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Policy Implementation Is Operational

Steven Were Omamo

Development Strategies and Governance Unit
IFPRI Africa Regional Office

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AUTHORS

Steven Were Omamo (s.w.omamo@cgiar.org) is Director of the Development Strategies and Governance (DSG) Unit and Director for Africa at the International Food Policy Research Institute, Nairobi, Kenya.

Abstract

This paper argues that policy implementation must be understood as a fundamentally operational process, not merely the execution of policy intent. It proposes a framework centered on four core dimensions of implementation: activation cost, option value, kinetics, and negotiation. Drawing on the case of the World Food Programme's 2008 Cash and Voucher Policy, the paper shows that implementing a policy requires building physical and institutional systems, creating delivery capacity, managing uncertainty, and preserving strategic flexibility. The case is not about cash transfers as such, but about what it took—organizationally, technically, and politically—for the World Food Programme to move from a policy decision to sustained, system wide operational capability and delivery. The paper concludes that successful policy implementation depends on treating implementation itself as the central frontier of policy action—requiring investment, learning, negotiation, and time. Several implications emerge for researchers, practitioners, and investors seeking to close the gap between policy on paper and policy in action.

Keywords: Policy, implementation, development, readiness

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Introduction

Across many development contexts, there remains a persistent and troubling gap between policy aspirations and tangible results. Governments and development partners routinely launch policies and strategies intended to drive transformation—whether in agriculture, education, health, or infrastructure—but implementation falters. Reforms stall. Outcomes fall short. This repeated cycle of policy ambition followed by weak follow-through has led to growing skepticism about the effectiveness of policy reforms in producing real change (Bayat et al., 2023).

Effective policy implementation is especially critical in the agrifood sector, where outcomes depend not only on sound policy design but also on the timely delivery of services, infrastructure, and institutional support across highly dispersed and diverse rural and urban environments. Because agricultural productivity, rural incomes, and food and nutrition security are deeply tied to the operational performance of public programs and regulatory systems, implementation failures in this sector tend to have particularly wide-reaching and persistent effects.

Africa's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) illustrates this dynamic. While the 2014 Malabo Declaration set clear agricultural transformation goals, the 2023 CAADP Biennial Review shows that no country is on track to meet all 2025 targets. The continental performance score stands at just 4.56 against the benchmark of 9.29 — with notable slippage even among earlier front-runners (AUDA-NEPAD, 2023). In contrast, in parts of Asia, successful policy implementation has been a distinguishing feature of sustained transformation. In China, for example, the "No. 1 Central Document" on rural revitalization of 2004 was followed a cascading policy architecture that drove coordinated investments, institutional innovation, and delivery platforms down to county level (GoC, 2024). Similarly, Vietnam's implementation of its Doi Moi reforms, including Resolution 10 in 1988 on land rights, catalyzed agricultural productivity growth and export surges within a decade, aided by local-level interpretation and iterative adaptation (Vu and Nguyen, 2021).

The literature has tended to locate implementation outcomes in issues of governance, institutional weakness, or lack of capacity (Andrews et al., 2017; Hudson et al., 2019). While these are indeed critical, they often remain abstract. Less explored is the operational core of implementation—the practical mechanics of translating policy into action. The execution of policies is not just about coordination or authority; it is about mobilizing people, resources, systems, and decisions in time and space. Yet this operational dimension is typically glossed over in both writings and conversations about policy implementation.

The argument advanced in this paper is that policy implementation is fundamentally operational. An approach that surfaces the core operational dynamics underpinning policy execution is therefore proposed. This approach is inspired by field-based experiences and draws from the emerging concept of *development readiness*—a framework that emphasizes the capability of systems to move, align, trigger, and adapt in support of development objectives (Omamo, 2025).

In doing so, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the policy-to-practice gap and to propose new avenues for assessing and strengthening implementation capacity in operational terms.

The next section reviews prevailing approaches to analyzing policy implementation and highlights where they fall short. This is followed by a framing of policy implementation as an operational challenge and an illustration of that framing for the World Food Programme's 2008 Cash and Voucher Policy (WFP, 2008). Because the paper has both analytical and practical relevance, implications for both research and practice are then drawn. A summary and conclusions round out the analysis. The overall message is that the practice of implementation must be treated as an arena in its own right—one that requires time, resourcing, and learning. To focus on policy alone is to miss the place where real change happens: not in what is promised, but in what is built.

