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Policy Implementability in Public Sector Innovation: Reconstructing Classical Implementation Theory

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Abstract

This article reconstructs classical determinants of public policy implementation into a policy implementability framework for contemporary public sector innovation. Drawing on Van Meter and Van Horn, Edwards III, and Sabatier and Mazmanian, this article uses an integrative conceptual review to reorganize variables that are often treated separately in the top-down tradition. The main argument is that implementation failure should not be understood only as a downstream administrative weakness, but also as an outcome of low implementability embedded in policy design. The synthesis identifies four interrelated dimensions of policy implementability: policy design clarity, administrative capacity, institutional structuring, and socio-political support. These dimensions explain how policy decisions are transformed into implementation outputs, target-group compliance, and policy performance. By linking classical implementation theory with studies on policy capacity, public sector innovation, digital transformation, local governance, climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and implementation gaps, the article offers a diagnostic framework for assessing implementation readiness before policies are carried out. The contribution is to shift the analytical focus from asking why policies fail after adoption to asking whether policies are designed to be implementable from the outset. The framework is relevant for analyzing innovative, digital, collaborative, and cross-sectoral policies that require interorganizational coordination, behavioral change, technological capacity, and sustained political legitimacy.

Keywords: policy implementability, policy implementation, policy design, public sector innovation

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary public policy still faces a recurring paradox. Governments have become increasingly productive in issuing regulations, programs, digital roadmaps, innovation agendas, and cross-sectoral strategies. Yet many policy decisions do not become the performance promised to citizens. The gap between formal decisions and experienced outcomes remains a central problem in public administration, both in conventional policies and in innovative policies that rely on technology, collaboration, and organizational behavioral change.

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This problem is not new. Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) located implementation as the linkage between policy and performance. Policy refers to formal statements of governmental goals and intentions, whereas performance refers to the actions and services actually delivered to target groups. Edwards III (1980) later showed that substantively sound policies can stall because communication is unclear, resources are insufficient, implementer disposition is weak, or bureaucratic structures are fragmented. Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) extended this reading by emphasizing the tractability of the problem, the capacity of statutes or policy design to structure implementation, and the political and social variables that shape support for policy objectives.

In contemporary debate, classical implementation theory is often treated as a top-down tradition that is too administrative and insufficiently sensitive to governance complexity. This criticism is understandable because many current policies operate in multi-actor networks, across sectors, across levels of government, and under the influence of digital transformation. However, disregarding classical theory is equally problematic. Many contemporary implementation problems still arise from issues that classical literature had already identified: unclear objectives, inadequate instruments, weak administrative capacity, poor interagency coordination, overlapping authority, unstable political support, and target-group compliance that cannot be taken for granted.

Recent studies demonstrate this continuing relevance. Coastal adaptation governance shows that high-level legislative requirements must be connected with local bottom-up action to avoid institutional lock-ins and maladaptive decisions (Brown et al., 2017). In Indonesia, the implementation of tsunami disaster risk reduction policy is hindered by policy integration problems, resource limitations, interagency coordination gaps, inadequate risk data, and weak public awareness (Akhirianto et al., 2025). In public sector digital transformation, governance readiness is not determined by technology alone, but also by organizational structures, work processes, data capacity, and public management arrangements (Gil-Garcia et al., 2018).

However, the remaining problem in the literature is not the absence of implementation variables. The problem is the absence of a sufficiently explicit concept that translates those variables into an anticipatory question: before a policy is launched, can its design, administrative arrangements, institutional architecture, and political support plausibly sustain implementation? Existing frameworks are strong in explaining why implementation fails (Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975; Edward III, 1980; Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1980), but they are less explicit in treating implementability as an object of analysis in its own right. As a result, implementation is often evaluated after policy adoption, when institutional mismatch, capacity deficits, or weak support have already produced costs, delays, and symbolic compliance.

