics cycle: a seven-step process for building evidence-based and ethical HR analytics capabilities	Falleta and Combs	2020
Erosion of workplace privacy	The promise versus reality: a systematic review of the on-going debates in people analytics	McCartney&NaFu	2021
Erosion of privacy, lack of transparency, discrimination	The dark sides of people analytics: reviewing the perils for organizations and employees	Giermindl *et al.*	2022
Invasion of workplace privacy, legislation dilemma	A study on Human Resource analytics for decision-making in international business machines in India and the United States of America	Gohain and Saikia	2021
Invasion of privacy	Examining the dark side of human resource analytics: an empirical investigation using the privacy calculus approach	Chatterjee *et al.*	2021
Lack of Analytic competency and management support	The rise of HR Analytics: Exploring its implications	Upadhyay *et al.*	2021

	from a developing country perspective		
Technostress	Why not take a step further? Analysis of challenges in early-stage adoption of HR-Analytics in Swedish organizations	Beka and Behrami	2019
Invasion of workplace privacy, legislation dilemma	The Grey Area Ethical Dilemmas in HR Analytics: Perspectives from the global workforce	Guenole *et al.*	2018

Source: Scholarly survey (2025)

Techno-stress

Organizational leaders face stressors arising from the ever-changing learning environment. Specifically, the need to learn and unlearn new technology due to short dynamic technology cycles (Behl *et al*., 2022). HR analytics comprises statistics and analysis, and, in most cases, HR professionals and managers are not techno-savvy. Hence, the coming in of techno-stress. Similarly, working with new technology poses the challenge of employees fearing they may lose their jobs due to its introduction. Moreover, there is an assumption that human resource analytics reduces the value and competence of human beings in decision-making in organizations (Giermindl *et al*., 2021). This is usually true when there are no clear lines of communication and when key expected changes in job tasks within the organization are unclear (Arslan *et al*., 2021). The results above point to one form of stress, emphasizing the aspect of uncertainty. In most cases, employees are unsure how to keep pace with the fast-moving technical transformations in the corporate world. Another form of mental strain depicted here is the potential loss of employment due to technological replacement.

The third challenge here is the strain caused by the fear of not having the right qualifications to meet new technological demands. For sure, such a difficulty affects the productivity of individual employees in different organizations. Based on the preceding account, the author developed a new definition of techno-stress. Specifically, techno stress is a person's psychological state and latent hostility resulting from his/her inability to accommodate and use technology beneficially. Thus, this paper identifies three overarching causes of workplace strain due to the computer technology revolution.

Erosion of workplace privacy

The intrusive tendency of human resource analytics poses sociological and cognitive challenges to employees in the workplace. Surveillance, the collection of sensitive data, and the tracking of workers and their work tools were found to impair employees' integrity and autonomy (Giermindl *et al*., 2022). Eventually, that evokes feelings of resentment and reduces employees' commitment to the organization's cause (ibid). Nevertheless, machine tracking and surveillance would be particularly useful in risky and creative industries to capture all vital business movements (Tursunbayeva *et al*., 2021). Health and safety programs in the workplace sometimes require employees to share their medical data, and such exchanges may lead to the unwarranted disclosure of employees' medical conditions. From an ethical perspective, this might lead to health inequalities(Chatterjee *et al*., 2021; Tursunbayeva & Pagliari, 2021). Gohain and Saikia (2021) maintain that privacy ethics must be upheld as the HR department collects data from outside the organization. Equally, health and sexual orientation data must be sufficiently safeguarded. Some organizations hire external companies to assess employees' health risks, and it is unclear how such records are kept securely (Falletta & Combs, 2020).

The typical lesson drawn from the above collection is that the advent of information technology in the corporate business world has caused organizations to trade their employee's privacy for convenience. The development has social and cognitive effects and challenges to both organizations and individual employees. Generally, this electronic gathering of employee data and monitoring of activities applies to specific industries, such as mining and construction.

Regulatory challenges

The subject of human resource analytics is relatively new, and the ethical dilemma is the lack of guiding statutes or precedent case references to consult. Some risk management laws do not apply to human resource analytics challenges (Tursunbayeva & Pagliari, 2021).

Vigorous education on employee rights and data protection laws is still lacking in third-world countries. Recognized employee unions are still in the dark as far as workers' privacy rights are concerned. Guenole *et al.* (2018) propose that legislation is insufficient to keep pace with ever-changing technologies. In some cases, business managers must apply risk laws according to the nature of human risk.

The above results indicate three categories of people responsible for enacting laws governing the application of human resource analytics in different organizations. To avoid operational challenges in HRA, national lawmakers should play a crucial role by engaging in diplomatic lobbying alongside company directors and interested practitioners. Equally, trade unionists are vital, as they represent large numbers of employees who subscribe to them, and must be protected by legal statutory instruments. Thus, through a tripartite arrangement, regulatory challenges associated with human resource analytics can be a thing of the past. Therefore, constant interaction, communication, and mutual understanding should be maintained among the three parties to achieve good results.

Political challenges

Ownership of HR analytics in organizations is a challenge; there is a raging debate about who exactly should be the custodian of HR analytics, either an independent analytics team or the HR department. Due to organizational mudslinging, organizations face many challenges, including data duplication, missing data, and a lack of centralized data storage (Guenole *et al.,* 2018). Typically, organizational activities are concealed, which brings in friction with regulatory authorities in some developed countries (Behl *et al*., 2022).

Given the above situation, human resource practitioners in different organizations should be the custodians of human resource analytics. This argument stems from the fact that data should be collected and analyzed by qualified practitioners who have been trained in the importance of gathering, storing, and interpreting data and linking it to broader organisational strategies. Therefore, such a position can be successfully adopted when relevant quantitative courses, such as business statistics and data analysis techniques, are compulsorily incorporated into tertiary institutions' study programs. In some developing countries' tertiary education institutions, the current position is that people management courses should not have compulsory numerical courses on offer. Practically, this severely affects the performance of people management graduates and undermines some study programs. Thus, the researcher opines that such a perspective should be a thing of the past; tertiary institutions and professional bodies should regulate this field and enunciate practice requirements to avoid professional bullying in the corporate business world.

Bias and Discrimination

Human resource analytics enabled by machines can be biased towards a specific gender and discriminate against a particular category of potential employees. A typical example is the Amazon adventure story 2015, where their recruitment machine was set to recognize only male applicants (Tursunbayeva & Pagliari, 2021). The causative agents of such incidents are humans who train artificial intelligence systems with such bias and colleagues in the organization who lack appreciation for artificial intelligence. Discrimination in business practices, such as recruitment and training, can lead to class-action lawsuits in developed countries like the United States of America. It was observed that reducing human performance to numbers can devalue other aspects, such as satisfaction, that are harder to measure (ibid). Furthermore, a machine might not know when an employee has a running stomach problem and must be away from their desk.

Bias towards a specific gender can be addressed through extensive consultation with relevant stakeholders by human resource analytics software vendors. There must be consensus on job aspects to be put under camera surveillance and data analysis. This adds relevance to the point noted above in this paper that the nature of operations in some industries does not suit human resource analytics. Instead, there should be better, more practical ways to gather human resource data for analytical purposes without necessarily compromising workforce privacy.

Discussion

This paper sought to identify the dark side of human resource analytics in organisational management. An integrative literature review was conducted, and the research field was mapped using the theme-oriented approach as suggested by Leidner (2018). Beyond question, human resource analytics is associated with reduced labour costs, effective workforce management, and increased productivity. However, a literature review has demonstrated ethical challenges and problems associated with the praxis of analytics in

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organizations. Failure to diligently consider the unique aspects of human resource analytics can lead to unintended consequences such as techno-stress, invasion of workplace privacy, regulatory challenges, political challenges, and bias and discrimination.

Working with new technology presents a challenge of employees suspecting that they can end up losing their jobs due to the inception of technology. In light of this revelation, the author humbly submits that when there is a change in the organisation, transparency in communication and associated training are two key matters to be carefully handled. The general workforce needs to be educated about the reasons why new operational software or techniques are adopted. Associated training linked to a rewards strategy would address potential resistance to change among long-serving employees, who tend to adopt gate-keeping tendencies in the workplace. The elderly workforce, who can have difficulties in catching up with technological requirements due to certain health issues, need careful redeployment to certain points that do not require excess technology demands.

Regarding workplace privacy, the researcher argues that the business world would benefit from tailored advertisements about individual health cases, which would save lives. If used diligently, shared health data on some side effects and lifestyle habits can yield a major breakthrough in medical research. Maintaining privacy, in most cases, is an injury to the larger society, as only a few entities, including the government, would have access to certain information and the power to control its flow.

Due to constant changes in information technology, regulating the use of human capital analytics in organisations is very difficult, but it can be controlled through watertight regulations and regular surveys to understand customer satisfaction and usage challenges. Organisational leaders should obtain informed consent from the general workforce for the use of HRA software in the workplace. Furthermore, individual employee identification in areas under surveillance should be minimized to avoid challenges to workplace privacy. An in-depth understanding of legal matters and their associated impact should be sought from the organisation's legal department or externally. Historical data obtained through descriptive analytics would not align well with the business strategy; hence, proper data screening is advisable to avoid data misalignment. The control of organisational processes through codes of conduct, procedure manuals, and statutes will certainly address the

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political challenges of data collection and interpretation posed by different organisational leaders. National leaders should include statistical and data analysis subjects in all human resource study programs to avoid the overbearing attitude of other professions. Rightly qualified people practitioners should manage human resources as a discipline.

As a result of the bias and discrimination observed in this study, it is encouraging that employers across organisations that have adopted human resource analytics seriously teach and disclose the predictive dimensions of the software used for recruitment. Important business stakeholders should be allowed to conduct an independent evaluation of the software to ensure it aligns well with overall business goals, cultural practices, and institutional mandate. These key steps would bring transparency to the entire employee resourcing process, enabled by intelligent business machines. Equally, human resource analytics vendors should strive to detect and reduce bias in their software tools. The review also revealed a lack of both qualitative and quantitative empirical studies. Not many organisations have advanced human resource analytics. Generally, the findings corroborate the talent analytics model and the technology acceptance model, which clearly indicate the levels of HRA adoption by organisations and the associated practice challenges, respectively.

Conclusions

The five ethical challenges of HRA identified by the integrative review are real, despite differences in the economic development of the countries where they are experienced. In first-world countries where companies fully embrace new technology in their operations, it is easy to appreciate the practical challenges they pose. In third-world countries, some of these challenges are hard to recognize due to either non-implementation or low operational level of human resource analytics. Whilst technology is advancing, machines cannot fully replace humans in the organisation. Rather, it is prudent to continuously train responsible personnel so they remain abreast of new analytics technologies. The researcher suggests mixed-method and longitudinal empirical studies for each observed theme. Such studies would provide a clear picture of the trends and patterns of human resource analytics challenges. Possible strategies to address the menacing challenges can be found in abundance through empirical evidence research. While there are opportunities for organisations to utilise analytics, the exponential growth of artificial intelligence will further exacerbate the identified challenges if responsible stakeholders within organisations do not take due diligence measures. Hence, various organizations in the corporate world need to develop appropriate rules and guidelines for the use of human resource analytics in the workplace. This idea would work if first initiated by the responsible governments in different countries. Furthermore, an agreeable and unbiased position would be adopted on the real custodians of human resource analytics to avoid mudslinging, political games, and counterproductive behaviour in organisations.

Implications

Methodological implications: The review also revealed a lack of both qualitative and quantitative empirical studies. Not many organisations have advanced human resource analytics. Hence, the results of this study should be replicated in other contexts, and further qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies can be conducted to support generalization. The researcher used two databases and the World Wide Web for a literature search to identify human resource analytics challenges articles. Therefore, future researchers can use more than two databases and conduct an ancestry search to learn more about the challenges associated with artificial intelligence in the workplace. An ancestry search would help reveal key patterns in human resource analytics problems and further add credibility to the study's findings.

Practical implications: Human resource practitioners and other managers responsible for people management and production processes can be informed about critical challenges associated with human resource analytics through this study. Thus, evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation are enabled in organizational operations. Watertight operational laws would be used to address challenges such as organisational political dynamics and employees' mental strain.

Theoretical implications: The two theories used as a theoretical framework supported the investigated phenomenon, but in very general terms without a precise degree of accuracy. The two theories appear useful for understanding the ethical challenges in human resource analytics. Thus, the theories have been partially supported, necessitating further study to expand the theoretical framework. An expansion of the theoretical framework would help clarify the dark side of HRA, including sources of problems and possible corrective actions.

Limitations

The paper has limitations associated with its methodology. An integrative review methodology uses secondary data, which, in most cases, lack the depth of empirical studies. The paper used the inclusion criteria of English-language studies and similar context studies published within the past 5 years. Therefore, this criterion may lead to omitting current studies, and other papers in other languages may contain relevant information on the subject matter being studied. Reliance on academic papers and grey literature sources may overshadow practical insights from industry reports and practitioners. Finally, the rapid evolution of HR analytics and AI means some findings may become outdated as technology advances. These limitations suggest the need for further primary research to validate and expand upon the identified challenges.

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Harnessing emotional intelligence for resilient leadership in human resources staff: A case of one state university in Masvingo Province

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Abstract

The study explores the role of emotional intelligence in fostering resilience among employees in the human resources department. The purpose of the study was to understand how emotional intelligence contributed to human resources manager's resilience in the human resources department especially during turbulent times. A case study research design was employed .The study was guided by an intepretivist philosophy .The study used a qualitative study on ten (10) members of staff at different managerial level in the human resources department who were purposively sampled. The study was based on the following objectives:-to examine how emotional intelligence contributes to resilience in leadership within human resources (HR) department in a university set up.; to identify challenges faced by human resources (HR) leadership in applying emotional intelligence in their day to day practices and to recommend strategies for enhancing emotional intelligence to foster resilient and effective human resources (HR) leadership in the university context. The study was guided by emotional intelligence theory. The study established that human resources managers with high emotional intelligence demonstrated adaptability in responding to challenges. The study found that emotional intelligence helped human resources managers to build strong relationship with staff, fostering a supportive work environment. The study also revealed that human resources managers with high emotional intelligence effectively managed to resolve conflict in the department. The study concluded that emotional intelligence was a critical component of *resilience leadership in human resources department, enabling human resources managers to navigate turbulent times effectively. Based on the findings, the study recommended that human resources departments should incorporate emotional intelligence assessment in its recruitment for various university positions. The study recommended that human resources managers to undergo emotional intelligence training to develop social skills and introduce mentorship programmes to support them.*

Key words: Emotional Intelligence, Human Resources, Leadership, Managers, Resilient.

Introduction and Background

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is generally understood as the ability to notice, understand, manage, and control one's emotions, as well as those of others (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The term was first introduced in the 1990s by researchers John Mayer and Peter Salovey, but it gained popularity through psychologist Daniel Goleman. Recent studies highlight the important role of emotional intelligence in HR leadership. Emotional intelligence (EI) helps leaders deal with complex interpersonal situations, boost employee engagement and make better decisions in organisations (Bhat and Chahal, 2024). Key emotional intelligence (EI) skills, which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, can be used by HR leaders or managers to make good decisions, improve communication, and resolve conflicts in organizations (Singh and Prakash, 2024).

Current global trends show that emotional intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognized as a key skill in Human Resource (HR) departments worldwide. Emotional intelligence (EI) has become essential for strong and effective leadership (Pudasaini Pramila,2025). Recent studies highlight that emotional intelligence (EI) provides HR leaders with crucial skills like self-awareness, empathy, motivation, and social skills. These skills are vital for managing complex interpersonal relationships (Rahul, 2024). Additionally, employers around the world predict that emotional intelligence (EI) will continue to be important for successful HR management as workplaces adopt flexible work models that emphasize the human resource aspect. Emotional intelligence (EI) plays a major role in fostering employee engagement and creating resilient teams in the workplace as the work environment evolves (Boas & Morin,2019).

Globally, the shift toward hybrid work environments and a greater focus on diversity and inclusion has increased the need for emotional intelligence among HR leaders. In this context, emotional intelligence (EI) is considered crucial for handling workplace challenges, improving conflict resolution, making strategic decisions, and responding to change effectively.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has become an important part of how resilient and successful human resources departments are in organizations. Recent research and reviewed papers show that companies around the world are investing in emotional intelligence by offering training programs for HR professionals as a key focus (Krishnga and Awang, 2025). This aims to encourage people-centered leadership and ongoing organisational performance (Bhat and Chahal, 2024). This training helps HR create positive workplace cultures, lower employee turnover, and connect HR strategies with broader business goals. Choudbury (2024) suggests that focusing on emotional intelligence (EI) also meets the varied needs of today's HR workforces. It promotes adaptability, trust, and teamwork in diverse and more digital environments.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has become a key factor in promoting emotional well-being and creating effective coping strategies for resilient leadership in human resources departments (Maharaj and Ramsaroop, 2024). Resilient leaders are better prepared to face challenges with a positive outlook. A study by Abudu (2024) in Ghana on educational leadership showed that emotional intelligence is the hallmark of effective leadership. It encourages resilience and inspires commitment, turning setbacks into opportunities for growth. Similarly, research in South Africa by Makhanya (2024) indicates that emotional intelligence is now a central part of leadership development programmes in human resources departments. These programmes aim to improve employee retention, engagement and change management effectiveness. Resilient leaders excel at managing crises and adjusting to new situations. They inspire and motivate their employees, which leads to high morale (Singh and Prakash, 2024). Leadership resilience is not a new idea, but it has gained attention in recent years as emotional intelligence (EI) becomes essential for distinguishing effective leaders. Developing emotional intelligence (EI) and leadership resilience is now a vital skill set for leaders to succeed in an ever-changing business landscape (Sharma, 2024).

In today's fast-changing workplace, strong leadership in human resources (HR) is crucial for boosting employee engagement, organizational growth, and resilience (Reyes, & Prado,2025). The shifting landscape of HR management, especially in universities, requires leaders who can handle complicated interpersonal relationships while considering both organizational goals and employee well-being. Despite this growing awareness, the use of emotional intelligence (EI) in HR leadership, particularly in university settings like those in Masvingo Province, is still not widely studied.

In Zimbabwe, organizations are looking for ways to improve performance, build resilience, and achieve lasting success in a challenging economic landscape. The country's economic environment can be unpredictable, causing stress and uncertainty among employees. Those with high emotional intelligence (EI) are better able to manage their emotions and keep a positive attitude even in difficult times (Muchechetere, Ganesh, and Karambwe, 2014). Chirasha et al. (2018) studied the Gweru and Kwekwe City Councils and found that emotional intelligence is becoming a key factor for individuals in the workplace. Empathy and social skills lead to clear communication which reduces misunderstandings and creates a more inclusive and cohesive team environment.

Additionally, the economic challenges in Zimbabwe put pressure not just on employees but also on leaders who have to make important decisions quickly. Resilient leadership is essential for maintaining productivity and morale during tough periods (Muchechetere, 2022). In today's fast-changing work environment, strong HR leadership is crucial for encouraging employee engagement and supporting organizational growth and resilience (Reyes, & Prado,2025).The fast-paced nature of HR management, particularly in universities, requires leaders who can handle complex interpersonal relationships while keeping employee well-being in focus. Despite the growing awareness of its importance, the use of emotional intelligence in HR leadership especially in universities like those in Masvingo Province has not been deeply explored. This research aims to leverage emotional intelligence (EI) core skills in resilient leaders to help them address conflicts and crises that arise in their departments.

Statement of the Problem

In Zimbabwe's state universities, human resources (HR) departments face various challenges. These include increasing workforce diversity, rapid technological changes and higher employee expectations. It has been noted that HR leaders often struggle to manage these issues. This situation highlights the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in helping HR leaders handle interpersonal relationships effectively. Despite the existing knowledge about emotional intelligence (EI) there is a gap in the research concerning resilient leadership in Zimbabwe's state universities. HR managers need to understand emotional intelligence (EI) to resolve workplace conflicts and make decisions that support departmental and organizational performance. Preliminary observations and studies show that many HR leaders have difficulty applying emotional intelligence principles due to limited training and organizational culture. These challenges limit the potential for resilient leadership, which can respond positively to stress and change. This ultimately impacts the effectiveness of HR functions in organisations. Therefore, it is crucial to explore how emotional intelligence (EI) influences leadership resilience in university settings and develop ways to leverage emotional intelligence skills.

Research Objectives

- To examine how emotional intelligence contributes to resilience in leadership within human resources (HR) department in a university set up.
- To identify challenges faced by human resources (HR) leadership in applying emotional intelligence in their day to day practices.
- To recommend strategies for enhancing emotional intelligence to foster resilient and effective human resources (HR) leadership in the university context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory, by Salavey and Mayer (1990), which is still very important in current research and practice in human resource management and leadership. Emotional intelligence theory suggests that people differ in their ability to understand, use, and manage their own emotions and those of others (Krishnga and Awang, 2025). This ability includes both cognitive and emotional processes that highlight the link between emotions and intellect. According to Goleman (1998), emotional intelligence includes a set of skills and abilities centered on four areas: self-awareness, self-regulation, relationship management, and social awareness. Understanding emotional intelligence (EI) helps HR leaders to connect operational goals with human needs by building trust and teamwork in the workplace.

The study draws on established emotional intelligence (EI) models, such as Goleman's Mixed Model, which emphasises self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management as key aspects of effective leadership behaviour (Sharma, 2024). The research also follows Mayer and Salovey's Ability Model, which focuses on emotion perception, integration, understanding, and regulation skills (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, 2004). Using these frameworks allows the study to thoroughly examine how the emotional intelligence (EI) skills outlined by Goleman (1998) can help HR leaders in universities manage organisational crises in difficult situations.

In addition, recent research supports the idea that emotional intelligence theory provides a strong foundation for studying effective HR leadership in higher education institutions (Mrisho and Mseti, 2024). Overall, emotional intelligence theory is important for maintaining effective and resilient human resource leadership, even in challenging environments, provided leaders understand its key skills (Boyatzis, 2021). When HR leaders possess high emotional intelligence, they can build resilient teams that adapt well to change and foster inclusive workplaces (Shandilya and Bansal, 2025). This will improve employee motivation and retention in various organisations. The core emotional intelligence (EI) skills self-awareness, self-regulation, relationship management, and social awareness help the research explore how resilient leadership can be developed within university human resources departments.

Literature Review

Emotional intelligence in strengthening leadership resilience

Emotional intelligence (EI) is essential for strengthening leadership resilience. It allows leaders to manage their own emotions and respond with understanding to others. Leaders gain skills like self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social understanding (Krishnan, & Awang, 2025).These skills are vital for handling challenges and staying calm during tough times. Sharma (2020) studied emotional intelligence in crisis leadership. He found that leaders with high emotional intelligence had a positive impact on employee morale and organizational resilience. By showing empathy, being self-aware, and communicating effectively, emotionally intelligent leaders reduced the negative effects of crises (Mrisho and Mseti, 2024). They built a supportive environment that strengthened collective resilience and helped organizations adapt in the long run.

Another mixed study conducted by Coronado-Maldonado and Benítez-Márquez (2023) revealed that emotionally intelligent leaders can control their own emotions and the emotions of their staff. This skill enhances the ability to resolve conflicts, make decisions and build trust. They create an atmosphere of psychological safety in their organizations through their empathy, making them part of a resilient leader in complex organizations.Research by Salameh-Ayanian, Tamer, and Jabbour Al Maalouf, (2025).looked at the direct effects of emotional intelligence on organisational resilience in the Jordanian manufacturing sector. The study found that all aspects of emotional intelligence self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship management significantly improve resilience outcomes. It also showed that transformational leadership is a key factor that enhances this relationship. This highlights the interplay between leadership style and emotional skills in building resilience.

Shandilya and Bansal (2025) stated that leadership resilience relies heavily on emotional intelligence, especially the ability to handle stress, stay calm under pressure, and foster empathy in teams. Their practical insights suggest that leaders who develop these emotional intelligence skills are more likely to adapt to change, motivate employees, and sustain productivity during uncertain times. An extensive literature review by Boyatzis and McKee (2023) combined data from over 100 peer-reviewed articles. They concluded that emotionally intelligent leaders consistently produce better results in team cohesion, motivation, and performance, largely because of their resilience. The review confirmed that emotional intelligence helps foster adaptive leadership behaviours needed for overcoming organisational challenges and maintaining long-term success.

