Sophisticated Strategies, Weak Delivery: Explaining the Implementation Paradox in Zimbabwe's Digital Government

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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes a qualitative survey of 28 public officials from 25 Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) to investigate why sophisticated digital government projects in Zimbabwe are not providing effective services. The conclusions and recommendations are based on the notion that the disclosure of differences and challenges would help Zimbabwe to align policy design and implementation early. However, supply and demand-related factors are blocking digital government readiness. The data revealed five major themes: digital skills shortages (Mutsagondo and Charewa, 2025) and technophobia (Munyoka and Maharaj, 2019); fragmented institutional coordination (Madire, 2017; Mutsagondo and Khumalo, 2023); political economy limitations (Munyoka and Maharaj, 2019); centralized governance and local innovation challenges (Madire, 2017; Mutsagondo and Charewa, 2025); and finally, citizen-centric design failures (Munyoka, 2019). These conditions exacerbate institutional decoupling whereby formal policies are only given symbolic endorsement but not implemented in practice. In response, this study develops a Context-Sensitive Implementation Framework (CSIF) and a readiness assessment instrument to identify and explain key implementation needs and facilitators. The approach also offers ideas on how to address Zimbabwe's implementation problem, for example by better engaging and facilitating local communities and aligning local practices with formal policies.

Keywords: digital government, e-government, implementation paradox, Zimbabwe, design-reality gap, qualitative research, public administration, developing countries, institutional theory

INTRODUCTION

High-end technology, with features that are gradually displacing traditional methods of providing public service, is at the forefront of revolutionizing administrative and governance systems. Digital government is a new era of public management in which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) pervades practically all public services and appeals to consumers, businesses, industries and the government. As a result, companies are obliged to convert into digital entities, while citizens and businesses increasingly demand exceptional services (Bwalya, 2018; Heeks, 2018; Savoldelli et al., 2014). Since digital government systems present a workable method for transforming how services are offered (Bannister, 2015; West, 2005; 2007; Cloete, 2005), the transition of public functions to virtual platforms is often seen as a sensible answer to the ongoing deficiencies that affect the provision of public services (Dada, 2006; Ndou, 2004; Tsokota & Solms, 2013). Consequently, research exploring how new technologies could alter patterns of service provision has received increased international attention; however, stubborn problems continue to exist (Muparadzi et al., 2019; Masumo-Gwebente & Phiri, 2022).

Modernizing the delivery of public services demands setting-specific models that take into account the unique challenges and needs of each community or region. The limited techniques for direct implementation of digital governance are generally known; however, the conclusions presented below attempt to fill this gap by answering the fundamental research question: Why do sophisticated digital government plans in Zimbabwe constantly yield poor delivery results?

Zimbabwe is no exception to the worldwide trend of digital transformation. Since 2018, the Zimbabwean government has launched a number of ambitious digital government initiatives, including the Smart Zimbabwe

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2030 Master Plan, the e-Government Gateway Platform (ZimConnect), the 'electronic Government Procurement (e-GP) system,' and the 'Integrated Electronic Case Management System (IECMS)' for the judiciary (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). These plans are interwoven within bigger national development frameworks, including 'National Development Strategy 2' and Vision 2030, which place digitalization as one of the foundations for achieving an upper-middle-income economy (Government of Zimbabwe, 2025).

However, a disturbing pattern has evolved across numerous sectors: advanced policy frameworks coexist with consistently poor delivery performance. The e-GP system, for example, demonstrates that 98% of procuring entities have approved annual procurement plans on paper; yet, full usage remains a challenge, notably in the public health sector, where discrepancies imperil maternal health supply chains (Zimnow, 2025). The ZimConnect site establishes the groundwork for a digital Zimbabwe, but fragmented government systems impede data integration and efficient service delivery, leading to delays in accessing essential services and undermining the overall effectiveness of digital initiatives (UNCTAD, 2025).

This research refers to the disparity between strategic sophistication and operational inadequacy as the "implementation paradox in digital government." The implementation dilemma is not limited to Zimbabwe. In the literature on e-government in underdeveloped countries, the systematic mismatch between design and reality is well-established (Heeks, 2003, 2018; Savoldelli et al., 2012). However, the bulk of previous research has been based on quantitative gap measures or isolated case studies of specific platforms without the lived experiences of implementers and the context in which they place implementation issues.

