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Development Readiness

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ABSTRACT

Why do some systems move while others stall—even when resources, plans, and intent appear similar? This paper introduces the concept of development readiness as one way to understand and address this question. Development readiness is defined as the capacity of a system to act—at the right time, at the right scale, and with purpose—whether in response to crises or in pursuit of development goals. It emerges when kinetic capacity (the ability to move people, goods, and services) aligns with negotiation capacity (the ability to coordinate, decide, and resolve), conditioned by activation costs (tangible and intangible obstacles) and option value (flexibility to act under uncertainty). A conceptual framework based on these four operational forces is set out and illustrated with real-world examples. A structured research agenda and strategy emerges, along with implications for investment and operations. The case illustrations demonstrate that the development readiness framework applies equally at national, sectoral, and organizational levels, with wide-ranging applications—from scaling innovations, accelerating service delivery, and strengthening value chains, to deepening climate resilience and enabling coordinated action in crisis-prone and institutionally fragmented settings.

Keywords: Development strategy, readiness, kinetics, negotiation, governance

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MOTIVATION

This paper draws on direct operational experience from two large-scale humanitarian and development initiatives with similar urgency, planning, and resources, but sharply different outcomes. One succeeded; the other stalled. The contrast raised a core question: what enables systems to act under pressure? A colleague's casual remark at the time—"Development must be treated like an emergency"—initially seemed exaggerated, but ultimately captured a central truth: timely, decisive action is not peripheral to development, but essential. Yet this capability remains poorly understood and largely overlooked in the literature.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, African governments urgently needed to distribute medical supplies amid grounded flights and disrupted supply chains. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) responded by launching the Addis Ababa COVID-19 Response Hub. Within weeks, it was operational—dispatching protective gear and test kits across the continent, supporting medical evacuations, and constructing a field hospital. Success relied on rapid, coordinated action: WFP managed logistics, contracting, and donor relations; Ethiopian Airlines provided transport and warehousing; national and local government agencies expedited customs clearances, approved new health protocols, and allocated land; and the African Union and Africa Centres for Disease Control led regional coordination. Agreements were swiftly secured, operational platforms established, and millions reached.

In contrast, during the 2020-2022 conflict in northern Ethiopia, WFP and partners were often unable to deliver food, fuel, and supplies to impacted areas and groups, despite stocked warehouses, secured transport, and detailed plans. Convoys were blocked, looted, or denied access by local communities and warring parties. Coordination broke down, agreements collapsed, and the system stalled. Supplies remained immobile and needs went unmet.

These two contrasting experiences—in the same country, within the same organization—raised basic questions: What makes systems capable of acting? Why are some able to turn plans into action, while others stall?

This paper introduces the concept of *development readiness* to address these questions. Development readiness is defined here as the capacity of a system to act—at the right time, at the right scale, and with purpose. It is the ability to turn intent into action, allowing systems to deliver—not just plan or promise.

Development readiness builds on a broader framework—the *kinetics-negotiation framework*—that brings together two critical dimensions. *Kinetics* refers to the physical, logistical, and technological capacities to move people and resources. *Negotiation* refers to the governance mechanisms, coordination structures, policies, and trust relationships that enable or constrain those movements.

Kinetics is about doing. Negotiation is about enabling. When they align—as in the COVID-19 response—systems act. When they diverge—as they did during the northern Ethiopia conflict—systems stall. Readiness sits at this intersection. Neither static nor predetermined, readiness is a dynamic outcome of the interaction between physical and digital capacities, on one hand, and coordination capabilities, on the other. The kinetics-negotiation framework applies in crisis response as well as in the day-to-day work of development.

This paper advances the idea that development readiness is a systemic condition—one that determines whether actors and institutions can respond effectively not only to crises but also to emerging opportunities. The two stories that motivate the paper are not about crises per se. They are chosen because they lay bare the underlying question this paper explores: why do some systems move while others do not? In moments

of crisis, the presence—or absence—of readiness becomes sharply visible. But the concept applies just as powerfully in non-crisis settings. The focus here is on understanding what readiness is, how it operates, and why it matters.

Traditional development models focus on capital accumulation, institutional quality, and technological change. While essential, these factors do not explain the “action gap”—the difference between what systems are capable of doing and what they actually do. The readiness lens brings this gap to the center, shifting the focus from inputs and intentions to execution. The central question becomes: *Can a system act when it matters?* Readiness is not a bonus but rather a prerequisite. If systems cannot act, they cannot deliver. If they cannot deliver, they cannot develop. This paper proposes a way to understand, measure, and act on that imperative.

This paper thus has two intertwined objectives. First, it proposes a framework that sharpens research on what enables development to happen. Second, it offers practical guidance for those designing, funding, or implementing development interventions. While these objectives differ, they are complementary: a clearer conceptual understanding improves practice, and real-world challenges sharpen the research agenda. The structure of the paper reflects this duality. The next section situates development readiness in the literature. This is followed by a deeper elaboration of the kinetics-negotiation framework. The paper then defines readiness in operational and strategic terms, illustrates its relevance through case examples across countries, sectors, and value chains, outlines a research agenda and strategy, and draws implications for investment and operations. A summary and conclusions round out the analysis, drawing inferences for development strategy and modernization.

SITUATING DEVELOPMENT READINESS IN THE LITERATURE

The idea of development readiness draws from several strands of work but does not sit fully in any of them. This review outlines where the concept of readiness has appeared before—in policy, practice, and theory—and shows how development readiness extends and reframes those ideas. It also situates the concept within broader efforts to explain growth and transformation. The aim is not alignment but rather positioning through comparison and contrast.

Readiness as a Concept

The concept of *readiness* is multifaceted and has been explored across various fields, each offering unique perspectives. Five are especially relevant: organizational change management, implementation science, technology development, behavioral change models, and educational psychology.

Organizational Change Management. Readiness is often conceptualized as a combination of commitment and capability to implement change. Organizational readiness for change is a shared psychological state in which organizational members feel committed to implementing a process of organizational change and confident in their collective abilities to do so (Weiner, 2009).