Challenges faced by human resources leaders in applying emotional intelligence

Human Resources leaders face several challenges in applying emotional intelligence in their roles. These challenges affect their ability to lead effectively and create positive work environments. One problem identified by Erasmus and Oosthuysen, (2025), is the issue of managing emotional labour. Managing their emotions and reacting to employee needs can be challenging, which may result in emotional exhaustion or burnout if not properly managed, so HR leaders must control their emotions while reacting to employee needs. A further challenge highlighted by Boyatzis and McKee (2023) is the lack of uniformity in how emotional intelligence skills are being used by the various groups of people within the team, particularly in multicultural teams. Emotion expressions and norms may differ widely and make it more difficult for leaders to accurately process and respond to emotional signals. Mandal et al. (2022) found that HR managers are often put under pressure to engage in operational tasks but not emotional and relational work in organisations due to competing demands. This diminishes the utilization of emotional intelligence in daily activities and conflict handling. Furthermore, the absence of a formal programme on emotional intelligence and inadequate organisational support hinder the development of HR leaders, and their use of emotional intelligence (Chen and Guo, 2020). Many don't have the skills to deal with intricate interpersonal dynamics. Finally, Kim (2024) emphasized the importance of organizational culture and change resistance as one of the constraints for HR leaders to effectively apply emotional intelligence. This is especially the case in traditional hierarchical structures where it is not encouraged to express emotions openly. These challenges indicate that some of the challenges that prevent HR professionals from effectively applying their emotional intelligence in practice include emotional strain, cultural diversity, competing priorities, inadequate training and organisational constraints.

Strategies for enhancing emotional intelligence to foster resilient HR leadership

Improving emotional intelligence is vital for building strong and effective human resources (HR) leadership. Emotional intelligence (EI) offers the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills needed to handle complex workplace dynamics and boost employee engagement. A study by Salameh-Ayanian, Tamer, and Jabbour Al Maalouf, (2025).stresses the importance of formal EI training programmes. These programmes focus on developing self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship management as key strategies for nurturing emotionally intelligent HR leaders. They typically include workshops, coaching, and reflective practices aimed at enhancing leaders' emotional resilience and flexible decision-making.

Similarly, Erasmus and Oosthuysen, (2025) found that integrating emotional intelligence (EI) development into continuous leadership training contributes to HR leaders' stress management and team cohesion, thereby enhancing the organization's adaptability. Another significant technique suggested by Boyatzis and McKee (2023) is mindfulness and resilience exercises. These exercises will enable HR leaders to keep their emotions in check in times of pressure and improve their responses to crisis situations.Attah, Ogwuche, and Aliyu (2024) also supports creating workplace cultures that value psychological safety, where emotional expression is welcomed. This allows HR leaders to practice and strengthen their EI skills during real-time interactions. Additionally, Mandal et al. (2022) highlight the need to integrate emotional intelligence (EI) competencies into performance management and recruitment processes. This ensures that selecting and evaluating HR leaders consistently reflects their EI skills, which are linked to effective leadership outcomes. These combined strategies not only enhance the effectiveness of individual leaders but also contribute to healthier and more adaptable workplace environments that maintain resilience over time.

Methodology

The research design employed in the study was a case study design underpinned by an interpretivist research philosophy. A case study research design focused on understanding the subjective experiences and meanings HR staff assigned to their realities concerning emotional intelligence and resilience within social contexts (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that such a design facilitates deep exploration of complex psychological and social processes that quantitative methods alone cannot capture. The study purposively selected 10 HR staff members from a total population of 20 to ensure diverse managerial perspectives related to emotional intelligence and resilience were represented. This is supported by Johnson and Christensen (2024) who indicated that purposive sampling was essential for qualitative studies seeking nuanced understanding from carefully selected participants who have unique knowledge about the study. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and discussions, allowing the investigation of how emotional intelligence manifested in real-world HR settings and helped individuals manage stress, adapt to change, and maintain strong leadership performance (Creswell, 2021).To address the methodological insufficiency in the initial description, the study rigorously processed data by transcribing interviews verbatim followed by thematic coding, guided by qualitative data analysis frameworks (Yin,2018). The coding was iterative and conducted with the aim to identify key patterns, themes, and relationships related to emotional intelligence skills and resilience strategies. Hirose and Creswell (2023) asserted that, coding ensured transparent data handling, enhanced reliability, and provided rich, contextualized insights grounded in empirical evidence from a single case study especially in the case of HR department at a state university. This design and analytic rigor enhanced the study’s validity and relevance to the Zimbabwean higher education context.

Findings

The study identified four key themes about how emotional intelligence (EI) affects HR managers' leadership effectiveness, resilience, adaptability, and team collaboration. The responses emphasize the important role of EI in handling workplace emotions, resolving conflicts, and encouraging empathetic leadership.

Self-Awareness and Self- Regulation

HR managers emphasized the importance of being aware of their own emotions to maintain calm and objectivity during stressful situations. This self-awareness helps them regulate emotions to focus on problem-solving rather than reacting impulsively. For example, Respondent 1 had this to say:-

"Being aware of my own emotions helps me recognize and understand what I am feeling right now. This awareness prevents emotional overwhelm. It allows me to pause and respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively to stress. It brings a sense of calm that helps me stay clear-headed and make better decisions in tough situations. Being aware of my own emotions helps me recognize and understand what I am feeling right now. This awareness prevents emotional overwhelm. It allows me to pause and respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively to stress. It brings a sense of calm that helps me stay clear-headed and make better decisions in tough situations''.

Respondent 5 opined that:

'*Emotional self-regulation is important because it helps me manage my feelings so they don't interfere with my work. By controlling my emotional responses, I can focus on the facts and goals of the situation instead of getting side-tracked by personal biases or frustrations. This skill allows me to stay objective and fair when dealing with sensitive or challenging personnel issues. It also helps create a calm and respectful environment during tough conversations''.*

Empathy and Team Collaboration

Another major theme relates to empathy as a foundation for building resilience and collaboration within HR teams. Managers described how understanding and adjusting to others' emotions strengthens teamwork and helps prevent conflicts from escalating. Respondent 10 had this to say:

''Emotional self-regulation is important because it helps me manage my feelings so they don't interfere with my professional responsibilities. Promoting empathy within the department allows team members to understand and appreciate each other's feelings and perspectives. This builds stronger connections among individuals. When everyone understands each other, it creates a supportive environment where people feel valued and motivated. Encouraging empathy helps the team develop resilience. This resilience enables them to handle changes and challenges more effectively. It also fosters collaboration, allowing people to work together more smoothly toward common goals. By controlling my emotional responses, I can stay

focused on the facts and the objectives of the situation instead of getting side-tracked by personal biases or frustrations. This skill helps me remain objective and fair when addressing sensitive or difficult personnel issues. It also contributes to a calm and respectful atmosphere during tough conversations''.

Another Respondent 5 added that:-

'Promoting empathy throughout the department encourages team members to genuinely listen to and respect each other's emotions and viewpoints. This deeper understanding strengthens interpersonal relationships and builds trust among colleagues. Through fostering empathy, the workplace becomes more supportive, where everyone feels acknowledged and motivated to contribute their best''.

Furthermore, Respondent 6 stressed that:-

"When I actively listen to my staff, I give them my full attention, which shows that their thoughts and feelings are important to me. Acknowledging their emotions helps create a safe space where they feel understood and respected. This approach strengthens trust and encourages open communication within the team. As a result, staff members feel valued and supported, which boosts their confidence and motivation''.

Emotional Awareness and Conflict Resolution

HR leaders are able to sense unspoken or emerging emotional issues, allowing them to act early and manage disputes patiently and effectively. Emotional intelligence supports timely intervention and dispute resolution, which enhances organizational stability. Supporting this Respondent 8 highlighted that:

"I have learned to recognize early signs of stress in my team members, such as changes in behaviour or mood and identifying these indicators promptly, I can address issues before they become more serious and affect overall performance. This proactive approach helps me provide timely support and resources to those who need it. It also prevents conflicts or misunderstandings from escalating within the team''.

Respondent 7 also indicated that:

"Effectively resolving disputes involves taking the time to listen carefully to all parties involved, which requires a great deal of patience. Emotional awareness helps me understand the underlying feelings and concerns that may be driving the conflict. As a result recognising these emotions, I can respond with empathy and avoid escalating tensions. This thoughtful approach fosters open dialogue and encourages cooperation between conflicting parties''.

Moreover, Respondent 9 observed that:

"*Leaders who possess high emotional intelligence are attuned to subtle cues, such as body language and tone of voice, that reveal unspoken concerns or tensions. This sensitivity allows them to detect potential problems before they fully emerge or disrupt the team by addressing these issues proactively, they can prevent misunderstandings and conflicts from escalating. This foresight fosters a more open and trusting work environment. As a result, teams feel supported and challenges are managed more effectively before they impact performance''*

Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

HR managers emphasised that emotional intelligence is vital for effective leadership, enabling them to stay calm and objective in challenging situations. They highlight empathy and adaptive communication as key emotional intelligence skills that improve teamwork and build resilience. These strategies foster trust, effective conflict resolution, and stronger relationships within the department, enhancing overall leadership success.

Respondent .3 had this to say:-

"Adjusting my responses based on others' emotions has greatly improved teamwork in our department. Emotional intelligence training must be tailored to fit the socio-economic and cultural realities of Zimbabwean universities to be truly effective''.

Respondent .2 opined that: _

"I believe that understanding my emotions allows me to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively in challenging situations. The need for emotional intelligence training that considers our local context is essential for meaningful leadership development''

In addition Respondent .4 indicated that:-

""Recognizing how emotions impact decision-making has been vital in my role. I make a conscious effort to remain balanced and objective, especially in difficult personnel issues''.

These themes highlight the important role emotional intelligence plays in effective HR leadership. By being emotionally intelligent, HR leaders can improve their personal resilience. This helps them stay calm and focused during tough or stressful situations. Emotional intelligence also helps create a supportive team environment where staff feel understood, valued, and motivated to work together. This sense of support builds trust and encourages open communication, which are essential for good teamwork. Moreover, emotional intelligence allows HR leaders to spot and tackle workplace issues before they get worse. This proactive approach helps prevent conflicts and supports a positive organizational culture. Leaders who use emotional intelligence can better manage change and guide their teams through uncertainty. These attributes improve decision-making and contribute to the overall success of HR. Emotional intelligence is not just a personal trait; it is a key leadership asset that strengthens both individuals and teams

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of emotional intelligence (EI) in enhancing leadership resilience, especially within the context of Zimbabwean universities. The themes of self-awareness, empathy, proactive problem-solving, and the challenges in applying EI principles resonate deeply with existing literature, suggesting that EI is not merely an abstract concept but a vital skill set that can significantly impact organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. The theme of self-awareness and self-regulation, as highlighted by participants (R.1, R.5), aligns with the work of Boyatzis and McKee (2023), who emphasize that leaders with high EI can manage their emotions and foster emotional unity within teams. This ability is particularly important in high-pressure environments, where the capacity to remain composed can directly influence decision-making and team morale. The findings suggest that ignoring EI in leadership development could lead to increased emotional exhaustion, diminished trust, and a lack of cohesion among team members, ultimately undermining organizational performance.

Moreover, research indicates that leaders who lack emotional separation skills struggle with effective leadership (Mahapa & Chirasha, 2012). This gap in EI application can be especially detrimental in contexts characterised by economic instability and cultural complexities.

Without EI, leaders may fail to recognize and address underlying stressors, as a result leaders should show empathy and team collaboration. Leaders who actively practice empathy not only enhance trust but also motivate their teams, which is vital for long-term success. Ignoring this aspect could result in silos within teams, decreased collaboration, and ultimately, poor organizational outcomes (R10, R5, R6). Coronado-Maldonado and Benítez-Márquez, (2023) indicated that emotionally intelligent leaders could manage both their own emotions and those of their employees. This ability improves conflict resolution, decision-making, and trust-building. Their empathy fosters inclusive environments that ensure psychological safety, which is a key part of resilient leadership in complicated organizations.

The challenges faced by HR leaders in applying EI principles, as discussed in the findings, highlight the necessity for organizational support and structured training programs (R.5, R.2). This reflects broader trends in the literature, which indicate that while EI is acknowledged as essential, its practical implementation often falters due to a lack of training and institutional commitment (Chirasha, 2012; Mafuta, 2018). In a Zimbabwean context, where hierarchical structures may limit open emotional expression, the absence of EI can exacerbate tensions and hinder effective communication (R8,R7,R9). Boyatzis and McKee (2023) noted that HR managers should use mindfulness and resilience-building exercises. These exercises help HR managers maintain emotional balance in high-pressure situations and enhance their ability to respond effectively during crises.

Lastly, the need for contextualized EI development (R.4, R.3) cannot be overstated. The findings reveal that EI training must be tailored to fit the socio-economic and cultural realities of Zimbabwean universities. This involves recognizing local challenges such as economic constraints and cultural norms that may inhibit the application of EI principles. As highlighted in the literature, existing EI training programs often lack the necessary adaptation to be effective in diverse environments (Mandal et al., 2022). Therefore, by addressing these contextual factors, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of EI implementation in Zimbabwe's higher education sector. It highlights the importance of designing culturally sensitive interventions that not only focus on individual competencies but also consider external challenges that may impede the effective application of EI.

Conclusion

This study concludes that emotional intelligence (EI) is a key part of strong and effective leadership in human resource departments. Therefore, by encouraging self-awareness, empathy, and emotional control, human resources (HR) managers can better handle workplace challenges, solve conflicts positively, and create supportive environments that boost employee well-being and improve organisational performance. The insights from the human resources (HR) managers interviewed match well with existing research that highlights emotional intelligence as a major factor in adaptive leadership and organisational strength. This connection emphasises the need to actively develop and integrate emotional intelligence skills into human resources (HR) leadership practices. This focus helps HR managers deal with periods of change and uncertainty confidently while maintaining workforce unity, involvement, and productivity. The study confirms that emotional intelligence (EI) is essential for resilient leadership, helping human resources (HR) managers lead effectively in difficult and changing situations.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations aim to strengthen emotional intelligence skills among human resources (HR) leaders and improve organisational resilience:

- The study suggested that human resources departments should include emotional intelligence assessment in their recruitment for various university positions.

- The study suggested that human resources managers as leaders in the department should go through emotional intelligence training to develop social skills and introduce mentorship program to support them.

- The study suggested that universities should create and integrate emotional intelligence development programmes specifically designed for human resources (HR) professionals to improve self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation skills.

- The study suggested that organizational leaders should create environments where open emotional expression is encouraged and valued. This will allow HR managers and staff to communicate emotions constructively without fearing judgment or backlash.

• The study suggested that HR departments should hold regular reflective sessions or coaching opportunities to help manager's process emotional experiences, build resilience and adjust leadership styles as workplace dynamics change.

• The study suggested that universities encourage human resources (HR) leaders to set up systems for early detection of emotional distress among employees. This will enable timely interventions to reduce conflict and support well-being.

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Emerging Trends and Best Practices in Stakeholder Collaboration for Innovation in Cultural Heritage Tourism: Perspectives from Developing Countries

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Abstract

Cultural heritage tourism has become a key area for economic development and cultural preservation in developing countries. However, many heritage destinations face challenges such as limited infrastructure, fragmented stakeholder coordination, and exclusion of local communities from decision-making. This paper investigates how multi-stakeholder collaboration and innovation can address these issues and support sustainable growth in the sector. The research uses a systematic literature review method, analyzing 135 academic and policy documents published between 2000 and 2025. The reviewed studies focused on stakeholder roles, participatory governance, community-based tourism, and the use of digital technologies in heritage interpretation. Results reveal that collaborative models grounded in trust, shared goals, and inclusive planning are more likely to succeed. Technological tools like augmented reality (AR), digital storytelling, and virtual platforms were found to improve visitor engagement and cultural education, especially when developed with local input. The use of AR at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, for example, led to a 25% increase in youth engagement. Case studies from countries like South Africa, Indonesia, and Italy show that community-led innovation and cross-sector partnerships enhance both authenticity and economic outcomes. However, challenges such as power imbalances, limited digital literacy, and governance gaps persist. The review identifies best practices including value co-creation, equitable benefit-sharing, and capacity-building. The study concludes that stakeholder collaboration is not just beneficial but essential for making cultural heritage tourism more resilient, inclusive, and adaptive to global shifts such as digital transformation and climate change.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Tourism, Stakeholder Collaboration, Sustainable Tourism Development, Community-Based Tourism, Digital Innovation, Augmented Reality (AR), Participatory Governance, Developing Countries, Heritage Site Management, Inclusive Tourism, Cultural Preservation, Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships, Digital Storytelling, Resilient Tourism, Heritage Interpretation, Local Community Engagement

Glossary

NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization
NMMZ	National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe
CAMPFIRE	Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources
VR	Virtual Reality
AR	Augmented Reality
GCT	Gonarezhou Conservation Trust

Introduction

Cultural heritage tourism, characterized by travel that engages with the historical, cultural, and social fabric of a destination, has become an essential component of the global tourism landscape. It serves as a vehicle for preserving cultural narratives, fostering intercultural understanding, and supporting local economies (Makandwa et al., 2023). Activities in this sector typically include visits to heritage landmarks, museums, traditional festivals, and other culturally significant spaces that highlight the uniqueness of a region's identity and traditions. As highlighted by Eremenko et al., (2025), cultural heritage tourism contributes nearly 40% of global tourism revenue, playing a critical role in protecting both tangible and intangible heritage assets that are increasingly vulnerable to the forces of globalization. In the context of developing countries such as Zimbabwe, cultural heritage tourism represents a key strategic focus within national tourism frameworks (Thompson et al, 2023). Iconic destinations like the Great Zimbabwe Ruins and Victoria Falls attract both domestic and international visitors, underpinning the country's efforts to position itself as a cultural tourism hub (Muchenje et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the sector faces significant structural and operational challenges. These include insufficient infrastructure, inadequate investment, and limited involvement of local communities in planning and governance (Maunganidze, 2025). Comparable issues are evident in both developing and developed nations for example, in Italy and India, authorities must constantly balance heritage conservation with the pressures of mass tourism (Aronsson et al., 2024). Effective and sustainable development in cultural heritage tourism increasingly depends on multi-stakeholder collaboration. Public agencies, private sector actors, non-governmental organizations, local communities, and tourists each play distinct yet interconnected roles (Gwerevende, 2023). However, diverging priorities, such as the tension between economic gain and cultural preservation, often complicate collaborative efforts. In Zimbabwe, historical patterns of community exclusion from tourism decision-making have undermined social equity and weakened local ownership of heritage assets (Muchenje et al., 2025). Conversely, models of community-based tourism in countries like South Africa demonstrate that inclusive collaboration can lead to more equitable and resilient outcomes (Makoni, 2025). This research investigates how innovation and stakeholder collaboration can serve as catalysts for sustainable growth in cultural heritage tourism, particularly in developing country contexts. Technological innovations, such as augmented reality and digital storytelling, are increasingly being employed to enhance visitor experiences while maintaining cultural authenticity. Examples include augmented reality tools at heritage sites like Great Zimbabwe and digital reconstructions of heritage sites in other regions, such as Japan. The study explores the dynamics of stakeholder cooperation, evaluates the potential of digital tools and community-led initiatives, and identifies effective strategies that align heritage conservation with economic viability. The research is particularly timely given the accelerated digitalization of tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also spotlighted the critical role of local communities in shaping tourism governance. Through this lens, the study aims to generate insights and best practices that can inform the development of more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable cultural heritage tourism frameworks in Zimbabwe and similar settings.

Research Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the current trends and innovations shaping cultural heritage tourism in developing countries, with a focus on digital technologies and community-based approaches.
2. To identify the roles and contributions of various stakeholders, including government entities, local communities, private sector actors, NGOs, and tourists, in shaping sustainable cultural heritage tourism.

3. To evaluate the challenges and barriers to effective stakeholder collaboration, particularly in contexts characterized by limited infrastructure, governance gaps, and socio-economic disparities.
4. To explore best practices in stakeholder engagement and technological innovation that can enhance the appeal, sustainability, and inclusivity of cultural heritage tourism.

Statement of the problem

Cultural heritage tourism is globally recognized as a vital contributor to economic growth, cultural preservation, and community development, generating nearly 40% of worldwide tourism revenue (Rodríguez-Morales et al., 2025). In Zimbabwe, while this sector accounts for approximately 12% of national tourism income, its potential remains largely underutilized. Only 30% of the country's heritage sites offer adequate visitor infrastructure, underscoring critical gaps in service provision and strategic investment (Muchenje et al., 2025). Despite the sector's recognized importance, several systemic barriers continue to undermine its sustainability and inclusiveness. Challenges such as fragmented governance structures, unequal stakeholder influence, and the marginalization of local communities in decision-making processes have impeded progress toward resilient cultural tourism models. For instance, top-down planning approaches have sidelined local custodians of heritage, weakening both community empowerment and site stewardship. Technological innovations, such as augmented reality and digital storytelling, have shown promise in enhancing visitor engagement, evidenced by a 25% increase in youth interest at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. However, broader implementation is constrained by inadequate digital infrastructure, limited human capacity, and poor inter-institutional coordination. At the same time, climate-related threats, including accelerated erosion at sensitive sites like Matobo Hills (a 15% increase reported in recent years), further highlight the need for adaptive and collaborative solutions (Chiwaridzo et al., 2024). While case studies from regions such as South Africa and Indonesia demonstrate that inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships can foster more equitable and sustainable tourism development (Basyar et al., 2025; Ramadhani et al., 2024), Zimbabwe and other developing countries' progress remains limited by fragmented collaborations and inconsistent policy frameworks. Without deliberate efforts to integrate innovation and stakeholder engagement, Zimbabwe's cultural heritage tourism risks stagnating, jeopardizing not only economic opportunity but also the integrity and continuity of its cultural legacy. This study addresses these concerns by exploring how stakeholder collaboration, combined with innovation, can be harnessed to improve the resilience, inclusiveness, and appeal of cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe and comparable developing contexts.

Literature Review

Stakeholder Collaboration in Cultural Heritage Tourism in developing countries

Cultural heritage tourism has become a dynamic field where the intersection of heritage conservation and sustainable development necessitates inclusive, well-structured stakeholder collaboration (Frederick et al., 2024). In this multifaceted ecosystem, government agencies, local communities, private enterprises, NGOs, and international organizations interact to safeguard cultural resources while simultaneously promoting socio-economic advancement (Iwasaki et al., 2023). The success of such initiatives often hinges on the quality of collaboration, particularly the establishment of equitable partnerships that address the sometimes competing objectives of cultural preservation, economic development, and community empowerment (Ottaviani et al., 2024). Contemporary discourse advocates a shift from symbolic participation to authentic power-sharing frameworks, emphasizing governance models where decision-making is decentralized and reflective of the rights, knowledge systems, and aspirations of local stakeholders (Aronsson et al., 2024; Munyima, 2023). This shift recognizes cultural heritage as a living, evolving tradition rather than a static product for tourist consumption, an understanding essential for fostering sustainable, resilient tourism models. In Zimbabwe, heritage sites such as the Great Zimbabwe Monument and Victoria Falls offer instructive examples of the promise and pitfalls of stakeholder collaboration. Co-management efforts at Great Zimbabwe, led by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), have included community representatives in planning processes (Muchenje et al., 2025). However, studies highlight ongoing friction over benefit-sharing arrangements and restricted access to ancestral lands, reflecting deeper tensions between institutional mandates and indigenous cultural rights (Simakani et al., 2024; Tapfuma et al., 2024). Similar tensions have surfaced at Victoria Falls, where the interests of private tourism developers sometimes conflict with local spiritual and ecological values (Hurombo et al., 2022). Such challenges have fuelled calls for improved conflict resolution mechanisms, transparency, and inclusive dialogue. Digital platforms have started to bridge communication gaps community radio, mobile apps, and social media tools now enable rural voices to be heard in national and regional heritage governance debates (Moyo et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the adoption of digital tools, including augmented and virtual reality applications, is reshaping visitor experiences. Yet, these innovations also raise questions around cultural authenticity, intellectual property, and access inequality (Chitima, 2025; Muchenje et al., 2025). At the Khami Ruins, for example, digital storytelling initiatives have engaged local youth in documenting oral traditions (Mlilo et al., 2024). While these efforts empower communities and attract new audiences, disputes over content ownership and commercial use persist. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated digital transformation in heritage tourism, with platforms like Google Arts & Culture enabling remote engagement and alternative revenue streams (Mutanda, 2022). Nevertheless, the digital divide remains a barrier, especially for rural communities lacking adequate infrastructure or digital literacy. Climate change presents another layer of complexity. Increased weather volatility and environmental degradation pose existential risks to heritage sites (Dube et al., 2024). At Matobo Hills, collaborative climate adaptation initiatives involving meteorologists and traditional spiritual leaders exemplify how blending indigenous knowledge with scientific insight can yield contextually relevant strategies (Chiwaridzo et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2016). These examples reinforce the importance of inclusive and culturally grounded approaches to environmental and heritage management.