What has not been studied is how different interacting dimensions of the system, technical, institutional, human capital, political and sociocultural, contribute to this paradox even when national strategies appear to be well-designed and how such dimensions are experienced and interpreted by the people in charge of implementation. This study helps to fill this gap by taking an interpretive qualitative approach that is based on the perspective of practitioners.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: Literature review and theoretical framework will be contained in Section 2. Section 3 covers the research methods, Section 4 the findings and Section 5 discussion. Section 6 is the suggested Context-Sensitive Implementation Framework (CSIF). Section 7 concludes the paper. The basic idea of this study is that the scale of digital government implementation is influenced by both supply-side and demand-side characteristics which a state must consider before scaling up digital structures nationally. However, achieving implementation readiness requires recognizing specific characteristics, developing a deep understanding of the dynamics arising from the implementation problem, and actively encouraging ICT integration across all government departments.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Background and context of the study: Global and African trends in Digital Government Development.

There has been significant academic and world interest in digital government development since the 1990s. As Scholl (2015) observed, during that decade public management information systems had an impact on e-government development. Since then, e-government research has grown significantly, as evidenced by West (2005), Mayer-Schönberger and Lazer (2007), Bwalya (2018), and Shareef et al. (2012). Although new trends in ICTs and digital government emerge on a regular basis, about three billion people remained offline in 2022. This situation means that there are numerous challenges to establishing digital government so that it may be fully utilized. Ezz (2007) and Dada (2006) challenge early techno-determinist ideas, arguing that the usage and implementation of ICTs are significantly more complex than previously thought.

While digital government projects are challenging, ICTs continue to play an important and significant role in the delivery of public services. The COVID-19 global emergency increased the importance of enhancing service delivery systems (UNDP, 2022; Qekaj-Thaqi & Thaqi, 2021). Furthermore, the potential of improved public sector performance is not only theoretical but also practically accessible (Nam, 2019), providing credence to the idea that ICTs should serve as both inspiration and engine for twenty-first-century governance.

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Developed countries continue to lead the shift to digital and knowledge based economies. The E-Government Development Index (EGDI) consistently reveals that Europe and North America are the most developed areas, followed by Latin America and Asia, with Oceania and Africa trailing the rest of the globe, a trend that has continued since 2003 (UNDP, 2022). Although there are bottlenecks in the later regions, major investments in digital government systems have been made since 2009, spurred by the need to improve public service delivery in Africa (Hafkin, 2009). According to Mawela et al. (2017) and Ifinedo (2005), Africa is taking a long time to compete in the global digital economy due to a lack of telecommunications and technological skills that are unevenly dispersed.

Extensive narratives from the literature indicate that Africa, Zimbabwe included, is confronted with numerous challenges, including well-defined strategies that continue to fail (Mawela et al., 2017); design and implementation problems (Hafkin, 2009; World Bank, 2021); weak ICT infrastructure; failure in policy; lack of human capital skills; poor change management; weak digital government strategies; lack of leadership; and difficulties in partnership and collaboration. The failure of e-government programs in Africa has been attributed to ambitious goals and e-government initiatives that are not sector specific and ignore cultural dimensions (Elkadi, 2013; Hafkin, 2009; Ojha & Pandey, 2017), which stifles effective implementation of digital initiatives and exacerbates the existing challenges faced by the continent.

The present condition of Digital Governance in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's present governance environment is still very challenging, and this hinders the country's ability to take full advantage of digital government. Slow and outdated service delivery remains a common feature of most government institutions. Even though a strong preference for strong and effective state institutions started to emerge around 1999 (Chikwanha-Dzenga, 1999), trust in state institutions is not strong. Public service quality is poor across the country, though political and economic conditions seemingly appear improved.

According to Muparadzi et al. (2019), the National Information and Communication Technology (NICT) policy framework and United Nations resolutions have a significant impact on the development of digital government in Zimbabwe (Zinyama & Nhema, 2016; Government of Zimbabwe, 2012). The national ICT policy created in 2005 guides the implementation of digital government. In 2009, the Ministry of Information Communication Technology and Courier Services (MICTCS) was set up with a mission to push ICT growth. Zimbabwe, like all other African countries, is still very far behind when it comes to technology. Information resources are mostly made up of old-fashioned ICT hardware and software (Nhendere, 2020; Tsokota & Solms, 2013; Zinyama & Nhema, 2016).

Still, the country keeps track of the use of ICT at the national level (Hikwa & Maisiri, 2014; Zinyama & Nhema, 2016), aiming to expedite the influence of ICT on service delivery. Despite these efforts, most public institutions remain entrenched in outdated paper-based models, characterized by bureaucratic fault lines. The public service machinery is poorly networked, slow, and inflexible, with clear independent service silos. It is a situation that has led to missed chances of improvement worsened by policy failure (Cloete, 2005), and the lack of modernization in public institutions prevents the adoption of more efficient, technology-driven solutions that could improve service delivery.