Existing Approaches to Analyzing Policy Making and Implementation

Efforts to understand and improve development outcomes have yielded a variety of analytical frameworks, ranging from linear models of policymaking to more dynamic approaches grounded in political economy or institutional diagnostics. Each has made valuable contributions to the study and practice of development. But regarding the actual implementation of policies—translating design into delivery—many of these approaches fall short, particularly in addressing the operational dimensions of performance. This section reviews the dominant schools of thought and identifies the persistent blind spot in operational readiness that this paper seeks to address (Table 1).

One of the earliest and most enduring conceptualizations of the policy process is the policy cycle model, which outlines a series of sequential stages—agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. This model, which emerged in the mid-20th century and has been widely adopted in public administration curricula and donor frameworks, provides a structured view of how policies are supposed to be developed and enacted. However, in practice, policymaking is rarely linear. It is messy, iterative, and shaped by shifting priorities, bureaucratic politics, and evolving constraints (Hill and Hupe, 2014). The neat segmentation of the policy cycle obscures the entanglement of design and execution and offers little guidance on how to navigate the operational terrain where implementation actually happens.

Closely related to the policy cycle approach are tools such as logical frameworks (logframes) and results-based management (RBM), which structure development interventions through a cascade of inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts. These tools have become the default templates in many multilateral and bilateral agencies, prized for their clarity and accountability. Yet they tend to assume that implementation will proceed as planned once the causal logic is defined. In doing so, they overlook the many real-world disruptions—capacity shortfalls, stakeholder resistance, coordination failures—that derail even the best-designed interventions. Such frameworks often promote "ritual compliance" rather than genuine responsiveness to implementation realities (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

Table 1: Comparative approaches to analyzing policy making and implementation

Analytical Approach	**Core Focus / Strengths**	**Limitations for Understanding Implementation**	**Value Addition of the "Policy Implementation is Operational" Perspective**
Policy Cycle Model	Sequential view of policymaking (agenda-setting to evaluation); helpful for clarity and pedagogy	Overly linear; ignores iteration and complexity; weak on execution dynamics	Recognizes implementation as an embedded, adaptive process requiring sustained operational capability
Logical Frameworks and Results Based Management	Clarifies goals, inputs, and causal chains; emphasizes accountability and planning	Assumes implementation proceeds as planned; poor on adaptation, politics, and bottlenecks	Adds a diagnostic lens to assess whether systems are operationally ready to deliver results
Political Economy Analysis	Illuminates incentives, power structures, feasibility of reform	Strong on diagnosis, weak on operational pathways; stops short of delivery strategy	Complements feasibility analysis with actionable insights on what needs to function operationally
Governance and Institutional Diagnostics (WGI, PEFA, etc.)	Enables benchmarking and macro-level comparison of public sector health	Too aggregated; misses program-level, real-time delivery issues	Adds meso-level operational specificity: can identify where and how systems falter on the ground
Implementation Science / Delivery Units	Focuses on execution, performance tracking, problem-solving	Often tied to elite commitment; difficult to scale without top-down support; uneven uptake	Offers a middle path: operational principles that can be applied more broadly and embedded in routine implementation analysis

Source: Author's synthesis

A more dynamic lens is offered by political economy analysis (PEA), which focuses on the distribution of power, the interests of stakeholders, and the incentives embedded in institutions (Grindle, 2017). PEA has been instrumental in shifting the focus from "what should be done" to "what is politically feasible." It has illuminated why some reforms succeed while others are blocked or reversed, despite their technical merits. The World Bank's problem-driven political economy work (Fritz et al., 2014) and the Overseas Development Institute's "politically smart, locally led" approach (Booth and Unsworth, 2014) are leading examples. However, PEA tends to center on diagnosis rather than operational strategy. It identifies constraints and entry points but typically does not provide a roadmap for the day-to-day work of making policies function on the ground.

In parallel, a suite of governance indicators and institutional diagnostics has emerged, aimed at benchmarking and comparing performance across countries. These include the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), Doing Business reports, and Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) assessments. While useful for highlighting systemic issues such as rule of law, regulatory burden, and fiscal transparency, these measures are often too aggregated to capture the granular, context-specific realities of implementation. They are better suited for macro-level comparisons than for guiding mid-level managers trying to unblock delivery bottlenecks (Kaufmann et al., 2010; PEFA Secretariat, 2020).

More recently, the field of implementation science—largely developed in health and education sectors—and the rise of delivery units in government have attempted to close the gap between strategy and execution. Countries like the United Kingdom and Malaysia pioneered high-level delivery units to track key outcomes, apply data for performance management, and drive inter-agency coordination. These innovations represent important advances, offering structured approaches to implementation monitoring and problem-solving (Wilson et al., 2024). Yet they often depend on sustained political commitment at the highest levels and may falter when transplanted into settings without strong executive backing or institutional continuity.