Globally, several models demonstrate the value of inclusive stakeholder engagement. South Africa's !Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre showcases how cultural tourism can be a vehicle for indigenous empowerment, combining heritage interpretation with skills training (Makandwa et al., 2023). Similarly, India's Taj Mahal conservation program integrates community-based artisan cooperatives and smart tourism tools like time-based entry to manage mass visitation (Ichumbaki et al., 2023). In Portugal, regenerative tourism models are pushing the frontier beyond sustainability toward ecological restoration and social renewal (Ramaano, 2024). For Zimbabwe and other developing contexts, to harness the full benefits of stakeholder collaboration, enabling policy and governance reforms are essential. These may include the legal recognition of traditional custodianship, the design of equitable benefit-sharing frameworks, and long-term capacity-building investments for community-based tourism enterprises (Dube et al., 2024).

Emerging strategies such as blockchain for revenue transparency, AI for crowd flow management, and participatory cultural impact assessments signal the potential for technological tools to strengthen accountability and stakeholder alignment (Amadu et al., 2025). Ongoing developments like the proposed Cultural Hub at Great Zimbabwe, supported by UNESCO, represent efforts to institutionalize such innovations. However, successful integration depends on embedding these technologies within ethical frameworks that prioritize cultural sovereignty, intergenerational equity, and participatory governance (Gohori et al., 2024). True collaboration necessitates treating local communities not as passive beneficiaries but as equal partners throughout the design, implementation, and monitoring phases. This principle is exemplified by the Gonarezhou Conservation Trust, which emerged from a decade-long trust-building process and now serves as a benchmark for inclusive heritage governance in Zimbabwe (Zhou, 2024). Ultimately, the sustainability of cultural heritage tourism will not be measured solely by visitor counts or economic returns but by its ability to fortify cultural resilience, promote social inclusion, and foster environmentally responsible practices (Frederick et al., 2024). As globalization intensifies, so does the urgency to reconcile modern development pressures with the need to honor local traditions, cultural integrity, and long-standing stewardship systems (Gwerevende, 2023). Navigating these tensions requires flexible, transparent governance structures that reflect a diversity of voices and values. Zimbabwe and other developing nations stand to benefit greatly by learning from both domestic trials and global innovations. At the heart of this transformation is a paradigm shift: one that positions collaborative stewardship, inclusive innovation, and cultural respect as pillars of a truly sustainable heritage tourism future.

Methodology

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to investigate emerging trends and best practices in stakeholder collaboration and innovation within the domain of cultural heritage tourism, particularly from the perspective of developing countries. The methodology was structured in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, ensuring transparency, replicability, and rigor throughout the review process. A comprehensive and strategic search was conducted across ten prominent academic and scholarly databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, and Taylor & Francis Online. The time frame for publication was limited to the years 2000 to 2025, capturing both foundational and contemporary literature relevant to the study's objectives. Search terms were formulated using Boolean operators to enhance precision, combining keywords such as "cultural heritage tourism," "stakeholder collaboration," "community engagement," "technological innovation," and "sustainable tourism development." These terms were selected to reflect the study's core themes and filtered to return only English-language publications. While this language criterion supported consistency in analysis, it is acknowledged as a limitation that may have excluded valuable contributions published in other languages. To ensure the relevance and quality of sources, the screening process followed a multi-stage protocol. Initially, titles and abstracts were reviewed based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1), which prioritized studies focusing on collaborative governance models, community participation, digital tools in heritage interpretation, or innovation in tourism sustainability. Grey literature, including government reports, UNESCO case studies, and policy briefs, was also included to enrich contextual understanding, particularly where academic data was limited. Eligible studies were then subjected to full-text analysis to extract data on stakeholder roles, collaboration mechanisms, technological applications, and contextual challenges in cultural heritage tourism. Attention was given to documenting patterns across regions, especially within the Global South, and identifying interventions with proven or potential scalability. The data synthesis phase involved thematic coding and comparative analysis, aimed at identifying emerging models of practice, cross-cutting barriers, and policy-relevant insights that inform sustainable and inclusive heritage tourism development.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	**Inclusion Criteria**	**Exclusion Criteria**
Topic Focus	Studies exploring stakeholder collaboration, innovation (for example, digital technologies), and best practices in cultural heritage tourism, particularly in developing countries.	Studies not related to cultural heritage tourism or lacking focus on stakeholder dynamics or innovation.
Type of Study	Empirical or conceptual studies, including peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and case-based research relevant to cultural heritage tourism.	Opinion pieces, blog posts, promotional content, or non-scholarly commentary lacking academic merit.
Timeframe	Studies published between 2000 and 2025, capturing both historical context and recent innovations in stakeholder collaboration and tourism development.	Studies published prior to 2000 or post-2025, falling outside the defined analytical scope.
Language	Publications written in English to maintain analytical consistency and accessibility of content.	Studies in languages other than English without reliable translations.

Methodological Rigor	Research employing clear methodological frameworks (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) and providing empirical data or theoretical insights.	Studies lacking transparency in research design, data sources, or analytical approach.
Relevance	Studies addressing digital transformation, community-based tourism, cross-sector partnerships, sustainability, or ethical governance in cultural heritage contexts.	Studies that do not examine emerging trends, innovation, or collaborative practices in heritage tourism.
Geographic Scope	Research focusing on developing countries or emerging economies, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with cultural heritage relevance.	Research focusing solely on developed nations or tourism types unrelated to cultural heritage.
Grey Literature	High-quality reports, policy briefs, and strategic documents from recognized organizations (for example, UNESCO, UNWTO, ICOMOS) related to cultural heritage tourism.	Informal, unverified, or non-institutional sources (for example, personal blogs, non-reviewed online articles).

Source: Secondary Data (2025).

Following the selection of relevant sources, the full-text articles underwent a structured thematic analysis guided by a standardized data extraction framework. This framework was designed to identify recurring patterns across several analytical dimensions, including geographic distribution, research design, and thematic concentration. A particular emphasis was placed on African case studies, for example, especially those pertaining to Zimbabwe's cultural heritage sites, such as the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, due to their relevance to the study's context and objectives. In terms of geographical focus, the literature predominantly addressed contexts in the Global South, where stakeholder collaboration often operates under unique socio-political and infrastructural conditions. Within these settings, cultural heritage tourism is deeply intertwined with issues of access, equity, and localized forms of knowledge. These contextual factors made African examples particularly insightful for exploring stakeholder engagement and innovation (refer Table 2).

Table 2: Selection Criteria and Document Group

Selection Criteria	Document Group	Number of Documents
Years	2000–2010	**10** (for example, *Mind the Gap*, *Global Production Networks*)
	2011–2020	**20** (for example, *Green Grabbing*, *Smart Cities in Europe*)
	2021–2025	**100** (Majority of entries, for example, *Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships in Binjai City*, *Building Information Modelling*)
Total Authors	Single-authored	**25** (for example, *Orbelyan, Gevorg*; *Galli, Antonio*)
	Co-authored	**105** (Most entries have 2+ authors)
Geographical Areas	Zimbabwe	**12** (for example, *Great Zimbabwe* studies)
	Other African countries	**15** (Nigeria, Tanzania, Ethiopia, etc.)
	Asia	**50** (Indonesia: 25+, Malaysia: 8, India: 10, etc.)
	Latin America	**5** (Peru, Mexico)
	Europe	**20** (Croatia, Italy, Norway, etc.)
	Global/Transnational	**10** (Multiple countries, UNESCO studies)
Research Design	Qualitative	**90** (Case studies, stakeholder analyses)
	Quantitative	**25** (Surveys, choice experiments)
	Mixed methods	**15**
Thematic Focus	Stakeholder collaboration	**60** (for example, titles with "multi-stakeholder")
	Cultural heritage preservation	**50**
	Sustainable tourism	**30**
	Innovation in tourism	**20** (BIM, digital tech)
	Community resilience	**10**
Area of Use	Academic research	**110**
	Policy development	**15**

	Community-based projects	**5**

Source: Secondary data (2025)

The methodological characteristics of the reviewed studies revealed a strong orientation toward qualitative case-based approaches. Many articles employed ethnographic methods, in-depth interviews, or participatory research, which are especially suited for examining the complex social and institutional dynamics that underpin stakeholder collaboration in heritage tourism. These qualitative insights allowed for a nuanced understanding of how various actors, ranging from local communities to government agencies, navigate issues of power, benefit-sharing, and cultural integrity. The literature also consistently reflected three overarching themes: the integration of digital technologies to enhance heritage experiences, the rise of community-driven heritage management models, and the role of collaborative financing mechanisms in sustaining large-scale heritage projects. To ensure analytical rigor, peer-reviewed journal articles were given precedence due to their methodological transparency and academic credibility. However, these were supplemented by grey literature from authoritative sources such as UNESCO and the UNWTO, which provided practical insights into policy implementation, capacity-building initiatives, and international best practices. To deepen the analysis, three illustrative case studies were selected for their diverse approaches to stakeholder collaboration. The first focused on Zimbabwe's use of augmented reality at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, which illustrates how digital partnerships can enhance both preservation and visitor engagement. The second explored the !Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre in South Africa, where indigenous leadership and community empowerment form the basis of the site's tourism and education model. The third examined the Colosseum restoration project in Italy, a prime example of public-private collaboration that leverages cross-sector investment for heritage conservation. Each case offered unique insights into different collaboration mechanisms, ranging from technological integration to grassroots management and strategic funding, and together, they provided a comparative lens for evaluating current practices and identifying adaptable strategies for Zimbabwe and similar developing contexts. The analysis employed mixed methods: qualitative thematic coding of collaborative practices and quantitative mapping of publication trends, supported by reference management software (Mendeley Reference Manager) and weekly team verification to ensure consistency. While providing comprehensive coverage of recent developments (2021-2025 publications constituted 77% of sources), the methodology's limitations include potential English-language bias and the exclusion of non-traditional knowledge sources, suggesting opportunities for future multilingual and participatory research approaches.

Results

The systematic review revealed four overarching themes that collectively underscore the critical role of multi-stakeholder collaboration in fostering innovation within cultural heritage tourism. These themes emerged consistently across the selected literature, offering insights that are particularly relevant to Zimbabwe's evolving tourism landscape while also holding broader applicability to developing country contexts. The findings demonstrate that collaborative partnerships, whether between governments and local communities, public and private sectors, or cultural custodians and digital innovators, serve as catalysts for transformative practices in heritage management. Such collaborations not only enhance visitor engagement through digital tools but also improve governance structures, promote cultural equity, and support sustainable development goals. Analysis of the literature, informed by a bibliometric overview of high-impact studies (see Table 3), reveals a mix of foundational contributions and emerging perspectives. The relative citation frequency of these sources illustrates both the maturity of key theoretical frameworks and the growing interest in new models of participatory tourism governance and technological integration. Across the dataset, a clear pattern emerged: successful stakeholder collaboration is most effective when underpinned by equitable power-sharing, context-specific innovation, and sustained community involvement.

Table 3: Major Contributors to the Emerging Trends and Best Practices in Stakeholder Collaboration in Innovation in Cultural Heritage Tourism

Author(s)	**Year**	**Topic**	**Country**	**Citations**
Kollmuss, A., & Agyeman, J.	2002	Barriers to pro-environmental behaviour in sustainable practices	Not specified	5097
Henderson, J., et al.	2002	Global production networks and economic development	Not specified	1394
Fairhead, J., Leach, M., & Scoones, I.	2012	“Green Grabbing” and appropriation of nature	Not specified	1185

Scoones, I.	2009	Livelihoods perspectives in rural development	Not specified	1095
Berkes, F., & Ross, H.	2012	Community resilience and integrated approaches	Not specified	1046
Caragliu, A., et al.	2011	Smart Cities in Europe	Europe	2319
Dwyer, L., & Kim, C.	2003	Destination competitiveness indicators	Not specified	963
Sims, R.	2009	Local food and authentic sustainable tourism experiences	UK	842
Aas, C., Ladkin, A., & Fletcher, J.	2005	Stakeholder collaboration in heritage management	Laos	881
Liu, Z., Zhang, M., & Osmani, M.	2023	BIM-driven sustainable cultural heritage tourism	Multiple	17
Suryani, W.	2024	Cultural and heritage tourism trends for sustainability	Multiple	5
Mandic, A., et al.	2024	Stakeholder insights for post-crisis cultural tourism resilience	Croatia	1
Scholtz, M., et al.	2024	Unlocking intangible heritage's tourism potential	Belgium/Netherlan ds	0
Prasetyo, Y., et al.	2024	Cultural heritage sports tourism design (bibliometric analysis)	Indonesia	2
Shakya, M., & Vagnarelli, G.	2024	Intangible cultural heritage and innovation for rural tourism	Germany/Italy	3
Woyo, E., & Woyo, E.	2019	Cultural tourism growth in Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	16
Gurira, N., & Ngulube, P.	2016	Sustainable heritage tourism at Great Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	15

Snis, U., et al.	2021	Smart old towns and stakeholder collaboration	Norway	40
Xin, W., & Chia, L.	2015	Tourism motivation and loyalty in Macao's heritage tourism	Macao	42
Kudinova, I., & Terzi, S.	2024	Cultural heritage as Ukraine's tourism brand	Ukraine	3

Source: Secondary Data (2025)

However, the results also highlight persistent challenges, such as infrastructural limitations, digital divides, and power asymmetries, that can hinder the scalability of otherwise promising initiatives. These barriers are especially pronounced in developing regions like Zimbabwe, where resource constraints and institutional fragmentation often limit the reach and effectiveness of collaborative tourism strategies. Overall, the results affirm that meaningful innovation in cultural heritage tourism is not merely a product of technological advancement but of inclusive processes that empower all stakeholders to contribute to and benefit from tourism development. This underscores the importance of rethinking traditional governance models in favour of adaptive, cross-sectoral approaches that prioritize cultural authenticity, resilience, and shared value creation.

Collaboration as a Strategic Response to Resource Constraints

This study confirms that multi-stakeholder collaboration is not merely a theoretical ideal but a critical strategic response to persistent resource limitations within cultural heritage tourism, particularly in developing countries. In contexts such as Zimbabwe, where only 30% of heritage sites possess adequate visitor infrastructure despite the sector contributing approximately 12% to national tourism income (Manwa et al., 2024), collaborative governance emerges as both a necessity and a potential catalyst for innovation. The analysis of literature reveals that partnerships involving the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), local communities, NGOs, and private tourism operators have played instrumental roles in sustaining key heritage sites such as Great Zimbabwe and Khami Ruins (Gwerevende, 2023; Muchenje et al., 2025). These collaborations, though promising, continue to face constraints linked to uneven power dynamics, limited funding, and fragmented institutional support. The findings resonate strongly with Berkes & Ross's (2013) influential framework on community resilience, which underlines the importance of integrated, cross-sectoral cooperation in building local capacity under stress. With over 1,000 citations, their work provides a theoretical anchor for interpreting how cultural heritage tourism systems can evolve adaptively through inclusive, locally grounded strategies. The reviewed studies also highlight a gradual but growing scholarly shift toward the use of technological innovations, such as Building Information Modelling (BIM) in heritage preservation (Liu et al., 2023). While Liu et al., (2023) report relatively low citation figures (17), the novelty of such tools in tourism planning reflects an emerging trend toward digital innovation that enables more effective data sharing and joint decision-making among stakeholders. Notably, the review uncovers a range of grassroots-driven innovations that exemplify how resource constraints can fuel creative, community-based responses. These include mobile heritage exhibitions that bring underfunded sites to schools and marketplaces, as well as micro-tourism initiatives managed by local cooperatives in rural Zimbabwe and others of similar economic context. Such examples, though often underrepresented in high-impact journals, offer powerful demonstrations of resilience, ownership, and context-specific ingenuity. They also affirm the need to broaden evaluative frameworks in tourism scholarship to recognize informal knowledge systems and low-tech solutions alongside high-end technological innovations. In sum, the evidence supports the conclusion that in resource-limited environments like Zimbabwe and many other developing nations, sustainable cultural heritage tourism depends not solely on capital-intensive interventions but on inclusive, strategic collaboration. Future policy and research must continue to prioritize mechanisms that empower local communities, encourage ethical public-private partnerships, and promote scalable innovation that respects cultural integrity while enhancing tourism's developmental impact.

The Imperative of Multi-Level and Cross-Sectoral Engagement

This study affirms that meaningful innovation in cultural heritage tourism cannot occur in isolation; it requires coordinated, cross-sectoral, and multi-level engagement. The complexity of heritage tourism especially in developing contexts like Zimbabwe demands alignment between local, regional, national, and international stakeholders, each bringing complementary capacities, mandates, and perspectives. Achieving sustainability in this sector involves forging strategic linkages across public institutions, private enterprises, academic researchers, and civil society actors, all of whom contribute to shaping heritage tourism policy, funding, and practice. The bibliometric analysis underscores the theoretical relevance of global frameworks such as Henderson et al. (2002) work on global production networks, which provides insight into how local heritage resources are embedded within broader economic and governance systems. With over 1,300 citations, their model has become instrumental in interpreting how global and local forces interact, particularly in settings where tourism is both a cultural and economic enterprise. Similarly, Caragliu et al.'s (2011) seminal study on Smart Cities, widely cited with over 2,300 references, offers conceptual tools that are now being adapted to cultural tourism through emerging technologies like Internet of Things (IoT), augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR). These innovations are increasingly used to manage visitor flows, enhance interpretation, and monitor conservation conditions in real time. More recent scholarship, such as Snis et al.'s (2021) work on "smart old towns," illustrates the operationalization of this multi-scalar thinking in heritage environments. Drawing from case studies in Norway, their research demonstrates how digital infrastructure, municipal leadership, and local entrepreneurship can be aligned to embed innovation into historic urban cores. This kind of systemic coordination is particularly instructive for Zimbabwe, where tourism development at sites like the Great Zimbabwe Ruins often involves a complex mix of international agencies, national heritage institutions, local authorities, and community stakeholders. However, the Zimbabwean case also reveals critical limitations. While partnerships with international NGOs and donor institutions have helped fill institutional and financial gaps, persistent power asymmetries and fragmented governance platforms continue to constrain long-term impact. Studies by Woyo & Woyo, (2019) and Gurira & Ngulube, (2016) indicate that although cross-level partnerships have supported heritage conservation and visitor engagement, they often lack mutual accountability mechanisms and struggle to balance local participation with externally driven agendas. The findings thus underscore an urgent need for robust governance structures that facilitate sustained, transparent, and equitable collaboration across levels and sectors. Without formalized platforms for continuous engagement such as joint planning committees, heritage councils, or digital stakeholder dashboards collaboration risks becoming symbolic or short-lived. In this context, multi-scalar governance is not just a theoretical ambition but a practical necessity for ensuring that innovation in cultural heritage tourism is inclusive, adaptive, and responsive to both local realities and global expectations.

Co-Creation as a Paradigm Shift in Participatory Innovation

The findings of this study elevate co-creation from a procedural concept to a transformative paradigm in cultural heritage tourism, one that redefines stakeholder roles and centers equity as a foundational principle. In contexts where communities have historically been positioned as passive beneficiaries of tourism development, co-creation introduces a participatory model that enables local actors to become co-designers and co-producers of heritage experiences. This shift challenges top-down models of tourism planning and instead supports more democratic, culturally grounded, and sustainable innovation. The bibliometric review underscores the theoretical strength of this approach. Sims's (2009) widely cited work on culinary tourism in the UK demonstrates how tourism grounded in local culture enhances authenticity and distributes benefits directly to host communities. Similarly, Aas et al.'s (2005) influential study on heritage tourism in Laos provides empirical support for inclusive stakeholder engagement, showing how participatory governance can align conservation goals with local development interests. These foundational contributions collectively establish that participatory innovation yields more sustainable and ethically sound outcomes than tokenistic forms of consultation. Contemporary case studies, such as the !Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre in South Africa, exemplify the practical application of co-creation in the Global South. This Indigenous-led initiative demonstrates how cultural preservation, education, and tourism can be integrated under community control, even if academic literature has yet to fully capture its impact through citation metrics. Newer research by Shakya & Vagnarelli, (2024) in rural Europe expands this narrative by showing how intangible cultural heritage, such as traditional crafts, rituals, and local storytelling, can serve as fertile ground for tourism models rooted in local agency and innovation. Nevertheless, the research also highlights risks embedded in the rhetoric of co-creation. Fairhead et al.'s (2012) critical work on "green grabbing" reminds us that participatory language can be co-opted to justify exploitative practices, especially when communities lack formal control over resources and decision-making processes. In this light, co-creation must not be reduced to an aesthetic or procedural label; it must be grounded in equitable power-sharing, cultural rights protections, and long-term community benefit. Digital tools offer promising pathways for expanding co-creative processes, particularly through mechanisms such as participatory mapping, crowdsourced storytelling, and community-managed heritage platforms. However, their effectiveness depends on the presence of robust enabling conditions, including capacity building, digital inclusion, and transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms. Without these safeguards, digital participation risks replicating extractive dynamics under the guise of innovation. In sum, co-creation represents a paradigm shift not just in how innovation is implemented, but in who defines its purpose and who benefits from it. For developing countries like Zimbabwe, embedding co-creation into heritage tourism strategy can unlock new forms of resilience, identity affirmation, and equitable economic opportunity, provided it is practiced not as a project model, but as a governance ethic.

Governance, Trust and Institutional Support as Foundational Elements

The research confirms that sustainable and inclusive stakeholder collaboration in cultural heritage tourism is fundamentally dependent on the presence of robust governance systems, institutional trust, and long-term policy support. These structural elements form the scaffolding on which all successful partnerships are built, particularly in resource-constrained and politically complex environments such as Zimbabwe. Without clarity in mandates, transparent processes, and shared accountability mechanisms, collaboration often remains symbolic or unsustainable. Theoretical grounding for this conclusion is found in Scoones's (2009) livelihoods approach, which emphasizes how institutions mediate access to resources, shape participation, and influence resilience outcomes. In the Zimbabwean context, institutional fragmentation, evident in overlapping responsibilities between national tourism bodies, heritage authorities, and local councils, has undermined coordinated action. Case studies at Great Zimbabwe and other key heritage sites highlight how bureaucratic inefficiencies and top-down governance continue to erode trust between communities and state actors (Gurira et al., 2016; Woyo et al., 2019). The study also explores the promise and limitations of digital governance tools such as participatory dashboards, open-data platforms, and mobile reporting systems which have been introduced to increase transparency and enable decentralized decision-making. While these tools offer important technological advancements, they cannot by themselves resolve entrenched issues related to mistrust, exclusion, and institutional inertia. Technology must therefore be viewed as a complement, not a substitute, for deeper structural reform. Berkes & Ross's (2013) framework on community resilience reinforces the importance of hybrid governance arrangements that integrate formal institutional structures with traditional authority systems and local knowledge. The success of such models depends on a constellation of enabling conditions: clearly defined legal rights around land access and benefit sharing; long-term state and donor support for stakeholder forums and inclusive planning bodies; and intentional trust-building strategies anchored in transparent communication and shared decision-making. Findings from Zimbabwe indicate that historical legacies, particularly those tied to colonial-era land policies and centralized governance, continue to create friction in stakeholder engagement. These legacies have generated scepticism toward government-led initiatives and have hindered community buy-in, even when projects are designed to promote inclusivity. As a result, well-meaning collaborations often disintegrate once external funding ends or political agendas shift. In sum, for stakeholder collaboration in cultural heritage tourism to be both effective and enduring, it must be grounded in institutions that are transparent, accountable, and responsive to local needs. Trust, once broken or absent, cannot be engineered through technical solutions alone; it must be cultivated through consistent, equitable, and participatory governance practices. For countries like Zimbabwe, this means investing not only in tourism infrastructure or digital innovation but also in the political and institutional foundations that enable meaningful, long-term cooperation.

Synthesis and Scholarly Contribution

This study offers three key contributions to the academic discourse on cultural heritage tourism, drawing from both citation trends and empirical analysis. First, it establishes that stakeholder collaboration is not merely beneficial but often indispensable for achieving sustainable outcomes in heritage tourism, particularly in the context of developing countries such as Zimbabwe. In environments where financial, technical, and governance capacities are limited, the involvement of diverse actors, ranging from local communities to international organizations, is critical to maintaining the viability of heritage assets while advancing local development goals. The findings affirm that collaborative governance enhances resource mobilization, fosters local ownership, and aligns conservation with inclusive economic participation. Second, the research highlights the growing influence of digital innovation in transforming how stakeholders interact and co-manage cultural heritage. Emerging technologies such as augmented reality, digital archives, and mobile-based engagement tools are reshaping the modalities of stakeholder collaboration, enabling more participatory and transparent tourism practices. However, the bibliometric evidence indicates that this domain remains in its early stages within scholarly literature. While the theoretical potential of digital platforms is clear, empirical studies on their long-term impacts in African heritage contexts are limited, signaling a significant opportunity for future research.