Implementation Science. Readiness has long been recognized as a critical determinant of successful intervention uptake and effectiveness. Frameworks like $R=MC^2$ (Readiness = Motivation \times General Capacity \times Innovation-Specific Capacity) suggest that readiness is a product of motivation and capacity (Scaccia et al., 2015). Studies have shown that higher readiness levels are associated with better implementation outcomes, such as acceptability and feasibility of new interventions (Livet et al., 2022).

Technology Development. Readiness is used to capture the staged progression of technologies from concept to deployment. Technological development is a process of many discrete decisions and behaviors that unfold slowly over time with diffusion viewed as information exchange among participants in a communication process (Rogers, 2003). Tools like the Technology Readiness Level (TRL) scale, developed by NASA, assess the maturity of a particular technology, providing systematic metrics to evaluate the progress of technology from conceptualization to deployment. (Manning, 2023).

Behavioral Change Models. Readiness is understood in behavioral change models as a staged process that shapes how individuals adopt, sustain, or resist new behaviors. Improving the design and implementation of evidence-based practice depends on successful behavior change interventions (Michie et al., 2011). The Transtheoretical Model (TTM) outlines stages of change, emphasizing that individuals move through different levels of readiness when modifying behavior. Recognizing an individual's stage can inform tailored interventions to facilitate progression (Prochaska et al., 2009).

Educational Psychology. The principle of readiness in learning theories posits that learners must be prepared—physically, mentally, and emotionally—to engage effectively in the learning process. This readiness affects their ability to absorb and retain new information (Brandsford et al., 2000).

These diverse perspectives underscore that readiness is a dynamic interplay of factors that enable effective action. Development readiness integrates that notion, aiming to add value by filling conceptual gaps (Table 1).

Table 1: Situating development readiness in the “readiness” literature

Literature Strand	Focus of Readiness	Key Concepts	Identified Gaps	Development Readiness Contribution
Organizational Change Management	Commitment and capability to implement organizational change	Psychological readiness, collective efficacy, change commitment	Often lacks operational specificity; may not address systemic and infrastructural constraints	Introduces a systemic perspective, emphasizing both human and structural capacities for action
Implementation Science	Preparedness of systems to adopt and integrate new interventions	R=MC ² framework, motivation, general and innovation-specific capacities	Limited empirical evidence linking readiness to successful implementation outcomes	Provides a framework to assess and build readiness, linking it directly to implementation success
Technology Development	Maturity level of technologies from conception to deployment	Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs), systematic assessment of technological maturity	Focused on technological aspects; may overlook organizational and societal readiness factors	Expands the concept to include organizational and societal readiness, ensuring holistic preparedness
Behavioral Change Models	Individual's stage in the process of changing behavior	Stages of change (precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance), self-efficacy	Primarily individual-focused; may not account for organizational or systemic readiness	Applies behavioral insights to organizational contexts, recognizing stages of readiness in systems and institutions
Educational Psychology	Learner's preparedness to engage in the learning process	Readiness to learn, motivation, prior knowledge, mental and emotional preparedness	Often centered on individual learners; may not address broader educational system readiness	Suggests that educational systems themselves need to be ready to facilitate learning, not just the learners

Source: Author’s synthesis

Development Readiness, Growth, Poverty, and the Problem of Underdevelopment

The enduring question in development economics is why some countries grow and others do not. Canonical models—Solow (1956), Lucas (1988), Romer (1990)—emphasize factor accumulation, human capital, and technological change. More recent empirical work focuses on institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2001), geography (Sachs, 2003), and structural transformation (McMillan and Rodrik, 2011). Alongside this, a large literature has emerged on poverty traps—the idea that some countries (or communities) remain stuck in low-income equilibria due to constraints like low savings, poor infrastructure, or adverse expectations (Carter and Barrett, 2006). Much of this work focuses on identifying constraints. But it often underplays the role of system functionality—that is, whether state and societal institutions can act on known constraints when the opportunity arises. Development readiness seeks to fill this gap.

Development Readiness, Implementation Failure, and the Missing Middle

There is growing recognition that implementation is a major weak link in development strategy. Research shows that policies often fail not because they are poorly designed, but because they are poorly executed. The notion of “isomorphic mimicry” has been put forward to describe how many countries adopt reforms in form but not function, leading to poor results (Andrews et al., 2017). Some scholars highlight the missing middle—the space between high-level plans and frontline delivery (Levy, 2014). The “capability trap” literature emphasizes that many systems are unable to adapt or problem-solve in real time (Pritchett et al., 2010). Development readiness builds directly on this tradition but adds operational specificity: it asks *what* systems need in order to move, *when* they must move, and *why* they so often fail to do so even when resources and intent are present.

Development Readiness, State Capacity, and Crisis Response

Research on state capacity has long focused on taxation, coercion, and bureaucratic professionalism (Fukuyama, 2004). But recent crises—especially COVID-19 and climate-related shocks—have shifted attention toward adaptive capacity: the ability of governments to coordinate, reallocate, and deliver under stress (Angeler et al., 2022). Literature on fragility and resilience also explores how systems respond to shocks (Barrett and Constanas, 2014). But that literature typically treats emergency capacity as separate from long-term development systems. Development readiness treats crisis response and development delivery as manifestations of the same underlying capability: can systems act?

Development Readiness, Social Protection, Delivery Systems, and Scaling

Social protection programs—especially cash transfers—have become a cornerstone of anti-poverty policy (Gentilini et al., 2022). Much research now focuses on effectiveness, targeting, leakage, and graduation outcomes. But increasingly, attention is turning to delivery systems—how registries are built, how payments are made, how errors are corrected, and how programs can scale during crisis. The shock-responsive social protection literature explores these dynamics but lacks a unifying operational framework (O’Brien et al., 2018). Development readiness offers such a framework by integrating social protection into a broader theory of execution and action, connecting emergency scale-up with institutional design, cross-sectoral coordination, and kinetic capacity.

