
REVISITING RESOURCE OPTIMIZATION AND PROJECT PERFORMANCE: A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL SYNTHESIS ON THE MODERATING ROLES OF GOVERNMENT POLICY AND DONOR PRIORITIES

***¹Schiman Niyonkuru, ²Denis Sekiwu, ³Godfrey Barigye & ⁴Andrew Mpuhwe Rucyahana**

¹Doctorate of Business Admiration Research Scholar, Kabale University, Uganda

²Kabale university, Uganda

³Kabale university, Uganda

⁴Business Professional Network

***Email of the Corresponding Author: niyonkuruschiman@gmail.com**

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ABSTRACT

This literature review offers a comprehensive synthesis of theoretical and empirical scholarship on the relationship between resource optimization practices and project performance, with particular attention to the moderating roles of government policy and donor priorities. While resource planning, allocation, and utilization are widely acknowledged as critical determinants of project success, existing studies report mixed and often contradictory findings. These inconsistencies stem largely from varying institutional environments, regulatory constraints, and divergent donor agendas that shape how resources are deployed in development projects. Anchored in Contingency Theory, Stakeholder Theory, the Resource-Based View, and Dynamic Capability Theory, this paper critically examines how government policy frameworks and donor priorities either strengthen or weaken the effectiveness of resource optimization efforts. By integrating evidence from African and global development contexts, the review highlights significant methodological and conceptual gaps, including limited application of moderation analysis, inadequate theorization of external institutional pressures, and insufficient attention to rural community-based project settings. The paper further develops a refined conceptual model that positions government policy and donor priorities as essential institutional moderators influencing the translation of resource optimization into improved project performance. Overall, the review advances a clearer understanding of how external governance structures interact with internal resource practices, offering substantive implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and funding agencies seeking to enhance the performance and sustainability of community-based development initiatives.

Keywords: *Resource Optimization, Project Performance, Government Policy, Donor Priorities*

INTRODUCTION

Effective resource management is widely recognized as fundamental to the success of development and community-based projects particularly in resource-constrained settings funded by external donors. Resource optimization practices, including resource planning, allocation, utilization, and control, are often considered critical for achieving intended project outcomes (Ntinyari & Nyang'au, 2024; Iribagiza & Kirabo, 2024). Empirical evidence supports that structured project management practices increase the likelihood of project success. For instance, a study involving nearly 500 project managers in non-governmental organization-led international development (ID) projects found that greater maturity in the adoption of project management tools significantly correlates with both short-term and long-term project success (Ika, 2015). However, the influence of resource optimization practices on project performance is not uniform across contexts. A recent study of the Sustainable Agriculture Intensification Food Security Project (SAIP) in Rwanda's Kayonza District demonstrated that project planning, implementation, risk management, and monitoring & evaluation were positively associated with project performance. Yet, results also underscored the importance of contextual factors beyond internal management practices (Uwase & Dushimimana, 2025). Similarly, other studies reveal that resource allocation and management practices positively influence performance of donor-funded health and infrastructure projects in Kenyan counties, affirming the relevance of resource optimization in development projects (Ntinyari & Nyang'au, 2024; Onyango & Musembi, 2023).

Despite these positive associations, variations in outcomes suggest that resource optimization alone may not guarantee project success. External institutional and environmental conditions such as governance structures, government policies, regulatory frameworks, and donor funding modalities can significantly influence whether resource optimization translates into improved performance (Njogunjogu, Namusonge & Oluoch, 2018; Wango, Ngatia & Lango, 2024). Studies of community-based and donor-funded projects highlight how project governance and stakeholder involvement affect outcomes, demonstrating the complex interplay between internal management practices and external institutional context (Ochieng & Noor, 2023; Wachira & Owuor, 2024). Nevertheless, there remains a significant gap in the literature: few studies explicitly test how external factors such as government policy environment or donor priorities moderate the relationship between resource optimization practices and project performance. Self-employment