Third, the study reinforces that governance quality and institutional trust are foundational to the success of collaborative efforts. Clear legal frameworks, participatory planning structures, and transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms are not merely administrative concerns, they are central to transforming collaborative potential into measurable outcomes. The integration of well-established theoretical perspectives, such as Scoones's (2009) livelihoods approach and Berkes & Ross's (2013) resilience framework, alongside field-based case studies from

Zimbabwe, creates a robust analytical bridge between conceptual insights and real-world practice. These frameworks provide a deeper understanding of how institutional structures either enable or hinder multi-stakeholder tourism development. In synthesizing these contributions, the study underscores that collaboration, innovation, and governance must be seen not as isolated elements but as interdependent drivers of sustainable cultural heritage tourism. Together, they shape how heritage is preserved, interpreted, and leveraged for local benefit. The research also points toward several critical directions for further inquiry. These include in-depth exploration of digital collaboration tools in Sub-Saharan Africa, longitudinal studies on trust formation and breakdown within heritage governance networks, and greater scholarly attention to grassroots and informal tourism innovations, which often escape formal evaluation but hold significant potential for inclusive development. By linking highly cited academic theory with grounded empirical findings, this study contributes a balanced, multi-dimensional understanding of stakeholder collaboration in cultural heritage tourism. It offers conceptual clarity and practical guidance for policymakers, tourism planners, and heritage professionals working to build inclusive, adaptive, and resilient tourism systems in developing country settings.

Key Recommendations

To strengthen the sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation capacity of cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe, this study proposes a multi-dimensional policy and practice framework rooted in participatory governance, digital transformation, community empowerment, and climate resilience. First, there is a pressing need to institutionalize co-management frameworks that facilitate inclusive decision-making among key stakeholders, namely, government institutions, local communities, private sector actors, and non-governmental organizations. Drawing lessons from South Africa's !Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre, which exemplifies Indigenous-led tourism governance (Manyane, 2023), Zimbabwe can adopt similar models to promote shared authority and long-term stewardship. These efforts should be aligned with international policy instruments such as UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, which advocates for participatory planning and multi-level collaboration (Lusaka, 2024). Second, digital innovation must be prioritized to enhance visitor engagement, interpretation, and access. Technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI)-driven storytelling present new opportunities for revitalizing heritage experiences. The implementation of AR at the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, which resulted in a 25% increase in youth visitation (Gwerevende, 2023), demonstrates the transformative potential of such tools. Zimbabwe could further benefit by adapting global benchmarks such as the Machu Picchu virtual reconstruction initiative in Peru, which successfully broadened international outreach while supporting conservation efforts (Coughlan, 2024). Third, community-based tourism (CBT) models should be scaled and strengthened through equitable benefit-sharing frameworks and targeted capacity-building. Namibia's conservancy model, which allocates 60% of tourism revenue to local communities, offers a viable template for Zimbabwe to enhance economic inclusivity and community ownership (Muchenje et al., 2025). Complementary investments in local training programs for artisans, guides, and cultural performers similar to those implemented in Kenya's Maasai Mara cultural villages can improve service quality while safeguarding intangible heritage (Coughlan, 2024). Finally, Zimbabwe's National Tourism Policy should incorporate robust climate adaptation strategies to safeguard vulnerable cultural landscapes. With increasing environmental pressures on iconic sites such as Victoria Falls, proactive integration of conservation science and traditional ecological knowledge is essential. Botswana's Okavango Delta management plan serves as a model for balancing ecosystem health with tourism development (Chekero, 2024). Zimbabwe can similarly adopt cross-sectoral climate strategies that prioritize resilience, community participation, and ecosystem integrity. Collectively, these recommendations offer a blueprint for transforming Zimbabwe's cultural heritage tourism sector into a more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable domain. By grounding development efforts in collaborative governance, technological advancement, equitable participation, and environmental responsibility, Zimbabwe can reposition its heritage sites not only as tourist attractions but as engines of cultural vitality and local empowerment.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study offer a roadmap for enhancing cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe and other developing economies through integrated, multi-stakeholder collaboration. The adoption of digital tools such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and AI-assisted storytelling can improve visitor engagement and reduce pressure on vulnerable heritage sites, provided they are implemented with adequate local capacity and cultural sensitivity. Strengthening community-based tourism models is equally vital, as inclusive training, revenue-sharing mechanisms, and the recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems have proven to increase both conservation outcomes and community benefits.

Table 4: Summary of the Research Findings

Research Objective	**Findings from Article**	**Supporting Evidence**	**Citations (APA style)**
To examine the current trends and innovations shaping cultural heritage tourism in developing countries	Digital tools such as augmented reality, virtual reality, and digital storytelling are increasingly used to enrich visitor experiences and preserve cultural authenticity.	In Zimbabwe, the use of AR at Great Zimbabwe Ruins and digital archives in local museums have attracted younger audiences and enhanced interpretive learning.	Nyambiya, G., & Mutyandaedza, M. (2022). *Digital innovation in cultural heritage tourism in Zimbabwe*. Journal of African Cultural Studies, 34(2), 145–160.
To identify the roles and contributions of various stakeholders in shaping sustainable cultural heritage tourism	Stakeholder networks including communities, NGOs, private actors, and government agencies collectively shape tourism practices and policies.	The Traditional Foods Festival in Matobo Hills showcases how cultural custodians, tourism boards, and local councils co-manage events that preserve heritage while generating income.	Bakari, M., Chikozho, C., & Moyo, L. (2024). *Stakeholder networks in African heritage tourism*. African Journal of Tourism and Heritage Studies, 11(1), 88–104.
To evaluate the challenges and barriers to effective stakeholder collaboration	Centralized control, minimal local agency, and infrastructural gaps weaken collaborative frameworks.	Studies on Great Zimbabwe highlight lack of equitable revenue sharing and exclusion of local voices in site planning as key constraints.	Gurira, T., & Ngulube, M. (2016). *Community exclusion in heritage site management: The case of Great Zimbabwe*. Heritage & Development Review, 8(2), 77–91.
To explore best practices in stakeholder	Participatory approaches, community	The !Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre and Zimbabwe's AR-based	Viju, M., Sibanda, T., & Ndlovu, S. (2020). *Community innovation*

engagement and technological innovation	ownership, and ICT integration are shown to foster more inclusive and innovative heritage tourism.	heritage interpretation projects demonstrate scalable, community-centric models.	*in heritage tourism: A Southern African perspective*. International Journal of Tourism Innovation, 5(1), 25–42.
To propose context-specific strategies for Zimbabwe and similar countries	Policy reform, investment in digital infrastructure, and empowerment of community-based enterprises are critical to achieving sustainable tourism.	Research suggests decentralizing authority, promoting traditional knowledge systems, and building digital capacity can transform Zimbabwe's heritage sector.	Woyo, E., & Woyo, T. (2019). *Decentralizing cultural tourism governance in Zimbabwe*. Tourism Policy and Planning Review, 13(3), 201–219.

Source: *Author's own construct (2025*

To support these initiatives, sustainable financing approaches like blockchain-enabled transparency tools, public-private partnerships, and green certification programs can reduce reliance on donor funding while encouraging ethical investment. Importantly, climate resilience must be embedded in heritage tourism planning through the integration of traditional ecological knowledge and modern conservation strategies. Collectively, these measures provide a scalable, context-sensitive framework for developing countries seeking to balance cultural preservation, innovation, and inclusive development within their tourism sectors. Table 4 highlights some of the research findings.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretical implications from this study contribute to the broader academic discourse on cultural heritage tourism, particularly in developing country contexts, by reinforcing and extending several foundational frameworks. The research affirms the relevance of collaborative governance theory, emphasizing that inclusive, multi-stakeholder engagement enhances cultural sustainability and equitable resource management. It supports adaptive tourism theory by illustrating how digital innovations such as AR and VR can increase the resilience and relevance of heritage sites in changing socio-economic and environmental conditions. The study also deepens the discourse on cultural resilience by showing how local communities navigate tourism pressures while preserving identity and traditional practices. In line with global calls for decolonizing tourism strategies, the findings validate the role of Indigenous knowledge systems in shaping authentic and locally grounded tourism models. Additionally, it advances participatory tourism theory by demonstrating that co-management structures foster more equitable and sustainable outcomes. Finally, the research contributes to the growing field of digital heritage by supporting the notion that technology can both democratize access and enrich cultural interpretation. Together, these insights underscore the importance of interdisciplinary, culturally grounded, and innovation-led approaches to heritage tourism in the Global South.

Future Direction of Research

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. Future research in cultural heritage tourism should deepen its focus on the intersection of innovation, inclusivity, and governance, particularly within the context of developing economies where systemic constraints and cultural complexity often intersect. As digital technologies such as augmented reality, AI-driven interpretation, and participatory mapping continue to reshape the tourism experience, future studies must critically examine not just their technical feasibility but their socio-cultural impact, especially in regions with limited digital infrastructure and varying levels of digital literacy. Longitudinal research is needed to explore how trust is built, sustained, or eroded over time in multi-stakeholder tourism governance models, particularly in postcolonial contexts like Zimbabwe, where historical legacies shape present-day collaboration dynamics. Furthermore, there is a need to systematically document and analyses grassroots and informal tourism innovations, ranging from community-curated exhibitions to locally managed eco-cultural trails that remain underrepresented in mainstream academic literature but hold significant potential for equitable development. Comparative cross-country studies could also reveal how different institutional and cultural settings influence the success or failure of stakeholder collaboration frameworks, providing valuable lessons for policy transfer and regional adaptation. Finally, future scholarship should consider integrating interdisciplinary lenses drawing from cultural studies, environmental science, political economy, and digital humanities to better understand how heritage tourism can evolve as a space of both innovation and resistance, simultaneously fostering cultural preservation, community empowerment, and economic sustainability across diverse developing world contexts.

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Developing a Strategic Human Resource Training and Development Framework to Optimise Performance in Zimbabwe's Local Authorities

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Abstract

The study establishes a strategic human resource development training and development model for the local authorities in Zimbabwe. A sequential mixed-method design that was explanatory was pursued. It has a combination of both survey data (n=312) and interviews (n=11). The target population of the study included managerial and non-managerial employees who were selected within local authorities in Zimbabwe. The SPSS 21.0 software was used to analyse the quantitative data and present them in a tabular and graphical format. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data. The study findings identified several fundamental key elements of a customised training framework, one of which is the ability to integrate technologies, engage with the stakeholders, mobilise resources, customise the programme and align it with performance and talent management among others. The suggested framework is premised on nine integrated steps with the goal of maximising performance in local authorities. For practical implementation, the study concludes that local authorities should integrate training into human resource policies, allocate clear budgets for staff development and track results through establish monitoring systems

Keywords: human resource, training and development, stakeholder engagement, technology integration, local authorities

Introduction

Local governments have become legal bodies and loci of communal growth worldwide. They serve as key institutions for grassroots development, service delivery and socio-economic transformation. At the global level, the advent of extremely competitive and complex environments, pushed by topical global and growth-oriented policies, has made it more pressing to improve how local governments perform. Schwab et al. (2017) aver that in Europe, the way local services are delivered has changed a lot since 1980, mainly because of market liberalisation, public sector reforms and EU legislation. Across the globe, sustainable development ushered by local governments is at the forefront. In Pakistan, Ahmand and Haq (2021) pointed out that local governments' employees should have adequate knowledge of sustainable urban development aspects (social, economic, environmental and urban governance). This knowledge will help them manage urban growth responsibly and it can be built through proper training and development initiatives (Ahmand & Haq, 2021).

Within the African context, constitutions and policies in different countries have spelt the role of local authorities. In Nigeria, the local authorities are an essential tool that the government can use in the socio-economic grassroots development and this is offered by the 1999 Constitution. In Tanzania, the local government authorities (LGAs) were introduced in the articles 145 and 146 of the constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania of 1977 (Rugeiyamu, 2018). In Uganda, the government launched a decentralisation policy which seeks to transfer essential services from national government to local level in terms of Article 200(1) of the Ugandan Constitution. All these increased obligations called for new skills and competencies from local authorities' staff to perform their duties efficiently, leading to a high demand for employee training and development (Apolot & Emuron, 2024). Similarly, in Kenya, local authorities have the mandate to provide the necessary services as per the Local Authority-by-laws (Government of Kenya, 1986). In this regard, the major roles of local authorities are said to be the provision of the public health services, economic planning, water and sanitation as well as maintenance of infrastructure utilities among others (Akinola & Matlosa, 2025; Jegede, 2022; Munyade, 2022).

In Zimbabwe, Section 276 of the Constitution grants the right to a local authority to govern, in its own initiative, the local people in its area of policing. As such, the successful and efficient implementation of this mandate depends on not only political leadership and legislative systems but also administrative equipment, especially human resource that introduce programs and policies (Jegede, 2022). However, a persistent challenge lies in the human resource capacity of local governments. The increased obligations of decentralised governance demand new skills and competencies from staff, creating a high demand for training and development. Yet, training and development in Zimbabwean local governments are not very cohesive and aligned neither to the organisational strategic objectives nor to the national interests (Mhaka, 2024; Mojaki, 2024). This gap erodes workforce capacity and makes it harder for them to support sustainable economic growth. Resultantly, a lot of challenges are cropping up in the performance of local authorities, and they are not limited to capacity gaps, inefficiency, poor service delivery, infrastructure decay, and customer dissatisfaction. Therefore, there is an urgent need for strategic realignment and refocus of training and development within local authorities in Zimbabwe. Custom-made and contextual training and development programs will enable the institutions to adapt, innovate and enhance service delivery.

Thus, this paper focuses on creating a strategic human resource training and development (SHRTD) model that would enhance the best performance of the local authorities in the Zimbabwe context. The central research question guiding the study was: "*What are the key components and features of a practical strategic human resource training and development framework tailored to the specific needs and context of local authorities in Zimbabwe?"*

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Human Capital Theory

The Human capital theory (HCT) is a product of the original work done by Becker back in 1964. The theory as comes out by Aliaga (2001) tries to give an explanation of outcomes of education and training as an investment in people. It suggests that human resources are taken as development capital (Aliaga, 2001; Nafukho, 2004). Simply, HCT argues that education raises the output and incomes of the individual; hence, it is an investment (Tan, 2014). Pfeffer (1994) agrees with this fact as in the United States of America (USA), the growth in productivity between 1929 and 1982 was attributed to education by 26 percent and on-job learning by 55 percent. As a matter of fact, this is a significant investment to both the individual and the economic development of a country. According to Marshall (1920) in Tan (2014), the capital invested in human beings is the most useful one (p.564). That is, HCT reconsiders human competencies as operation inputs and strategic resources enhancing the service delivery and organisational performance. Based on these assumptions, the spirit behind HCT implies that education, training and experiential learning enhance the human capital. This causes an increased productivity and hence an increased wage.

Resting on such reasoning, it can further be concluded that training/education and earnings are correlated directly (Tan, 2014). Training/education should therefore be promoted. In addition, Karia and Asaari (2006) as referred by Acho Elendu and Nelson (2024) hint that training and education are associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment and job involvement. This is indicative of the fact that regardless of how developed the organisations can be, it will be hard to maintain the growth and effectiveness unless strategies that complement its operations are put in place as cited by Mahoney and Kor (2015) in Acho Elendu and Nelson (2024). This renders human capital as an essential instrument that contributes to the performance of institutions (Mahoney and Kor, 2015; Acho Elendu and Nelson, 2024). In this respect, individuals are now becoming understood as the source of wealth creation in organisations.

Human Capital Theory is valuable for this study because it reveals how training acts as an investment which improves the performance of both employees and organisations. The theory explains training outcomes by linking skills and learning to higher productivity, better service delivery and stronger economic growth. Within Zimbabwean local authorities, the theory helps to create the Strategic Human Resource Training and Development framework. It highlights that employees are not just workers but strategic resources whose knowledge and skills drive performance. This supports the idea that customised training programs which use technology, involve stakeholders, mobilise resources and align with performance goals can reinforce workforce capacity. Human Capital Theory therefore anchors the study's objective of creating a SHRTD model for local authorities in Zimbabwe.

Existing Training and Development Frameworks

Learning programs are based on training and development models. They provide recommendations on how institutions design, implementing as well as evaluating training. A lot of such training frameworks have been presented in the literature. Nevertheless, they demand a glimpse analysis, which would derive their relevancy and applicability to the current public sector training and development aspiration.

The methods that have influenced the development of training over the decades are traditional models such as ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation). The advice given by scholars is to design the instruction in a more efficient and effective way by following the steps in a logical order wherein each step output adds information to the other (Molenda and Reigeluth, 1996). The model offers a systematic approach to training, whereas its opponents claim that it is excessively strict in regard to various and changing educational requirements (Molenda and Reigeluth, 1996; Suravi, 2024).

Equally, the Model of Kirkpatrick is a widely applied model of evaluating efficiency of training courses (Ambu-Saidi et al., 2024). Donald Kirkpatrick was its founder in the 1950’s. It quantifies training and learning on four levels viz; reaction, learning, behaviour and results (Kirkpatrick, 1959). The model provides a concept to evaluate the impact of training initiatives on trainees and their institutions (Ambu-Saidi et al., 2024). However, the model was criticized. In Ambu-Saidi et al. (2024) by Bates (2007) and Guerci et al. (2010) argue that the framework offered by Kirkpatrick gives an overgeneralized perspective on training effectiveness, which does not fully encompass the complicated process of training evaluation. They also reveal its inability to include the role of individual and organisational factors on training evaluation.

Moreover, the Five Levels Evaluation model created by Kaufman and Keller appeared in 1994. It is a wider approach that encompasses value addition to society and unremitting improvement and goes beyond outcome-based evaluation (Watkins et al., 1998). According to Kaufman et al. (1996), the framework proposed by Kirkpatrick undermines the influence of training in society and in the process, undermines resources and methodologies of training. Nevertheless, the model is also criticized because of its theoretical background and low practical implementation (Topno, 2012; Ambu-Saidi et al., 2024).

On top of that, the Bushell input process and output model was also presented in 1990. It is possible to use this model both prior to and after training with the formative and summative evaluation considerations (Ambu-Saidi et al., 2024). The framework has a way of articulating the training value in monetary terms, by including measures like profitability, productivity and customer satisfaction (Bushnell, 1990). Nevertheless, the model is criticized because of offering insufficient insights on how the programs will work (Passmore & Velez, 2012).

More to the point, the Six-Stage Model elaborated by the Brinkerhoff was designed back in 1987. It has six stage training assessments referred to as; goal setting, program design, program implementation, immediate outcomes, usage outcomes and impacts and value assessment

(Brinkerhoff, 1987). The model works well when there is no budget constraint and no time constraint on the deadline (Passmore and Velez, 2012). However, a trade-off between rigour of the model and the constraints of the real-world institutions is essential in the successful application of the model (Ambu-Saidi et al., 2024).

Based on the analysis above, we can assume that most of the well-known training and evaluation models are now obsolete by the requirements of the up-to-date business world of the 21st century. In this regard, therefore, the success of training is contingent on context knowledge, cultural fit, technological-driven and organisational congruence. This means that customization of the training and development models appears to be a viable solution for the best performance of the local authorities in the world.

Impact of Training and Development on Performance of Local Authorities

Public sector organisations face increasing pressure worldwide to improve employee performance and productivity. This is owing to the fact that their workforce depends on government funding, donor support and taxes from the citizens (Manu et al., 2025). As such, local authorities' performance optimisation is a complicated issue. It needs powerful human resource systems of which one such system is strategic training and development. Vanitha and Ganesh (2024) maintain that there is a positive relation between training and employee performance. In this article employee performance is defined as the achievement and fulfillment of definite and determined tasks within an organization. Wachiuri and Makokha (2024), in their study on training and development within the Country Government of Kiambu in Kenya, established that the methods used in training significantly influence employee performance. They further observed that development programmes also play an important role in enhancing performance among public sector employees. Mwakasangula (2023) examined the role of training and development in Tanzania's local government authorities. The study revealed that training and development explain about 25% of performance, while other factors account for the rest. This implies that training and development are important even though not the only drivers of success. The study concludes that well-planned programmes, guided by Training Needs Assessments (TNA), are key to building of employee commitment and improving performance. These findings indicate that LGAs should put resources into both training and development. Doing so will build a stronger workforce and improve overall performance.

Nkpurukwe et al. (2020) argue that good and tailor-made training programs enable employees with innovative methods and mechanisms in addressing institutional problems. This is further expounded by Wachiuri and Makokha (2024) who affirm that employees who gain proper training and development are more assured, driven and prepared to undertake complicated activities hence enhancing organisational performance. In a study carried out by Arugu (2020) to establish the effectiveness of service delivery by the local government employees under strategic training programs, it was determined that the training programs also minimise the risks of skills obsolescence as they make the workers remain acquiescent to future challenges. This means that, with continuous strategic training interventions, firms will be able to maintain a competitive advantage and achieve sustainable success.

Moreover, Noe (2017) confirms that training provides superior know-how regarding best practices and standards to the employees to enhance the quality of work with minimal errors. In addition, Kalli et al. (2023) have the same opinion, stating that organizations investing resources in employee training also place themselves in a position to retain the employees. This is because training and development will result in job satisfaction among employees, which leads to organisational loyalty.

New Trends in Training and Development

Human resource training and development is evolving at a high pace. The emergence of new technologies such as advanced analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud platforms is changing the way training is provided (Bhumika et al., 2024). Nowadays, computer-based training such as simulations or virtual training techniques has become the reliance of organisations. These trainings prove a game-changer particularly when LGAs are aiming to reduce expenses and increase the impact of training and development (Huseynova & Mazanoya, 2023). Linje (2026) observes that, although national frameworks set out ambitious goals for digital governance, it is still uncertain how far LGAs have reshaped their structures, norms, operations and training programs to meet these digital demands. Yigitcanlar et al. (2024), in their study titled "*Unlocking Artificial Intelligence Adoption in Local Governments: Best Practice Lessons from Real-World Implementations*," establish important findings. They show that use of AI in local authorities has grown steadily over the past 10 years, with China, USA and UK on the lead. Natural language processing and robotic process automation are the most common adopted technologies. The study also notes that LGAs apply AI in 28 different services, mainly in, information management, back-office operations and transport and traffic management. This calls for the need of proper technology-driven training and development programs within the LGAs.

Bhumika et al. (2024) hand in the submission that in the 21st century, the training of employees is undergoing a significant transformation, brought about by technology, shifting workforce demands and the necessity to engage in constant learning. They say even more that; more flexible and nimble training systems have overtaken old ones. Through this perspective, the latest global corporate trends are centred on applying organised patterns in training and development to improve organisational effectiveness (Bhumika et al., 2024; Linje, 2026). According to Sarwar et al. (2023), the development of virtual courses, webinars and e-learning modules requires workers to be trained in the content anywhere at any time. The adaptive learning systems were more or less superior to one-size-fits-all training. Bhumika et al. (2024) claim that such systems use AI and data analytics to dynamically change the content of the difficulty module, depending on the individual's progress.

Stakeholder engagement also adds to the current training and development. These are on the in-house (managerial and non-managerial staff) and on the outside stakeholders (e.g., academics, development agencies and civil society). In this connection, as Schnepf et al. (2024) hint, the lack of bottlenecks in the implementation of training programs can be avoided by a good stakeholder integration and knowledge exchange. Using the needs of the stakeholders, they deduce solutions that increase the likelihood of success and training adoption (Schnepf et al., 2024). In their study titled "*Much at stake: the importance of training and capacity building for stakeholder engagement in evidence synthesis*," Eales et al. (2017) conclude that seeing every stakeholder engagement as a chance for training and capacity building is necessary, both in specific reviews and across reviews as a community of practice in evidence synthesis. Recent studies suggest that local government authorities need to rethink how their institutions are structured. Instead of relying on narrow, inward-focused administrative routines, they are encouraged to adopt more open and inclusive governance approaches that actively involve stakeholders (Sarwar et al., 2023; Huseynova & Mazanoya, 2023).

In addition, the concept of talent management (TM) is a noble new trend in the field of training and development within local governments. In this study, TM is defined as a set of integrated organisational human resource processes designed to attract, develop, motivate and retain productive engaged employees. A strategy that promotes the development of talented employees in such a way that the latter can help boost high performance in an organization. Foteini and Karen (2019) support this view and opine that TM has emerged as a valuable source of competitive advantage that generates value to all institutions. In this regard, the integration of TM into strategic training and development models will place local authorities into high-performing organisations within the current global business environment. In their study on talent management within Botswana's local government institutions, Barkhuizen and Masale (2022) highlight the importance of leaders embracing the right mindset. They argue that by doing so, leaders can effectively apply TM practices that help retention of skilled and capable workers in the public sector. Building on this idea, Mthintos et al. (2024), in their study "*Exploring the Talent Management Strategies and Practices at a South African Municipality*," point out that municipal leaders should give priority to putting TM practices into action. They particularly underline the importance of using e-recruitment methods and embracing technology as part of these efforts.

Summing up, these current trends in training and development discussed above also influenced a lot in formulation of a strategy for the human resource training and development framework to be used in local authorities in Zimbabwe.