Models for E-Readiness Assessment and the Implementation Paradox

There is an impressive literature about e-readiness measuring frameworks and models of evaluation. The best-known is DIT/NCAER's E-readiness Index and other models include the E-Government Readiness Index, the ICT Development Index (IDI), the E-Participation Index, the E-Government Survey, and the Networked Readiness Index (NRI) (Wasim et al., 2016; UN E-Government Survey, 2022; WEF, 2016). These frameworks identify various preparedness variables, including political, environmental, regulatory, market, and infrastructure. Other factors include connection, the variety and quality of online services, the ability to connect to telecommunications, human capabilities, engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and governments, and access to public data.

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Al-Omari and Al-Omari (2006), ITU (2009), and the UN E-Government Survey (2005), Bui et al. (2003), Azab (2009), and Chanyagorn and Kungwannarongkun (2011) proposed that, while diagnostic and descriptive e-government readiness models are useful, some of them lack utility and ease of use, and importing these models all at once does not work (Hafkin, 2009). A taxonomy of readiness factors derived from these models includes organizational readiness, governance readiness, citizen readiness, infrastructure and technology readiness, regulatory readiness, human capital readiness, economic readiness, and other factors such as culture (Khalil, 2011; Shareef et al., 2012; Bwalya, 2010).

Factors that affect readiness on both the supply and demand sides

In addition to the aforementioned studies, Ifinedo (2005) and Zahid et al. (2022) noted that e-readiness should take into account both demand- and supply-side characteristics. According to Sharan (2011), the supply-side aspects are back-office and front-office, while the demand side includes computerization; infrastructure (mobile networks, energy, the internet, fixed-line phones, and fiber); governance; leadership; and optic networks. Furthermore, the demand side focuses on end users of public services and their capacity to access, consume, and fully benefit from ICT adoption. As a result, important predictors of digital government implementation success, such as user engagement, technological readiness and policy frameworks, need to be addressed, and their negative consequences mitigated (UN, 2005; Bwalya, 2018; Lev-On & Steinfield, 2015).

Important Issues for Implementation

The research provides an overview of effective methods to create a well-written, robust, and context-specific operationalization framework (Schuppan, 2009; Hafkin, 2009; Bwalya, 2010; Kettani & Moulin, 2014; Masumo-Gwebente & Phiri, 2022). These kinds of strategies need to be a result of “think-local” initiatives (Misuraca, 2007), which emphasize the need to tailor strategies to the specific needs and contexts of local communities. They should also be well-planned with flexibility to technology changes (ITU, 2010; Bwalya, 2018) and there should be regular assessment and adaptation to better serve the needs of the community.

Effective strategies must incorporate the technologies and other tools required to achieve success, such as data systems, laws and regulations, stable institutions, competent leaders, and political stability. Culture plays an essential role as well. Strategies that recognize the gaps between design and reality are advocated (Dada, 2006). Good strategies could also incorporate lessons from nations that have successfully implemented digital government systems (Heeks, 2001; Cloete, 2005; Khan & Moon, 2012), such as Estonia and Singapore, which have effectively utilized technology to enhance public service delivery and citizen engagement.

Benefits that are thought to exist and gaps that keep happening

The most talked-about benefits of digital government are seen as solutions to administrative problems, such as governments that do less than expected, outdated processing systems, repeated policy failures, agency silos, corruption, and cost overruns (Heeks, 2001; Cloete, 2005; Bwalya & Healy, 2010). Twizeyimana and Anderson (2019) see value in the way digital government improves public services, management, and social life. ICTs have increased efficiency through electronic management systems (Makki & Alqahtani, 2022), which help reduce administrative burdens and improve service delivery in government operations.

Digital government systems also have the potential to transform government systems to make more efficient delivery of public services and improve governance in a very effective manner (Dada, 2006; Cloete, 2005; Tsokota & Solms, 2013). E-government also promotes decentralization (Jain & Akakandelwa, 2016), fosters networked communities (Ojo, 2014) and streamlines work processes to make it easier for citizens to be involved and can increase effective governance. Digital technologies help to build a society that is sustainable (UN, 2014; Bwalya & Healy, 2010; MICTCS, 2010). However, the implementation issue is still there, mainly because social subsystems often lag behind technical subsystems and thus e-government cannot be integrated into society.