The concept of policy implementability is therefore necessary because contemporary public sector innovation intensifies this diagnostic problem. Digital platforms, collaborative service models, cross-sectoral programs, and climate- or disaster-related policies are frequently launched with ambitious normative goals, but without a systematic assessment of whether their instruments, organizations, authority relations, and target groups are ready for implementation. Policy implementability responds to this gap by moving from a list of determinants toward an integrated readiness perspective that can be used before and during implementation, not only after failure has occurred.

This article argues that classical implementation theory remains relevant when it is reconstructed into a policy implementability framework. This reconstruction is not intended to add another isolated determinant to an already crowded field. Rather, it repositions classical determinants as interdependent readiness conditions that can be assessed before implementation proceeds. Policy implementability is understood here as the degree to which policy design, administrative capacity, institutional structuring, and socio-political support are sufficiently aligned to translate policy decisions into performance. From this perspective, implementation failure is not only a downstream failure of implementing agencies. It can also emerge because a policy was not sufficiently designed to operate within real institutional, administrative, and political conditions.

The main question addressed in this article is: how can classical determinants of policy implementation be reconstructed into a conceptual framework for analyzing policy implementability in the era of public sector innovation? To answer this question, the article conducts an integrative conceptual review of three classical models: Van Meter and Van Horn's policy implementation process model, Edwards III's implementation factor model, and Sabatier and Mazmanian's framework of analysis. The article then connects these models with recent literature on public sector innovation, digital transformation, local governance, and policy capacity.

The article makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it reorganizes classical implementation variables into four more concise dimensions. Practically, the framework can help researchers, policy analysts, and decision-makers assess the implementation readiness of policies from the design

stage, rather than only explaining failure after implementation has already produced costs, delays, or unmet expectations.

METHOD

This article uses an integrative conceptual review. This approach is appropriate because the article does not test hypotheses using primary data; instead, it builds a theoretical framework by rereading, comparing, and synthesizing key concepts in policy implementation literature. An integrative conceptual review enables the article to connect classical works with contemporary analytical needs, especially in the context of public sector innovation, digital transformation, and multi-actor governance.

The core literature analyzed in this article consists of three groups. First, the policy implementation process model developed by Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), which positions implementation as a relationship between policy decisions, implementing actions, and policy performance. Second, Edwards III's model (1980), which focuses on communication, resources, implementer disposition, and bureaucratic structure. Third, the framework of Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) and Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983), which expands implementation analysis through problem characteristics, the capacity of policy design to structure implementation, and political or non-statutory variables.

These three models were selected as the primary theoretical foundation for three reasons. First, they constitute the core classical top-down lineage that explicitly conceptualizes the relationship between prior authoritative decisions and subsequent implementation performance. Second, they represent complementary levels of analysis: Van Meter and Van Horn emphasize policy-to-performance variables at the system level; Edwards III specifies administrative and organizational bottlenecks; and Sabatier and Mazmanian explain how problem tractability and statutory design structure political and institutional conditions. Third, these models are directly concerned with conditions that can be assessed at or before the policy design stage, which makes them especially relevant for developing the concept of policy implementability.

Other influential implementation approaches were considered but were not used as the primary foundation because their analytical purposes differ from the reconstructive aim of this article. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) foreground implementation complexity and chains of decision points, while Lipsky (1980) and Berman (1978) move the analytical focus toward street-level discretion, local adaptation, and micro-implementation. Matland's (1995) ambiguity-conflict model and the third-generation perspective of Goggin et al. (1990) are important for explaining contingent implementation regimes and intergovernmental communication, but they are less directly focused on deriving ex ante design, capacity, institutional, and support conditions from the classical top-down tradition. For this reason, they are treated as contextual references rather than as the primary foundation of the framework proposed here.

The review proceeds in three steps. First, it identifies the main variables that each classical model treats as determinants of implementation success or failure. Second, it compares the analytical position of each model, especially the locus of explanation: whether implementation failure is located in policy design, implementing organizations, legal-institutional structure, or the political environment. Third, it synthesizes these variables into dimensions that are more operational for analyzing policy implementability in contemporary governance.