Research Methodology

This research was guided by a pragmatist philosophy in as far as the methodological process is concerned since pragmatism promotes practical problem solving and is well-suited to mixed-methods research. It was also based on a mixed-method approach and explanatory sequential research design. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) explain that explanatory design is aimed at applying qualitative data to assist in shedding more light on quantitative findings. In this study, quantitative data were collected first, followed by qualitative data, which helped to explain and enrich the quantitative results.

The target population used in the study was managerial and non-managerial employees in four local authorities in Zimbabwe namely Chitungwiza Municipality, Harare City Council, Manyame

Rural District and Epworth Local Board. These authorities were chosen because they reflect different categories of local governance: urban, metropolitan, peri-urban and rural. Their inclusion matters because, together, they give a fuller picture of local government operations in Zimbabwe. Qualitative information was also included through the incorporation of experts and policymakers in the domain of local governance. The research was carried out between January 2024 and August 2025, a time that was characterized by a direct shortage of workforce capacity.

The Raosoft online sample size calculator was used to calculate a sample size of 377 respondents, based on a default population of 20 000 employees within the four selected local authorities. After establishing the sample size, stratified random sampling was applied to ensure that both managerial and non-managerial staff were represented proportionately in the study. On the qualitative level, 11 crucial informants were selected purposively. Online and ordinary structured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews were utilized as methods of data collection. On the one hand, SPSS version 21.0 was used to analyse quantitative data and report them in tabular and graphical forms. Conversely, the qualitative results were analysed using thematic analysis. Inference statistics were drawn as well, where relationships between variables were tested.

The study also followed basic ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained by protecting participant identities. Clearance to conduct the study was sought and granted by the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works as well as by the four selected local authorities.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Analysis of Respondents

This section presents the demographic profile of the study respondents, namely, gender, age group, level of education, organisational affiliation and work experience. Out of the 377 sampled respondents, 312 participated, giving a response rate of 82.8%. Table 1 presents the results.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents (N=312)

Variable	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Respondents Gender		
Male	162	51.9%

Female	150	48.1%
Age of Respondents		
Below 30 years	62	19.9%
31 - 40 years	116	37.2%
41 - 50 years	106	34.0%
51 - 60 years	19	6.1%
Above 60 years	9	2.9%
Highest Level of Education		
Secondary School Level	77	24.7%
Professional Certificate	80	25.6%
Professional Diploma	94	30.1%
Bachelor’s Degree	39	12.5%
Master’s Degree	17	5.4%
PhD	5	1.6%
Name of Your Local Authority		
Harare City Council	83	26.6%
Chitungwiza Municipality	78	25.0%
Epworth Local Board	79	25.3%
Manyame Rural District	72	23.1%
Position in Local Authority		
Top Management	25	8.0%
Middle Management	50	16.0%
First Line Management	94	30.1%
Non-Managerial Employee	143	45.8%
Work Experience		
Less than 1 year	35	11.2%
2-5 years	62	19.9%
6- 10 years	86	27.6%
11-15 years	76	24.4%
More than 16 years	53	17.0%

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Gender distribution is quite equal as indicated in Table 1. There are 51.1 % males and 48.1 % females. This balance reduced the chances of gender bias on the findings of the study. According to the age profile, 71.2 % of the respondents fall in the 31 to 50 years age range. This is an indication that this survey involved professionals, mostly in the middle of their careers, who are in the height of their productivity and in a position to give informed opinions. There is a skewed educational qualification in the form of a vocational qualification. This implies the critical importance of training in the development of skills of local authorities' staff. It also cites a problem of poor higher education qualifications. There is a relatively equal institutional representation. This equilibrium of the urban and peri-urban local authorities enhanced inclusiveness and made the results of the study represent different organisational realities. Moreover, 45.8 percent of the respondents are in non-managerial positions. This proved useful since the frontline employees are the ones directly dealing with the practice of policy and service delivery. Their perspectives support the practicality of the suggested SHRTD framework. The level of work experience demonstrates that 69.0% of the respondents have over five years of work experience. This denotes an experienced workforce that has deep roots within the institute.

Reliability Test

Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability in this research. As indicated in Table 2, the construct "Essential Components of a Tailored Strategic HRTD Framework", which consists of 18 items, gave Cronbachs' alpha of 0.751. This is higher than the acceptable research value of 0.70 in the social sciences. Thus, it shows that the items are highly internally consistent (Izah et al., 2023).

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha

Variable	**No. of Items**	**Cronbach Alpha**
Essential Components of a Tailored Strategic HRTD Framework	18	0.751

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Essential Components of a Strategic HRTD Framework

The Table 3 contains the quantitative results which demonstrate the major components of a strategic HRTD structure. The data is analyzed based on the responses of 312 respondents, who rated 18 descriptive items on a five-point Likert scale.

Table 3. Components and features of a tailored SHRTD for Local Authorities (N=312)

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Integrate training and development into Human Resource Management strategy	312	4.21	.597	-.470	.138
Align with strategic goals	312	4.22	.612	-.337	.138
Utilize needs assessment to address skills gaps	312	4.28	.597	-.280	.138
Integrate with talent management strategy	312	4.38	.598	-.472	.138
Align with performance management	312	4.38	.594	-.460	.138
Incorporate technology and innovation	312	4.37	.597	-.452	.138
Engage key stakeholders in training design and implementation	312	4.39	.622	-.670	.138
Customize training programs to meet specific employee needs	312	4.24	.664	-.577	.138
Utilize multiple training delivery methods	312	4.33	.613	-.590	.138
Flexible and responsive to change	312	4.23	.611	-.261	.138
Encourage trainee feedback on training effectiveness	312	4.31	.629	-.516	.138
Implement robust program evaluations	312	4.24	.649	-.637	.138
Promote a culture of continuous learning	312	4.31	.628	-.508	.138

Develop skills aligned with community needs and local priorities	312	4.12	.735	-.625	.138
Incorporate Zimbabwean cultural context for relevance and acceptance	312	4.10	.676	-.437	.138
Ensure financial sustainability for Zimbabwean local authorities	312	4.09	.686	-.482	.138
Integrate succession planning	312	4.09	.686	-.482	.138
Foster leadership/ managerial support	312	4.38	.598	-.462	.138
Valid N (listwise)	312				

Source: Survey Data (2025)

The statistical findings indicated in Table 3 portray the measures of mean, standard deviation and skewness. The average scores of all the items are 4.09-4.39. This means that there is always a high consensus on the applicability of all the components. The most rated item, involving the key stakeholders in training design and implementation, had a mean of 4.39. This indicates high congruence among the respondents.

The remaining items: "Integrate with talent management strategy", "Align with performance management", and "Foster leadership/ managerial support" all had a score of 4.38, and the standard deviations were low and the skewness of the items was negative. The findings attest to the high degree of consensus and preclude the necessity of integrating training into the broader HR functions. Likewise, the technological element, namely, "Integration of technology and innovation" (mean = 4.37), indicates an increase in the awareness of training tools of a digital nature. Items like "Utilization of multiple training strategies" (mean = 4.33), "promote trainee feedback" (mean = 4.31) expound versatility and employee involvement.

The other significant ones are "Promote continuous learning" (mean = 4.31) and "Customise training program" (mean = 4.24). This underscores the importance of constant learning and custom-made programs. The solid support of evidence-based assessment was also rated high with a 4.24 score on the exercise of strong program evaluations. The weakest-rated ones, although also positively supported, are the following: "Develop skills based on community requirements" (mean = 4.12), "Incorporate Zimbabwean cultural context" (mean = 4.10), "Ensure financial sustainability" (mean = 4.09), and "Integrate succession planning" (mean = 4.09). These scored slightly lower but their scores of above 4.00 show that they are still valued and may be challenged at implementing them.

These quantitative results show a strong agreement among respondents, as mean scores range from 4.09 to 4.39. The low standard deviations and skewness that are negative confirm a high level of consensus, showing that participants support the proposed SHRTD components vehemently. These findings align with the Human Capital Theory, which posits that investment in training improves organisational performance. High ratings for combining training with HR strategy, performance management, leadership support and technology highlight positions training as a strategic investment in human capital.

In order to supplement these findings, qualitative interviews were held with 11 key informants (**P_1-P_{11}**). Their opinions expounded the statistical findings as illustrated below.

The key point that was brought up by all participants is the necessity to tie training to bigger HR systems. In this respect, **P_1** demystified that "*Performance management and training ought to be united*," noting that explicit indicators are used to measure training outcomes. **P_4** buttressed that, "*Training should be linked with performance appraisal and career development to make the process smooth*. Also, **P_6** emphasised that "*Training must be included in the overall HR strategy to help it have a long-term effect*."

Most of the participants were also supportive of training programs that involve the needs of the community. **P_7** elaborated this in the following words: "*In this perspective, our training ought to be in line with the needs of their communities*." This demonstrates the relevance of social responsibility and organisational commitment.

According to some participants, needs assessment is a critical success factor for training programs. Indicatively, **P_8** explained: "*A good training program starts with a proper needs assessment*." On the same note, **P_{11}** cautioned against failing to evaluate training needs properly since the resources are bound to be wasted on programs that do not address real needs.

Moreover, the majority of the participants of the study agreed that the utilization of technology is one of the most prominent characteristics of a custom training program as well. In this respect, **P_3** opined that: "*Technology is transforming the manner in which training is conducted*." This is an indication of the vital use of virtual learning, analytics and AI tools to make training more practical and relatable.

More importantly, the participants supported stakeholder engagement as the other important aspect of a personalized training and development program. **P_5** had this to say: "*Engaging the key stakeholders during and after as well as before training development is one way to ensure that no opinion is excluded*." **P_9** also valued program customisation when he noted that: "*There is no two employees, or organisation the same*." This supports the necessity of customised program material that optimises the influence as per an individual or team preference. And finally, feedback and evaluation were also endorsed as the key factors. Here is what **P_2** said: "*Feedback is a useful tool to enhance training received by the trainees and trainers*." **P_{10}** further claimed that: "*Good evaluation systems should be in place to quantify results*."

As shown above, the qualitative findings reinforced key themes such as linking training to: performance management, stakeholder engagement, technology integration, conducting needs assessment and customising programs. The combination of these results indicates that the proposed strategic HRTD model can strengthen human capital development within local authorities by making training strategic, inclusive and responsive to organisational, communal and national needs.

Inferential Statistics

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA results: Differences in perceptions of SHRTD components

Variable	**Source of Variation**	**Df**	**F-value**	**Sig. (p)**
Strategic Alignment	Education Level	5,306	4.12	0.001 **
Technology Integration	Education Level	5,306	3.76	0.003 **
Performance Management	Managerial Position	3,308	3.87	0.012 *
Stakeholder Engagement	Managerial Position	3,308	2.94	0.034 *

Note: *p < 0.05; *$p < 0.01$.

The ANOVA results in Table 4 revealed that the perceptions of SHRTD components vary based on education and managerial levels. The more educated the respondent, the more he or she was in support of strategic alignment and technology integration. Managers, however, emphasized performance management and engagement of stakeholders than the frontline staff. These variations indicate that, when considering the workforce in terms of level of educational and organisational position, when designing training strategies, ensure that programs are responsive to different perspectives and needs.

Regression Analysis

Table 5. Regression Analysis: Predictors of SHRTD perceptions

Predictor Variable	**Standardized Beta (β)**	**t-value**	**Sig. (p)**
Education Level	0.29	4.21	0.000 **
Work Experience	0.21	3.02	0.003 **
Managerial Position	0.14	1.87	0.062 †
Gender	0.05	0.91	0.364

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.18$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.16$, $F(4,307) = 16.92$, $p < 0.001$

Note: **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; $p < 0.10$ (marginal significance).

These differences can be further explained by the regression results in Table 5. The positive perceptions about SHRTD effectiveness were strongly predicted by education level ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and work experience ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$). Managerial position was found to have a lesser but significant influence ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.062$) but gender did not have any impact. The model described 18 per cent of the variance ($R^2 = 0.18$) indicating that demographic and professional attributes partly influence perceptions with other factors also contributing to influence. Practically, this implies that while education and experience should be considered in designing training programs, local authorities should also address other contextual factors to ensure that training initiatives are inclusive and effective.

Discussion

The findings of the study regarding the major primary elements and attributes of an effective strategic human resource training and development model to adapt to local authorities' needs and situations in Zimbabwe are quite close to the literature reviewed. All respondents were very supportive of the stakeholder engagement in training design and implementation as one of the best discoveries. This supports the previous results of Schnepf et al. (2024) who established that an effective stakeholder integration process and knowledge sharing can avoid the bottlenecks in implementation of training programs. This emphasis also replicates the ADDIE model, whereby stakeholder input during the analysis and design stages safeguards training relevance and responsiveness to the needs of the organisations.

Moreover, the integration of the technology was also met with a massive support by everyone involved in it, making it an essential element of a personalized training program. This observation has been reinforced by Linje (2026) who resolute that with the development of virtual courses, e-learning modules and webinars, it is possible to have the staff receive training content anywhere and at any time. Similarly, Bhumika et al. (2024) reinforced that the efforts of staff training are registering an enormous turnaround in the 21st century, occasioned by the technological changes and the necessity of learning on the go with innovation. This finding can be linked to the Kirkpatrick evaluation model, where technology enhances the learning process and the measurement of outcomes at multiple levels.

Program customisation is also a program specialty that has been reflected in the study outcomes in relation to the proposed strategic HRTD framework. This is also consistent with the reflection of Nkpurukwe et al. (2020) that well-informed and tailor-made training programs enable workers with creative practices and procedures to address the company challenges. Moreover, it also supports the idea that Bhumika et al (2024) hold that tailored training programs meet the needs and interests of employees. This supports the wider theoretical assumption of Human Capital Theory, which views training as an investment that strengthens the capabilities of the workforce as well as organisational performance. In addition, mobilisation of resources was also set as an essential aspect of a personalized training and development program. This observation echoes what Kalli et al. (2023) state that organisations, which invest in staff training, reap the benefits of labour retention.

Altogether, the study results infer that the proposed SHRD model should build on traditional models such as ADDIE and the Kirkpatrick models on a systematic foundation, though extends them by putting emphasis on flexibility, stakeholder involvement and situational adaptation. Unlike the traditional ADDIE applications, being criticised for rigidity, the proposed SHRD model integrates technology and communal needs. This makes it more adaptive to dynamic organisational and societal needs. The integration of technology, customisation and evaluation also aligns with Kirkpatrick's' evaluation model. This ensures that the training outcomes are measurable and connected to institutional performance.

Proposed Strategic HRTD Framework

The framework is built on nine interconnected pillars, as depicted in Figure 1 below.

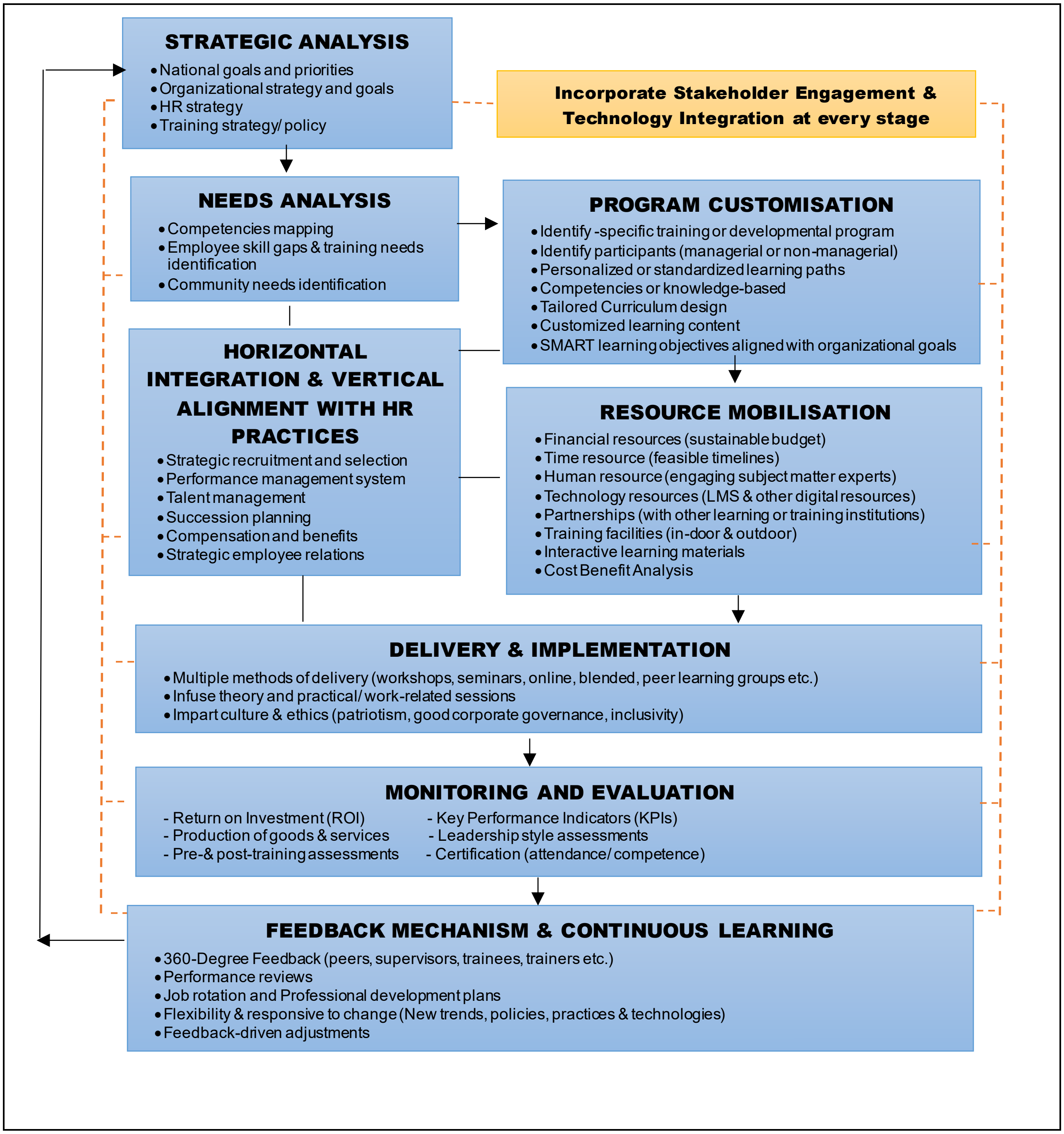

Figure 1. Strategic Human Resource Training and Development Framework for Local Authorities

Source: Author (2025)

Narration of the Strategic HRTD Framework steps

Step 1: Strategic Analysis

The initial step aligns training efforts with the priorities of national development keeping in mind the presence of organisational objectives, HR strategy and the training policy.

Step 2: Needs Analysis

This step determines training needs and skills gaps among the employees. It takes into consideration community needs. This makes training programs relevant to both the employees and the priorities of the local people.

Step 3: Program Customisation

Training programs are customized to various positions at this stage (between managerial and non-managerial employees). Perfect content and SMART objectives along with core competencies, are the focuses of curriculum development as the means of overcoming performance gaps that are detected.

Step 4: Resource Mobilisation

The step ensures the securing of financial, human and technological resources needed to implement the programs. It includes budgeting, professional interaction, preparation and partnering of infrastructure. The process is informed by cost-benefit analysis that will be used in the allocation of resources to maximise the effect of training.

Step 5: HR Practices Integration

This action incorporates training programs with the overall HR strategies such as performance management, talent management and succession planning among others. This inter-departmental integration and vertical alignment promote consistency and long-term workforce growth.

Step 6: Delivery and Implementation

The step entails program delivery by the use of a variety of training methods such as workshops, virtual and blended to accommodate the diversity in learning capability. It is stressed that theoretical lessons should be accentuated with practice.

Step 7: Monitoring and Evaluation

At this point, evaluation is done by applying different evaluation instruments like ROI (Return on Investment), KIPs (Key Performance Indicators) and pre/post-training assessments. The impact of leadership style and the outputs of goods and services are also studied in order to identify the influence of training and its effect on improvements.

Step 8: Feedback and Continuous Learning

Adaptive learning strategies are informed in this step by feedback from the trainees and trainers, as well as performance reviews. Job rotation and personalised development plans are some of the interventions that promote reaction and long-term development.

Step 9: Stakeholder Engagement and Technology Integration

This is a cross-cutting step that ensures collaboration and innovation at every stage. Stakeholder involvement builds legitimacy, while technology boosts adaptability.

Limitations of the Study

Like any other study, this study has its own limitations. It relied on self-reported data, which may have been influenced by personal perceptions or bias. The study was also limited to four selected local authorities in Zimbabwe. As such, the findings may not fully represent all local government authorities' country-wide. These constraints entail that the findings should be applied with caution. Future studies could expand the geographic scope and use additional data sources to strengthen the generalisability of the proposed framework.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Finally, the paper offers a strategic HRTD model that would suit local governments in Zimbabwe. According to empirical data, the suggested framework combines strategic analysis, needs assessment, engagement of stakeholders, the use of technologies and mobilisation of resources into one rational model. An active learning system that can adapt to organisational, communal and national needs is supported by continuous feedback and numerous training delivery methods. For practical implementation, local authorities should integrate training into human resource policies, allocate clear budgets for staff development and track results through establish monitoring systems. The Ministry of Local Government and Public Works can help local authorities through the provision of guidelines and resource mobilisation support. Above all, future studies could apply and test this proposed framework in other sectors or regions and see how well it adapts in different contexts. This would expand its relevance and contribute to improving strategic HRTD models both in Zimbabwe and beyond.

Recommendations

In order to apply the strategic HRTD framework, the local authorities must:

- Introduce rigorous strategic planning involving national concerns and organisational interests that are projected to the overall HR strategy and society needs, to shape their training and development programmes.
- Market stakeholder involvement in the pre-planning, planning and implementation of staff training and/or developmental programs. This reduces bottlenecks.
- Invest in electronic infrastructure and integrate their training programme with new e-learning platforms and analytics technology that requires learners to get training from anywhere, any time.
- Integrate training and development with the HR core functions i.e., recruitment, succession planning, performance management and talent management. This creates an institutional elasticity and sustainability to manpower planning and development.

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Impact of Strategic Human Resource Training and Development in the Performance of Local Authorities: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Local government authorities (LGAs) are the nearest arm of government to the people, yet many can hardly provide the essential services effectively. Strategic human resource training and development (HRTD) has the potential to increase performance and capacity of LGAs, but remains limited across regions. A systematic search (2015 - 2025) identified 487 records; after screening 42 studies were included. These studies covered diverse local government contexts, with Africa contributing the largest share (Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Ghana), Asia adding cases from Nepal, India and Pakistan, and smaller but useful samples from Latin America and Oceania. In terms of method, 42 studies (52%) used quantitative approaches, 12 (29%) qualitative and 8 (19%) mixed methods, with sample sizes ranging from 35 to 1 240 respondents. Narrative synthesis and thematic analysis showed consistent findings across Africa, Asia and Europe that organised training programmes enhance staff performance, service provision and corporate responsibility in LGAs. Common approaches include coaching, mentoring and competency-based training. Key variables that moderate the relationship between training and performance include leadership commitment, sufficient funding and a systematic training needs assessment. The review concludes that strategic HRTD is a powerful force behind local authority performance, though its success depends on organisational circumstances. Policy implications include institutionalising needs-based training, strengthening leadership development, and improving evaluation systems. Future studies should focus on longitudinal designs and economic assessment of return on HRTD investment.

Keywords: human resource training, local authorities, employee performance, service delivery, municipal

Introduction

Local government authorities (LGAs) or local authorities (LAs) are the immediate link between a government and its people. As Ojofeitimi (2020) articulates, the word "local" denotes that councils are intended to serve small communities, and the word "government" implies that they have certain elements of a government. In this study, LGAs can be defined as systems of local governments under local communities that are structured to ensure law and order, provision of limited social amenities, and promotion of co-operation and involvement of the citizens in improving their conditions of living. Indeed, they have a mandate to provide essential services to citizens. These services include health facilities, housing, water, maintenance of sewer, refuse disposal, road services, and community welfare. People's livelihoods are determined by their operational efficiencies, particularly in developing countries where central governments are constrained. For instance, Woods et al. (2025) observe that in Australia, regulatory tasks that are challenging when undertaken by a national government are executed by LGAs due to their localised and varied character. Notwithstanding their pivotal role, many LGAs across the globe are still underperforming, resulting in poor customer satisfaction, low accountability, and waste of government resources.

One of the critical factors linked to the performance of LAs lies within the competencies and skills set of their human resource. In this regard, employees within LGAs represent both the prime cost and the key source of value creation. Studies on organisational behaviour and public administration demonstrate poor employee motivation and inadequate training as attributes of poor service delivery (Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Llorens et al., 2017). Hitherto, local authorities have not invested much in manpower development because they perceive it as an expense rather than an investment. Habib et al. (2015) observe that training and development programs are often seen as an expense despite yielding immense productivity and employee performance in the long term.