Development readiness sits at the intersection of these literatures in several ways (Table 2). It connects macro theories of growth and traps with micro-level delivery dynamics. It turns implementation failure from an observation into a diagnostic framework. It bridges the divide between crisis response and development delivery under one concept: readiness to act. And it grounds ideas like adaptive capacity, resilience, and institutional performance in a common set of system features to be detailed in the next section: kinetics, negotiation, activation cost, and option value. By doing so, development readiness provides a language—and a method—for asking not just what should be done, but what can be done, when, and how.

Table 2: Situating development readiness in the development literature

Literature Strand	Core Focus	Key Concepts and Contributions	Gaps and Limitations	What Development Readiness Adds
Growth, Poverty, and Underdevelopment	Why countries fail to grow or escape poverty traps	Factor accumulation, technological change, poverty traps, structural transformation	Focuses on constraints and conditions; less attention to whether systems can act on solutions	Shifts focus from conditions to capability to act; readiness as an operational layer between theory and outcome
Implementation Failure and the Missing Middle	Why good plans fail at execution	Capability traps, isomorphic mimicry, problem-driven iterative adaptation	Diagnoses failure, but lacks tools to measure or build operational readiness	Provides a diagnostic framework for readiness: how to identify bottlenecks and align systems to deliver
State Capacity and Crisis Response	How states perform under stress and in fragile contexts	Bureaucratic quality, adaptive capacity, resilience, state functionality	Crisis response seen as separate from development delivery; often lacks integration	Unifies crisis and development delivery under a common operational capability: readiness to act
Social Protection and Delivery Systems	How social protection reaches people and scales	Targeting, leakage, shock-responsiveness, digital infrastructure, safety nets	Strong delivery focus, but lacks a general framework for cross-sectoral readiness or scaling barriers	Situates social protection in broader system readiness; links shock-response to delivery architecture

Source: Author's synthesis

THE KINETICS-NEGOTIATION FRAMEWORK

The kinetics–negotiation framework offers a structured way to examine how operational capacity and enabling conditions interact to shape system outcomes. It brings together two core imperatives—action and governance—and provides language to help explain why systems and initiatives succeed or stall. The framework is built on four concepts: kinetics, negotiation, activation cost, and option value. Development readiness resides at the intersection of these four operational forces.

Kinetics

Kinetics, drawn from physics, refers to motion and the forces behind it—unlike statics, which studies systems at rest (Martin, 1907). In development, it reflects a system’s ability to translate potential into action, especially under pressure—not just what systems have, but how they move. In this paper, kinetics refers to the physical and logistical capacity to mobilize resources—covering infrastructure, supply chains, and technologies. While development studies often emphasize static aspects of infrastructure like construction and financing (World Bank, 1994), kinetics focuses on how infrastructure is activated and sustained in real time (Foster et al., 2023). Kinetics extends beyond logistics. Logistics focuses on moving goods; kinetics includes infrastructure quality, decision speed, personnel deployment, and coordination systems. At issue is not only the ability to move, but how quickly, precisely, and under what constraints—like the difference between owning trucks and deploying them effectively in uncertain settings. Crisis research highlights the value of logistics—efficient supply chains reduce shortages and speed response (Jiang and Yuan, 2019). Innovations like AI platforms and blockchain enhance targeting (Chukwu and Garg, 2020). But much of this work isolates logistics from the governance systems that shape deployment.

Negotiation

Negotiation involves the processes through which actors make decisions, resolve conflicts, and align goals. Drawing from multiple disciplines, it examines how agreements are shaped by power, trust, and cooperation. Practically, it includes the tools and strategies for coordination and consensus-building across diverse stakeholders (Sebenius, 1992). In this paper, negotiation refers to the governance, coordination, and policy frameworks that make kinetic action possible. It shapes how and when systems move—e.g., through inter-agency links, local governance, and regional cooperation. Effective negotiation aligns actors through actionable agreements, managing trade-offs and competing interests. It applies from local resource management to global crisis response (Spector, 2024; UNDP, 2004). Governance research often examines how politics and policy shape long-term resource use, service delivery, and public goods (Resnick, 2014). Less attention is given to how governance affects the use of kinetic capacity—who controls access to infrastructure, under what rules, and with what flexibility. These practical questions are central to negotiation as defined here but often overlooked in governance debates.

Activation Cost

Activation cost refers to the barriers—both procedural and political—that must be overcome to convert capacity into action. The term originates in physics and chemistry, where it describes the minimum energy needed to initiate a reaction (Brown et al., 2018). In both crisis and development

contexts, activation cost captures the friction that slows or prevents timely response. A system may have strong logistics or trained personnel but still fail to act if approval processes are slow, mandates unclear, or coordination mechanisms weak. Activation costs can include bureaucratic inertia, regulatory bottlenecks, procurement delays, or stakeholder resistance. Reducing these costs often requires negotiation—e.g., pre-agreed protocols, faster clearance pathways, delegated authority, or shared response plans. Governance reforms that lower activation costs make it more likely that systems will move when it matters.

Option Value

Drawn from the field of finance, option value refers to the benefit of preserving the right but not the obligation to act in the future, depending on how conditions evolve (Dixit and Pindyck, 1994). In this paper, it emphasizes the strategic value of maintaining the flexibility and capacity to act, even in the absence of immediate demand. Preparedness investments—such as pre-positioned supplies, flexible funding, or stand-by agreements—may seem inefficient when idle. But they provide the capacity to respond quickly when needs emerge. This flexibility has a value of its own, especially when the cost of inaction is high. Option value links the kinetic and negotiation domains. Kinetic systems must be in place and functional; negotiation mechanisms must allow their timely use. Maintaining option value means preserving both capacity and the institutional flexibility to act. It is not about predicting every future need, but ensuring systems can adapt when conditions change.

Development Readiness

Development readiness refers to the proactive state in which a system can mobilize and deploy resources quickly, at scale, and with precision. It emerges as the outcome of the four forces described above—kinetics, negotiation, activation cost, and option value (Table 3 and Figure 1).