Beyond the classical literature, this article uses recent studies to assess the contemporary relevance of the framework. These include studies on policy capacity by Wu et al. (2015) and Howlett and Ramesh (2016), policy failure and the implementation gap by Hudson et al. (2019), and public sector innovation by de Vries et al. (2016) and Cinar et al. (2019). It also draws on research about digital transformation in the public sector, especially Gil-Garcia et al. (2018) and Mergel et al. (2019), as well as studies on local governance and environmental implementation, including adaptive irrigation reform in Indonesia (Alaerts, 2020) and coastal adaptation governance (Brown et al., 2017).

As a conceptual article, the results are not intended as final empirical generalizations. The proposed framework should be read as an analytical device that can be used in future empirical research, for example in studies of digital government, public service innovation, regional development planning, environmental policy, disaster governance, or cross-sectoral programs that require interagency coordination.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Implementation as a Link between Policy Decisions and Policy Performance

One of Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) most important contributions is the distinction between policy and performance. The distinction is simple but decisive. A policy as a formal decision cannot yet be treated as success. A policy obtains public meaning only when it is translated into organizational action, service outputs, target-group compliance, and outcomes experienced by

citizens. Implementation is therefore not merely a technical phase after formulation; it is a process of transforming mandates into practice.

In this sense, implementation transforms abstract decisions into administrative action, political objectives into organizational procedures, and policy instruments into behavioral change among bureaucracies and target groups. Any disruption in this transformation chain can generate an implementation gap. Such a gap may occur when outputs are not produced, when outputs are produced but not complied with, or when outputs are complied with but fail to produce the intended impacts.

The model of Van Meter and Van Horn identifies six clusters of variables that affect implementation: policy standards and objectives, resources, interorganizational communication and enforcement activities, characteristics of implementing agencies, economic-social-political conditions, and implementer disposition. These variables show that implementation cannot be explained by a single factor. Failure can emerge because objectives are unclear, resources are inadequate, interagency communication is inconsistent, the implementing agency is unsuitable, the political environment is unsupportive, or implementers lack commitment to policy objectives.

Edwards III (1980) strengthens the administrative dimension of this problem. In Edwards' perspective, a substantively sound policy can still fail if instructions are not clearly communicated, resources are insufficient, implementers' dispositions are not aligned with policy objectives, or bureaucratic structures are overly fragmented. In other words, policy decisions require an administrative infrastructure in order to work. Without communication, resources, commitment, and appropriate structure, policy remains a formal document.

Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) extend this analysis by locating implementation within the relationship between problem characteristics, statutory design, and political variables. They argue that some public problems are more implementable than others. Policies that require limited behavioral change, have clear intervention technology, and target a limited group are easier to implement than policies that demand major change, involve many actors, and face causal uncertainty. This is the dimension of tractability that is often neglected when implementation failure is attributed solely to bureaucracy.

The three models can therefore be read as complementary attempts to explain how policy becomes performance. Van Meter and Van Horn provide a systematic model, Edwards provides an administrative diagnosis, and Sabatier and Mazmanian provide a legal-political analysis. Taken together, they show that implementation is a relational quality shaped from the moment a policy is designed, authorized, translated into derivative rules, distributed to implementers, and negotiated with target groups.

Reconstructing Classical Determinants of Policy Implementation

This section reorganizes the main variables in the three classical models into four dimensions of policy implementability: policy design clarity, administrative capacity, institutional structuring, and socio-political support. These dimensions do not stand alone. Clear design can strengthen communication and evaluation; administrative capacity determines whether a mandate can be translated into action; institutional structuring regulates authority and incentives; and socio-political support determines the sustainability of implementation.

Table 1 summarizes the reconstruction of these classical determinants. It shows that the models are not merely historical references. Each model continues to offer an analytical entry point for diagnosing whether a policy has the conditions needed to become operational performance.