Given this lacuna, a comprehensive literature review is warranted. A critical synthesis that consolidates findings across geographical regions, project types, and institutional contexts especially with a view toward moderation by governance and donor-related variables can clarify under which conditions resource optimization reliably leads to project success and when external constraints or misaligned priorities may erode that effect. Such a synthesis has the potential to advance theory, refine conceptual frameworks, and provide actionable guidance to policymakers, donors, and project implementers operating in complex, resource-constrained, and institutionally diverse environments. Accordingly, this paper undertakes a systematic literature review to examine how governance frameworks (e.g. government policy) and donor priorities function as institutional moderators in the relationship between resource optimization practices and project performance. By integrating theoretical perspectives (e.g. Contingency Theory; Stakeholder Theory; Resource-Based View) with empirical evidence drawn from African and global development contexts, the review aims to propose a refined conceptual model that advances understanding of project success in development settings. The insights from this synthesis are intended to inform both future empirical research and the design and implementation of more effective, context-sensitive development interventions.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Understanding how resource optimization practices influence project performance in donor-funded and community-based projects requires a theoretical approach capable of capturing internal capability, environmental conditions, stakeholder influence, and organizational adaptability. Because project success in development settings is shaped simultaneously by how resources are managed and by how external actors structure project operations, no single theory is sufficient to explain performance variations. This review therefore integrates the Resource-Based View, Contingency Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Dynamic Capability Theory to provide a comprehensive explanation of the relationships examined in this study.

Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View, first articulated by Wernerfelt (1984) and later expanded by Barney (1991), argues that organizations achieve superior performance when they develop and deploy resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable. In the context of

development and community-based projects, RBV offers a strong explanation for why effective resource planning, allocation, and utilization can enhance project performance, particularly in settings where resources are limited and competition for inputs is high. When project teams implement systematic planning, allocate resources strategically, and ensure efficient utilization, they create internal competencies that contribute directly to achieving project goals and improving overall outcomes.

The theory therefore links clearly with the independent variables of this study resource planning, resource allocation, and resource utilization by explaining how internal practices generate performance advantages. RBV has been widely applied in project management, nonprofit project performance, and donor-funded program evaluation, where internal project capability is shown to influence outcomes (Andrews et al., 2015; Santos & Brito, 2012; Zou et al., 2018). However, RBV assumes a relatively autonomous organization capable of deploying resources without external constraints. In donor-funded development projects, this assumption rarely holds because donor requirements and government regulations often restrict how resources can be used. Consequently, RBV is necessary for understanding performance but insufficient on its own for explaining performance variation in highly regulated and donor-dependent environments.

Contingency Theory

Contingency Theory, associated strongly with Donaldson (2001), proposes that organizational effectiveness depends on the fit between internal practices and the conditions imposed by the external environment. Development projects operate within complex regulatory systems shaped by government policies on procurement, reporting, decentralization, and compliance. These policies can either enhance or limit the impact of resource optimization practices. For example, flexible policy frameworks allow project teams to reallocate resources when community needs shift, thereby increasing performance. Conversely, rigid procedures can reduce the effectiveness of even well-designed resource optimisation practices because they limit operational discretion.

Thus, Contingency Theory provides a theoretical basis for treating government policy as a moderating variable in this study. The theory has been widely used in public project delivery, project governance, and infrastructure project performance research, where environmental fit has been shown to significantly shape project outcomes (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Merrow, 2011; Mugenyi et

al., 2022). However, while Contingency Theory explains how environmental conditions influence performance, it offers limited insight into how power dynamics and stakeholder interests shape project decisions, which is addressed more directly by Stakeholder Theory.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), emphasises that organisational outcomes depend on how effectively managers identify and respond to the needs, power, and expectations of all actors who influence or are affected by project activities. In community-based and donor-funded projects, stakeholders are numerous and diverse, including donors, government agencies, implementing organisations, local leaders, beneficiaries, and monitoring agents. Donors, in particular, exert strong influence through project design requirements, spending restrictions, performance indicators, and accountability mechanisms.

Stakeholder Theory therefore provides theoretical justification for modelling donor priorities as a moderator in the relationship between resource optimisation practices and project performance. When donor priorities align with project realities, optimisation practices are more likely to enhance performance; when they conflict, optimisation efforts may have reduced impact or even fail to improve outcomes. This theory has been applied in project performance research, donor–NGO relationship studies, and participatory development evaluation (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2016; Lewis, 2016; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Nevertheless, Stakeholder Theory does not fully address how internal capabilities enable project teams to respond effectively to stakeholder pressure, which is why it must be complemented with RBV and Dynamic Capability Theory.