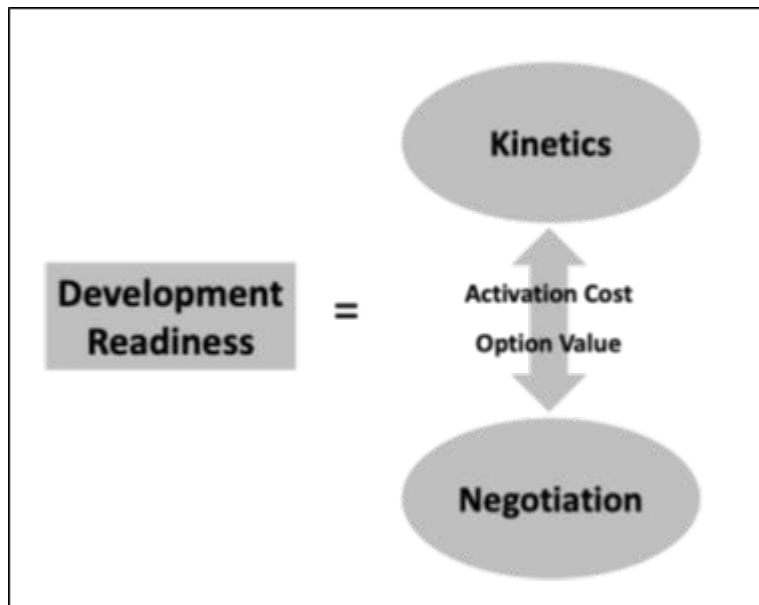
Kinetics and negotiation lie at the core. Kinetics provides the operational backbone: supply chains, infrastructure, and systems for action. Negotiation aligns actors and creates the conditions for action to unfold. Readiness also requires low activation cost, minimizing friction in the transition from 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.

As framed, development readiness enables systems not only to act, but to learn, adjust, and stay on course. It also reflects the ability to plan strategically, build coalitions, overcome stagnation, and sustain momentum through uncertainty. In this framework, development is not a fixed goal but instead a dynamic process defined by the capacity to act consistently and adaptively in pursuit of evolving priorities. Kinetic readiness enables movement; development readiness ensures it leads somewhere.

Table 3: Definitions and relevance of kinetics-negotiation framework concepts

Concept	Brief Definition	Importance/Relevance
Kinetics	The physical and logistical capacities necessary for mobilizing resources, encompassing infrastructure, supply chains, and emerging technologies.	Fundamental for rapid response in crises and for executing large-scale, impactful development interventions. Its effectiveness depends on alignment with governance frameworks.
Negotiation	The governance structures, partnerships, and coordination needed to enable and sustain action.	Ensures that kinetic capacities are directed meaningfully, reducing barriers and fostering inclusivity and long-term impact. In both crises and development, negotiation sets the stage for successful action.
Activation Cost	The tangible and intangible obstacles that must be addressed to initiate effective action.	High activation costs can delay responses, undermining effectiveness. Negotiation frameworks can help reduce these costs, enabling quicker transitions in both crisis and development contexts.
Option Value	The strategic benefit of maintaining the flexibility and capacity to act when a need arises, despite uncertainty.	Justifies investments in preparedness, ensuring systems can pivot to address emerging needs. It bridges crisis response and long-term development by maintaining readiness for unforeseen challenges.
Development Readiness	A proactive state of preparedness to mobilize and deploy resources rapidly, at scale, and with precision, minimizing delays in action. It encompasses the infrastructure, systems, and capabilities that ensure action can be initiated effectively.	Development readiness is the foundation of both crisis response and long-term development. By reducing activation costs, it ensures timely transitions from planning to action. Its proactive nature enhances the option value of preparedness, enabling systems to adapt flexibly to unforeseen challenges and maximizing long-term impact. It depends on negotiation to secure enabling conditions such as access, coordination, and alignment of stakeholders. Its absence leads to inertia, while its presence transforms plans into action.

Figure 1: The kinetics-negotiation framework and development readiness



ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

The idea of development readiness is abstract, but its manifestations are not. Its presence or absence is revealed in results. Some systems deliver; others do not. Some countries respond fast, scale up programs, reach the right people. Others fall behind, no matter how good their spoken or published intentions, or how large their budgets. This section presents real-world examples of both, drawing from evidence and experience across countries, sectors, and delivery systems. At issue in each case is: Was the system able to act, at the right time, at the right scale, and with the right focus? If so, why; if not, why not? The examples are illustrative, not definitive. The aim is not to offer final judgments but to illustrate how the presence or absence of key dimensions of development readiness as defined here offer insights into outcomes in practice. These examples also help motivate features of the research agenda on development readiness introduced in the next section.

Table 4 presents cases where various aspects of development readiness contributed to successful outcomes. Bangladesh's successful efforts to deliver emergency food assistance to rural communities cut off by flooding relied on pre-authorized operational systems with delegated decision rights to quickly provide support to flood-affected communities. The kinetic systems were modest—boats and warehouses—but they worked because activation costs were low, with no need for permissions from the center.

Vietnam's rural road and irrigation projects succeeded in improving market access and incomes for smallholder farmers because local governments had been empowered with budget authority and planning capacity. Construction crews, suppliers, and engineers were in place and well-practiced. Procedures were clear and decentralized with strong local leadership lowered activation costs and turned planning into delivery.

In Peru's highlands, community-based irrigation schemes aiming to reduce poverty by strengthening productive and social assets were scaled effectively due to a shared planning platform that merged technical and social readiness. Farmers' associations participated directly in design and oversight, minimizing the need for external coordination. Institutions were built to adapt and self-correct, even in a variable climate.

Indonesia's massive rural empowerment initiative seeking to build smallholder knowledge on sustainable agricultural practices and improve productivity hinged on trusted facilitators and pre-approved community grant procedures. Once the funds were released, village committees moved quickly to implement, drawing on pre-trained labor groups and existing procurement templates. Operations were simplified by frontloaded negotiation, and activation costs were kept low by design.

Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme succeeds not just because of donor support, but because implementation systems have been built over time. Communities know the program, local officials have clear mandates, and payment channels are established. Years of iterative planning between central and local actors has created a platform where funding, targeting, and logistics flow with minimal friction—even during shocks like drought or conflict.