Taken together, these approaches have enriched understanding of development performance. They highlight political constraints, clarify institutional arrangements, and promote results-oriented thinking. However, they also tend to treat implementation as a black box—a final stage in the process that will unfold smoothly if planning is sound and political will is present. In reality, implementation is an arena of action in its own right, full of frictions, misalignments, and trade-offs. Still missing is a structured, empirically grounded way to assess the operational readiness of systems to actually execute policy—whether that policy involves building infrastructure, delivering services, scaling innovations, or responding to crises.

The framework proposed in this paper seeks to fill this gap. Without introducing any particular tool or model at this stage, the argument is that policy implementation must be analyzed through the lens of operational systems and their performance. This calls for attention to core operational forces such as momentum, coordination, cost of activation, and adaptability—categories that remain underexplored in most conventional approaches.

Policy Implementation as an Operational Challenge

Viewing policy implementation as an operational challenge begins with recognizing policy implementation as a complex systems problem involving coordination and mobilization of actors, resources, infrastructure, and adaptive mechanisms. Implementation success depends on the ability to make systems work—not just administratively, but physically, institutionally, organizationally, and socially. This view does not deny the importance of politics, institutions, or design. Rather, it insists that even well-designed and politically supported policies will fail if the operational foundations for delivery are not in place or are under strain. In this sense, implementation is the lived reality of policy—where development happens or stalls. An overtly operational lens is required to understand why implementation succeeds in some contexts and fails in others.

Hill and Hupe (2013) powerfully frame implementation as a form of operational governance—arguing that policy results are significantly shaped by the behavior of street-level actors, institutional norms, and network dynamics. The current approach builds on this insight but extends it by offering a structured diagnostic logic. Drawing on the "development readiness" framework, the argument is that four interdependent operational forces determine the real-time readiness of any system to implement policy: kinetics, negotiation, activation costs, and option value (Omamo, 2025) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Analytical framework

Source: Adapted from Omamo (2025)

Kinetics and negotiation lie at the core. Kinetics provides the operational backbone: supply chains, infrastructure, and systems for action. Negotiation aligns actors and creates the conditions for action to unfold. Readiness also requires low activation cost, minimizing friction in the transition from intent to implementation. And it depends on high option value, preserving the capacity and flexibility to act when conditions shift. When these elements align, systems move; when they do not, even well-designed strategies falter. Development readiness thus is not a static asset; it is a dynamic condition, achieved through the interaction of technical systems and institutional arrangements.

Kinetics: The Capacity to Move Resources and People

Kinetics refers to the ability of a system to mobilize, allocate, and physically or digitally move resources—people, goods, services, and information—to the right places at the right time. It encompasses logistics systems, transport infrastructure, warehousing, supply chains, digital platforms, and the ability to deploy skilled personnel. Kinetic failures are pervasive. For example, food assistance programs often secure ample food supplies and beneficiary lists, but falter because they cannot move food to distribution points in time (WFP, 2022a). During COVID-19, many governments announced social protection programs that were delayed by months due to the lack of digital payment systems or poor last-mile delivery capacity. These are kinetic breakdowns: failures not of design or funding, but of motion—breakdowns which Andrews et al. (2017) attribute to "isomorphic mimicry" where the appearance of capacity masks the absence of real delivery capability.

Negotiation: The Ability to Align and Coordinate Actors

Implementation is not only about motion; it is also about alignment. Negotiation capacity refers to the ability of implementing systems to coordinate across agencies, resolve conflicts, broker roles, and maintain coherence amid diversity. Negotiation here thus refers not to formal diplomacy but to routine, practical negotiations embedded in program design, budget decisions, reporting systems, and local interactions (Lipsky, 1980). No major policy is executed by a single actor. Ministries, departments, donors, local governments, NGOs, and private firms all play parts, often without clear incentives or accountability structures. Negotiation challenges are legion and frequently block implementation, even when funding and planning are in place, imparting political economy considerations to operational dynamics. Policies often fail not due to technical errors but because actors are misaligned, authority is unclear, and implementation coalitions are fractured. The issue is not the policies per se, but the absence of negotiated settlements about what they mean and who does what (Andrews, 2013).