Armstrong and Taylor (2020) view human resource training and development (HRTD) as any planned and systematic processes aimed at improving the knowledge, skills and attitudes of employees to enable them accomplish both current and future activities of the organisation. In local governments set-ups, this includes both formal and informal initiatives such as on-the-job and off-the-job training, coaching, classroom instructions, and leadership developmental courses. Gamuga et al. (2025) define training as the methodological acquisition and enhancement of knowledge, skills and behaviours of employees in a manner that enables them to perform better in their work stations. It can be inferred that when training is well aligned with the organisational strategy, it can transform institutional performance. This closely aligns with the contemporary rationale of strategic human resource training and development presented by Tembo et al. (2024) as the intentional and planned activity of an organisation aimed at improving the knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies of its workforce to meet strategic goals and objectives.

Notwithstanding clear evidence of the relationship between strategic human resource training and performance in organisations, most LAs worldwide do not have systematic training programs or adequate training budgets. For example, training in the Bukedea District of Uganda indicates that local governments often conduct training without a policy, resulting in unreasonable participant selection and minimal post-training assessment (Apolot & Emuron, 2024). This led to shortages of core competencies among employees, absence of leadership competencies among supervisors, and eventual failure by LGAs to adapt to evolving public needs. Recent global policy debates (2022 - 2025) have emphasised the importance of institutionalising workforce development and accountability in local governance, yet practice remains uneven. It is against this backdrop that this systematic review seeks to consolidate and critically examine evidence on the impact of strategic HRTD on the performance of LAs. This may determine what works, for whom, and under what conditions, through answering the following questions:

(i) Which HR training and development interventions have been implemented in local authorities?

(ii) What evidence demonstrates the impact of strategic HRTD on employee and organisational performance?

(iii) Which factors moderate the link between strategic HRTD and local authority performance?

(iv) What are the key implications for policy and practice?

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives on Training and Development

There are numerous theories which support the study of human resource training and development in local government:

The Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) perceives training as an investment, which enhances productivity and performance. Numerous researchers support this claim, having tested that training and development enhances service provision and efficiency in an organisation (Eze et al., 2025; Nkosi, 2015; Ramesh, 2022; Munyede, 2022; Obeng-Tuaah, 2025).

The Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) emphasizes observation, imitation and modelling. This is consistent with the findings of Ndumbaro (2023), who reported that interactive learning motivates employees to develop skills together by means of knowledge exchange.

Resource-Based View (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991) argues that unique, rare and precious resources trigger optimal performance within organisations. In this notion, talented employees are assumed to be one of such resources. Research by Amegayibor (2021) conforms to the RBV, as it observed that training programs like inductions and workshops enhanced staff capabilities which subsequently improved service delivery in Ghanaian local government authorities.

The Organisational Learning Theory (Senge, 1990) views organisations as systems that prosper on knowledge creation and sharing. Sharing the same view, Jehow et al. (2018) conducted a study on Kenyan government agencies and discovered that training improved staff skills, job satisfaction and retention.

Performance Management Theory places training within the appraisal and feedback systems. Nama et al. (2022) proved that the connection between training and performance reviews yields measurable outcomes.

Collectively, these theories provide useful theoretical lenses in the understanding of how training and development shape local governments. They show that training enhances productivity, protects accountability, facilitates learning, aids better use of resources and promotes sound corporate governance.

Impact of Training and Development on Employee Performance in Local Authorities

The global literature consistently shows that human resource training and development positively influences employee performance in local governments. Bataineh (2017) defines performance as the efficiency and effectiveness of tasks performed to meet stakeholder expectations. In South Africa, Nama et al. (2022) found that mentoring and coaching explained nearly half of the variance in employees' performance outcomes, while Ndumbaro (2023) reported that on-the-job, off-the-job, and interactive learning methodologies significantly improve performance in Tanzania LGAs, with coaching and mentorship emerging as the strongest predictors. Nigerian studies (Eze et al. 2025; Nkosi, 2015) affirmed that training enhanced productivity and sustainability, with Nkosi showing that training explained 76.7% of variation in performance, retention and commitment. In Uganda, leadership development, workshops, and seminars improved timeliness and reporting (Karegyeya, 2018), while training needs assessment and evaluation strengthened performance in Masindi District (Katusabe, 2016). These findings underscore the importance of aligning training with job requirements. However, regional differences emerge: while South Africa and Tanzania emphasise mentoring and coaching, Uganda highlights leadership development, and Nigeria stress institutional sustainability. This suggests that training effectiveness is context-specific rather than universally uniform.

Training and Development as a Driver of Service Delivery in Local Authorities

Beyond individual performance, training has been linked to service delivery outcomes. In South Africa, Nama et al. (2022) showed that trained personnel improved municipal services, while Ojoh and Okoh (2015) reported that inadequate training in Nigeria's Delta State undermined service delivery. In Nepal, Ramesh (2022) identified off-the-job training as the key predictor of improved service delivery. Comparative evidence from Ghana and Asia (Obeng-Tuaah, 2025; Johnson & Lee, 2022) revealed that structured training improved service-related performance by 18%. Yet contradictions exist: while some studies highlight strong causal links between training and service delivery, others (e.g. Ojoh & Okoh, 2015) emphasise that poorly designed or absent training can exacerbate inefficiencies. This divergence underscores the need to critically assess not only the presence of training but its design, relevance and evaluation.

Training Methods and Approaches in Local Authorities

Training methods refer to formalised methods of imparting skills, while approaches reflect the philosophy behind training. Evidence shows regional variation: South Africa priorities mentoring and coaching (Nama, 2022; Nkosi, 2015), Tanzania employs group discussions and interactive learning (Ndumbaro, 2023), Nigeria emphasises leadership development and cross-departmental training (Eze et al., 2025; Onumadu et al., 2024), and Nepal values seminars and workshops. Comparative analysis suggests that blended approaches – combining on-the-job training for immediate skill application with off-the-job training for broader perspectives yield long-term performance gains. However, contradictions remain: while some regions report success with informal mentoring, others stress structured, policy-driven training, highlighting the absence of a universally effective model.

Challenges and Constraints in Implementing HRTD in Local Authorities

Despite clear advantages, implementation faces systemic challenges. In South Africa, corruption and irrelevant training undermine outcomes (Nama, 2022). Zimbabwean local authorities face similar issues, with Munyede (2022) attributing service deterioration to corruption, maladministration and poor governance. Tanzanian councils struggle with inadequate funding, weak leadership support, and poor evaluation systems (Mwakasangula (2023; Ndumbaro, 2023). Nigerian training remains ad hoc, lacking systematic needs assessment (Eze et al., 2025; Ojoh & Okoh, 2015). Nepalese LGAs face bureaucratic hurdles, inconsistent programs, and political interference (Ramesh, 2022). Ugadan evidence (Apolot & Emuron, 2024)) shows that training without inclusive policy leads to random participant selection and weak post-training assessment. Obeng-Tuaah (2025) further identifies financial limitations, employee resistance, outdated materials, and lack of managerial support, noting that absence of leadership reinforcement reduced training adoption by 20%. These findings reveal contradictions: while some regions attribute failure to resource constraints, others highlight governance and institutional culture. Collectively, they point to the need for comprehensive HR training policies, adequate funding, systematic evaluation, and leadership commitment to sustain staff development.

In summary, the literature demonstrates that while training and development consistently enhances employee performance and service delivery, regional differences and contradictions highlight the importance of context, design, and governance. This study, therefore, develops a conceptual framework to capture the interplay between training inputs, contextual moderators, and performance outputs in local authorities.

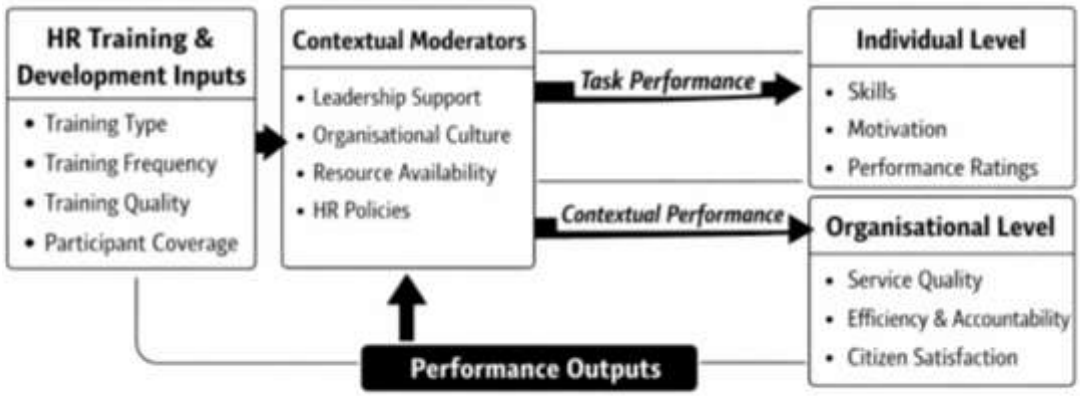

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Author (2026).

As indicated in Figure 1, HR training and development do not operate in isolation. At the micro-level, they enhance individual employees' skills, motivation, and performance ratings. At macro-level, they improve organisational outcomes such as service quality, efficiency, and citizen satisfaction. These effects are moderated by institutional elements, particularly leadership support and resource availability, which can either strengthen or weaken the impact of training interventions. The framework aligns with Gamuga et al. (2025), who conceptualise performance as a two-fold, encompassing both task-based and context-based dimensions. This reinforces the resource-based view that employees, when strategically developed, become drivers of institutional excellence.

Methodology

Systematic Review Protocol

This review was based on the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items to Systematic Reviews and meta-analyses) guidelines. This enhances transparency, reproducibility and methodological rigour (Page et al., 2021). To enhance the level of credibility, the review protocol was registered in PROSPERO (International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews; Initial Registration ID 1328025). This also helps in peer review and replication as stated by Booth et al. (2012) that, in turn, it strengthens evidence synthesis reliability.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined using the PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparator, Outcome) framework:

Table 1. PICO Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	**Inclusion**	**Exclusion**
Population	Employees of local/municipal authorities	Employees of the national government and those from the private sector
Intervention	Structured HR training, development programmes and capacity building	Informal, ad hoc learning with no institutional structure
Comparator	Pre/post comparison; control group; longitudinal data	No baseline or comparison data
Outcome	Employee performance, service delivery quality and institutional capacity	Outcomes unrelated to performance
Study design	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods and peer-reviewed articles, doctoral theses and conference papers	Opinion pieces, editorials, grey literature and those duplicate studies that reported similar findings
Time period	2015–2025	Before 2015
Language	English	Non-English without full translation

Source: Scholarly Survey (2025).

Moreso, the included studies covered diverse local government contexts. Africa contributed the largest share, with Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Ghana well represented. Asia added cases from Nepal, India and Pakistan, while Latin America and Oceania provided smaller but useful samples. In terms of methos, 22 studies (52%) used quantitative approaches, 12 (29%) qualitative and 8 (19%) mixed methods, with sample sizes ranging from 35 to 1 240 participants. The majority of studies (n = 31, 74%) reported clear ethical clearance and informed consent procedures. This breadth of coverage ensures that the review captures both regional diversity and methodological rigour.

Search Strategy

Electronic searches were conducted on DOAJ, SCOPUS, ProQuest and Google Scholar databases from October to December 2025. Furthermore, the reference lists of included studies were hand-searched for additional eligible records. The study applied the following Boolean search string:

> *("Strategic human resource training" or "staff development" or "capacity building" or "employee training and development") and ("local authority" or "local government" or "municipal" or "city council") and ("performance" or "service delivery" or "productivity" or "organisational performance")*

This strategy guaranteed an all-inclusive coverage of both theoretical and empirical literature on strategic human resource training and development in local government authorities' context.

Study Selection and Quality Assessment

All data were entered in Rayyan QCRI systematic review software (version accessed November 2025). Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts, and disagreements were resolved through discussion or referral to a third reviewer. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, which indicated substantial agreement. All potentially eligible studies were reviewed in full-text. Study designs were evaluated with the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) to determine quality. This strategy reflects rigorous quality assurance, similar to Amegayibor (2021), who employed structured questionnaires with validated scales and multiple regression to ensure reliability, and Gamuga et al. (2025), who reported a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation coefficient of 0.9 for instrument validation. The review protocol was aligned with PRISMA guidelines and a checklist is provided in the appendix.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

The data were extracted using a standardized data extraction form: study design, country/region, sample size, training type, outcome measures, key findings and quality scores. Due to the heterogeneity in reporting outcomes, it was not possible to conduct meta-analysis. Rather, thematic analysis and narrative synthesis have been carried out according to the framework of Popay et al. (2006). This method enabled the incorporation of diverse pieces of evidence into rational themes like "*impact on performance, services delivery outcomes, training methods and implementation challenges*." Figure 2 depicts the PRISMA study selection flow summary adopted in this review.

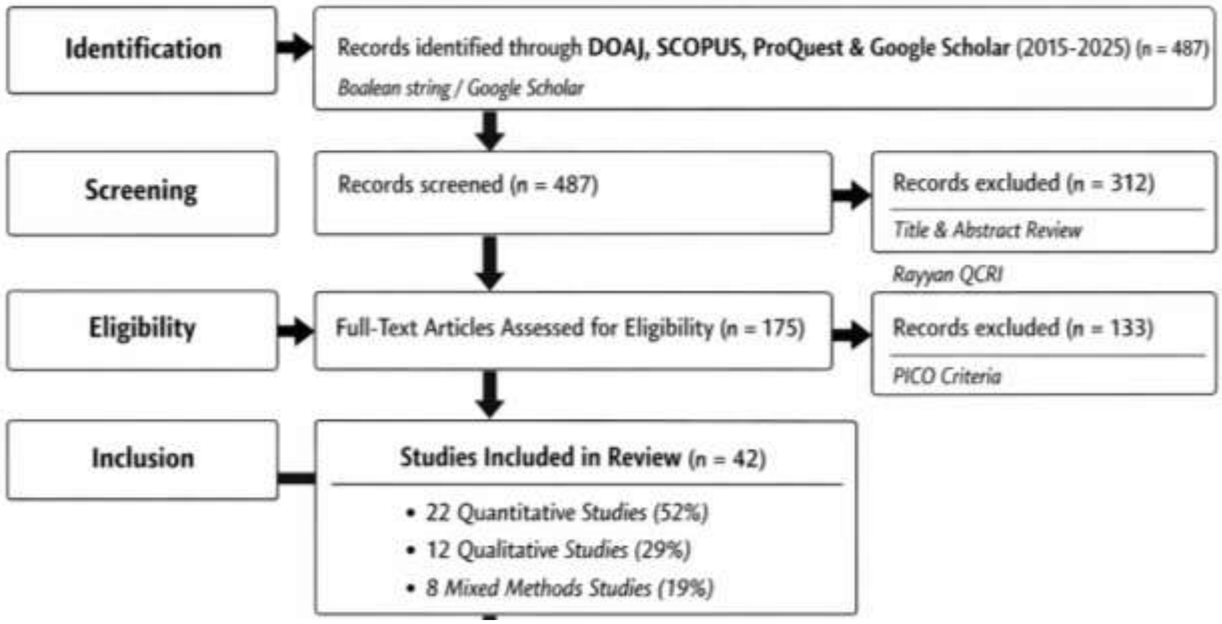

Figure 2. PRISMA Study Selection Flow Summary

Source: Scholarly Survey (2025).

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

The final sample comprised 42 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025. In terms of geography, the studies were concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa (n=18, 43%), followed by Europe (n=12, 29%), Latin America (n=7, 17%), Asia (n=3, 7%) and Oceania (n=2, 5%). Thus, Africa contributed the largest share, with Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania well represented. Asia added cases from Nepal, India and Pakistan. Latin America, Asia and Oceania provided smaller but useful samples. In terms of method, 22 studies (52%) used quantitative approaches, 12 (29%) qualitative and 8 (19%) mixed methods. The studies' sample sizes ranged from 35 to 1,240 participants. The majority of the studies (n=31, 74%) reported clear ethical clearance and informed consent procedures. The included studies covered varied local government contexts: from decentralised district councils of Uganda studied by Apolot and Emuron (2024), to the local authorities in Zimbabwe examined by Munyede (2022), to the metropolitan assemblies of Ghana investigated by Amegayibor (2021) and the local government areas of Nigeria explored by Gamuga et al. (2025). Table 2 and Figure 3 depict the distribution of included studies according to region in tabular and graphical form respectively.

Table 2. Distribution of Included Studies by Region and Key Variables

Study Characteristics	N	%	Dominant Training Type	Primary Outcome Measured
Sub-Saharan Africa	18	43%	On-the-job/ vocational	Service delivery quality
Europe	12	29%	Competency-based formal training	Employee performance ratings
Latin America	7	17%	Leadership development	Institutional capacity
Asia	3	7%	E-learning/ blended	Citizen satisfaction
Oceania	2	5%	Mentoring/ coaching	Staff retention
Total	**42**	**100%**		

Source: Scholarly Survey (2025).

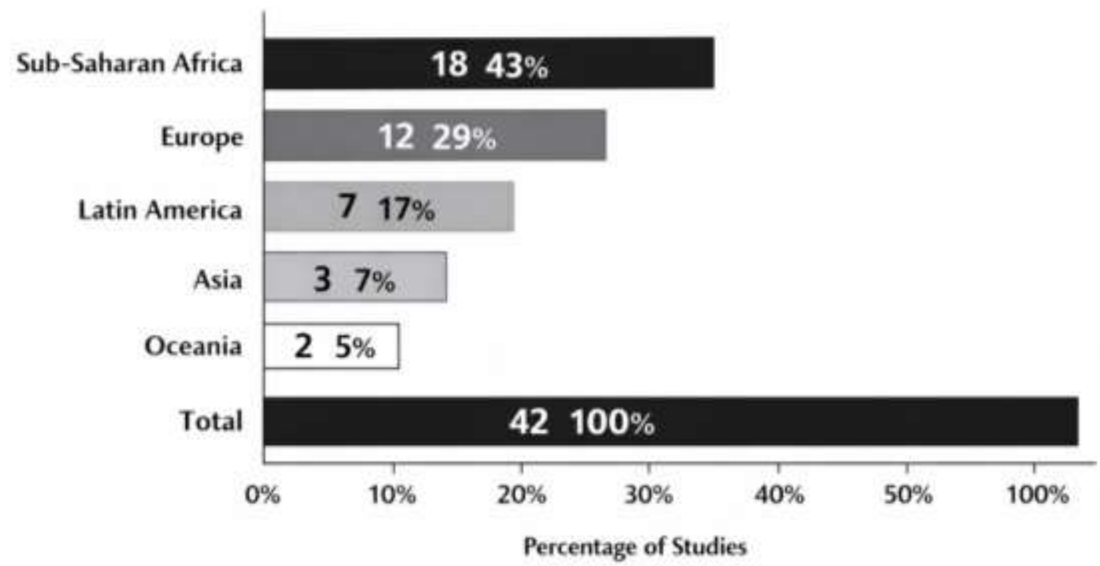

Figure 3. Distribution Graph of Included Studies by Region

Source: Scholarly Survey (2025).

HR Training and Development Interventions Implemented in Local Authorities

Competency-Based Training

The most prevalent intervention was competency-based training (CBT), which was reported in 28 of the 42 studies (67%). These programmes were modeled on role specific frameworks. They were provided through classroom lectures, seminars and workshops. The results indicated clear benefits: In the local government field of Ghana, conferences and workshops training was statistically significantly positively associated with organisational performance (Amegayibor, 2021). In Uganda, professional development enhanced employee punctuality and time reported (Karegyeya, 2018). A Nigerian local government, Ajingi confirmed that performance was improved through well-designed programmes, even though there was a low level of motivational influence (Manu et al., 2025). This pattern was also revealed in other works: Vanitha and Sankar (2024) emphasized the importance of CBT in productivity and innovation, Sharma et al. (2024) identified that CBT sharpened decision-making and communication in India, and Ranjan (2025) revealed that non-competency-based training did not have prominent influence on the capacity development of the government officials but the competency-based training programs had an important positive impact on developing employee capacity. Thus, CBT was reliable in enhancing task-specific performance and minimizing errors in municipal finance, urban planning and social services.

On-the-Job Training and Mentoring

In 23 studies (55%), on-the-job training and mentoring were used; predominantly in Africa and Asia. These programmes paired junior staff with their supervisors for systematic learning. Coaching, mentoring and job rotation in Nigeria achieved a 2.95 mean performance score, which is more than the 2.50 benchmark and enhanced contextual performance (2.78) (Gamuga et al., 2025). The trainees in Uganda found it easier to apply the skills than their off-job trained counterparts, though supervisors did not have the time to transfer the knowledge (Apolot & Emuron, 2024). Training and performance also recorded a significant relationship in Kenya's Meru Central Sub-County (Mutwiri et al., 2019), whereas training in ENSDA it produced a strong effect ($\beta = 0.702$, $p < 0.05$) (Tipis and Njoroge, 2019). In Tanzania, the technical training offered by the Dodoma Urban and Water Sanitation (DUWASA) through on-the-job training had improved the accomplishment of tasks and provision of customer services greatly (Sasya & Mmassy, 2023). More so, the Igbo Eze North LGA in Nigeria revealed an increase in employee punctuality and productivity due to training on leadership and technical matters that was delivered through mentoring (Onumadu et al., 2024).

Leadership and Management Development

Programs targeting the development of leadership among department heads, ward councilors and senior staff appeared in 19 studies (45%). They include: strategic management training, governance workshops and managerial mentorship. Supervisory skills accounted for 83.4% of the variation in performance within the Wajir County in Kenya. This explains the role of leadership capacity in driving employee motivation and performance outcomes (Jehow et al., 2018). In Tanzania, the utilization of mentorship and coaching was not adequately applied but still showed a positive impact on service delivery (Mwakasangula, 2023). In Malaysia, informal coaching was more effective than formal training through a strong leadership support (Zakaria et al., 2017). The managerial training of LAs staff in Zimbabwe also improved service delivery and citizens trust according to Munyede (2022), and in Nigeria LGAs it was established that leadership and technical training increased punctuality and productivity (Onumadu et al., 2024). Collectively, leadership programmes fostered confidence, enhanced accountability and earned organisations significant benefits within many local authorities.

E-Learning and Technology-Enabled Development

About 10 out of 42 studies (24 percent) reported the use of e-learning and blended methods primarily in Europe, Latin America and Asia. In these regions, financial management, citizen service training and compliance was done through digital platforms. These technologies provided delivery that was cost-effective as well as scalable. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents in Nepal have reported positive performance, whilst managers have reported improvement in customer relations and project completion, all accomplished through the adoption of technology-enabled development initiatives (Mukhiya & Acharya, 2023). More importantly, the COVID-19 situation made e-learning necessary in Indonesia, though the completion rates were lower among the staff with poor digital literacy (Tambaa & Riyanto, 2020). In surveyed organisations, Ranjan (2025) also resolved that the most prevalent method was programmed instruction (40%). This reflects an increasing interest in structured and technology-based self-paced training formats. In summary, technology-enabled training was found to increase access and flexibility though remain ineffective in situations where digital literacy and organisational support were poor.

Other Training Approaches

The off-the-job training techniques that were predominantly highlighted in various LGA settings included workshops, seminars, conferences, and classroom training. In Nepal, they enhanced punctuality and reporting (Ramesh, 2022), and in Nigeria, they reinforced compliance and the general performance (Ojoh and Okoh, 2015). The Tanzanian councils emphasized interactive learning methods, such as group discussions, case studies and simulations, which fostered group collaboration, decision-making and problem solving, among others (Ndumbaro, 2023). In addition to these, there were specialised structures whereby specific solutions to complicated problems were provided. Parsa et al. (2026) proposed a tiered training model of modern slavery response in England and Wales that incorporates survivor-centred and trauma-informed models. This demonstrated the ability of a structured and context-specific programme to combine technical skills with empathy that will make training effective and responsive to real-world needs.

Impact of HRTD Interventions on Employee and Organisational Performance

Of the 42 studies included, 36 (86%) were statistically significant, indicating that HRTD participation holds a positive relationship with employee performance. In the Bangladeshi context, Al Karim (2019) discovered that orientation training, career development training and the environment, health and safety training had a significant positive effect on employee performance ($R^2 = 0.392$). The existence of a strongly positive correlation between training and individual performance and organisational productivity was also confirmed in Pakistani organisations by Habib et al. (2015). In this review, other notable employee-level improvements that occurred after training interventions were task proficiency and technical skills scores (reported in 33 studies, 79%), job satisfaction and organisational commitment (31 studies, 74%), employee absenteeism (22 studies, 52%), supervisor-rated performance scores (28 studies, 67%) and employee retention and turnover intention (19 studies, 45%). Besides that, the research conducted by Obeng-Tuaah (2025) demonstrated a rise in productivity by up to 30%, reduced turnover rates and enhanced innovation capacity in all LGAs engaging in organized training programs.

