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Tracing Administrative Bottlenecks from Policy Design to Programme Delivery in Non-Formal Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

Administrative bottlenecks are often prevalent between the development and implementation of policy and programmes in the non-formal education (NFE) sector of Nigeria, but little is known about them, their causes, and the impact. This research particularly explores the links between clarity in policy interpretation and intergovernmental coordination, the impact of accountability frameworks on the efficiency of local-level NFE programs, and how administrative bottlenecks collectively affect programme quality. The research is grounded in the principal-Agent Theory, which views policy implementation as a delegation process that creates administrative bottlenecks. Using three research questions and two hypotheses, the study adopted a descriptive survey approach with a structured questionnaire, surveying 464 adult education program supervisors in Nigeria. Descriptive and regression analyses (at a 0.05 threshold) were conducted for data analysis. The results indicate that clear interpretations of policies are likely to improve inter-governmental coordination through reduced ambiguity and increased trust between agencies. But uncertainty in operational guidelines may limit the effectiveness of these benefits, revealing the difficulties in translating policies to practice. Accountability processes were found to support timely initiation and implementation of programmes where processes were transparent and approval mechanisms clear, but inflexible procedures or financial processes could inadvertently delay implementation. Also, bureaucratic inefficiencies, institutional weaknesses and budgetary constraints tended to build up and impact planning, implementation and service continuity. Although adaptive measures occasionally offset these impacts, inefficient processes, especially when sustained, were found to limit programme efficacy and over time have potential to undermine public trust. This research concludes that policy-makers and educational administrators should create operational guidelines, coordination tools and role expectations to minimize role ambiguity and promote intergovernmental co-operation.

Keywords: Administrative Bottlenecks; Intergovernmental Coordination; Non-Formal Education; Policy Implementation

Introduction

Non-Formal Education (NFE) remains a challenge in translating national policies to programme implementation despite its importance to meet educational needs of the marginalized. Non-Formal Education (NFE), is a purposeful, systematic and structured learning program that takes place outside the formal school system. NFE is different from formal education, which is graded and strictly regulated, and informal education, which is a result of unstructured everyday learning experiences (Ololube & Egbezor, 2012). Its key goals include functional literacy, remedial education for out-of-school children and vocational training to promote self-sufficiency and poverty reduction (Acha, 2021; Ololube & Egbezor, 2012) and its beneficiaries include out-of-school children, illiterate youth, nomadic people and migrants seeking to engage in lifelong learning (Acha, 2021; Gabdo, Sule, & Jafaru, 2025). Through its specific focus on marginalised populations, NFE is a key policy tool in addressing educational inequality and advancing equity. As such, the understanding of its objectives and beneficiaries serves as a foundation for focusing on how policy and administration affect programme outcomes, connecting theory and practice.

This emphasis also extends to the field of public policy, which can be conceptualised as the purposeful design of administrative tools to effect change (Howlett, 2011). In this context, a distinction can be made between policy formulation, which focuses on the choice of instruments, and policy implementation, which refers to the "business-as-usual" processes of administration that translate policy goals into practice (Howlett, 2011; Trondal, 2025). Implementation may cut across multiple layers of administration and demand both horizontal integration among agencies and vertical co-ordination across federal, state and local jurisdictions (Peters, 2015; Trondal, 2025). The success of these intergovernmental relationships hinges on the alignment of agencies and their collaborative capacity (Peters, 2015; Gil-Garcia, Guler, Pardo, & Burke, 2019). However,

unclear policy directives and role uncertainty can complicate collaboration and even lead to "collaborative inertia" where agencies are unable to achieve their goals because they lack clear operational guidance (Peters, 2015). These findings emphasize the need to explore the administrative contexts that influence NFE in Nigeria, and the link between policy and implementation.