Activation Costs: The Ease or Difficulty of Getting Started

Policies often stall because the cost—financial, administrative, or procedural—of starting them is too high. Activation costs represent the burden of initiating action within systems and may include cumbersome procurement rules, delayed hiring processes, budgeting inflexibility, or compliance requirements that overwhelm frontline actors. High activation costs create "policy inertia" where systems that look ready cannot move. Development systems frequently collapse under their own administrative complexity (Pritchett et al., 2013). Large programs often become brittle and unable to pivot or launch new components due to accumulated activation burdens. Activation costs are not just friction—they are often invisible handbrakes on progress. Removing them does not mean deregulating indiscriminately. Rather, it entails identifying where procedural overloads or physical impediments prevent execution and designing systems that are lean where they need to be (Ramalingam and Wild, 2019).

Option Value: Flexibility and Adaptive Capacity

Finally, implementation requires systems to cope with uncertainty. Option value refers to the capacity of a system to respond to change—to reallocate, re-sequence, or redesign activities in real time. This includes flexibility in budgets, feedback mechanisms, and decision space for local implementers. Without option value, systems can persist in error, becoming rigid and unable to adapt to shocks or feedback. Adaptive management—structured learning and adjustment during implementation—was a key success factor in the UK's Doing Development Differently approach (Wild et al., 2017). Systems with embedded optionality are more resilient and responsive (Ramalingam et al., 2013). Option value is not simply flexibility for its own sake. It is strategic adaptability: the ability to change direction based on signals from the field, changes in context, or new information. Building option value requires decentralization, trust, information flow, and policy architectures that permit revision (Andrews et al., 2017).

These four operational forces—kinetics, negotiation, activation costs, and option value—do not operate in isolation. High kinetic capacity may fail without coordination (negotiation), and rapid deployment can backfire without the ability to adapt (option value). The implementation system must function as an integrated whole. Like an ecosystem, strength in one area cannot compensate for systemic weakness. The case of cash-based transfers in WFP detailed in the next section illustrates that framing policy implementation as operational in this way surfaces the machinery of delivery and provides a new lens—both diagnostic and practical—through which to understand how to make policies work in the real world.

These forces are also not simply metaphors. They refer to observable, measurable system features that play out in almost every policy arena, from safety nets to climate response, from infrastructure delivery to education reform. And they define the scope and requirements of policy implementation. In this sense, the current framework operationalizes the terrain mapped by Hill and Hupe (2013), offering tools for diagnosing where policy stands in relation to system capability, and what it would take to make it move. The current approach also integrates the notion offered by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) that political, fiscal, and institutional legacies shape outcomes but shifts the lens from macro trajectories to micro systems dynamics—asking how policy becomes deliverable in context, and what mechanisms determine whether systems can mobilize or are stuck in mimicry.

Case Study – WFP's Cash and Voucher Policy

WFP's experience scaling its cash assistance portfolio from under USD 10 million in 2009 to over USD 3.3 billion by 2022, reaching 56 million people in 72 countries, did not follow a linear trajectory. By 2023, cash-based transfers constituted 35 percent of WFP's assistance portfolio; in 2024, it rose to 39 percent despite funding cuts, and operations expanded to 76 countries. This growth was the result of a sustained and deliberate process of institutional innovation, strategic investment, internal retooling, and ongoing negotiation—with donors, partners, markets, and governments. The evolution demonstrates that policies do not implement themselves; they must be activated, negotiated, and made to move through real-world systems, with all four operational forces of the development readiness framework featuring prominently.

From Policy to Capability: Activating Cash Transfers

WFP's formal entry into cash-based assistance began with the adoption of its 2008 Cash and Voucher Policy (WFP, 2008).[1] That policy opened the door—but crucially, it did not unlock the system. It was a statement of intent; an articulation of a new option, but one that required years of careful activation before it could become a viable delivery channel. Activation meant building the entire machinery to make cash transfers work: designing pilots, developing operational manuals, negotiating agreements with financial service providers, investing in staff training, developing market assessment tools, and creating the governance, monitoring, and risk-assurance systems needed to ensure accountability. These were not peripheral issues—they were central to making the policy real (WFP, 2015). The activation process was costly—both financially and organizationally.[2] But it was necessary. Without these systems in place, WFP could not act with confidence. The early investments in capability effectively lowered future activation costs, allowing the organization to scale operations rapidly once the infrastructure was mature and the internal and external trust in the modality had been earned.