These are not idealized stories. Each had limits—whether in scale, sustainability, equity of impact, or dependence on specific political conditions. Some faced resource constraints, others had weak feedback loops or limited reach beyond initial target groups. But in each case success appears to have been driven by a combination of functioning kinetic systems and real-world negotiation platforms that achieved the operational alignment that defines development readiness.

Table 4: Cases where readiness was present

Case	Objective	What Happened	Why It Worked	Key Sources
Bangladesh: Emergency Food Relief During Floods	Deliver emergency food assistance to rural communities cut off by flooding	Food aid reached affected households within days	Local disaster committees had delegated authority; pre-positioned stocks and trained personnel allowed low-friction response. Community trust enabled effective targeting	BRAC (2020)
Vietnam: Agricultural Value Chain Development Project	Improve market access and incomes for smallholder farmers in targeted provinces	Project enabled smallholders to access structured value chains through upgraded infrastructure, financial services, and capacity building	Strong institutional coordination across ministries and provinces; local implementation readiness and embedded market systems	IFAD (2022)
Peru: Sierra Sur Rural Development Project	Reduce poverty among rural highland communities by strengthening productive and social assets	Women and indigenous farmers engaged in diversified economic activities through group-based approaches	Pre-existing community platforms and strong local ownership enabled rapid scaling and absorption	World Bank (2018)
Indonesia: Farmer Field School	Build smallholder knowledge on sustainable agricultural practices and improve productivity	Millions of farmers adopted integrated pest management and improved yields through experiential learning	Low actuation cost due to community-led training model; strong extension network provided kinetic support	Feder et al. 2004
Ethiopia: Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)	Provide predictable safety net support while building community assets	Delivered timely food and cash transfers, even during shocks, while maintaining development focus	Years of negotiated institutional investment across government levels enabled low-friction program delivery	World Bank (2011)

Table 5 presents examples of initiatives in which the absence of key dimensions of development readiness led to outcomes that fell short of their objectives. Ghana’s programs to provide job opportunities and income for young people through public works experience delays originating from within the public sector. The program had funding and political visibility. But it was run by overlapping agencies, each with its own rules. Duplication was widespread. Fragmented implementation by multiple agencies, poor coordination, and lack of impact evaluation resulted in slow rollout and low outcomes.

While Kenya’s fertilizer subsidy program had high-level political support and sufficient financial resources, the kinetic systems—procurement channels, distribution networks, last-mile logistics—were underdeveloped or poorly integrated. Authority and decision-making were centralized and disconnected from the operational realities of farmers and the private sector. Responsibilities were unclear across national and county governments, and the lack of coordination mechanisms raised activation costs. The absence of option value was evident: systems that could have enabled rapid delivery under pressure were not in place, and there were no fallback arrangements. As a result, fertilizer often arrived after planting windows had closed, undermining the program’s objectives.

For food relief in South Sudan, physical access was part of the problem—but not the whole story. The core issue was the absence of a platform for negotiation. No single actor had the authority to guarantee safe passage. Frontline humanitarian workers had to renegotiate access week by week. The result was a paralyzed kinetic system, even when food was in-country.

Pakistan’s efforts to expand its cash transfer system to reach poor households faltered during rollout because of fragmented databases and poor local coordination. Although funds were available and policy support strong, the cost of moving money to households proved too high. Operational systems were untested at scale, and no mechanism existed for local problem-solving, stalling implementation.

Mexico’s attempt to scale rural financial services through direct payments to farmers faced resistance from entrenched institutions and poor interoperability among agencies. The readiness failure wasn’t technical—it was institutional. Negotiation platforms were weak, with turf battles between ministries and financial intermediaries. With no shared data backbone and unclear lines of authority, the initiative stagnated despite high potential demand.

These are not edge cases. They reflect frequently encountered development bottlenecks and illustrate three recurring readiness failures: (i) misaligned mandates and unclear decision-making authority across actors with competing incentives; (ii) high activation cost where projects that look attractive on paper require multiple approvals, memoranda, and meetings just to start; and (iii) fragile negotiation structures where access, authority, or delivery depends on informal workarounds rather than institutional clarity. In every case, the breakdown was systemic, not just technical. Plans failed because systems could not act as needed.

Table 5: Cases where readiness was absent

Case	Objective	What Happened	Why It Failed	Key Sources
Ghana: Youth Employment Program Rollout	Provide job opportunities and income for young people through public works	Multiple youth-employment programs launched but suffered delays, overlapping roles, and limited impact	Duplication of initiatives, fragmented implementation by multiple agencies, poor coordination, and lack of impact evaluation resulted in slow rollout and low outcomes	Lambon-Quayefio et al. (2023)
Kenya: National Fertilizer Subsidy Program	Provide affordable fertilizer to farmers to enhance food production and security	The program faced delays in fertilizer distribution, reaching farmers after the optimal planting period	Centralized procurement and distribution through government agencies led to logistical bottlenecks. Lack of coordination with the private sector and inadequate infrastructure increased activation costs	Ricker-Gilbert et al. (2024)
South Sudan: Food Distribution in Conflict Zones	Deliver emergency food to conflict-affected communities in hard-to-reach areas	Aid convoys were delayed or blocked for extended periods	Lack of secure access agreements, fragmented authorities, and unstable local governance undermined coordination	WFP (2022)
Pakistan Benazir Income Support Programme – Expansion Phase	Expand safety nets to reach poor households more equitably	Expansion lagged; targeting inefficiencies and payment delays undermined delivery	Weak negotiation and actuation capacity; systems unready to handle scale and complexity	OPM (2016); OPM (2019)
Mexico Procampo Agricultural Subsidy Program	Support rural incomes through direct payments to farmers	Benefits disproportionately captured by larger landowners; limited productivity impact	Poor targeting and lack of readiness to adapt to diverse farmer needs or upgrade program design	Scott (2010)

RESEARCH AGENDA AND STRATEGY

The country cases provide preliminary support for the notion that development outcomes depend on key aspects of underlying readiness as defined here. This section outlines a research agenda and associated research strategy aimed at understanding readiness: what drives it, how can it be measured, and how it can be strengthened through strategy, policy, and investment.