For instance, in the Nigerian context, the NFE system is based on the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004, which officially include adult literacy as part of the education program (Acha, 2021; Gabdo et al., 2025). Nationally, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME) formulates policy and the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult, and Non-Formal Education (NMEC) oversees monitoring, curriculum development and training (Acha, 2021; NMEC, 2017). State-level implementation is the responsibility of the State Agencies for Mass Education (SAME), which handle personnel training, research and administration of the programme, while Local Government Adult Education Units (LGA-ADU) oversee the day-to-day activities, enrolment, assignment of facilitators and local supervision (Acha, 2021; NMEC, 2017). While this multi-layered governance framework seems holistically robust, it creates coordination issues that impact on the success of programme delivery; thereby, it is critical to map out administrative processes from policy setting through to local implementation. The implementation of national policies into state-level plans is also complicated by the overlap in responsibilities between the NMEC and SAME, institutional confusion and bureaucratic challenges (Acha, 2021; NMEC, 2017). The flow of these administrative and fiscal processes is often interrupted by multilayered approval processes and slow disbursement of funds (Yakubu, 2024; Fadumo, Adewunmi, Umolo, & Osonwa, 2025). Despite the fact that NFE funding is supposed to be a joint federal and state responsibility, irregularities in funding and disbursement often delay the implementation of educational programmes, and bureaucratic redundancies (often

referred to as "red tape") add to the cost of delivery and extend timelines (Yakubu, 2024). So, it is essential to understand these systemic issues in order to appreciate how administrative bottlenecks play out at the grassroots level and affect program delivery.

At the grassroots level, programme implementation involves learning centres staffed by facilitators and supervisors who manage daily learning activities (Acha, 2021). However, the impacts of administrative bottlenecks, such as funding delays, staffing and resource materials, can deter learner participation and ultimately degrade the quality of the program (Yakubu, 2024; Fadumo et al., 2025). In some instances, strategies such as school feeding have alleviated some of these bottlenecks to increase enrolment and learner retention (Gabdo et al., 2025). These real-world examples show the need to operationalise and measure constructs that affect implementation outcomes such as administrative bottlenecks, intergovernmental coordination, resource allocation, fiscal governance, and indicators of programme effectiveness (e.g. timeliness, resource adequacy, and retention) (Yakubu, 2024; Acha, 2021; Gabdo et al., 2025; Likangaga, Kumburu, & Panga, 2023).

The study draws on a wide range of theories such as implementation theory, street-level bureaucracy and principal-agent theory to provide a lens for analysis. Implementation Theory (Pressman & Wildavsky) views policy implementation as a sequence of interrelated activities among actors, arguing that coordination among multiple bureaucracies is critical for the success of a programme (Peter & Michael, 2015). Street-Level Bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980; Chang & Brewer, 2022) draws attention to the discretion of the street-level facilitator, showing how their decisions under resource constraints transform the policy for the learner. Principal-Agency Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Natalisma, Randa, & Sampe, 2021) conceives implementation as delegation and where the principal (NMEC) delegates to an agent (SAME), and where monitoring gaps might allow agent to diverge from principal's goals. This positioning of the implementation

of NFE illustrates how administrative uncertainties, coordination challenges and resource inadequacies present practical barriers, and this is the heart of the problem addressed by this study. The problem facing this study then, emerges from the disconnect between an idealized NFE system marked by clear policy, timelines for funding and coherent administration, and the reality of unclear policy, multiple mandates, multiple approvals and scarce resources. These inefficiencies result in poor delivery, lack of resources and attrition among learners, and compromise programme effectiveness. While previous research has examined programme effectiveness or budget adequacy, there is a lack of attention to vertical and horizontal administrative processes from the national to the local level. Few studies have focused on vertical and horizontal bottlenecks in multi-level governance and how they interact to impact on long-term programme success. This is the key purpose of the current study.