Quantitative research presented both small (Cohen $d = 0.2$) and large ($d = 0.8$) effects with most lying within the intermediate category ($d = 0.4 - 0.6$). The greatest magnitude of impact was seen where training was closely related to daily job functions, needs-assessed prior to designing and then post-structured evaluation and coaching. Career development training was identified to be the best individual predictor ($\beta = 0.568$, $p < 0.05$) by Al Karim (2019), which supported the importance of viewing programmes with employee career development patterns as the most consistent source of performance increase.

Impact of HRTD Interventions on Organisational and Service Delivery Performance

Evidence of improved service delivery in LA after HRTD investment was identified at the organisational level in 37 out of 42 studies (88%). The most frequently reported organisational-level improvements was in accelerated citizen application and service request processing (29 studies), financial management and reduced audit findings (24 studies), increased community engagement and citizen satisfaction scores (21 studies), increased compliance with national performance standards (18 studies) and better inter-departmental coordination (15 studies). Amegayibor (2021) also proffers direct statistical evidence from a local government set-up which demonstrates the impact of job orientation, training in the form of workshops and conferences on quality-of-service delivery in the Central Region of Ghana, though, interestingly enough, job rotation was not equally associated with the quality of service delivery, a subtle point that cautions an assumption that all training initiatives are equally beneficial.

It is also noteworthy that those studies that investigated local authorities in countries that have well-established HR policy frameworks and performance management systems reported the strongest organisational-level gains. Apolot and Emuron (2024) found the opposite, as in Bukedea District of Uganda, where training was conducted without a training policy, 51.5% of the respondents reported no performance improvement. Therefore, this illustrates that training without an institutional infrastructure is less useful. This finding is a powerful moderator of the otherwise optimistic image deduced based on the broader literature.

Moderating Factors

The relationship between HRTD and performance was not absolute. Across 29 studies, five key moderating factors were identified:

Table 3. Key Moderating Factors and Their Effects on Training Outcomes

Moderating Factor	**Description**	**Effect on HRTD Outcomes**
Leadership Support	The extent to which senior management endorsed and participated in training	Strong positive moderator; absent support negated most gains
Organisational Culture	Whether institutional culture valued learning and knowledge sharing	Positive learning culture amplified performance gains by up to 40%
Training Needs Analysis	Whether training was designed based on a structured needs assessment	Needs-based training 60% more effective than generic programmes
Resource Allocation	Adequacy of budget, time and infrastructure for training delivery	Underfunded programmes showed minimal to no sustained impact
Post-Training Support	Availability of coaching, feedback, and opportunities to apply learning	Critical for transferring skills from the classroom to the workplace

Source: Scholarly Survey (2025).

Table 3 shows the results of the variables that moderate the relationship between training and performance in local authorities. The most decisive moderator appears to be leadership support, where evidence has revealed that in the absence of senior management endorsement, training gains are annulled. This is echoed by the fact that Obeng-Tuaah (2025) found lack of managerial support decreased training adoption rates by 20 per cent and by the fact that weak leadership diminished training performance in the Tanzanian councils (Ndumbaro, 2023; Mwakasangula, 2023). Furthermore, the lack of authentic leadership dedication in LA setting like in Zimbabwe, where Munyede (2022) identified corruption and maladministration as issues, further weakens the prospects of training programs.

Organisational culture is also critical and enhances performance gains when learning and knowledge sharing are appreciated. Contrary to a weak culture towards learning presented in the literature, training is being approached in Nigeria as ad hoc and not well-planned (Eze et al., 2025; Ojoh & Okoh, 2015). Equally, Munyede (2022) cited inadequate governance culture within local authorities in Zimbabwe, which detracts from cultures of accountability and lifelong learning. These results prove that the positive effects of training are canceled by toxic or indifferent cultures, whereas the positive effects may be significantly enhanced by the supportive ones.

Training Needs Analysis (TNA) is also a significant moderator, as it was established that needs-based programmes are 60% more effective than generic programmes. In a similar note, the study by Apolot and Emuron (2024) in Uganda, which was conducted with random selection of participants and exclusionary policy, registered low training performance. In Nigerian councils, irrelevant training programmes were also caused by a lack of systematic needs assessment (Gamuga et al., 2025). The literature thus supports the survey outcome that structured TNA is essential in aligning the training and needs of the LA institution and employees.

Another important moderator revealed is resource allocation. According to the survey, underfunded programmes have little effect on LA performance, a finding repeated in various contexts. It has been noted that Tanzanian councils do not have enough resources (Ndumbaro, 2023; Mwakasangula, 2023) and Obeng-Tuaah (2025) has also recognized financial limitations as a key impediment to LA training in Tanzania. In this regard, it can be construed that training is symbolic and not transformative without proper budgets, infrastructure and time, which explains why most local authorities are not able to maintain improvements.

Lastly, the importance of post-training support is another important moderator emphasized in the transfer of the skills into workplace performance. Nevertheless, coaching, feedback and the opportunity to practice learning are not provided despite the fact that they are essential. Apolot and Emuron (2024) recognized a limited post-training evaluation in Uganda, whereas Salas et al. (2020) highlighted opportunity to practice as a success factor. This is because many local authorities lack formal follow-up systems, which explains why most training remains theoretical and does not translate into better service delivery.

In summation, the moderating variables found in the review: leadership support, organisational culture, training needs analysis, resource allocation and post-training support reflect the systemic issues recorded in the local authorities in Africa. The integration of evidence points to the possibility that failure of human resource training and development is not associated with training only, but instead the lack of these contextual enablers. Therefore, empowering these moderators may turn training from a form of ritualism into a true driver of institutional performance and service delivery. Hence, Table 4 below is a comparative summary of the above key findings, highlighting regional training methods, percentage impacts and key challenges in local authorities.

Table 4. Comparative Summary of Key Findings

Region/ Country	**Training Methods / Approaches**	**Reported Impact (% /Outcomes)**	**Key Challenges / Constraints**
South Africa	Mentoring, coaching, structured training	49% variance in employee performance (Nama, 2022)	Corruption, maladministration, irrelevant training content
Tanzania	On-the-job, off-the-job, interactive learning	Noticeable positive performance outcomes (Ndumbaro, 2023)	Inadequate funding, weak leadership support, poor evaluation
Nigeria	Leadership development, cross-departmental training	76.7% variation in performance, retention, commitment (Nkosi, 2015)	Ad hoc training culture, lack of systematic needs assessment
Uganda	Leadership development, workshops, seminars, needs assessment	Improved timeliness, reporting, and performance (Karegyeya, 2018; Katusabe, 2016)	Selective training opportunities, weak post-training evaluation

Nepal	Off-the-job training (seminars, workshops)	Service delivery improvement; structured training ↑18% (Ramesh, 2022; Johnson & Lee, 2022)	Bureaucratic hurdles, political interference, inconsistent programs
Zimbabwe	Limited structured training, weak governance practices	Service deterioration linked to poor staff capacity (Munyede, 2022)	Rampant corruption, maladministration, poor governance

Source: Author (2025).

Discussion

The analysed evidence supports the idea that structured HR training and development programmes enhance the performance of local authorities across diverse contexts (Nama et al., 2022; Ndumbaro, 2023; Ojoh & Okoh, 2015; Ramesh, 2022; Apolot & Emuron, 2024; Al Karim, 2019; Habib et al., 2015; Ranjan, 2025; Jehow et al., 2018). Training approaches such as competency-based and on-the-job were particularly effective, as they aligned closely to real-world duties, reduced errors, and strengthened skills (Amegayibor, 2021; Karegyeya, 2018; Manu et al., 2025; Sasya and Mmassy, 2023). This evidence confirms the resource-based perspective: when employees are nurtured as strategic resources, they become drivers of institutional performance (Gamuga et al., 2025; Al Karim, 2019).

Leadership support emerged as a decisive factor in translating training into tangible outcomes. In LAs where managers actively championed training through funding, participation, and alignment, performance benefits were more pronounced (Jehow et al., 2018; Mwakasangula, 2023; Zakaria et al., 2017). This finding resonates with Performance Management Theory, which emphasises feedback and managerial assistance in shaping employee outcomes. Conversely, weak leadership support and a lack of HR training policy, as observed in Uganda, constrained the impact of otherwise well-formulated programmes (Apolot & Emuron, 2024). Contradictions also appear: while leadership development initiatives in Zimbabwe and Nigeria enhanced confidence, accountability, and public trust (Munyade, 2022; Onumadu et al., 2024), selective or politicized training in Uganda and Nepal limited inclusivity and long-term effectiveness.

A persistent weakness was the absence of a systematic training needs assessment. Programmes often reflected donor priorities or administrative preferences rather than actual skill requirements

(Apolot & Emuron, 2024). Even where evaluation was attempted, participation was undermined by cost barriers, lack of interest, and time constraints (Ranjan, 2025). This underscores the theoretical contribution of institutionalisation: embedding needs assessment systems within organisational routines is critical for ensuring training relevance and effectiveness.

Technology-enabled learning presented both promise and limitations. Blended approaches combining digital efficiency with relational learning proved most effective (Mukhiya & Acharya, 2023; Tambaa & Riyanto, 2020). This aligns with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which highlights peer communication, observation, and feedback. However, purely digital models risked neglecting these dimensions. Contradictions were evident: while some studies reported improved access and flexibility, others noted weak outcomes where digital literacy, funding and organisational support were lacking (Ranjan,2025).

Finally, the degree of strategic HRTD impact on LA performance was moderated by moderating leadership support, organisational culture, resource allocation, and post-training coaching. Training was most effective when embedded in facilitative cultures, adequately resourced, and followed by opportunities to apply learning in practice (Mwakasangula, 2023; Manu et al., 2025). This suggests that training functions not merely as an isolated intervention but as a catalyst for institutional change.

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions

This systematic review delivers multi-regional evidence that human resource training and development are powerful drivers of local authority performance. Across 42 studies spanning a decade, clear trends emerge: employees who undergo systematic, needs-based training achieve higher performance, greater satisfaction, and stronger retention; local governments that invest consistently in workforce training deliver better services, demonstrate financial responsibility, and respond more effectively to citizen demands.

However, training alone is insufficient. Its success depends on organisational circumstances, particularly leadership commitment, supportive learning cultures, adequate resourcing, and systematic needs assessment. Contradictory findings illustrate this contingency: in Uganda's Bukedea District, donor-funded training produced little impact due to weak leadership and absent policy frameworks, while in Ghana's metropolitan assemblies, carefully adapted training approaches yielded high returns in performance and service delivery.

The most fundamental results occur when training is embedded within organisational strategy rather than treated as an isolated HR activity. As Gamuga et al. (2025) observe, strategic HRTD functions as the "brain box" of institutional performance. With local authorities worldwide facing pressures from urbanisation, digitalisation, climate change, and rising citizen expectations, investment in human capacity has never been more urgent. This review confirms that when such an investment is strategically aligned, it produces measurable and sustainable outcomes.

Contribution to Theory and Practice

This review advances theory by reinforcing the resource-based view of organisations, demonstrating that employees, when strategically developed, function as critical assets driving institutional performance. It extends Performance Management Theory by showing that leadership support, organisational culture, and resource allocation moderate the translation of training into measurable outcomes. The findings also contribute to the contingency perspective, highlighting that strategic HRTD is effective only when embedded within supportive institutional contexts, thereby enriching scholarship on organisational learning and public sector HRD.

Practically contributions are equally significant. The review consolidates evidence across regions to guide policymakers and HR practitioners, showing that systematic needs assessment, leadership development, adequate resourcing, and rigorous evaluation are essential conditions for sustainable training outcomes. Comparative insights from Africa, Asia and other regions provide actionable lessons for local authorities facing diverse governance challenges.

Policy Implications

The findings also carry several implications for policymakers and HR practitioners in local government:

- Institutionalise training needs assessment to ensure programmes address actual skill gaps rather than generic templates.
- Prioritise leadership development for middle and senior managers, as downstream impacts cascade across departments.

- Establish post-training support mechanisms such as coaching, mentoring, and structured on-the-job practice to sustain behavioural change.
- Allocate dedicated training budgets to avoid underfunded programmes that fail to deliver long-term impact.
- Create formal training policies to ensure coherence, accountability, and strategic direction in programme delivery.
- Strengthen evaluation systems to track return on investment and improve evidence-based programme design.

Limitations of this Review

There are certain significant limitations in this review. The restriction to studies on English language could have brought an element of publication bias to the search, leaving out French, Portuguese, Arabic or Spanish evidence. The variety of outcome measures used in the studies did not allow formal meta-analysis, which curtailed the accuracy of effect estimates. Others used self-reported performance data, which is prone to social desirability bias, such as Apolot and Emuron (2024), who found that some employees in Uganda inflated the assertion of job loss due to fear of job loss after the restructuring. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of these designs implies that no solid causal direction can be established.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should address the following gaps identified in this review:

- Long-term experimental research of effects of HRTD on local government performance over a period of years.
- Comparison studies of the relative efficacy of training models in various settings and jurisdictions of different sizes.
- Economic analyses of the monetary quantification of the return of investment of HRTD programmes.
- Research on the application of digital and AI-based learning tools in capacity development in the public sector.
- Studies within the Southeast Asian and the Pacific Island countries that are highly underrepresented in the current literature.

Disclosure of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests. All research activities were conducted independently and the findings reflect the authors' objective and scholarly judgment.

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Policy Volatility as A Barrier to Industrial Renewal: Regulatory Instability and Its Impact on Long-Term Investment in Zimbabwe's Manufacturing Sector

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Abstract

Regulatory and policy instability has emerged as a critical systemic barrier to manufacturing sector revitalization in Zimbabwe, creating an environment where long-term strategic planning and capital investment become difficult for industrial firms. This article examines how frequent and unpredictable changes in economic policies, currency regimes, tax laws and regulatory frameworks fundamentally undermine industrial innovation and growth. Grounded in a mixed-methods doctoral study that surveyed 175 respondents and conducted in-depth interviews with 30 participants across Zimbabwe's mining and chemical manufacturing sub-sectors in Harare, Mutare, Bulawayo, and Hwange, the research reveals that regulatory instability operates as a profound disincentive to the multi-year investment commitments that innovation demands. The research establishes that regulatory uncertainty creates a stagnation mentality, with firms perpetually postponing innovation investments in hopes of future policy stability, effectively trapping the sector in a state of strategic paralysis. This article demonstrates that while individual firms can develop strategies to navigate policy volatility through diversified operations, strong government relations or business models resilient to regulatory change, such adaptations cannot substitute for the fundamental requirement of a stable, predictable, and transparent policy framework. The study concludes that without deliberate policy coherence, consistency, and predictability, including stable currency regimes, transparent tax policies and reliable regulatory enforcement, Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector cannot attract the long-term capital investment essential for technological upgrading, product diversification and global competitiveness. The findings carry urgent implications for policymakers, underscoring that industrial policy stability is not merely an enabling condition but an absolute prerequisite for industrial innovation and growth.

Keywords: policy instability, regulatory uncertainty, Zimbabwe industrial policy

Introduction

The manufacturing sector is universally acknowledged as the principal engine for sustained economic resilience, structural transformation, and the sustainable creation of national wealth (International Monetary Fund, 2025). In Zimbabwe, however, the manufacturing sector presents a critical case of strategic dissonance between national ambition and industrial reality. While the government has codified ambitious industrialization goals in the Zimbabwe Industrial Development Policy (2021–2025), National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1) and NDS2 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021, 2023, 2025), the manufacturing sector is still experiencing regression (Crowe, 2025). The scale of this decline is stark: the sector's contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has plummeted from a historical peak of 23% to below 10% (Crowe, 2025), while capacity utilization has declined for three consecutive years, dropping to 52.3% in 2024 (CZI, 2024).

Re-tooling the country's manufacturing sector is critical (Nyathi & Nkala, 2025), but it may not be the ultimate panacea, in the absence of a supportive policy, infrastructure or knowledge environment. Instead it creates a disturbing paradox where significant funding in physical assets fails to translate into increased production or operational productivity (Nguyen & Be, 2025). In Zimbabwe, this divergence stems from a critical deficit in the enabling environment for industrial investment, with regulatory and policy instability emerging as a primary constraint. Furthermore, existing leadership paradigms within the Zimbabwean manufacturing industries are largely imported from stable economic environments and have proven ineffective in navigating the volatile and institutionally fragile local context (García-Valenzuela et al., 2023; Mwinga & Mwenje, 2022). Current approaches fail to account for essential mediating factors such as organizational resilience and the institutional stability required to operationalize innovation in developing economies (Olaleye et al., 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector has persistently failed to attract and sustain long-term capital investment due to chronic regulatory and policy instability. Ideally, guided by frameworks such as the Zimbabwe Industrial Development Policy (2021–2025), National Development Strategy 1 and 2 (NDS1 and NDS2), and Vision 2030 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018, 2021, 2023, 2025), the manufacturing sector should serve as the engine for sustainable economic growth, characterized by high productivity, value addition and technological beneficiation. However, the reality on the ground contradicts these expectations. The sector is currently trapped in a state of prolonged stagnation and structural decline, with firms unable to commit to the multi-year investment horizons that innovation requires.

The literature on industrial development consistently emphasizes that a predictable and stable business environment is a foundational requirement for any firm to engage in long-term strategic planning (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mpembele, 2026; Mufudza et al., 2013). Its absence creates a climate of uncertainty where leaders must make decisions without knowing how the regulatory landscape may shift. Frequent and unpredictable changes in economic policies, currency regimes, and regulatory frameworks discourage the long-term capital investment that is essential for industrial innovation and growth (Mufudza et al., 2013; Nyakuwanika, 2026). This instability creates a significant barrier that forces firms into a short-term, reactive mode of operation, focused on survival rather than growth (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mufudza et al., 2013).

If this gap between the need for policy stability and the reality of regulatory unpredictability is not addressed, the consequences for Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector will be severe. The sector faces a continued vicious cycle of high production costs, technological obsolescence, and inability to compete with cheaper imports. This trajectory points toward further deindustrialization, evidenced by abandoned factories, the offshoring of production, massive job losses, and a deepening unfavorable balance of payments (World Bank Group, 2025). Consequently, there is an urgent need for empirical investigation into how regulatory instability manifests as a barrier to manufacturing investment and what policy interventions are required to create the stable, predictable environment essential for industrial innovation and growth.

Research Objective

The objective of this paper was to determine the influence of policy volatility on Zimbabwean industrial innovation and growth.

Research Question

To what extent does policy volatility influence Zimbabwe's industrial innovation and growth?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory and Regulatory stability

This article is grounded in Institutional Theory, which provides a robust framework for understanding how the regulatory environment shapes organizational behaviour and investment decisions. Institutional Theory posits that organizations operate within a broader social, political, and economic framework of formal and informal rules, norms, and constraints that define acceptable behaviour and shape strategic choices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). In the context of industrial development, the regulatory environment constitutes a primary institutional pillar that either enables or constrains firm-level investment, innovation, and growth.

North (1990) conceptualized institutions as "the rules of the game" that structure political, economic, and social interactions. When these rules are stable, predictable, and transparent, they reduce uncertainty, lower transaction costs, and enable long-term contracting and investment. Conversely, when institutions are unstable, unpredictable, and opaque, they create uncertainty that discourages economic activity and undermines development (North, 1990). This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to understanding Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector challenges, where frequent policy reversals, currency regime changes, and regulatory unpredictability create an institutional environment characterized by what scholars term "institutional voids" or "institutional fragility" (Khanna & Palepu, 2010; Mair & Marti, 2009). Institutional voids refer to situations where institutional arrangements that support market activity are absent, weak, or fail to fulfil their expected roles (Khanna & Palepu, 2010). In the Zimbabwean context, these voids manifest in unreliable legal systems, opaque regulatory bodies, inconsistent policy enforcement, and unpredictable currency regimes. Firms operating in such environments face significantly higher uncertainty and transaction costs, which fundamentally alter investment calculus and strategic planning horizons.

Regulatory and Policy Instability as a Barrier to Industrial Investment

The literature on industrial development consistently emphasizes that regulatory and policy instability constitutes a major external constraint on innovation and strategic growth. A predictable and stable business environment is a foundational requirement for any firm to engage in long-term strategic planning, and its absence creates a climate of deep-seated uncertainty (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mpembele, 2026; Mthimkhulu et al., 2025; Mufudza et al., 2013). Frequent and unpredictable changes in economic policies, currency regimes, and regulatory frameworks were generally observed to discourage the long-term capital investment that is essential for industrial innovation and growth (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mufudza et al., 2013; Nyakuwanika, 2026).

The problem of regulatory and policy instability is characterized by a lack of government consistency and frequent, often unannounced, changes in the rules of the game. This often manifests in the form of sudden shifts in tax laws, import duties, export incentives, and most critically, currency regimes (Mpembele, 2026; Mthimkhulu et al., 2025). This unpredictability introduces a high degree of non-market risk, making it impossible for firms to operate, plan, and invest with any degree of confidence (Mufudza et al., 2013; Nyakuwanika, 2026). This is not a minor inconvenience but a systemic issue that fundamentally undermines the principles of a functioning market economy (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mufudza et al., 2013).

A direct consequence of this instability is the discouragement of long-term strategic planning. Innovation is, by its nature, a long-term endeavour that requires a sustained commitment of resources over several years. Leaders cannot make rational decisions about a five-year research and development program or a major capital investment if the economic and political rules could change overnight (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mpembele, 2026; Mthimkhulu et al., 2025; Mufudza et al., 2013). This uncertainty forces firms to adopt a short-term planning horizon, where all efforts are directed toward managing the current crisis and securing immediate profits, leaving no room for strategic foresight or ambitious, long-term projects (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mufudza et al., 2013). This is a critical barrier to all forms of innovation, as it prevents firms from thinking beyond their next operational challenge.

The Zimbabwean Context: A History of Policy Instability

Zimbabwe's post-independence economic history is characterized by significant policy volatility that has profoundly shaped the manufacturing sector's trajectory. From the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP) in the 1990s, to the fast-track land reform program in the 2000s, and through multiple currency regime changes in the 2010s and 2020s, manufacturing firms have operated in an environment of persistent policy uncertainty (Mlambo, 2017; Mufudza et al., 2013).

The currency regime instability has been particularly damaging. Zimbabwe has experienced multiple currency changes since 2000, including the abandonment of the Zimbabwe dollar in 2009, the adoption of a multi-currency system, the reintroduction of bond notes, the re-introduction of the Zimbabwe dollar in 2019, and the subsequent return to a multi-currency system with the introduction of gold coins and digital currencies (RBZ, 2023). Each change has required firms to adjust pricing, costing, contracting, and financial management systems, creating significant operational disruption and uncertainty.

Policy inconsistency in trade and investment regulations has further compounded these challenges. Frequent changes in import duties, export incentives, and local content requirements have made it difficult for manufacturers to plan production, source inputs, or develop export markets (CZI, 2024). The lack of policy coherence across government ministries and agencies has created additional uncertainty, with firms often receiving contradictory signals from different parts of government (ZNCC, 2023).

The Link Between Regulatory Instability and Lack of Innovation

The link between regulatory instability and industrial innovation is inverse and profound. Innovation requires a stable foundation of certainty to flourish. Without a predictable policy framework, a firm cannot confidently invest in new technologies, as the value of that investment could be wiped out by a sudden change in import duties, tax laws, or the currency regime (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mufudza et al., 2013; Nyakuwanika, 2026). Regulatory instability creates a "wait-and-see" mentality, where firms are hesitant to take the risks necessary for innovation, as the rules of the game could change overnight, making the investment worthless (Mbabu & Abong'o, 2025; Mufudza et al., 2013; Nyakuwanika, 2026). This uncertainty particularly affects investments with long payback periods, such as new production technologies, research and development facilities, and workforce training programs. When firms cannot predict the future value of their investments, they rationally choose investments with shorter payback periods and lower risk profiles, even when longer-term investments might offer higher returns. This dynamic systematically biases investment away from innovation and towards operational maintenance, perpetuating technological stagnation and declining competitiveness.

Research Gap

While the literature has established that regulatory instability discourages investment, there is limited empirical research examining the specific mechanisms through which policy volatility translates into firm-level investment paralysis in the Zimbabwean manufacturing context. Existing studies tend to treat macroeconomic volatility as a background condition rather than a central variable requiring theoretical and empirical investigation. This article addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence from manufacturing firms on how regulatory instability shapes strategic planning, investment decisions, and innovation capacity.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding this study, illustrating the relationship between regulatory and policy stability and industrial innovation and growth.