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Theoretical Framework

Based on three theoretical lenses, which study digital government implementation from three different perspectives: Heeks' (2003) design-reality gap model, socio-technical systems approach, and institutional theory. These approaches are used in the framework of digital governance and together provide the analysis for the implementation paradox of digital governance in Zimbabwe. Heeks' Design-Reality Gap Model. In Heeks' (2003) model, the mismatch between a digital initiative's design and the real context in which it is implemented is what determines the impact of the success or failure of government projects (Heeks, 2018; Savoldelli et al., 2014; Masumo-Gwebente & Phiri, 2022). This model also emphasized how technology is accepted and used (Heeks, 2018; Savoldelli et al., 2014; Masumo-Gwebente & Phiri, 2022). The model also supported the research approach taken in this study, which is consistent with recommendations that some studies looking at design-reality gaps have used interviews and document analysis as primary data collection methods.

Institutional theory. Institutional theory provided insights into the complex interactions between organizations and information communication technologies (ICTs). It assisted the researcher in understanding how companies adopt practices not only to improve efficiency but also for legitimate and symbolic purposes. Luna-Reyes et al. (2008) argue that institutionalism appropriately articulates the intricate interrelationships between technology and institutional frameworks while also taking into account the current socioeconomic circumstances in which they are used.

There is a cyclical and complex relationship between ICTs and social systems. This relationship makes it difficult to assert that digital government programs are always successful. Cordella and Tempini (2015) define this relationship as one in which ICT disentangles the chaotic and localized domains of the social world in which it is used, leading to both opportunities for improved governance and challenges in ensuring that these digital government programs meet the diverse needs of the population.

The concept of socio-technical systems gives rise to the socio-technical systems perspective. Trist and Bamforth's (1951) research emphasizes that organizations are made up of interrelated technological and social subsystems that must work together for optimal performance. When applied to digital government, this view means that successful adoption requires not only the use of appropriate technologies, but also the alignment of organizational structures, work processes, skills, culture and incentives (Bostrom & Heinen, 1977). There needs to be a holistic perspective on why technologically complex strategies fail when they do not incorporate social aspects.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

Method of Study

In this study, a qualitative research design was used to explore the implementation paradox of Zimbabwe's digital government projects. The method allowed for examining experiences, interpretations and meanings from the people in the public sector to understand the problems that come with digital government implementation. Research that way allowed us to see the subtlety and context that quantitative approaches misses.

Research Location

The study was conducted in Zimbabwe with a focus on digital government implementation in several Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) in the public sector of that country. The study included central government bodies, local authorities and parastatals to address representation at all levels of governance and operational settings.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected in three complementary ways. First, a detailed literature review was carried out to develop the theoretical and empirical framework of digital government implementation (with a particular focus on the

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implementation conundrum in developing countries). Secondly, semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of data collection, which allowed for flexibility in the examination of participant responses while maintaining uniformity. Third, document analysis was carried out to supplement and triangulate the interview data by reviewing the policy frameworks, strategies and implementation reports, parliamentary records.

Informants

The primary data were collected from 28 carefully selected participants including government officials from Zimbabwe's Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). Purposive sampling was conducted to ensure that only those who were familiar with digital government implementation were included. This methodology was perfect for this exploratory qualitative study which sought in-depth understanding from information-rich instances rather than statistical generalization to a larger population (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To get a snapshot of Zimbabwe's digital government implementation, the sample strategy was based on four diversity criteria. First, the study was conducted organically where people were selected in three layers: senior management, middle management and technical or operational staff. Such vertical stratification ensured that the study was conducted from the perspective of strategic decision makers, mid-level coordinators and frontline implementers. Second, participants were selected from three key MDAs: central government ministries, local agencies and parastatals. The horizontal spread was representative of the governance levels and institutional requirements.

Third, the members participated in a number of major digital initiatives such as ZimConnect, electronic Government Procurement (e-GP) system, Integrated Electronic Case Management System (IECMS), and records management systems. This initiative-based variation ensured that the conclusions were not limited to one platform but reflected trends across Zimbabwe's digital government portfolio. By appointing officials who are actively engaged in implementation, the implementation paradox was well articulated from the implementers' perspective rather than from an external or only policy perspective. As frontline officials have firsthand knowledge of the daily obstacles, workarounds and institutional resistance that determine digital plans' success (Lipsky, 2010). Their lived experiences provide insights that cannot be garnered from document analysis or high-level policy judgments alone.