Purpose of the study

The general purpose of the study is to examine the administrative bottlenecks that emerge between policy design and programme delivery within the non-formal education sector in Nigeria. Specifically, the study:

1. determine the relationship between policy interpretation clarity and intergovernmental coordination effectiveness in non-formal education administration in Nigeria
2. examine the influence of accountability mechanisms on the efficiency of programme implementation at the local level in Nigeria
3. assess the cumulative effect of administrative bottlenecks on programme quality at the local level in Nigeria

Research Questions

In line with the specific objectives, the following research questions are raised to guide the study:

1. What is the relationship between policy interpretation clarity and intergovernmental coordination effectiveness in non-formal education administration in Nigeria?
2. How do accountability mechanisms influence the efficiency of programme implementation at the local level in Nigeria?
3. What is the cumulative effect of administrative bottlenecks on programme quality at the local level in Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were stated and tested at 5 % level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between policy interpretation clarity and intergovernmental coordination effectiveness in non-formal education administration
2. Accountability mechanisms do not significantly influence the efficiency of programme implementation at the local level.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, which, according to Obetta and Oreh (2017), is particularly suited to examining people's beliefs, opinions, attitudes, motivations, and behaviours in relation to a given phenomenon. This design was considered appropriate for the current investigation as it facilitates systematic collection of data from adult education program supervisors concerning the administrative processes, policy interpretation, and programme delivery within non-formal education across Nigeria. By capturing both perceptions and experiences, the design provides insight into the operational realities of decentralized governance in educational administration.

The research aimed at 774 adult education program supervisors in public institutions in Nigeria; these were chosen for their roles in managing, coordinating and supervising adult education

programs at the state and local levels. The sample size was to be determined with a sampling fraction of over 50.0 % based on guidelines for using large samples in research to attain a degree of representativeness in heterogeneous populations. According to Bartlett, Kotrlík and Higgins (2001), taking a sample of more than half a manageable population (less than 1,000) is optimal to enhance representativeness and reduce sampling error. Therefore, the sample size was 464 respondents, from a population of 774 adult education program supervisors, and was selected through a multistage sampling method. First, the states were stratified into Nigeria's six geopolitical zones to ensure representation from all parts of the country. In the second stage, individuals were sampled randomly from each stratum, with the aim of securing a sample of supervisors across a range of administrative settings. The purpose of this was to reflect the different interpretations of policy, accountability and delivery of programmes across regions and different institutional contexts.

The study employed a questionnaire, designed by the researcher, known as "Tracing Administrative Bottlenecks from Policy Design to Programme Delivery in Non-Formal Education Questionnaire." The questionnaire was based on literature and conceptual frameworks related to the administration, policy implementation and programme delivery of non-formal education. The questionnaire had four sections: Section A: Demographic data, such as administrative level, designation, years of experience and state.

Section B: Items addressing the interpretation and translation of national non-formal education policies at federal and state administrative levels. Section C: Items exploring the impact of accountable processes on the effectiveness of programme implementation at local levels. Section D: Items measuring the overall influence of administrative bottlenecks on the quality of programme delivery at local levels.

The instrument comprised 33 closed-ended items, each rated on a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). To establish content validity, the instrument was reviewed by three educational administration and policy studies experts, and their suggestions were integrated. Reliability was tested with a sample of 30 adult education supervisors not in the main sample and achieved a reliability coefficient of 0.82, which is high and implies that the instrument used is suitable for the study.

The researcher administered the questionnaires with the help of field assistants. In locations where access was restricted, the questionnaire was administered online via institutional email addresses and official WhatsApp groups for adult education coordinators. The study involved voluntary participation, with all participants giving informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, in keeping with ethical guidelines for research with human subjects. Such assurances were designed to encourage responding accurately and in accordance with ethical standards of research. Data were coded and analyzed with SPSS version 26. Means and standard deviations were calculated to describe respondents' perceptions and experiences.

Results

The formulated hypotheses were tested using regression analysis to examine relationships between policy interpretation clarity, accountability mechanisms, administrative bottlenecks, and programme outcomes. Analyses were conducted at a 0.05 level of significance.