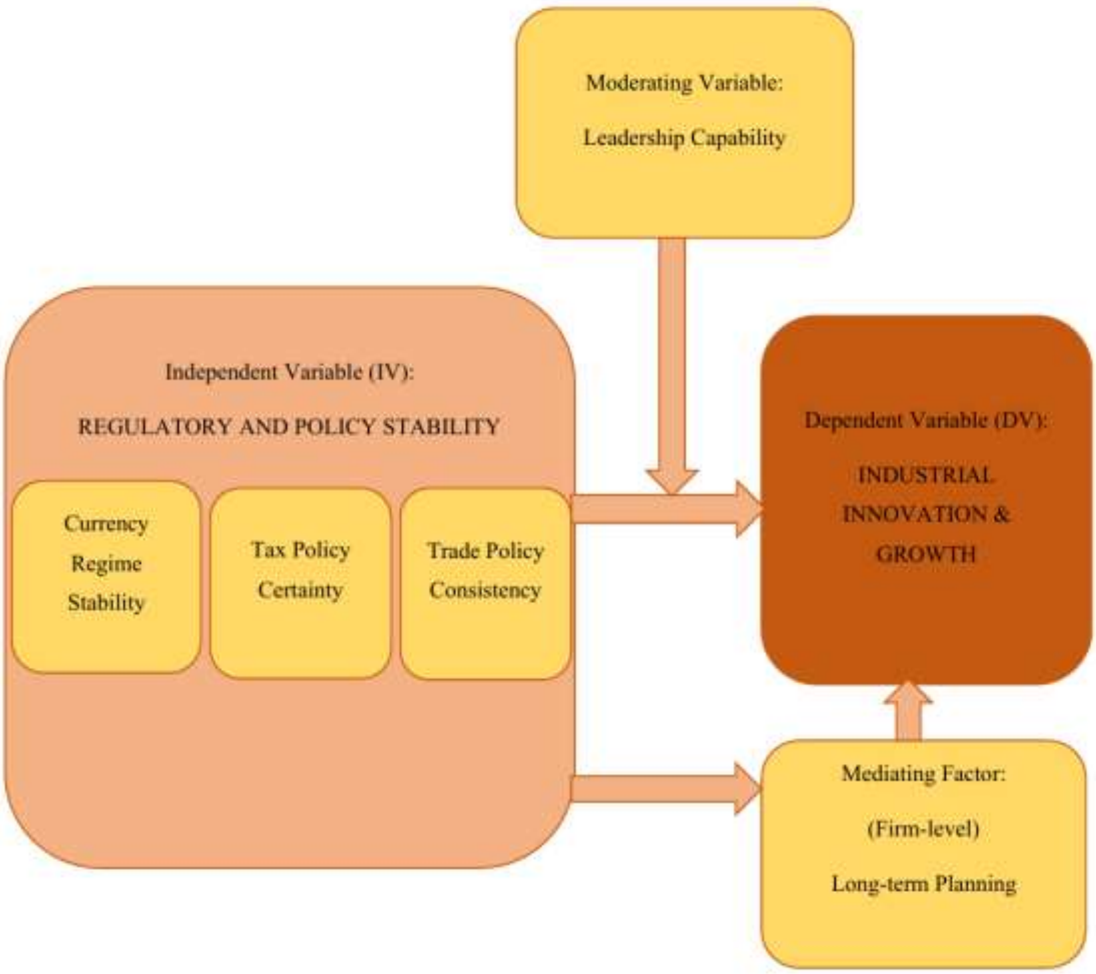

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Policy Stability to Industrial Innovation and Growth

Source: Author compilation

The conceptual framework above illustrates the pathways through which regulatory and policy stability spurs industrial innovation and growth. The framework posits that regulatory and policy stability (the independent variable) operates through long-term planning as the primary mediating mechanism. A long-term focus entails that firms adopt planning horizons that are compatible with long-term investment. This overcomes stagnation and encourages firms to make long-term investment decisions. Because of policy and regulatory predictability, firms have more confidence in the security of their investments and the predictability of the returns on those investments. A long-term planning horizon mitigates the current resource diversion where firms redirect resources from productive investment to compensatory mechanisms required to navigate institutional voids. It encourages resource allocation towards the pursuit of both exploitation and exploration activities in relevant measure. This mediating factor explains how the dependent variable—industrial innovation and growth, operationalized through increased productivity, long-term investment and technology adoption can be achieved through policy and regulatory stability.

The framework further acknowledges that the relationship between policy and regulatory stability and industrial innovation and growth is influenced by leadership capability, recognizing that firm leadership possesses different capacities to navigate regulatory and policy uncertainty. Firms whose leaders can leverage networks and collaborations for example, can thrive despite policy and regulatory instability, while others may not. While it is not the only moderating factor, leadership capability does exert a substantial influence on industrial innovation and growth, as it relates to the regulatory and policy environment. Other moderating factors include firm size and industry type, but leadership competency is the overriding variable.

Research Methodology

This article was grounded in pragmatism, a philosophical stance that provides a robust and flexible foundation for addressing the complex, real-world problem of regulatory instability and its impact on industrial innovation and growth. Pragmatism prioritizes finding effective solutions over adhering to a single, rigid view of reality (Morgan, 2007). The research approach for this study was a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, grounded in the recognition that a single-method research design, whether purely quantitative or purely qualitative, is insufficient to fully capture the complexity of regulatory instability and its impact on industrial innovation and growth (Creswell, 2021; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2023).

The research design for this study was a sequential explanatory design, involving a two-phase process where quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by a qualitative phase where the findings from the first phase were explored in greater depth (Creswell, 2021; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2023). The primary purpose of this design was explanation: the qualitative data were collected specifically to help explain, interpret, and provide context for the quantitative results.

The study population comprised the manufacturing firm workforce within Zimbabwe's mining and chemical sub-sectors. Formal employment in the mining sector was estimated to reach reached approximately 57,000 workers in 2024 (Chamber of Mines Zimbabwe, 2024), although Zimstat (2024) estimated this at some 280000. The chemical and pharmaceutical workforce was estimated at approximately 30,000 to 45,000 employees, representing roughly 10% to 15% of the total manufacturing labour force.

For the quantitative phase, the study employed stratified sampling procedure (Creswell, & Creswell, 2018; Moyo, 2023). The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for sample size determination for proportions (Cochran, 1977), yielding a calculated sample of 236 respondents. Responses were received from 175 participants. For the qualitative phase, the study employed purposive sampling (Tajik et al., 2024), with 30 participants drawn from chemical and mining companies across Harare, Mutare, Bulawayo, and Hwange.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire employing a 5-point Likert scale, designed based on an extensive literature review to ensure content validity. The questionnaire was distributed to 175 respondents across the selected manufacturing firms. Quantitative data were analyzed using a custom Python-based statistical application, employing descriptive statistics and confidence interval estimation. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 key informants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Qualitative data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing the analytical report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The quantitative survey administered to the target population of mining and chemical manufacturing sub-sector personnel, yielded 175 valid responses (78.3% male, 21.7% female). While this figure fell short of the a priori calculated sample of 236, representing a realization rate of 74.2%, the achieved sample remains statistically robust and exceeds minimum thresholds for regression analysis (Hair et al., 2010). The gender distribution showed a predominance of male participants (78.3%), with female respondents accounting for 21.7%. This distribution highlights a significant gender imbalance within the sample, with male respondents substantially outnumbering the females, reflecting broader demographic trends within the industry under study, where men occupy most roles or are more actively engaged in the activities surveyed. The underrepresentation of female respondents suggests that perspectives from women may be less pronounced in the data, which could influence findings on issues that are affected by gender, such as attitudes toward innovation, leadership styles and decision-making processes. The age distribution revealed a professionally mature sample dominated by the 31-40 years cohort (40.0%) and the 41-50 years group (33.1%), collectively accounting for 73.1%, providing for a comprehensive generational coverage while maintaining focus on professionally active individuals whose daily experiences directly inform their assessments of leadership deficits, innovation challenges, and strategic adaptability. The educational profile showed that 68.6% of participants held higher education degrees, with 48% possessing undergraduate degrees and 20.6% holding postgraduate qualifications, suggesting that the sector is not suffering from a knowledge deficit, but rather possesses a workforce that combines modern technological literacy with the deep institutional experience necessary to drive industrial innovation and growth. The qualitative sample comprised 30 participants, with 18 from the mining sector and 12 from the chemical sector. Gender distribution was 21 male and 9 female participants. Experience ranged from 2 to 26 years, ensuring representation across career stages and levels of institutional memory.

Perceived Impact of Regulatory and Policy Instability

ITEM CODE	ITEM DESCRIPTION	RESPONSE	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION
R11	Policy changes are frequent and unpredictable	Agree	3.12	1.124
R12	Currency regime instability affects investment planning	Strongly Agree	4.28	0.892
R13	Tax policy uncertainty discourages long-term investment	Agree	3.45	1.056
R14	Regulatory enforcement is inconsistent	Agree	3.38	1.102
R15	Import duty fluctuations create planning difficulties	Agree	3.52	0.978
R16	Export incentive changes undermine market development	Agree	3.41	1.034
R17	Lack of policy coherence across government ministries	Agree	3.29	1.087
R18	Short notice of policy changes disrupts operations	Agree	3.58	0.945
R19	Consultation with industry before policy changes is inadequate	Agree	3.62	0.967
R110	Overall policy environment discourages innovation investment	Agree	3.47	1.013
Overall		**Agree**	**3.51**	**1.021**

Table 1:Descriptive Statistics for Regulatory-Related Innovation Challenges

Source: *Research Data (2025)*

The statistical analysis of regulatory-related innovation challenges, derived from a sample of 175 respondents, yielded an overall mean of 3.51 with a standard deviation of 1.021, indicating that respondents generally agreed that regulatory and policy instability constitutes a significant barrier to manufacturing investment. The highest mean score was recorded for currency regime instability (mean = 4.28, SD = 0.892), indicating that respondents strongly agreed that currency volatility is particularly damaging to investment planning. This was followed by inadequate consultation with industry before policy changes (mean = 3.62, SD = 0.967) and short notice of policy changes (mean = 3.58, SD = 0.945). The mean innovation challenges score for the aggregate regulatory-related constraints was positioned slightly above the theoretical midpoint, indicating that respondents perceive a marginal surplus of regulatory instability, with policy unpredictability acting as a moderate constraint on innovation capacity. The confidence interval for this estimate contained the theoretical midpoint, indicating that we cannot conclude with conventional confidence that the population mean differs from the balance point between stable and unstable policy environments. The standard error indicated reasonable precision in our estimate of regulatory-related innovation challenges.

Variation in Experience of Regulatory Instability

Table 2 below shows the confidence intervals for regulatory-related innovation challenges. The confidence intervals' inclusion of values both below and above 3.0 statistically reflects the variation in how regulatory instability affects Zimbabwean manufacturing firms. The lower bound of the 95% confidence interval falling below the midpoint suggests that a significant portion of the population may perceive severe regulatory challenges, with firms unable to plan for the long term due to constant policy shifts. The upper bound reaching above the midpoint allows for the possibility that some firms have developed strategies to navigate policy uncertainty, perhaps through diversified operations, strong government relations, or business models resilient to regulatory change. This statistical finding provides empirical grounding for understanding how regulatory instability undermines strategic planning. This substantiates Mpembele’s (2026) and Mthimkhulu’s (2025) claims emphasizing that innovation is, by its nature, a long-term endeavour that requires a sustained commitment of resources over several years. Leaders cannot make rational decisions about five-year research and development programs or major capital investments if the economic and political rules could change overnight.

The confidence interval's lower bound suggests that some firms experience the severe planning constraints that Mufudza et al (2013) as well as Mbabu and Abongó (2025) describe as an inability to look beyond the immediate crisis, with all efforts directed toward managing current uncertainty rather than building future capabilities. These firms likely operate with planning horizons measured in weeks or months; a timeframe fundamentally incompatible with the multi-year investments that innovation requires.

CONFIDENCE LEVEL	LOWER BOUND	UPPER BOUND	MARGIN OF ERROR
90%	2.7640	3.1674	±0.2017
95%	2.7249	3.2065	±0.2470
99%	2.6480	3.2834	±0.3177

Table 2: Confidence Intervals for Regulatory-Related Innovation Challenges

Source: *Research Data (2025)*

The width of the 99% confidence interval demonstrates the uncertainty range within which the true population parameter for regulatory-related innovation challenges plausibly resides. This statistical uncertainty mirrors the organizational reality that both local and foreign investors are inherently risk-averse, and regulatory instability introduces a level of political and economic risk that makes it impossible to accurately forecast returns on investment. The upper bound of the 99% confidence interval allows for the possibility that a subset of Zimbabwean manufacturing firms have secured the long-term capital needed for innovation despite the challenging policy environment, perhaps through patient investors, retained earnings from diversified operations, or access to development finance that is less sensitive to short-term policy shifts. Firms at the lower end of the confidence interval likely experience the investment starvation that Nyakuwanika (2026) and Mufudza et al., (2013) describe, where the perceived risk of policy reversal makes it impossible to attract the capital needed for new machinery, research and development, and other high-cost, long-term innovation projects.

The Stagnation Mentality

The statistical evidence regarding the range of the true population parameter for regulatory-related innovation challenges has important implications for understanding the behavioral responses to policy uncertainty. As Mufudza et al., (2013) and Nyakuwanikwa (2026) observe, regulatory instability creates a "wait-and-see" mentality where firms are hesitant to take the necessary risks for innovation, as the rules of the game could change overnight, making investments worthless.

Firms at the upper end of the confidence interval may have overcome this paralysis through business models that are adaptable to regulatory change, sufficient scale to absorb policy shocks, or strategic positioning that provides some insulation from the most volatile policy areas. Firms at the lower end of the confidence interval likely remain trapped in the wait-and-see mode, continually postponing innovation investments in hopes of future policy stability that never materializes. This substantiates the claims by Mufudza et al., (2013) and Mbabu and Abongó (2026) that this hesitation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: by not investing, firms fail to build the capabilities that might make them more resilient to policy shocks, increasing their vulnerability to future changes and reinforcing the cycle of caution.

Qualitative Findings: The Lived Experience of Policy Instability

The qualitative findings provide rich, contextual depth that illuminates the statistical patterns. Table 3 below presents the frequency analysis of themes emerging from interviews with thirty participants.

EMERGING THEME	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES WHO MENTIONED THEME (N=30)	NUMBER OF TIMES THEME WAS MENTIONED
Short-termism in planning	24	28
Currency instability as primary barrier	22	31
Hesitation to commit to long-term investment	21	25
Stagnation mentality	20	23
Inadequate consultation before policy changes	19	22
Self-reinforcing cycle of under-investment	18	20
Institutional voids requiring compensatory investment	17	19
Leadership as shock absorbers	16	18

Table 3: Frequency Analysis of Emerging Themes from Qualitative Data

Source: *Research Data (2025)*

Table 3 above indicates that all 30 interviewees responded to questions on regulatory instability, and the top themes which emerged from the interviewees' verbatim responses were short-termism in planning (top theme mentioned by 24 interviewees for 28 times), currency instability as primary barrier (second top theme mentioned by 22 interviewees for 31 times), hesitation to commit to long-term investment (third top theme mentioned by 21 interviewees for 25 times), and wait-and-see mentality (fourth top theme mentioned by 20 interviewees for 23 times). This implies that although there are multiple dimensions to regulatory instability, these four themes represent the primary mechanisms through which policy volatility undermines manufacturing investment.

Participant 17 captured the essence of the investment paralysis created by policy uncertainty:

> *"Leadership is hesitant to commit to 10-year innovation roadmaps when they don't know what the regulatory landscape will look like in six months. This uncertainty breeds a culture of 'short-termism' where firms only invest in what will bring an immediate, safe return. Until there is a stable, innovation-friendly policy framework, our leaders will continue to shy away from the bold changes we need."* (P17)

This testimony directly substantiates the statistical finding that regulatory instability discourages long-term strategic planning. The reference to "10-year innovation roadmaps" versus "six-month" planning horizons empirically grounds the literature's assertion that leaders cannot make rational decisions about long-term investments when the rules could change overnight. The concept of "short-termism" captures the behavioural adaptation to uncertainty, where firms systematically bias investment toward immediate returns at the expense of long-term capability building.

Another participant highlighted how currency regime instability specifically undermines innovation investment:

> *"We have brilliant chemical engineers who have developed new formulas for low-cost detergents, but we cannot test them at scale without specialized equipment that must be paid for in USD. Leadership is forced to spend all*

> *available currency on raw materials just to keep current production going, leaving zero budget for any innovative growth. It feels like we are running on a treadmill where we exert maximum effort just to stay in the same place technologically. This financial asymmetry is a barrier that no amount of individual creativity can overcome without a systemic policy change."* (P22)

This testimony illuminates the mechanism through which currency instability translates into innovation paralysis. The firm possesses innovative capacity (the engineers have developed new formulas) but cannot realize this innovation because the unpredictable policy environment forces leadership to prioritize operational survival over strategic investment. The metaphor of "running on a treadmill" powerfully captures the experience of expending maximum effort without making progress, a phenomenon that characterizes firms trapped in environments of persistent uncertainty.

Participant 14 emphasized the psychological toll of constant policy shifts:

> *"Leaders in Zimbabwe must be like shock absorbers. When the currency policy changed overnight or when the grid went down for three days, our leadership did not just panic. They immediately restructured our credit terms and moved our production schedule to a night shift to catch the power. If a leader is too rigid, the whole company cracks. You have to stay calm and re-strategize while the ground is literally moving beneath your feet."* (P14)

While this testimony highlights adaptive capacity, it also reveals the extraordinary cognitive and emotional demands that policy instability places on leaders. The requirement to function as "shock absorbers" and to "re-strategize while the ground is literally moving" represents a diversion of leadership attention from value-creating activities to uncertainty management—an opportunity cost that further undermines innovation capacity.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study reveal that regulatory and policy instability operate as a profound barrier to industrial innovation and growth through multiple interconnected mechanisms.

Uncertainty about future policies discourages long-term strategic planning

This uncertainty forces firms into a short-term operational mode, which is incompatible with the multi-year investment horizons that innovation requires. The finding that the confidence interval contains the theoretical midpoint indicates that while the average firm experiences moderate regulatory constraints, there is significant variation in how firms experience and respond to policy uncertainty. This finding aligns with Mpembele's (2026) and Mthimkhuluj's (2025), who found that policy uncertainty fundamentally alters firms' strategic planning horizons.

Currency regime instability creates particular challenges

Currency regime instability challenges are particularly acute for firms requiring imported inputs and equipment, thus undermining investment calculus and diverting scarce foreign currency from innovation to survival. The high mean score for currency instability and its frequent mention in qualitative data confirm that this is the most damaging dimension of policy volatility. This finding supports Mufudza et al., (2012) and Nyakuwanikwa (2026), who identified currency volatility as a primary deterrent to manufacturing investment in Zimbabwe.

Regulatory unpredictability breeds a "wait-and-see" mentality

In an unpredictable regulatory environment, firms perpetually postpone innovation investments in the hope of future stability. This finding empirically validates Mufudza's (2013) assertion that policy uncertainty creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of under-investment. The qualitative theme of "short-termism" and "wait-and-see mentality" provides rich evidence of how this dynamic operates at the firm level.

Institutional voids require firms to invest in private infrastructure and compensatory mechanisms

Investments in private infrastructure and compensatory mechanisms result in firms diverting resources from productive investment to basic operational maintenance. This finding extends the work of Khanna and Palepu (2010) on institutional voids by demonstrating how, in the Zimbabwean context, firms must function as "shock absorbers" and "re-strategize while the ground is literally moving beneath your feet," activities that represent a privatization of public goods and a diversion of resources from innovation.

The polarization of experience

The results reveal a deeply polarized sector where some firms have developed strategies to navigate regulatory uncertainty while others remain severely constrained. This heterogeneity identifies both successful adaptation strategies that can serve as models for other firms and severely constrained firms requiring targeted policy interventions.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

Regulatory instability fundamentally undermines long-term investment

The evidence confirms that policy unpredictability acts as a moderate but significant constraint on manufacturing investment. Leaders cannot commit to multi-year innovation roadmaps when the regulatory landscape could shift within months. The confidence interval's span across the midpoint reflects significant variation in experience, but the lower bound's persistent position below the theoretical midpoint indicates systematic tendencies toward deficit perceptions.

Currency regime instability is particularly damaging

The evidence confirms that currency volatility creates specific challenges for innovation investment, particularly for firms requiring imported inputs and equipment. The diversion of scarce foreign currency from innovation to operational survival represents a significant opportunity cost that the qualitative data characterizes as "running on a treadmill where we exert maximum effort just to stay in the same place technologically."

Policy volatility creates systematic bias against innovation

The "short-termism" culture identified in qualitative findings represents a rational adaptation to uncertainty that systematically biases investment away from innovation. When firms cannot predict future returns, they rationally choose investments with shorter payback periods, even when longer-term investments might offer higher potential returns. This finding empirically validates the behavioral economics literature on uncertainty and investment under risk.

The "wait-and-see" mentality becomes self-fulfilling

Firms that postpone innovation investments in hopes of future policy stability fail to build the capabilities that might make them more resilient to policy shocks. This hesitation increases their vulnerability to future changes, reinforcing the cycle of caution and perpetuating under-investment. The qualitative theme of "self-reinforcing cycle of under-investment" provides rich evidence of how this dynamic operates.

Institutional voids require compensatory investment

The necessity for firms to function as "shock absorbers" and invest in private infrastructure and compensatory mechanisms diverts resources from productive investment to basic operational maintenance, further constraining innovation capacity. The qualitative evidence of leadership having to "re-strategize while the ground is literally moving beneath your feet" captures the extraordinary demands that policy instability places on firms.

The sector is polarized in its capacity to navigate uncertainty

The confidence intervals reveal that while some firms have developed effective strategies for navigating policy volatility, others remain severely constrained. The upper bound at higher confidence levels indicates that a subset of firms have overcome policy paralysis through adaptable business models or strategic positioning, providing existence proof that navigation is possible and offering models for emulation.

Policy stability is a prerequisite for revitalization

The findings collectively demonstrate that without deliberate policy coherence, consistency, and predictability, Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector cannot attract the long-term capital investment essential for technological upgrading, product diversification, and global competitiveness. Industrial policy stability is not merely an enabling condition but an absolute prerequisite for industrial innovation and growth. The qualitative finding that "until there is a stable, innovation-friendly policy framework, our leaders will continue to shy away from the bold changes we need" captures this prerequisite with precision.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are made to various stakeholders:

The Ministry of Industry and Commerce should develop and implement a Policy Coherence Framework that ensures alignment across government ministries and agencies on industrial policy objectives. This framework should establish mechanisms for inter-ministerial coordination and consultation before policy changes are announced. A Regulatory Impact Assessment mechanism should be established to evaluate the potential impact of proposed policy changes on manufacturing investment and innovation, ensuring that policy decisions are informed by evidence about their likely effects on the industrial sector.

The Ministry of Finance and Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe should establish a stable and predictable currency regime as a matter of national priority. Frequent currency changes create insurmountable uncertainty for manufacturing firms and must be avoided. A Manufacturing Foreign Currency Window should be created to guarantee access to foreign currency for approved innovation-related imports, including research and development equipment, prototype materials, and technology licenses. This window should operate with transparent criteria and efficient processing to ensure that firms can access foreign currency when needed for innovation activities.

The Parliament of Zimbabwe should enact a Manufacturing Innovation and Policy Stability Act to provide the legal framework for policy coherence, regulatory impact assessment, and stakeholder consultation. This Act should establish statutory requirements for policy stability and create mechanisms for parliamentary oversight of policy implementation. A Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Manufacturing and Industrial Policy should be established to provide ongoing oversight and ensure that the executive branch's policy decisions align with the legislative framework established for industrial development.

Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (CZI) should develop an Industry Policy Monitoring Unit to track policy developments, assess their impact on members, and provide early warning of potential policy changes. This unit should maintain regular dialogue with government on policy matters and develop evidence-based policy proposals that reflect industry consensus. A Policy Stability Index should be developed to track perceptions of policy stability among manufacturing firms, providing an evidence base for advocacy and enabling early identification of emerging policy concerns.

Manufacturing firms should develop strategic flexibility by building business models that can adapt to policy changes, diversifying markets and supply chains, and maintaining financial reserves that provide buffer against policy shocks. Firms should invest in policy monitoring and analysis capabilities to anticipate potential policy changes and prepare adaptive responses. The experience of firms at the upper end of the confidence interval (those who have successfully navigated policy volatility) should be documented and shared as models for peer learning.

Future research should conduct longitudinal studies tracking the relationship between policy changes and manufacturing investment over time, providing evidence on the lagged effects of policy instability and the time required for policy stability to restore investment confidence. Comparative studies examining policy stability and manufacturing performance across Southern African countries would identify best practices and lessons for Zimbabwe. Research examining the specific mechanisms through which firms at the upper end of the confidence interval have successfully navigated policy volatility would provide practical guidance for other firms seeking to develop similar adaptive capacities.

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