Four, to avoid potential bias and distortions due to the government's official view of digital transformation. The sampling framework was based on unbiased and grounded e-government researchers who have been critical to the evaluation of government reforms, policies and service delivery, to point out blind spots and validate sample decisions (Patton, 2015). The introduction of external researcher perspectives into the sampling methodology reduced the likelihood of elitist bias and elevated the independence and credibility of the findings.

Table 1: The Demographic and Professional Traits of Interview Participants

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n=28)
Gender	Male	16
	Female	12
Position Level	Senior Management	7
	Middle Management	12
	Technical/Operational	9
MDA Type	Central Government	16
	Local Authorities	7

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	Parastatals	5
Years of Experience	<5 Years	6
	5-10 Years	11
	>10 Years	11
Primary Initiative	ZimConnect/e-government portal	10
	e-GP/Procurement	6
	IECMS/Judicial	4
	Records management	5
	Other/General	3

Data Analysis Techniques

Analytical Approach

The analytical approach of this study is mainly theme analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The six processes are: familiarization with the data, first coding, topic search, theme review, theme definition, and authoring. Familiarization entailed reading and re-reading interview transcripts to establish absorption in the data. The initial coding provided preliminary labels for meaningful text fragments. Theme search entailed organizing codes into probable themes, whereas theme evaluation entailed comparing these themes to both the coded data and the entire dataset. Theme definition entailed refining and naming the final topics, while writing resulted in a final report with extensive participant quotations. This methodical methodology ensured that the analysis was rigorous, transparent, and based on data.

To supplement thematic analysis, data from the literature survey were evaluated using content analysis, by organizing textual data into categories or themes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This allowed the researchers to better comprehend the dominant narratives surrounding digital government adoption, detect patterns in policy documents and implementation reports, and place key findings within the larger scholarly discourse.

Coding was done in NVivo 14 with a hybrid analytical approach that included deductive and inductive methodologies. Deductive coding was driven by known theoretical frameworks, Heeks' design-reality gap model, sociotechnical systems theory, and institutional theory, which offered an initial structure for data organization. At the same time inductive coding allowed themes to emerge from the stories of participants and the context-specific insights that were not predetermined by theory. This mixed method is consistent with Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid thematic analysis, which is one for theory-based research; one for exploring new patterns as well. This way we can validate the existing frameworks and also discover new dimensions. Collectively, these analytical methodologies offered a solid foundation for tackling the research challenge presented in the paper.

Validation strategies

Five strategies were used to increase trustworthiness: sustained involvement, triangulation, peer debriefing, member verification, and researcher reflexivity. These methodologies meet the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria defined in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Prolonged involvement entailed the researcher in devoting significant time to developing rapport with participants and deepening awareness of the research context. This increased credibility by allowing the researcher to establish trust with participants and gain a thorough understanding of the context before drawing conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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Triangulation was achieved by collecting data from three different sources: a literature survey, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Cross-verifying findings from numerous sources boosted the credibility of the study by lowering the possibility that they are artifacts of a single method or source (Denzin, 1978). Peer debriefing entailed regular talks with research colleagues to question and improve interpretations and reduce bias.

To validate the accuracy of the findings, eight participants were given interview summaries to review. This procedure allows participants to affirm or correct the researcher's interpretations of their opinions, which increases credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recognizing and correcting any positional biases throughout the study process, including keeping a reflective notebook, was an example of researcher reflexivity. This improved confirmability by ensuring that findings are derived from the data rather than researcher assumptions, values, or biases (Berger, 2015).

FINDINGS

This section answers the question: Why do sophisticated digital government strategies in Zimbabwe consistently produce weak delivery outcomes? Results on these precise elements under each type are deliberated in the ensuing themes.

Digital Skills Shortages and Technophobia

Key findings on human capital readiness revealed that a lack of digital skills is a major obstacle. "Donors funded the best software available. However, my registry colleagues are unable to turn on computers. They are scared of the new system. They make excuses to continue utilizing paper files" (Participant 12, Senior Manager, Central Government). Training exists on paper but is not implemented. Someone attends a three-day ZimConnect class, then returns to their desk and never utilizes it again due to a lack of follow-up, support, or incentive. This finding is consistent with research from Ethiopia, which identified technophobia and fear-based learning hurdles as significant route dependencies (Senshaw & Twinomurinzi, 2023).