Table 1. Reconstructing classical determinants of policy implementation

Classical model	Main variables	Analytical focus	Relevance for policy implementability
Van Meter & Van Horn (1975)	Standards and objectives, resources, interorganizational communication, agency characteristics, economic-social-political conditions, implementer disposition	The relationship between policy decisions and performance	Shows that policy needs objectives, resources, coordination, and environmental support to become performance
Edwards III (1980)	Communication, resources, disposition, bureaucratic structure	Administrative bottlenecks in implementation	Explains the minimum administrative prerequisites for a policy to be carried out
Sabatier & Mazmanian (1980; 1983)	Tractability, statutory capacity to structure implementation, non-	The link between problem characteristics, legal design, and	Shows that implementability is shaped from policy design and sustained by

	statutory variables	political support	political and social support

Source: Van Meter & Van Horn (1975), Edwards III (1980), Sabatier & Mazmanian (1980; 1983). *Authors synthesis*.

Added Value of the Policy Implementability Framework

The proposed framework advances beyond merely reorganizing classical variables in three ways. First, it changes the temporal orientation of implementation analysis. Classical models are often used retrospectively to explain why implementation succeeded or failed. Policy implementability turns the same determinants into ex ante diagnostic conditions that can be examined before a policy is operationalized. This shift is important for public sector innovation because policy failure is often costly once digital systems, institutional arrangements, or interorganizational programs have already been deployed.

Second, the framework changes the unit of analysis from separate variables to their configuration. A policy may have clear objectives but weak administrative capacity, adequate resources but fragmented authority, or political support without target-group legitimacy. The implementability question is therefore not whether each determinant exists in isolation, but whether design clarity, administrative capacity, institutional structuring, and socio-political support are sufficiently aligned to sustain implementation.

Third, the framework translates classical theory into a diagnostic vocabulary for contemporary innovation. It connects classical concerns about objectives, resources, communication, statutory design, and political support with current problems of digital transformation, co-production, multi-level governance, and local variation. In this sense, policy implementability is not a replacement for classical implementation theory. It is a conceptual bridge that makes classical determinants usable for anticipatory analysis in contemporary public sector innovation.

Policy Design Clarity

The first dimension is policy design clarity. In the model of Van Meter and Van Horn, standards and objectives are the starting point because implementers need a reference for understanding what must be achieved. A policy without clear objectives creates broad interpretative space, enabling implementers at different levels to understand the mandate differently. Clarity is also the basis of monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement. Without clear standards, implementation performance is difficult to assess.

Sabatier and Mazmanian add a deeper element: the validity of the policy's causal theory. Every policy contains an assumption that a particular instrument will change the behavior of particular actors and eventually produce particular outcomes. If this causal theory is weak, implementation may proceed procedurally but fail substantively. In digital policy, for example, the assumption that an application automatically improves services often fails when not accompanied by business process redesign, staff capacity development, data interoperability, and user adoption.

Recent literature confirms that policy design remains a source of implementation gaps. Hudson et al. (2019) argue that policy failure arises not only from execution, but also from mismatches among design, implementation support, and context. In the field of energy governance, Babalola and Olawuyi (2022) show that weakness in legal design and implementation can impede the achievement of energy justice. Chamusca (2025) similarly emphasizes the importance of an integrated methodological framework for designing regional development policies that fit territorial characteristics.

An implementable policy therefore requires explicit objectives, clear target groups, consistent instruments, measurable indicators, and a plausible causal theory. When these elements are weak, implementation depends heavily on field interpretation and political negotiation. The likely results are extreme territorial variation, symbolic compliance, or administrative fulfillment without substantive impact.

Administrative Capacity

The second dimension is administrative capacity. Edwards III places resources, communication, disposition, and bureaucratic structure at the center of implementation. Resources include budget, staff, information, authority, technology, and facilities. Communication includes transmission, clarity, and consistency of instructions. Disposition includes the willingness and commitment of implementers. Bureaucratic structure includes standard operating procedures, fragmentation, chains of command, and division of tasks.

Administrative capacity has become increasingly important in the era of public sector innovation. Innovation requires not only new ideas, but also organizational ability to change processes, allocate resources, manage risks, and sustain change. De Vries et al. (2016) show that public sector innovation is shaped by environmental, organizational, innovation-specific, and individual factors. Cinar et al. (2019) demonstrate that barriers to innovation appear across stages, from idea generation and development to implementation. Public innovation may therefore fail not because the idea is poor, but because the organization lacks the capacity to absorb and execute it.