Table 1: Mean with standard deviation responses of the respondents on the relationship between policy interpretation clarity and intergovernmental coordination effectiveness in non-formal education administration in Nigeria

sn	Item Statements	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	National non-formal education policies are clearly articulated.	3.14	1.06	Agreed

2	Operational guidelines derived from policies are unambiguous.	2.37	0.85	Disagreed
3	Federal policy directives are consistently interpreted at the state level.	3.17	1.05	Agreed
4	There is minimal contradiction between policy statements and implementation guidelines.	2.88	0.84	Agreed
5	Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined in policy documents.	3.22	0.93	Agreed

Note: \bar{X} =Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, N = Number of Respondents= 464

The responses of the 464 adult education supervisors regarding the clarity of national non-formal education policies and its implications for intergovernmental coordination are summarized in Table 1. From Table 1, it can be seen that item statements 1, 2, 3 to 5 had mean score greater than 2.50. This indicate that, in principle, policy frameworks provide an identifiable structure for administrative action and guidance. Nonetheless, participants disagreed that operational guidelines derived from policies are unambiguous ($\bar{X} = 2.37$), indicating that although policies themselves may be well-formulated, their translation into actionable directives is sometimes unclear.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between policy interpretation clarity and intergovernmental coordination effectiveness in non-formal education administration

Table 2: Correlation analysis of the relationship between policy interpretation clarity and intergovernmental coordination effectiveness in non-formal education administration in Nigeria

	Policy Interpretation Clarity	Intergovernmental Coordination Effectiveness
Policy Interpretation Clarity	1.00	0.71**
Intergovernmental Coordination Effectiveness	0.71**	1.00

** p < .001; N = 464.

Hypothesis 1 posited no significant relationship between policy interpretation clarity and intergovernmental coordination effectiveness. Pearson correlation analysis (Table 2) revealed a strong positive correlation (r = 0.71, N = 464, p < .001), indicating that greater policy clarity is

associated with enhanced intergovernmental coordination. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Table 3: Mean responses of respondents on how accountability mechanisms influence the efficiency of programme implementation at the local level in Nigeria

sn	Item Statements	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	The approval process for programme implementation is streamlined.	2.63	0.89	Agreed
2	Multiple approval layers delay programme execution.	3.09	1.14	Agreed
3	Funds are released on schedule.	2.64	0.86	Agreed
4	Budget approvals are completed without unnecessary delay.	3.11	0.97	Agreed
5	Funding flows smoothly from federal to local levels.	2.76	0.88	Agreed
6	Administrative clearance procedures are predictable.	3.17	1.04	Agreed
7	Excessive bureaucratic requirements hinder implementation.	2.78	0.79	Agreed
8	Disbursement procedures are transparent.	3.1789	1.00	Agreed

Note: \bar{X} =Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, N = Number of Respondents= 464

Table 3 shows the results for Research Question 2. The analysis centred on mean scores of respondents’ ratings of a range of statements relating to administrative and accountability processes related to local implementation of the programme. With a criterion mean of 2.50, the mean score of all eight items was higher than the criterion mean, suggesting that the respondents agreed on the statements.

Hypothesis 2: Accountability mechanisms do not significantly influence the efficiency of programme implementation at the local level.

The Results of Hypothesis 2 are presented on table 4

Table 4: Regression Analysis of the Influence of Accountability Mechanisms on the Efficiency of Programme Implementation at the Local Level in Nigeria

Predictor / Statistic	B	SE	β	t	P
(Constant)	0.989	0.077		12.822	<.001
Accountability Mechanisms	0.688	0.023	0.807	29.343	<.001
Model Fit Statistics					
R	0.807				
R ²	0.651				
Adjusted R ²	0.650				
Std. Error of Estimate	0.57549				

F(1, 462) 861.014*

Note: Dependent Variable = Efficiency of Programme Implementation. Accountability Mechanisms significantly predicted VAR00009, explaining approximately 65.1% of the variance in the outcome variable.
 $p < .001$

Our second hypothesis stated that local accountability mechanisms would not have a substantial impact on the efficiency of programme implementation. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a simple linear regression analysis, and the outcomes are shown in Table 4 below.