Building and Preserving Option Value

The 2008 policy granted WFP option value—the ability to use cash or vouchers as part of its broader toolkit. But this option was not simply about modality choice at the beneficiary level. It was about creating a strategic readiness platform: the ability to deploy the right tool in the right context, depending on the nature of the crisis, the functionality of local markets, and the preferences of affected populations (WFP, 2015; WFP, 2020). WFP has been clear—resolutely so—that it does not subscribe to a simplistic "cash-first" approach. While many donors and global actors have promoted cash as the default modality, WFP has argued that context should drive modality, not ideology (WFP, 2022b). The organization has preserved and defended the option to deliver in-kind food in contexts where markets do not function, where inflation is spiraling, where security is compromised, or where digital or financial inclusion is limited (WFP, 2023). At the same time, the systems built for cash-based transfers—digital infrastructure, registration platforms, vendor networks, payment modalities—created new internal option value. These systems became the foundation for other instruments: forecast-based financing, index-based insurance, anticipatory cash payments, and digital safety nets. The infrastructure created for cash delivery thus served not only external beneficiaries, but also WFP itself—strengthening its ability

[1] Cash-based transfers had featured in a number of countries prior to this, but without formal corporate recognition and guidance.
[2] For instance, the pilots to test modalities and generate impact evidence in Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Niger, Uganda, and Yemen cost well over USD 13 million, not counting the time and resources devoted by implementing WFP country offices (SOURCE – Spain grant).

to act strategically, flexibly, and proactively. The option value was outward-facing and inward-looking at the same time.

Kinetics: From Slow Uptake to Systemic Scale

The rollout of WFP's cash-based assistance was deliberately slow at first. Between 2009 and 2011, the organization tested cash and voucher approaches in a limited number of countries (WFP, 2015). The aim was not speed but rather control, quality, and learning. WFP understood the reputational and operational risks of a poorly implemented cash transfer. It knew that delivering money at scale, in fragile environments, to vulnerable populations, carried enormous downside if systems failed. And so it moved slowly, cautiously, building evidence, refining protocols, and strengthening internal systems (WFP, 2021). The acceleration phase began only when WFP had developed the internal capability to deliver at scale—when the activation cost of a new program had been reduced to manageable levels, and when external actors (including donors and governments) had gained confidence in the modality. Around 2015, WFP's cash portfolio began to grow rapidly. By 2022, it had become a core pillar of the organization's assistance portfolio, with more than a third of all aid delivered via cash (WFP, 2023). This kinetic arc—slow, deliberate uptake followed by rapid, system-wide expansion—is a hallmark of successful operational implementation (Woltering et al., 2019). It is not unusual for a policy shift to take years to build momentum. What matters is the readiness of systems to scale once the moment arrives. In this case, WFP's early investment in systems, people, and governance paid off: the scale-up was swift, strategic, and sustained.

Negotiation: The Operational Reality of Partnership

None of this could have happened without persistent and multidimensional negotiation. Internally, WFP had to negotiate between its programmatic and operational arms, between headquarters and field offices, between finance, logistics, and protection teams—to define business processes, allocate responsibilities, and ensure compliance (WFP, 2015; WFP, 2021). Externally, WFP negotiated with donors and partners, some of whom were eager to push cash as a political priority (Grand Bargain, 2016). WFP accepted donor support—but pushed back when needed to preserve its right to determine modality based on context and beneficiary needs (WFP, 2016). This was a negotiated balance—between donor preference and institutional judgment. Negotiation also occurred with host governments who often had to approve the use of cash, sometimes adapt regulatory frameworks and participate in the targeting and delivery process. And it extended to local partners: mobile money providers, banks, vendors, and community groups—all of whom had to be engaged to make delivery systems work in practice (WFP, 2014). In short, the implementation of the policy was not just technical. It was political, organizational, relational, and iterative, demanding not only procedures and protocols but also persuasion, compromise, and trust.

The WFP experience maps closely onto the conceptual structure outlined in this paper, but it also adds texture to each element. Activation cost, in theory, refers to the institutional investment required to make policy deliverable. In practice, WFP absorbed these costs by building operational manuals, contracting mechanisms, internal training systems, and cross-functional coordination protocols—transforming what began as bespoke pilots into something replicable at scale. The framework concept of option value finds real expression in WFP's insistence on preserving multiple delivery modalities. That flexibility was not accidental; it was engineered and defended as a core operational asset. Kinetics, as a concept, draws attention to tempo—how quickly or slowly implementation moves. In WFP's case, the speed of uptake followed the readiness of internal systems, not the urgency of external pressure. Once the right scaffolding was in place, acceleration became possible. And negotiation, the final dimension of the framework, emerges not as a one-time political hurdle but as a continuous operational requirement—threaded through every stage of design, delivery, and adaptation. Implementation was shaped by both deliberate design and cumulative experience.