Dynamic Capability Theory

Dynamic Capability Theory, advanced by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997), focuses on an organization's ability to sense opportunities and threats, seize emerging opportunities, and reconfigure internal resources in response to environmental change. Development projects are particularly exposed to uncertainty, including donor preference shifts, changes in government priorities, unexpected community needs, and operational disruptions. Projects with strong dynamic capabilities can adjust their resource optimization practices in ways that sustain or even enhance performance under such conditions.

This theory links closely to resource utilization and control, which require learning, flexibility, and continuous reconfiguration of project inputs. It has been applied in adaptive project management, humanitarian logistics, and complex project environments where uncertainty is high (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Fisher, 2017; Williams et al., 2010). However, Dynamic Capability Theory does not fully capture structural moderation such as formal policy restrictions, which is why it must be used in combination with Contingency Theory to provide a complete explanation of how external institutional forces shape project performance.

The relationship between resource optimization practices and project performance is shaped by determinants operating at multiple levels. RBV explains how internal resource management capabilities enhance performance, but ignores external constraints. Contingency Theory explains how environmental conditions, such as government policy, influence the effectiveness of internal practices but ignores stakeholder power. Stakeholder Theory explains how donor and beneficiary interests shape resource decisions but offers weak insight into internal capability. Dynamic Capability Theory explains adaptability under uncertainty but does not account for structural moderation imposed by policies and donor frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resource optimization practices have emerged as central determinants of project performance across diverse implementation contexts, yet their effectiveness varies considerably depending on institutional arrangements and stakeholder configurations. This review synthesizes empirical evidence on how resource planning, allocation, and utilization influence project outcomes while examining the moderating roles of government policy and donor priorities. The synthesis reveals both convergent findings and persistent disagreements that justify deeper theoretical and empirical investigation.

Effects of Resource Planning on Project Performance

Resource planning is widely recognized as fundamental to project success because it reduces uncertainty, improves coordination, and enables proactive constraint identification (Kerzner, 2022; Turner & Müller, 2023). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that planning maturity significantly predicts timeliness, cost control, and achievement of community outcomes (Aradukunda & Sikubwabo, 2024; Jha & Iyer, 2021). Research across African rural development

initiatives indicate that structured planning tools enhance transparency and build beneficiary trust (Niyonzima et al., 2023; Tchatchueng & Ndzana, 2023). These findings support the dominant view that planning contributes directly to performance in low-resource and donor-dependent environments. The convergence of evidence across multiple contexts strengthens confidence in planning as a reliable predictor of project success. Theoretical explanations grounded in contingency perspectives reinforce this relationship by highlighting how planning enables environmental fit and adaptive responses. Nevertheless, planning effectiveness depends significantly on implementation quality, stakeholder engagement, and alignment with contextual realities. The literature therefore establishes planning as necessary but potentially insufficient for guaranteed performance improvements.

However, significant disagreement exists concerning the universality of planning effectiveness across all implementation contexts and governance conditions. Some scholars argue that in environments with weak governance or restrictive donor requirements, detailed planning may deliver limited value (Flyvbjerg, 2020; Mugenyi et al., 2022; Ndakala & Muchelule, 2023). These authors propose that planning can degenerate into procedural compliance rather than functioning as a genuine management instrument. While this critique raises important considerations, it should be interpreted as highlighting contextual contingencies rather than rejecting planning entirely. The literature remains incomplete because few studies empirically model how governance quality or donor constraints moderate the planning-performance relationship. This gap is particularly significant for rural community-based projects that operate under precisely these institutional and resource constraints. Existing research has not adequately explained when planning strengthens performance and when contextual barriers neutralize its benefits. Our study responds directly to this gap by incorporating government policy and donor priorities as institutional moderators.