The results show that accountability mechanisms significantly predict the efficiency of programme implementation ($B = 0.688$, $SE = 0.023$, $\beta = 0.807$, $t = 29.343$, $p < .001$). The positive coefficient indicates that increased accountability is positively related to implementation efficiency. Further, the model has considerable explanatory power, explaining around 65.1% of the variance in programme implementation efficiency ($R^2 = 0.651$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.650$). The overall model fit was statistically significant, $F(1, 462) = 861.014$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictor meaningfully improves the prediction of the outcome variable.

Research question 3: What is the cumulative effect of administrative bottlenecks on programme quality at the local level in Nigeria?

Results of Research Question four are presented on table 5

Table 5: Mean responses of the respondents on the cumulative effect of administrative bottlenecks on programme quality at the local level in Nigeria

sn	Item Statements	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	Bureaucratic procedures significantly delay programme delivery.	2.77	0.78	Agreed
2	Administrative bottlenecks accumulate across implementation stages.	3.23	0.91	Agreed
3	Delays at one administrative level affect other levels.	2.78	0.74	Agreed
4	Institutional inefficiencies disrupt programme planning.	3.32	0.87	Agreed
5	Administrative complexity reduces implementation speed.	2.88	0.71	Agreed
6	Programme content is delivered as planned.	3.11	1.01	Agreed
7	Facilitators receive adequate administrative support.	2.82	0.79	Agreed
8	Learning materials arrive on time.	2.71	0.74	Agreed
9	Programme standards are consistently maintained.	3.00	1.11	Agreed

10	Administrative delays reduce programme quality.	2.84	0.76	Agreed
11	Programmes start according to schedule.	2.66	0.84	Agreed
12	Administrative delays cause interruptions in service delivery.	3.06	1.07	Agreed
13	Activities are completed within approved timelines.	3.38	0.79	Agreed
14	Fund delays postpone programme commencement.	2.62	0.79	Agreed
15	Timely approvals enhance programme continuity.	2.78	0.89	Agreed
16	Administrative processes support effective programme outcomes.	2.81	0.89	Agreed
17	Learner enrollment is stable across implementation cycles.	2.85	0.81	Agreed
18	Learner retention is affected by administrative inefficiencies.	2.73	0.91	Agreed
19	Facilitator motivation is influenced by administrative systems.	2.83	0.88	Agreed
20	Overall programme goals are achieved efficiently.	2.78	0.89	Agreed

Note: \bar{X} =Mean, SD =Standard Deviation, N = Number of Respondents = 464

The results addressing Research Question 3 are presented in Table 5. Using a benchmark mean of 2.50, all twenty items recorded mean scores above this threshold, indicating general agreement among respondents regarding the presence and effects of administrative bottlenecks on programme quality at the local level.

Discussion of Findings

This study's results suggest that policy interpretation clarity contributes to the improvement of intergovernmental coordination in the non-formal education administration in Nigeria. The respondents concurred that national education policies are unambiguously expressed, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, but there is some degree of confusion in operational guidelines. This trend implies that although policies provide structural direction, difficulties may arise in their interpretation into procedures at the state and local levels. Our findings are consistent with the findings of Gil-Garcia, Guler, Pardo, and Burke (2019) who found that clarity of roles and responsibilities (CRR) is a prerequisite to inter-organisational coordination and information

sharing. Well-defined functions and responsibilities, they contend, eliminate confusion, create trust between inter-organisational partners and improve inter-governmental performance. Likewise, Acha (2021) noted that while Nigerian national education policies outline functions across government levels, confusion often occurs during implementation. This, in turn, can produce "role complexity" and "role ambiguity", which Gil-Garcia et al. (2019) argue can result in collaborative inertia.

The predictive power observed in this study also highlights these observations. Gil-Garcia et al. (2019) note that "boundary objects", such as official statewide plans or diagrams, clarify roles and support coordination efforts. Acha (2021) also highlights the importance of planning and proper allocation of responsibilities to coordinators and facilitators for the program to run smoothly. Together, these findings indicate that a clear interpretation of policy not only clarifies the right process to follow but also influences the ability of agencies to coordinate, reduce ambiguity and ensure implementation of the programme across administrative levels.