Building on the original 2008 policy, WFP adopted a revised cash policy in June 2023 (WFP, 2023). This update formalized lessons from a decade of evidence-based delivery and significantly strengthened institutional infrastructure. The policy not only reaffirmed WFP's dual modality strategy but also laid out a structured implementation plan backed by explicit investment commitments.

Implications for Research

The framework presented in this paper—centered on activation cost, option value, kinetics, and negotiation—invites a rethinking of how researchers approach the study of policy implementation. Much of the existing literature tends to view implementation as either a bureaucratic function or a technical follow-through step between policy design and eventual impact. As a result, implementation is often marginalized in both research agendas and policy discourse. This paper adds to calls for a shift: to treat implementation as a primary object of inquiry—a strategic, operational, and institutional process that deserves the same analytical rigor applied to policy formulation or evaluation (Hill and Hupe, 2013; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

A first implication for research is the need to re-center implementation as a domain of active decision-making, investment, and uncertainty. The WFP cash-based transfers case illustrates that implementation is not merely a matter of rolling out plans—it is the construction of systems and the navigation of complexity. Researchers should explore how organizations translate policy mandates into institutional capability, how they sequence their internal reforms, and how operational systems mature over time. Implementation must be recognized not as the tail end of a policy process, but as the core arena where policies are contested, adapted, and ultimately made real.

Second, this paper highlights the need for research to make activation costs visible and measurable. Too often, policy analysis begins after a program is launched, ignoring what it took to launch it in the first place. Yet these upfront activation costs—technical, financial, organizational, and political—are often decisive. Without accounting for them, researchers risk misunderstanding why some reforms succeed while others stall. Future research could build typologies of activation costs, investigate how these costs are distributed within and across institutions, and examine the role of donors and governance structures in either enabling or obscuring them.

A third area for further inquiry concerns the notion of option value as a form of institutional readiness. Most research focuses on what is done, but not on what organizations preserve the ability to do. As the WFP case shows, maintaining delivery flexibility—between cash and in-kind assistance, for example—is not a neutral or costless choice. It requires investment in systems and infrastructure that may not be used in every context, but are essential when the environment shifts. Research must explore how organizations create, defend, and manage this kind of latent capacity, and how option value contributes to resilience, responsiveness, and innovation.

Closely related is the question of kinetics—the speed, rhythm, and trajectory of implementation. While research often focuses on scale as an end state, it pays less attention to how scale is achieved. The WFP case reveals that implementation often begins slowly, as institutions build confidence and capacity, before entering a phase of rapid scaling once systems are in place. This dynamic progression—from pilot to inflection to institutionalization—deserves far greater empirical and theoretical attention. Researchers could study what conditions tip systems from experimentation into acceleration, how kinetic trajectories differ across sectors, and what risks are introduced when scale precedes readiness.

A fifth implication pertains to negotiation as a central feature of implementation. Most policy studies recognize that policy design is political but assume that implementation is managerial. In practice, however, implementation is an ongoing process of negotiation: between donors and recipients, between headquarters and field teams, between implementers and the communities they serve. These negotiations shape everything from modality to targeting to accountability mechanisms. Research should treat negotiation not as noise in the system, but as a structuring force in how implementation unfolds, succeeds, or fails.

The approach diverges in important ways from the field of implementation science, which has gained traction particularly in health, education, and other programmatic sectors (Wilson et al., 2024). While implementation science focuses on bridging the “know-do” gap—ensuring that evidence-based interventions are adopted and applied with fidelity—its underlying assumption is that the intervention is already well-defined, and the primary challenge lies in optimizing uptake. By contrast, the framework developed in this paper treats implementation not as the refinement of a known solution, but as the construction of operational capability from the ground up, often amid uncertainty, fluid mandates, and incomplete systems. The questions here are not only how to scale what is known, but how to make delivery possible in the first place. This means contending with ambiguity, negotiation, sequencing, and organizational learning—not just fidelity or replication. In short, implementation science seeks to improve delivery; this paper seeks to explain how delivery becomes possible, particularly in the institutional and political environments of development and humanitarian work. It is a shift in perspective—from the optimization of predefined models to the study of institutional emergence and operational readiness as the heart of implementation itself. Implementation science improves delivery; our approach explains how delivery becomes possible in the first place.