Research Agenda

The illustrative cases surface the practical relevance of development readiness as a concept and show how variations in development readiness conditions may influence real-world results. While not conclusive, these examples expose patterns in enablers and impeters of action at scale. They also suggest several testable hypotheses. Twelve preliminary ones are proposed here, grouped into four thematic clusters: macro-level, sectoral, organizational and political, and longitudinal and dynamic. Two cross-cutting integrating hypotheses are also proposed (Table 6).

This structure reflects the layered and interdependent nature of readiness itself. The proposition is that development readiness is not located solely in national plans or sectoral strategies, nor is it reducible to institutional design or momentary capacity. Instead, it emerges at the intersection of macroeconomic context, sector-specific function, organizational practice, and the temporal dynamics of adaptation and reform. Organizing the hypotheses in this way acknowledges that development readiness must be understood and tested at multiple levels—each with its own logic, constraints, and levers for change. This clustering also allows for clearer identification of where bottlenecks may reside, and how progress in one domain (e.g., macro growth and stability) may or may not translate into improved readiness in others (e.g., frontline delivery of a nutrition improvement intervention).

Some hypotheses challenge conventional assumptions—for instance, that income alone drives delivery (H1), or that political commitment ensures implementation (H9). Others point to specific mechanisms that underlie system performance, such as activation cost (H7), feedback learning (H11), or the structuring of public–private roles (H6, H8). The two cross-cutting hypotheses (H13, H14) capture the notion that development readiness is not additive but interactive. Together, these hypotheses provide a roadmap for research and evaluation, offering a structured agenda for assessing readiness, diagnosing shortfalls, and identifying actionable reforms that enhance system effectiveness and resilience over time.

Table 6: Preliminary development readiness hypotheses

Category	Hypothesis	Intuition
Macro-Level	H1: Readiness is not linearly tied to income	Middle-income countries often diverge in delivery capability
	H2: High-readiness systems recover faster from shocks	Readiness matters more than income or aid in crisis response
	H3: Readiness predicts policy execution better than governance indices	Executional capacity may matter more than perception-based scores
Sectoral	H4: Readiness varies across sectors in the same country	Some sectors (e.g., health) may have stronger delivery systems than others (e.g., agriculture)
	H5: High-readiness sectors deliver more equitable outcomes	Coordination and targeting capacity drive distributional effectiveness
	H6: Public–private coordination boosts readiness in market-facing sectors	Logistics, finance, and innovation systems benefit from public-private partnerships
Organizational	H7: Systems with lower activation costs act more consistently under pressure	Bureaucratic friction slows and distorts systems, even when resources exist
	H8: Redundancy improves readiness only if roles are clear	Multiple actors can help—but only if coordination works
	H9: Political will enhances readiness only if delivery systems are funded	Symbolic commitment is insufficient without execution capacity
Longitudinal and Dynamic	H10: Readiness erodes faster than it builds	Recovery from institutional decay is slow and costly
	H11: Crisis exposure builds readiness only if systems learn	Without feedback loops, failure repeats
	H12: Donor alignment enhances readiness; bypassing systems undermines it	Long-term capacity grows only when support uses national systems
Cross-Cutting	H13: Readiness is highest when macro, sectoral, organizational, and temporal factors are aligned	Misalignment across levels blocks momentum
	H14: Moderate readiness across all four dimensions beats strong readiness in only one or two	Systems stall when strength in one area cannot compensate for weakness in others

Research Strategy

The illustrative cases and proposed hypotheses suggest that development readiness is a system property that cannot be measured through a single metric or explained through a single method. A robust research strategy must therefore be multi-dimensional and able to: (i) measure readiness across different systems and levels—national, sectoral, organizational; (ii) compare readiness across similar contexts to explain divergence in outcomes; and (iii) trace readiness in specific cases to understand how it emerges, how it breaks down, and how it can be rebuilt. This requires a plural, layered research design featuring quantitative tools to map variation and test general hypotheses, qualitative tools to understand dynamics, constraints, and decision-making, and comparative approaches to highlight what matters across settings. The goal is to build a body of evidence on what readiness looks like, what it delivers, and what it takes to build. Four interlinked research thrusts are relevant, with associated methods: (i) indicator and index development; (ii) comparative case studies; (iii) process tracing and political economy analysis; and (iv) simulation and modeling (Table 7).

Table 7: Research strategy and methods

Method	Purpose	Examples and Outputs
Indicator and Index Development	Measure readiness across systems and time	Composite metrics on logistics, governance, activation cost, option value
Comparative Case Studies	Explain variation across countries, sectors, and crises	Rwanda vs. Ghana on social protection; health vs. ag. in Bangladesh
Process Tracing and Political Economy Analysis	Unpack institutional barriers and coordination failures	Mapping actor roles, incentives, procedural bottlenecks
Simulation and Modeling	Stress-test readiness and project reform impacts	Agent-based models, budget stress-testing, crisis response simulations

Each method contributes uniquely: indicator and index development enables standardized measurement of readiness factors over time and space; comparative case studies reveal why systems diverge in outcomes under similar pressures; process tracing and political economy analysis help uncover institutional bottlenecks, incentive misalignments, and coordination challenges; and simulation and modeling allow for scenario testing and strategic foresight.

Toward a Development Readiness Index

Development readiness offers value both as a conceptual lens and as an operational tool. As a conceptual lens, it sharpens understanding of why strategies succeed or stall, bringing structure to diffuse institutional, political, and logistical challenges. As an operational tool, it must be measurable through empirical proxies for its core operational domains—kinetics, negotiation, activation cost, and option value—potentially leading to a development readiness index.