The research also found that accountability arrangements play a critical role in local programme implementation. Survey participants recognised that transparency, approval processes, and standardised administrative processes enable implementation. They also explained that numerous approvals and administrative processes could slow down implementation. This ambivalence suggests that accountability is both enabler and hindrance of administrative processes.

These insights are in line with Natalisma, Randa and Sampe (2021), who showed that public accountability, including legal, policy and programmatic accountability, has a positive effect on government performance. Their regression analysis found that an increase in accountability among stakeholders was positively associated with local government performance. Likewise, Likangaga, Kumburu, and Panga (2023) highlighted periodic reporting, setting clear objectives and managing finances as key indicators of accountability that are predictive of service delivery.

However, the study also identifies some potential accountability issues. Yakubu (2024) observes that bureaucracy, marked by inflexible and intricate processes, can hinder service delivery through bureaucratic bottlenecks and slow decision-making. In some cases, an emphasis on financial accountability might actually lead to a focus on measurable outputs rather than service quality (Likangaga et al., 2023). These findings point to the fact that while accountability systems are key to efficiency in implementation, their structure, flexibility and the level of oversight and autonomy offered impact whether they are enablers or barriers to performance.

Lastly, the research showed that bureaucratic bottlenecks aggregate in a potentially destabilising way to affect local programme quality. Survey participants concurred that administrative delays, institutional inefficiency, and financial constraints impact negatively on programme planning, implementation, timeliness, continuity, and participant outcomes. While basic programme quality may not suffer, the cumulative effect of delays seems to limit programme impact.

This is consistent with Yakubu (2024), who found that cumbersome and lengthy approval processes delay the delivery of public services. Similarly, Fadumo, Adewunmi, Umolo, and Osonwa (2025) reported that more than 60% of infrastructure projects in Nigeria have exceeded their initial schedule and budget as a result of bureaucratic bottlenecks, demonstrating how delays can compound over time to diminish program effectiveness.

Financing was another key issue identified in this study. Acha (2021) identified that while planning and monitoring may be done well, evaluation and financial sustainability is not. Similarly, the respondents suggested that fund delays impact the start and continuation of programs. However, flexibility in approach may enable the retention of key goals. For instance, Gabdo, Sule and Jafaru (2025) noted improvements in school feeding programs, such as increased school enrolment in the Federal Capital Territory, despite administrative challenges. But as Fadumo et al. (2025) discuss, delays can cause capital to lie dormant, delay implementation and erode public trust.

Conclusion

This study has shown that local non-formal education (NFE) programme delivery effectiveness and quality in Nigeria is determined by a number of interlinked factors. First, the interpretation of policies, the design and operation of accountability mechanisms and administrative bottlenecks. It seems that when responsibilities are clearly defined, there is improved intergovernmental coordination, as uncertainty is minimised and trust is more likely to be developed between agencies. However, inconsistencies in operational guidelines tend to restrict the extent of these benefits, revealing the challenges in translating intentions into action. This is because, it appears that the effectiveness of programmes is particularly affected by accountability mechanisms. As such, where reporting and approval processes are clear, procedures are not complex, and workflows are predictable, programmes can be implemented on time. But where bureaucratic processes are too rigid or financial controls too tight, this can inadvertently delay service delivery, implying that effective accountability requires a balance between control and discretion.

Recommendations

In light of the findings outlined above, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Government and education policy-makers and administrators should prioritise the development of clear operational guidelines, role descriptions, and coordination instruments, such as process maps, flowcharts or detailed plans to avoid role confusion and further improve intergovernmental co-ordination.
2. Local government agencies and programme managers should develop accountability tools that ensure oversight without compromising flexibility. These include routine reporting, setting up

performance indicators and sound financial practices that ensure efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery.

3. Steps should be taken to streamline administrative processes, minimise the number of approval points and expedite the disbursement of funds. Specific measures such as process re-engineering, computer-based record maintenance and training for administrative staff could assist in reducing time-delays and improving programme performance.

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