Finally, this paper underscores the need to build a richer empirical foundation for studying implementation. Much of what we know is derived from evaluations designed to measure outcomes, not to illuminate processes. As a result, implementation is often seen only in hindsight. There is an urgent need for studies that track the implementation journey in real time, that map system evolution over months and years, and that examine not just whether something was done, but how institutional capacity was created to do it again. By shifting the focus from policy to implementation, and from design to delivery, research can help illuminate what is arguably the most consequential phase of the policy process. This framework also challenges us to consider how our own methods reflect the very biases we hope to overcome. If researchers continue to measure success in terms of outputs and impacts alone, we will continue to miss the deeper story: the quiet, complex, and often invisible work of building systems that make public action possible. If implementation is where policy meets the real world, then research must meet it there too. This requires developing new conceptual tools, gathering new kinds of data, and asking harder, more grounded questions about how policies actually come to life. The framework proposed here is one step in that direction. It opens up space for a richer, more operationally attuned research agenda—one that sees implementation not as a shadow of policy, but as its fullest expression.

Implications for Practice and Investment

For policymakers, practitioners, funders, and reformers, the insights from this paper challenge conventional assumptions about how policies are turned into results. In many policy contexts—particularly in development and humanitarian settings—implementation is treated as a downstream function, something that will naturally follow once the right laws are passed, the right reforms are announced, or the right frameworks are adopted. But the case of WFP's Cash and Voucher Policy shows that this view is dangerously incomplete. Implementation is not an automatic consequence of policy adoption—it is a distinct, intensive, and often prolonged phase of work that determines whether a policy ever becomes real.

One of the most important implications for practice is the need to disentangle policy reform from policy implementation. Too often, reform is defined in terms of what is written—strategies, proclamations, or decrees—rather than in terms of what systems are built. This is particularly true in financing arrangements, where budget support or program disbursements are tied to formal reforms on paper. The speed with which funds are released after policy announcements often suggests that implementation is assumed, not interrogated. This gap reflects a deep misunderstanding, namely that reform creates delivery, when in fact it merely creates the option for delivery. Whether that option is ever realized depends on what happens next.

This points to a second implication: the need to invest in activation, not just design. The WFP example shows that turning a policy into a delivery system takes time, trust, and deliberate investment in organizational infrastructure. It requires new business processes, market assessments, partnerships with financial institutions, negotiation with national authorities, internal training, and iterative learning. In short, it requires physical and institutional foundations. Yet this foundational work is often underfunded, undervalued, or bypassed altogether in the rush to report progress. Without investment in activation, policy success becomes a matter of chance rather than design.

Third, implementers and funders alike must shift from a logic of immediate delivery to one of capability building. Success should not be measured only in terms of how many beneficiaries are reached or how many dollars are disbursed. It should also be judged by whether the institution is more capable than it was before—more able to scale, adapt, and respond to future needs. WFP's early cash pilots were not just about reaching people with assistance; they were about building the internal muscles of delivery. That capability later enabled large-scale responses in dozens of countries. In practice, this means adjusting performance indicators, expectations, and timelines to reflect the deeper work of system creation.

A fourth implication relates to modality selection—the question of how policies are delivered. Governments and donors often approach this through a lens of preference or ideology: cash vs in-kind, centralized vs decentralized, public vs private. But the WFP case shows that modality is an operational question, not a doctrinal one. At issue is what can be delivered, with quality, under current and anticipated conditions. Maintaining multiple modalities is not wasteful but rather enables responsiveness. The flexibility to choose requires investment in option value: infrastructure, tools, and agreements that may not always be used but must be available when needed. Pressuring institutions to choose one modality prematurely may appear efficient, but in the long run it erodes their ability to adapt.

Finally, practitioners must recognize that implementation is a negotiated space. Delivery is not just a technical sequence of steps—it is a continual process of alignment and re-alignment across actors with different incentives, capabilities, and constraints. Negotiation is needed within organizations, across departments, between funders and implementers, and at the interface with governments and communities. Yet negotiation is often seen as a sign of delay, weakness, or dysfunction, rather than a necessary condition for coherence and effectiveness. Practice must give space for negotiation, treat it as a legitimate operational activity, and support the relational capacities required to manage it well.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has argued that policy implementation is not the straightforward execution of predetermined plans, but an operational process marked by investment, construction, and negotiation. It proposed a conceptual lens—built around activation cost, option value, kinetics, and negotiation—for understanding what it actually takes to move from policy commitment to policy delivery. Through the case of WFP's Cash and Voucher Policy, the paper showed how large-scale implementation unfolds not as a smooth rollout, but as an evolving system of readiness, adaptation, and organizational learning. The result is an implementation story centered on the institutions, capabilities, and choices that make delivery possible under real-world conditions.