Studies of digital government reinforce this argument. Gil-Garcia et al. (2018) argue that digital government research must be connected with public management because digital transformation involves organizational structures, work processes, data capacity, and governance. Mergel et al. (2019) show that public sector digital transformation is not merely the use of technology, but an organizational change requiring strategy, capability, and new work culture. Research on smart sustainable cities further shows that information and communication technology infrastructure is necessary but not sufficient, because local context and the combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches shape implementation (Aina, 2017).

Administrative capacity also shapes the quality of local coordination. Busilacchi et al. (2025) show that the success of active social policies is influenced by institutional capacity, alignment between organizational missions and policy goals, and the quality of interinstitutional cooperation within multilevel governance. In Indonesia, Akhirianto et al. (2025) show that tsunami risk reduction policy faces resource, coordination, and risk data problems. Administrative capacity therefore concerns not only internal bureaucratic capability, but also the capacity to work across institutions and levels of government.

Institutional Structuring

The third dimension is institutional structuring. Sabatier and Mazmanian emphasize that statutes or policy design can structure implementation through the allocation of authority, the number of veto points, actor access, monitoring rules, incentives, sanctions, and resources. Institutional structuring determines whether implementation has a clear architecture of authority or operates under overlapping mandates.

Institutional structuring is especially important in contemporary governance because many policies are no longer implemented by a single organization. Environmental policy, digitalization, regional development, disaster governance, and public service innovation often involve central government, local government, technical agencies, private actors, communities, professional organizations, and civil society. In such situations, institutional design must regulate coordination, role division, accountability, and mechanisms for conflict resolution.

Abrams et al. (2018) show that small differences in state policy design can shape different implementation dynamics in federal-community cooperation. Bar and Beeri (2025) demonstrate that institutional design in intermunicipal cooperation affects political motivation, credit claiming, blame avoidance, and collaborative performance. Brueck and Liefner (2025) find that state-directed green and digital innovation processes in China still produce local variation because city-level actor constellations and coordination patterns differ.

In adaptive implementation, Alaerts (2020) shows that Indonesia's national irrigation reform moved through a sequential and adaptive approach based on local institutional capacity development. This case is important because it shows that institutional design does not have to be understood as rigid top-down control. Institutional structuring can provide direction, build capacity, and open space for adaptation according to physical, institutional, and political realities.

An implementable policy therefore requires an institutional architecture that is clear enough and adaptive enough. Clarity is needed to prevent overlapping mandates and responsibility shifting. Adaptability is needed because implementation contexts often change and differ across territories.

Socio-Political Support

The fourth dimension is socio-political support. Van Meter and Van Horn include economic, social, and political conditions as variables that influence implementation. Sabatier and Mazmanian also emphasize public support, elite support, target-group attitudes, and implementer commitment. This dimension matters because implementation never occurs in an administratively neutral space. Every policy encounters interests, values, resistance, and different distributions of benefits and burdens.

Socio-political support is particularly important for policies that require behavioral change. Target groups do not always comply because a policy may change their costs, benefits, access, or social position. In a study of rural restructuring in China, Chen et al. (2022) show that local actors can be mobilized by government, but farming households may resist planning because they bear transition costs. Target-group compliance must therefore be explained, not assumed.

Recent studies on environmental policy and climate adaptation show the importance of socio-political support. Brown et al. (2017) show that proactive coastal adaptation depends on opening, reframing, and transforming windows that connect top-down legislative requirements with local bottom-up action. In Indonesia, adaptive irrigation reform also shows that implementation depends on sequencing, institutional capacity development, and adjustment to physical, institutional, and political realities (Alaerts, 2020).