Several interviewees reported that fear of making mistakes and facing public chastisement hinders adoption. "If you press the wrong button in the e-GP system, the transaction stops and requires you to contact IT assistance, which can take days. As a result, some people prefer not to use it at all. The system penalizes experimentation" (Central Government Procurement Officer). Mutsagondo and Khumalo (2023), in their study, also, established a "worrisome scarcity of electronic skills" among Zimbabwean public sector records personnel, and Mutsagondo and Charewa (2025), also documented delayed adoption of AI-enabled records management systems due to competency gaps; whilst Munyoka and Maharaj (2019) further confirmed through a 489-respondent survey that perceived effort and ease of use significantly shaped e-government utilization behavior.

Fragmented Institutional Coordination

The findings confirm that the Zimbabwean government has been unsuccessful in addressing major coordination difficulties. "Each ministry purchases its own software. The Ministry of Health has one system for patient data; the Registrar General has another for birth certificates, and the Ministry of Social Welfare has a third for benefit payments. These systems do not communicate with one another" (IT Manager, Central Government). This fragmentation is in direct contradiction to ZimConnect's aim of an integrated gateway. There is no central data-sharing strategy or interoperability standards. Even when agencies want to share data, they cannot since the technical infrastructure was not built for it, which highlights the need for a comprehensive strategy to enhance data-sharing capabilities across departments. Because of the silo structure of government, interdepartmental cooperation on best practices is minimal, as seen by Mawela et al. (2017) and the World Bank (2021). Mutsagondo and Khumalo, (2023) also agree that government ministries and the National Archives operate in disconnected silos, whilst Madire's (2017) identified lack of strategic planning and inter-departmental coherence as core implementation barriers.

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Political Economy Constraints and Principal-Agent Problems

Interviews revealed fundamental political economy factors that go beyond just technical answers. “Donors appreciate digital government programs. They are visible and have beautiful launch ceremonies. However, after the donor money goes out, there are no funds for maintenance, updates, or staffing the helpdesk. So the system is idle” (Project Manager, Parastatal). It was described several times the “launch and abandon.” Digital systems that threaten conventional rent-seeking opportunities have been met with strong opposition, said several participants. “Prior to e-GP, procurement officers were able to obtain informal payments from suppliers. Now the system is transparent. They will do everything possible to slow down implementation” (Senior Manager, Procurement Regulatory Authority).

However, the same participant also observed that e-GP reduces corruption in the places where it is implemented so the paradox has a political effect for some people. Munyoka and Maharaj (2019), concur in their findings on a different study, which showed that price value and cost burdens had a great impact on citizens’ decision to use digital services, whereas Mutsagondo and Khumalo (2023) linked infrastructure deficits to skills scarcity that led to economic barriers.

Centralized Governance and Local Innovation Constraints

The results uncovered that power is mainly centralized, stifling local creativity. “Everything must originate from Harare.” If a local government wants to personalize a digital service for its community, it must obtain approval from three distinct ministries. By the time approval arrives, the community’s needs have shifted” (IT Officer, Local Authority). This centralization produces a paradox: plans are developed at the center but must be implemented on the periphery, where contextual knowledge is greatest but decision-making authority is lowest. “Harare-based consultants created the Smart Zimbabwe 2030 strategy. Did they go to rural areas? Did they speak with clerks from remote town councils? No. So the idea appears wonderful on paper but is unsuitable for local conditions, as it does not take into account the unique challenges and needs of these communities” (Local Government Official).

This verifies Senshaw and Twinomurinzi’s (2023) findings on path dependencies in low-income settings. It also verifies Madire’s (2017) study, who, found that local authorities lacked autonomy to adapt e-government systems to local conditions, and Mutsagondo and Charewa (2025), showed that national-level system deployment was delayed by top-down administrative controls.

Citizen-Centric Design Failures

Despite rhetorical claims of citizen-centeredness, participants described systems that were primarily built for administrative ease. “ZimConnect is a website. However, most citizens use the internet via mobile phones, and data is pricey. The website is not mobile-friendly, and there is no USSD support for basic phones. As a result, it is inaccessible to rural citizens. The digital divide continues” (e-Government Specialist, Central Government). Participants confirmed that citizen feedback systems are either weak or non-existent. “We did not incorporate citizens into the design. We assumed we understood exactly what they needed. But we didn’t. So we created a system that answers problems we imagined, rather than problems that citizens actually confront, which ultimately led to a disconnect between the services provided and the actual needs of the community” (Information Officer, Ministry of ICT).

This is consistent with studies demonstrating that the ‘agency-centric’ strategy prioritizes the interests of government departments over user service expectations (Mawela et al., 2017; World Bank, 2021). In addition, Munyoka (2019), also revealed that e-government systems in Zimbabwe were frequently rolled out without adequate user consultation, contributing to adoption resistance.