Some may point to the fact that implementation of the WFP Cash and Voucher Policy was internal institutional reform rather than national policy implementation. This distinction underestimates the real-world complexity and relevance of the case. The WFP cash transformation involved strategic shifts in policy, negotiation with host and donor governments, the creation of new delivery systems, reconfiguration of operational units, staff redeployment, technology adaptation, and external partnerships with financial service providers—all under conditions of uncertainty, risk, and scale. Far from being a narrow bureaucratic adjustment, the evolution of WFP's cash operations represents a full-spectrum exercise in policy design, institutional alignment, system activation, and adaptive delivery. It illustrates how large-scale development actors navigate political constraints, build readiness, and embed new capabilities—challenges that are equally present in national settings. As such, this example serves not as an exception, but as a microcosm of development systems in motion, offering valuable insight into how operational forces—kinetics, negotiation, activation cost, and option value—interact to enable or block implementation at scale. Several conclusions can be drawn.

First, policy success is determined not at the moment of adoption, but at the point of operational readiness. In policy discourse—among governments, funders, and reformers—there remains a widespread belief that the hard part is getting a policy approved. But the WFP case makes clear that adoption is only the beginning. The real test lies in whether an organization has the capacity to translate that policy into sustained, reliable delivery under pressure. Operational readiness is not simply about having funds or issuing guidelines; it is about having the systems, partnerships, tools, and trained personnel in place to act effectively and adaptively in complex environments. Without that readiness, policy remains performative—visible in frameworks and declarations but absent in the lives of those it was meant to serve.

Second, operational capacity is not incidental to reform—it is the reform. Too often, implementation is treated as a downstream function: the bureaucratic task of "rolling out" ideas that have already been decided. But in reality, implementation is where reform actually takes shape—where ambition meets constraint, and where vision either embeds or evaporates. As the WFP experience shows, the real reform lies in constructing the machinery of delivery: building systems, protocols, organizational trust, and adaptive feedback loops. This is where policy becomes real, yet this is where attention, time, and resources are most often lacking. If implementation continues to be treated as something separate from reform, failure will continue to be misdiagnosed and repeated.

Third, implementation is the central terrain of the policy process, not its end. This paper reveals that implementation is not a quiet coda to policy formulation; it is the arena in which politics, capability, and strategy are continuously negotiated. More strongly, implementation is not something that happens after the important work is done; it is where the important work happens. This has profound implications for how projects are structured, results evaluated, and power allocated. Implementers are not mere functionaries; they are co-creators of policy. Reform timelines must reflect the time it takes to build delivery systems, not just to pass decisions. Evaluation must look not only at outcomes, but at the operational journeys that produce them.

Fourth, flexibility requires investment. A central theme in this paper is that the ability to deliver flexibly—to adapt modality, adjust scale, or pivot in response to crisis—is not a natural byproduct of good intentions. It is the result of long-term investment in systems that preserve option value. WFP's commitment to retaining both cash and in-kind delivery modalities was not a hedge; it was a strategic stance, backed by infrastructure, capability, and foresight. Similarly, its cash infrastructure later became the foundation for entirely new instruments, such as anticipatory financing and risk insurance. Flexibility is not free. It must be planned for, resourced, and maintained, even when it looks inefficient in the short term. Without that investment, flexibility becomes a fiction, invoked in memos and speeches but unavailable in practice.

Fifth, a new mindset is needed. The overarching message of this paper is that policy implementation must be reimagined—not as routine execution, but as a dynamic, uncertain, and deeply consequential phase of public action. It requires a mindset that values patience over quick wins, system-building over visibility, and organizational learning over linear rollout. It requires that we stop equating paperwork with progress, or disbursement with delivery. Above all, it requires that we respect the implementers—the people in government offices, field teams, ministries, and agencies—who wrestle daily with the friction, ambiguity, and compromise that implementation entails. The path to better outcomes does not lie in more ambitious policy design alone; it lies in cultivating institutions that can make those policies breathe, move, and endure.

Finally, good policy creates space—it does not close it down. One of the quiet lessons of the WFP case is that successful reform often begins not with detailed design, but with a clear, permissive policy that opens space for operational exploration. The 2008 Cash and Voucher Policy did not dictate modality or impose a rigid delivery model. Instead, it authorized experimentation, made room for learning, and preserved institutional flexibility. This is a crucial and often overlooked function of policy: to create option value for future action. Yet in many reform processes, there is pressure to codify every detail in the policy itself—to insert delivery mechanisms, targeting models, and funding rules up front. While well-intentioned, this impulse toward granularity and control can produce unintended rigidity, stalling adaptation and innovation before systems have been built or tested. The insight here is simple but powerful: policy must be clear enough to authorize action, but open enough to allow the systems that follow to evolve, adapt, and respond to context. Precision can come later. At the start, what matters most is possibility.

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