In public sector innovation, socio-political support cannot be reduced to formal approval. Innovation requires user legitimacy, employee engagement, leadership support, and public acceptance. Barchana-Lorand and Weinberger (2024) show that institution-wide pedagogical change may require a shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches to address management and academic work environment challenges. Balonier and Huber (2025) also emphasize the importance of role allocation across levels and the combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches in implementing education for sustainable development.

An implementable policy therefore requires sufficient political support, social legitimacy, public communication strategies, target-group engagement, and mechanisms for managing resistance. This support is not static. It must be maintained throughout the implementation cycle because economic, political, and social changes can shift actor preferences.

The Policy Implementability Framework

Based on the reconstruction above, this article defines policy implementability as the degree of readiness in policy design, administrative capacity, institutional structuring, and socio-political support to translate policy decisions into outputs, target-group compliance, and policy performance. This definition emphasizes that implementability is not merely a quality of policy documents, but a relation among design, organization, institutions, and socio-political context.

The framework shifts analysis from policy failure as an explanation after implementation toward implementability assessment as an ex ante diagnosis. Before asking whether a policy succeeds or fails, analysts need to ask whether the policy has the prerequisites for being carried out. This question is important because many public policies fail not because normative commitment is absent, but because objectives are too general, instruments are inconsistent, resources are inadequate, authority is overlapping, target groups are unprepared, and political support is unsustained.

The framework also connects with the literature on policy capacity. Wu et al. (2015) distinguish analytical, operational, and political capacities in the policy process. Howlett and Ramesh (2016) show that governance failures often arise from capacity deficits. In the perspective of this article, policy implementability can be understood as the meeting point between policy design and policy capacity. Clear policy design is insufficient if implementation capacity is weak; conversely, strong administrative capacity is insufficient if policy design is unclear or politically unsupported.

Table 2 presents the dimensions, diagnostic questions, and initial indicators of policy implementability. These indicators are not intended as a closed measurement instrument. They are starting points for building more context-sensitive empirical instruments in future research.

Table 2. Dimensions, diagnostic questions, and initial indicators of policy implementability

Dimension	Diagnostic question	Initial indicators
Policy design clarity	Are the objectives, targets, instruments, causal theory, and indicators sufficiently clear?	Explicit objectives; measurable standards; identified target groups; consistent instruments; available evaluation indicators
Administrative capacity	Do implementing organizations have the resources and operational ability to carry out the policy?	Budget; staff; information; skills; technology; standard operating procedures; communication; monitoring
Institutional structuring	Are authority, coordination, incentives, sanctions, and accountability mechanisms arranged?	Role allocation; veto points; derivative rules; coordination mechanisms; enforcement; accountability
Socio-political support	Does the policy obtain support from political actors, implementers, target groups, and the public?	Elite support; public legitimacy; implementer commitment; target-group engagement; strategies for managing resistance

Source: Authors synthesis.

In this model, the four dimensions operate sequentially and interactively. Policy design clarity affects communication and evaluation. Administrative capacity determines whether policy can be implemented consistently. Institutional structuring determines whether actors have appropriate authority and incentives. Socio-political support affects compliance and sustainability. Weakness in one dimension can sometimes be partially compensated for by strength in another, but combined

weaknesses across dimensions increase the risk of an implementation gap.

Hudson et al. (2019) argue that policy failure often emerges from the gap between policy intent, implementation support, and institutional context. This perspective is consistent with the idea of implementability because many vulnerabilities can be anticipated from the design stage when analysts identify deficits in clarity, capacity, coordination, and support. Howlett and Ramesh (2016) similarly show that critical capacity deficits can become the Achilles heels of governance. This article extends these insights by positioning implementability as an integrated diagnosis of policy design, administrative capacity, institutional structure, and socio-political support.

Policy implementability is also not identical with top-down control. The framework recognizes that implementable policies may require room for adaptation. Brown et al. (2017) show that coastal adaptation requires a relationship between top-down legislative mandates and bottom-up local action. Alaerts (2020) shows that adaptive implementation in Indonesia's irrigation reform required sequencing and adjustment to institutional and political realities. Implementability therefore does not eliminate local discretion; it designs conditions so that discretion remains directed toward policy objectives.