To explore the feasibility and value of such an index, a simple and purely illustrative readiness score is constructed for five African countries—Botswana, Ethiopia, Niger, Rwanda, and Tanzania—each representing different income levels and demographic and institutional profiles. For each domain, one indicative national performance metric is selected: the Logistics Performance Index (LPI) – Infrastructure for kinetics; the budget execution rate for negotiation; the average procurement time (reversed) for activation cost; and the INFORM Coping Capacity Index for option value. The LPI-Infrastructure captures systemic capability in physical movement, infrastructure, and coordination—a proxy for the kinetic underpinnings of program or policy execution. The budget execution rate reflects the extent to which public systems can align and deliver on financial commitments—a proxy for institutional coordination and political functionality. The average procurement time captures bureaucratic friction and transaction costs in operationalizing initiatives—a direct proxy for activation-related delays. The Informed Coping Capacity Index (from the INFORM risk index) captures adaptive capacity and flexibility in responding to shocks—a conceptual match for the option value domain. Each indicator is normalized to a 0–1 scale, and the composite development readiness score is calculated as a simple average across the four domains.¹

Table 8 reveals wide variation across countries, underscoring the multidimensional nature of development readiness. Botswana leads in overall readiness, driven by strong scores across all four domains. Rwanda ranks second, performing especially well on negotiation and activation cost, despite significantly lower per capita GDP. Tanzania demonstrates a relatively balanced but moderate profile. Ethiopia, though

¹ To normalize positively oriented indicators (where higher values reflect greater readiness), the standard min-max normalization method was applied: Normalized score = $(X - X_{\min}) / (X_{\max} - X_{\min})$. To normalize negatively oriented indicators like *number of days* (where lower values reflect greater readiness), the following reverse min-max normalization method was used: Normalized score = $(X_{\max} - X) / (X_{\max} - X_{\min})$

comparable to Tanzania in income, scores much lower overall, particularly in activation and option value. Niger scores lowest across all dimensions, reflecting systemic constraints in capacity, coordination, and flexibility.

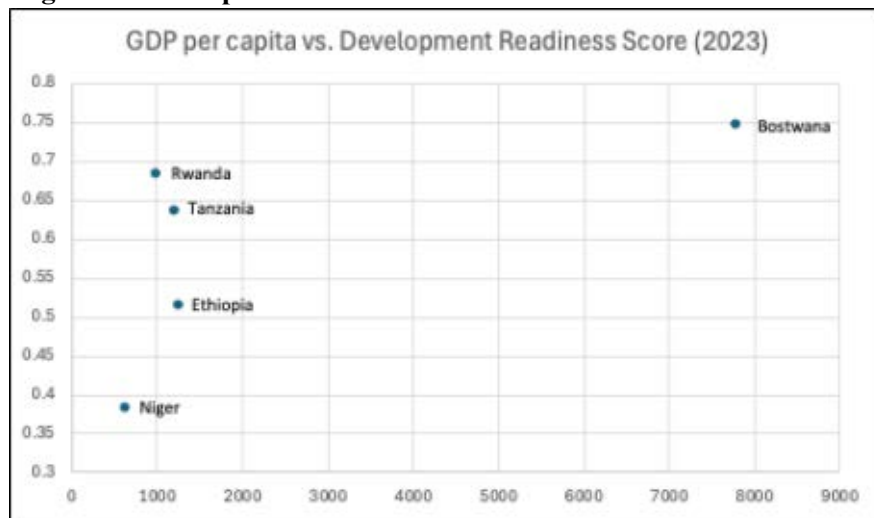
The income-readiness relationship is explored in Figure 2. Botswana aligns with expectations—high income and high readiness—while Niger confirms how low income can coincide with weak system capabilities. Rwanda and Tanzania have relatively strong readiness scores despite income constraints, while Ethiopia lags behind in system capabilities despite similar economic standing. The visual spread also reflects important contextual variation: Botswana is a relatively stable, upper-middle-income democracy; Ethiopia is a populous federal state with a complex recent history; Niger is a large, sparsely populated Sahelian country facing chronic fragility; and Rwanda is a small, densely populated, post-conflict state with a strong central government. These differences confirm that both income and institutional context likely matter to readiness, but neither is determinative on its own.

Table 8: Overview of indicators and composite index scores

Domain	Indicator Used	Niger	Rwanda	Tanzania	Ethiopia	Botswana
Income Level	Per Capita GDP (current USD/year 2023) ^{5/}	642	1,010	1,225	1,272	7,820
Kinetics	Logistics Performance Index (LPI) – Infrastructure (1–5) ^{1/}	2.1	2.9	2.6	2.4	3.1
Negotiation	Budget Execution Rate (%) ^{2/}	60	80	75	68	85
Activation Cost	Average Procurement Time (days, reversed) ^{3/}	120	60	60	90	45
Option Value	INFORM Coping Capacity Index (0–10) ^{4/}	2.5	6.5	5.8	4.2	7.0
Composite Development Readiness Score	(0–1 scale average)	0.38	0.68	0.63	0.51	0.74

Sources: 1/ World Bank Logistics Performance Index (LPI) 2023; 2/ International Monetary Fund (IMF) Government Finance Statistics, World Bank BOOST data; 3/ World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) 2022, National public finance and investment institutions, Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute; 4/ INFORM Risk Index; 5/World Bank Open Data

Figure 2: Development readiness and income



Source: Author's calculations

The readiness index presented in Table 8 and Figure 2 is illustrative and exploratory. It is not intended as a definitive or validated cross-country measure, but rather as an initial proof of concept to demonstrate how the development readiness framework could be operationalized using available indicators. The choice of one indicator per domain was guided by pragmatism, data availability, and interpretability, rather than an exhaustive process of selection or validation. Further work is needed to identify and test better-suited indicators, explore within-country applications, assess internal consistency and predictive validity, and evaluate whether such an index meaningfully reflects readiness across different contexts. This initial version of the index uses equal weighting across the four domains for simplicity and transparency. This assumes equal importance, which may not hold across reform types or contexts. Future work could explore alternative weighting schemes—e.g., using expert elicitation, empirical calibration, or context-driven assumptions—to better reflect domain-specific relevance and improve the diagnostic power of the index.