Interaction of Factors and Vicious Cycles

The qualitative study found that the five themes are not independent and interact in mutually reinforcing ways. “It is a vicious loop. Because skills are poor, systems are designed to be basic, making them incapable of

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handling complex problems. Because systems are restrictive, citizens cannot obtain assistance and therefore avoid using them. Because of the minimal utilization, management sees no incentive to spend on training or integration. Skills are poor due to a lack of investment" (IT Manager, Central Government). This also exacerbates the challenges citizens face in accessing the necessary services and support. Additionally, political economic restrictions are linked with centralization: donors fund initiatives based on their goals, not Zimbabwe's needs, and because the center is so central, local innovation is difficult and development is stymied, preventing local communities from responding to the specific challenges they face.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

The work makes some theoretical progress from a qualitative perspective in qualitative formulation. For one thing, it puts the implementation conundrum in context in regards to how gaps are perceived and interpreted, as opposed to simply being measured. Heeks (2003, 2018) has developed a methodology to measure gaps, but this study shows that gaps are socially constructed: top managers perceive smaller gaps than front-line workers, and therefore the paradox appears differently among different organizations in terms of their rank. This builds on Heeks' theory by including perceptual stratification into the gap analysis.

Second, the findings show that technology is the least troublesome dimension. While infrastructure issues exist, the most significant gaps are in human capacity, institutional coordination, and political economics, areas that quantitative gap ratings may undervalue when focusing on technical characteristics. This is consistent with socio-technical systems theory, which contends that social subsystems (skills, culture, and power) frequently lag behind technical subsystems, resulting in implementation failure even when hardware is adequate (Bostrom and Heinen, 1977; Klievink & Janssen, 2009).

Third, the study broadens institutional theory by exposing active decoupling. The gap between policy and practice is not simply passive (lack of capacity) but deliberately maintained by parties who gain from opacity. This means implementation failure can be politically beneficial for some players, which is a darker interpretation of the conundrum than technical-determinist interpretations allow (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014).

Comparison with other African and non-African contexts

Zimbabwe's implementation problems are not unique. Rwanda and Kenya offer important contrasts. Rwanda's Irembo platform was successful because of (1) strong, sustained political leadership; (2) an orientation to start with high-impact services and to scale up incrementally; (3) the investment in a single, interoperable platform; (4) multi-channel delivery; and (5) continuous user feedback (RISA, 2025). Kenya's Huduma Centers were successful because they incorporated digital and physical channels and implemented change at the frontline with frontline staff (Government of Kenya, 2025).

Nepal's Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS) first fell prey to over-centralization and lack of stakeholder engagement and then was reformed after implementing a phase-based, district-led pilot program (Sharma & Aryal, 2021). Bangladesh's a2i program was successful because it built digital champions in every ministry and continuously rebuilt services based on community feedback (Islam 2019). These studies demonstrate that decentralization, iteration and user-centered design have relevance beyond Zimbabwe and indeed align with Bwalya's (2018) call for context-sensitive techniques across Africa.

Context-Sensitive Implementation Framework (Csif).

Based on qualitative findings, this study proposes a Context-Sensitive Implementation Framework (CSIF) with five pillars based on practitioner perspectives and supply- and demand-side preparation readiness.

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Pillar 1: Human Capacity, Not Technology

Digital skill training must be mandatory and ongoing and augmented by on-the-job support. Training should also address technophobia through psychological safety and positive reinforcement in line with the human capital readiness needs of Al-Omari & Al-Omari (2006) and Wasim et al. (2016).

Pillar 2: Make Interoperability a Non-Negotiable Standard

The government must establish and enforce interoperability standards across all MDAs. A centralized data sharing strategy with detailed technological requirements is urgently needed. No new digital system should be allowed until it integrates with existing platforms and addresses the supply-side infrastructure inadequacies identified by ITU (2009) and Schuppan (2009), such as outdated hardware, insufficient bandwidth, and lack of training for personnel.

Pillar 3: Decentralize Implementation Authority.

Plans can be centralized but implementation power must be delegated to local governments with enough resources. Local governments should be able to adapt digital services to national norms as Janowski (2015) and Bwalya (2010) suggest.