Policy Implementability in the Era of Public Sector Innovation

Public sector innovation makes implementation problems more complex. Innovation requires governments to introduce new practices, technologies, service models, or ways of creating public value. However, innovation is often treated as if pilot projects, digital applications, innovation laboratories, or reform slogans are sufficient. Public innovation becomes substantive change only when it has clear design, organizational capacity, institutional structuring, and socio-political support.

Public sector innovation literature shows that barriers can appear at environmental, organizational, process, and individual levels. De Vries et al. (2016) show how innovation in the public sector is affected by multiple levels of determinants. Cinar et al. (2019) show that barriers appear across the innovation process. Lember et al. (2019) argue that digital technologies can transform co-production and co-creation, but their effects depend on interaction design, organizational capacity, and citizen-government relations. Torfing et al. (2019) show that transforming the public sector into an arena for co-creation requires attention to barriers, drivers, benefits, and institutional ways forward.

In digital transformation, the problem of implementability is particularly visible. Applications, dashboards, artificial intelligence, big data, and information systems do not automatically create public value. Wirtz et al. (2019) show that artificial intelligence in the public sector faces application and governance challenges. Engin and Treleaven (2019) argue that algorithmic government should be understood as the use of data science to support public services and civil servants, not merely as automation. These challenges are intensified when digital transformation is treated as a technological project rather than an organizational and governance reform (Mergel et al., 2019).

The implementability framework helps explain why digital innovation often fails to become institutionalized. In the design dimension, the objective of digitalization is frequently ambiguous: is the goal internal efficiency, transparency, monitoring, participation, or service improvement? In the administrative capacity dimension, many organizations lack digital skills, clean data, system interoperability, and suitable business processes. In the institutional dimension, procurement rules, data protection, algorithmic accountability, and division of authority may remain unclear. In the socio-political dimension, employees and citizens may resist technology because of distrust, additional workload, or the risk of digital exclusion.

In local governance, implementability is also central. Local governments often receive policy mandates from the national level but possess unequal capacities. Nationally designed policies do not always fit local variation in budgets, personnel quality, infrastructure, local politics, socio-economic conditions, and community support. Brueck and Liefner (2025) show that state-directed green and digital innovation processes can produce different local forms because actor configurations and coordination patterns vary. Aina (2017) also emphasizes that smart sustainable city development is shaped by local context and requires a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Table 3 illustrates how policy implementability can be used to diagnose innovation challenges. The table does not imply that innovation should be reduced to compliance with administrative procedures. Rather, it shows that innovation requires the alignment of policy aims, organizational capability, institutional arrangements, and public legitimacy.

Table 3. Relevance of policy implementability for public sector innovation

Innovation challenge	Implementation risk	Relevant implementability focus
Digital service delivery	Applications exist but are not used, data are not integrated, and services remain slow	Clarity of digitalization objectives; digital capacity; interoperability; user acceptance
Service co-production	Citizen participation becomes symbolic, burdens are shifted to communities, and accountability becomes unclear	Role structuring; social legitimacy; accountability mechanisms; target-group support
Environmental and climate policy	Normative commitments are strong but implementation is weak and cross-sectoral coordination does not work	Tractability; political support; multilevel coordination; technical resources
Regional development planning	Document synchronization occurs administratively but does not change program priorities	Design consistency; analytical capacity; coordination structure; local political commitment
Artificial intelligence in the public sector	Automation proceeds without accountability, produces data bias, faces employee resistance, or weakens public trust	Regulation; data capacity; ethics and accountability; social legitimacy

Source: Authors synthesis.

Theoretical Propositions and Research Agenda

Based on the synthesis above, this article offers four theoretical propositions. First, the clearer the policy design, the greater the possibility that policy will be translated into consistent implementation outputs. Policy design clarity includes objectives, standards, target groups, instruments, causal theory, and evaluation indicators. However, design clarity is not sufficient if administrative capacity and political support are absent.