While far from a comprehensive assessment, the results offer preliminary support for the paper’s conceptual claims: that readiness is multidimensional, that its components can be disaggregated and observed, and that it is not reducible to income. The potential value of further developing and refining a development readiness index to support strategic assessment and policy design would appear to be significant.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INVESTMENT AND OPERATIONS

The development readiness framework is not only a diagnostic and research tool—it also serves as a practical guide for design and implementation of development and humanitarian investments. The four readiness domains—kinetics, negotiation, activation cost, and option value—highlight the operational dimensions that determine how quickly and effectively resources can be turned into results.

Development readiness applies at multiple levels of engagement: national, sectoral, and organizational or local. As illustrated in the previous section, at the national level, it helps identify systemic strengths and weaknesses in state capability and institutional architecture. At sectoral level, it is visible in practice—i.e., where bottlenecks arise or success stories take root. At organizational and local level, readiness is about execution and delivery. At each level, the development readiness lens invites practitioners to ask critical operational questions that help expose potential friction points and unlock greater effectiveness. Table 9 summarizes key questions that can be asked of any development or humanitarian initiative using the development readiness lens.

Table 9: Key readiness questions for investors and practitioners

Readiness Domain	Issues	Questions for investors and practitioners
Kinetics	Physical and institutional systems to move, deliver, implement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are physical/digital and service delivery systems in place to reach the target population quickly? • How reliable are logistical channels and infrastructure? • Are frontline institutions resourced and empowered?
Negotiation	Policies, permissions, agreements, coordination arrangements, decision rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who holds the authority to initiate action or unlock funds? • Are there bottlenecks in inter-agency or center-local coordination? • What informal or political negotiations may delay delivery?
Activation Cost	Barriers to activation of resources and systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many steps or approvals are needed to initiate key activities? • Are procurement, recruitment, or disbursement processes flexible and timely? • What are the average delays in turning decisions into action?
Option Value	Capacity to pivot, absorb, or scale in response to change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there latent institutional capacity to absorb additional funds or responsibilities? • Are there contingency plans or systems for adaptation? • Can the initiative shift or expand quickly in response to shocks?

These questions can be integrated into appraisal processes, risk assessments, and implementation reviews. They can also guide investment decisions, particularly in fragile, low-capacity, or high-risk settings. By explicitly assessing development readiness, funders and implementers can avoid common pitfalls such as overdesign, unrealistic expectations, or underestimation of execution complexity.

The development readiness framework is not a substitute for traditional investment planning, project appraisal, or fiduciary assessment tools. Rather, it is a complementary perspective that enhances how practitioners think about feasibility, timing, and delivery potential across contexts.

Most development institutions already have robust frameworks for investment allocation and project approval. The development readiness approach could add upstream and downstream value to these tools. Upstream, it could help shape investment strategies and portfolios by clarifying where systemic or domain-specific constraints may limit returns or slow delivery. Downstream, it could guide adaptive management

and course correction, especially where implementation realities diverge from formal plans. Importantly, the development readiness framework can be used iteratively and selectively. It does not require full quantification or model-based ranking to be useful. Even a simple qualitative application—asking “what is readiness like in this sector, at this level, for this initiative?”—could shift design and delivery choices meaningfully. By clarifying whether a performance problem is one of systemic weakness or activation bottleneck, coordination failure or infrastructure gap, the development readiness lens can sharpen decision-making without displacing existing due diligence or institutional tools.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has introduced the concept of development readiness as an approach and lens for understanding system performance in multiple contexts. It has shown how the four operational forces of kinetics, negotiation, activation cost, and option value can illuminate the mechanics of effective action—both in acute crises and in the long-term effort to build resilient systems. Within this framing, development strategy is not a static blueprint but a dynamic process that depends on systems capable of balancing urgency with sustainability, speed with inclusion, and action with governance.

The value of the development readiness framework lies in its ability to clarify interdependencies and guide strategic thinking, thereby surfacing critical operational questions that are often overlooked: Which specific actions are intended—by whom, with whom, and for how long? Are the necessary kinetic capacities in place and are they designed for speed, scale, and precision? Do governance systems anticipate the activation costs of those actions? Are operations flexible enough to adjust to unanticipated developments?

Development readiness entails translating intent into effective, timely, and scalable action. It is not just about having a strategy or a well-designed policy. By focusing on both the capacity to act and the conditions that enable action, development readiness can bring clarity to complex systems. It can also help identify critical constraints—such as the absence of pre-negotiated agreements or chronic underinvestment in logistics—that often remain hidden in the noise of implementation. At issue is whether a system can mobilize resources, align actors, overcome barriers, and deliver results. That ability defines readiness—i.e., not aspirations or procedures, but outcomes. Can the food be delivered? Can the roads be built? Can the innovations or services be scaled? These are the tests.

A development strategy is only as effective as the existing system’s ability to carry it out. Readiness could offer a practical lens for testing that ability and help clarify whether a system can act, align, adapt, and sustain change by highlighting typically ignored or unrecognized kinetic and negotiation gaps and constraints. Readiness thus should not be treated as a downstream “implementation” concern but instead be built into how strategies are conceived, tested, and improved over time.

Development readiness sheds useful light on the notion of modernization and what it means in practice. In this framework, modernization is the capacity to respond, to implement, to recover, to build, to move. It is not about mimicking or becoming like “the West,” or about waiting for affirmation or permission from there, according to naïve colonial logic. It is about exercising agency now. Readiness allows authorities to make promises and keep them. It enables sovereignty to be lived, not just claimed. In this sense, readiness is not only a condition for development, it also gives development meaning by linking plans and results. A “modern” system is one that is able to act on its priorities in real time.

To say that “development must be treated like an emergency” is not to endorse panic or unplanned improvisation. It is to call for urgency, clarity, coordination, and timely action. Emergencies demand focus and strip away excuses. They require systems to move on time and decisively. The idea of development readiness seeks to bring that level of intentionality into the everyday work of transformation. The goal is not to react well, but rather to be prepared to act—at the right time, at the right scale, and with purpose.

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