Pillar 4: Design for the Citizen, Not the Bureaucracy

Citizen-centered design must move from rhetoric to practice. This involves: (a) involving citizens in co-design; (b) multi-channel access; (c) user-friendly interfaces; (d) feedback systems; and (e) regular monitoring of satisfaction. Ifinedo (2005) and Zahid et al. (2022) identified a demand-side preparedness gap which this fills in to make sure citizen-centered design practices are implemented in order to meet the needs of the community.

Pillar 5: Phase Iteratively, Starting Small

Rather than big-bang launches, the government should adopt an iterative approach: first with high-priority services, complete them with training and support, learn from mistakes and incrementally scale. A 24-month trial phase is recommended, with assessments at months 6, 12 and 24.

CSIF readiness assessment tool

Table 1: CSIF Readiness Assessment for MDAs

Dimension	Low Readiness (0-2)	Medium Readiness (3-4)	High Readiness (5)	Score
Leadership commitment	No clear champion; digital not prioritized	Champion exists but limited authority Active	Sustained champion at senior level	___/5
Digital skills baseline	<20% Staff can use basic digital tools	20-50% Staff proficient	>50% Staff proficient with ongoing training	___/5
Interoperability audit	No inventory of systems; no standards	Partial inventory; ad hoc integration	Complete inventory; standards enforced	___/5
Citizen feedback mechanisms	No formal mechanism	Passive feedback (suggestion box)	Active co-design and real-time dashboards	___/5
Local adaptation authority	All decisions from the Capital City	Some discretion within tight limits	Meaningful local flexibility with accountability	___/5

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Directions: evaluate each MDA on each dimension (0-5). A total score of <15 indicates that it is not ready for national scaling (pilot only). 15-20 represents "ready for phased rollout." >20 means that it is "ready for full implementation."

The Context-Sensitive Implementation Framework (CSIF) is developed for fragile and developing state contexts, which is different from other implementation-oriented digital government models. The most important of these are top-down planning, technology preparation, and project management (Ndou, 2004; Gil-García & Pardo, 2005). On the contrary, CSIF, emphasizes human capacity, citizen responsiveness, decentralization and adaptive execution while acknowledging that implementation is not only about the systems installed but about the officials who can use them, citizens' trust in them and how local institutions adapt to them.

Moreover, implementation in developing states is often iterative, uneven, and reversible, which is unlike stage-based implementation approaches that assume linear development from design to rollout and consolidation (Layne & Lee 2001). Heeks' (2002) design-reality gap framework explains the failure of implementation in this context, as imported systems are not in sync with the local realities. CSIF also builds on this reasoning and proposes practical solutions to bridge these knowledge gaps, including interoperability mandates, phased pilots, ongoing training, and localized decision making.

CSIF involves both supply-side state capability and demand-side citizen engagement whereas traditional readiness or capacity models focus on supply-side preparedness. So it is a more operational and contextually grounded platform to support digital government in fragile governance settings (Schuppan, 2009; Janowski, 2015).

Limitations and future research.

There are a few limitations to the study. First, the focus on public officials does not include citizen perspectives, and future work should look at user experience with digital government services. Second, the cross-sectional design captures the current experiences but not their evolution over time; longitudinal qualitative research could track how interpretations of the implementation dilemma change as changes progress. Third, as a Zimbabwean scholar, researcher positionality may include latent biases (which were reduced throughout the study process through reflexivity and peer debriefings).

Future research should include comparative qualitative studies in provinces to understand regional differences; (b) try to test training methods to alleviate technophobia in civil servants; (c) investigate the impact of artificial intelligence on the implementation process; and (d) how digital initiatives can be integrated with general governance changes outside ICT.

CONCLUSION

The digital government in Zimbabwe has poor alignment between digital government strategy and actual implementation activities. In comparison to other countries' implementation research, there is a scarcity of qualitative studies in Zimbabwe that explore implementers' life experiences, which opens up opportunities for further exploration. The key conclusion is that the implementation continuum has been established, including both supply-side and demand-side elements that a government should consider before scaling up digital systems to the national level. However, gaining implementation readiness should be followed by a thorough grasp of the vicious cycles that cause the dilemma, as well as well-thought-out approaches to driving ICT integration across all government agencies. The five themes are digital skills shortages, fragmented coordination, political economy limits, centralized governance, and citizen-centric design failures, which explain why advanced tactics continuously deliver poor results. The CSIF framework and readiness assessment tool provide a road map for Zimbabwe and others in similar contexts to progress from advanced strategies to effective implementation. While the findings are specific to Zimbabwe, the approach is adaptable to other low-income countries with similar institutional restrictions. The route is neither swift nor simple, but as one participant pointed out, "We have the strategies; now we need the delivery."

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