Second, administrative capacity mediates the relationship between policy design and implementation performance. A well-designed policy can still fail when implementing organizations lack resources, skills, communication, standard operating procedures, technology, and monitoring systems. Administrative capacity is especially important in innovative policies because innovation requires organizational learning and changes in work processes.

Third, institutional structuring determines whether coordination and accountability can work in multi-actor policies. The more actors and government levels involved, the more important the design of authority, coordination mechanisms, derivative rules, incentives, sanctions, and conflict resolution forums becomes. Without institutional structuring, policy can turn into an arena of overlapping mandates and responsibility shifting.

Fourth, socio-political support determines the sustainability of implementation. Policies that require behavioral change cannot rely on formal compliance alone. They need legitimacy, target-group involvement, elite support, implementer commitment, and strategies to manage resistance. This support is especially important in policies with distributive effects, policies that affect access to resources, or policies that change state-society relations.

Future research can move in three directions. First, it can operationalize policy implementability into an assessment instrument that can be applied before implementation. Second, it can test the framework in policy cases such as digital government, regional development planning, environmental policy, agrarian policy, and disaster governance. Third, it can compare implementability across territories to see how national policy design interacts with local capacity and local politics.

Discussion

Reconstructing classical determinants into the implementability framework produces two important implications. First, classical implementation theory should not be abandoned; it should be reread. The works of Van Meter and Van Horn, Edwards III, and Sabatier and Mazmanian were written in different historical contexts, but their variables remain useful for diagnosing contemporary policy problems. Many public innovation agendas fail not because classical theory is irrelevant, but because classical implementation prerequisites are ignored: unclear objectives, inadequate resources, poor communication, unsupportive bureaucratic structures, and unstable political support.

Second, the implementability framework helps avoid post-failure evaluation bias. In many policy studies, failure is explained only after implementation has already proceeded. This article emphasizes the importance of ex ante and ongoing assessment. By assessing implementability from the beginning, policy analysts can identify vulnerable points before policies generate large social, fiscal, or political costs. Such diagnosis can also become a basis for redesigning policy, adding resources, simplifying structures, or building socio-political support.

The framework nevertheless has limitations. First, as a conceptual article, it does not empirically test causal relationships among variables. Second, implementability

does not guarantee policy success because implementation is always influenced by uncertainty, conflict, and contextual change. Third, the framework is better understood as a diagnostic tool than as a deterministic formula. Empirical research is therefore needed to test how the four dimensions interact across sectors and contexts.

For Indonesia, this framework is particularly relevant because many policies operate under decentralization, fragmented authority, unequal local capacity, and local political dynamics. National policies often require local implementation, yet they are not always accompanied by adequate capacity support, coordination structures, or incentives. Policy implementability can therefore help assess whether a national policy can actually be carried out by local governments and target groups under real conditions.

CONCLUSION

This article reconstructs classical determinants of policy implementation into a policy implementability framework. By rereading Van Meter and Van Horn, Edwards III, and Sabatier and Mazmanian, the article shows that implementation cannot be understood only as a downstream administrative problem. Implementation is a systemic relationship among policy design, administrative capacity, institutional structuring, and socio-political support. The proposed framework consists of four dimensions. Policy design clarity emphasizes objectives, standards, targets, instruments, and causal theory. Administrative capacity emphasizes resources, communication, skills, standard operating procedures, technology, and monitoring. Institutional structuring emphasizes authority, coordination, incentives, sanctions, and accountability. Socio-political support emphasizes legitimacy, implementer commitment, elite support, target-group involvement, and resistance management. The main contribution of the article is to shift implementation studies from asking why policies fail after adoption to asking whether policies are designed to be implementable from the outset. In the era of public sector innovation, this question is increasingly important because digital, collaborative, and cross-sectoral policies require not only program design, but also governance readiness, organizational capacity, and sustained socio-political legitimacy. Future research should empirically test this framework in diverse policy sectors. Cases such as digital government, development planning synchronization, environmental policy, disaster governance, waste management, and agrarian policy provide promising arenas for examining how policy implementability explains variations in local implementation outcomes.

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