Effects of Resource Allocation on Project Performance

Resource allocation has been identified as critical in determining whether project inputs successfully translate into measurable outputs and outcomes (Dvir et al., 2022; Meredith & Mantel, 2021). Research demonstrates that timely allocation of financial resources, human skills, and materials improves performance through increased productivity (Mark, 2024; Ntinyari & Nyang'au, 2024; Santos & Brito, 2022). Studies of participatory initiatives show that transparent allocation processes enhance beneficiary satisfaction and reduce stakeholder conflict (Amadi &

Okorie, 2023; Munyao & Atieno, 2023). These consistent results affirm that allocation functions as both technical efficiency and a legitimacy-building mechanism in community projects. The dual role makes allocation particularly important in donor-funded development contexts where stakeholder trust critically influences implementation success. Evidence suggests that allocation decisions signal organizational values and influence how beneficiaries perceive project fairness and responsiveness. Transparent allocation processes can generate social capital that supports project implementation even when resource constraints create difficult trade-offs. The literature establishes strong theoretical and empirical support for allocation as a performance determinant.

Nevertheless, substantial disagreement exists concerning how donor influence and stakeholder politics shape allocation practices and their performance effects. Some researchers argue that donor oversight increases accountability and reduces resource misallocation through enhanced monitoring (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2021; Lewis, 2022). Conversely, other scholars contend that donor conditionality frequently reorients project goals away from local priorities, thereby reducing sustainability (Cooke & Kothari, 2020; Kabeer, 2022; Mosse, 2021). These debates expose a critical weakness: most studies discuss donor influence conceptually without empirically modeling when it improves performance. Empirical evidence remains particularly scarce in rural African project environments where donor dependence is high and stakeholder power unevenly distributed. The literature has not adequately tested whether donor priorities amplify or weaken the allocation-performance relationship under different governance conditions. This theoretical and empirical gap limits understanding of how external institutional forces shape resource deployment effectiveness. Our study fills this gap by explicitly modeling donor priorities as a moderating variable in the allocation-performance relationship.

Effects of Resource Utilization on Project Performance

Resource utilization describes how effectively project teams transform inputs into outputs and outcomes, and it links directly to performance (Atkinson, 2021; Fisher, 2023). Research in humanitarian logistics and rural supply chains demonstrates that poor utilization leads to waste and delays (Balcik & Beamon, 2022; Kabeza et al., 2024; Van Wassenhove, 2021). Studies in community-based health and infrastructure initiatives highlight that utilization effectiveness depends on monitoring systems and adaptive capacity (Mukayiranga & Wabala, 2024; Musyoki et al., 2025; Niyonzima et al., 2023). Resource scarcity in development contexts makes efficiency

a fundamental determinant of whether intended benefits reach target populations. Utilization therefore represents the final translation of project intentions into tangible community outcomes and directly affects beneficiary welfare. Evidence suggests that utilization problems frequently emerge during implementation rather than design, requiring continuous management attention and responses. The literature establishes utilization as a proximate cause of performance variation even when upstream planning and allocation are adequate. Effective utilization separates projects that achieve intended impacts from those that fail despite adequate resource endowments.

Significant disagreement exists regarding whether utilization improvements are primarily under managerial control or are strongly shaped by structural constraints. Some authors argue that corruption, weak procurement systems, and restrictive donor reporting cycles substantially reduce optimization capacity (Flyvbjerg, 2020; Merrow, 2023). Others propose that adaptive capability and organizational learning can offset many structural barriers through creative problem-solving (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2022; Teece, 2023). This divergence demonstrates that utilization cannot be fully understood without integrating both internal management capabilities and external institutional determinants. Existing research rarely examines how these factors interact to shape utilization effectiveness in specific contexts. Furthermore, empirical work remains dominated by corporate and humanitarian logistics settings rather than community-based rural projects, which limits generalizability. The literature has not adequately explained when managerial interventions improve utilization and when structural constraints render such interventions ineffective. Our study addresses this gap by integrating utilization within a broader optimization framework that explicitly models institutional forces.

Government Policy as a Moderator of Resource Optimization and Project Performance

Government policy has long been acknowledged as shaping project outcomes by influencing procurement processes, accountability mechanisms, and coordination (Donaldson, 2021; Hjelmbrekke & Hauge, 2023; Madsen, 2022). Recent research in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that effective policy frameworks reduce implementation delays and improve regulatory compliance (Aradukunda & Sikubwabo, 2024; Kamanzi & Uwamahoro, 2023; Mugenyi et al., 2022). These results support the proposition that policy environments can either enable or constrain project teams and shape optimization effectiveness. Policy coherence appears particularly important where multiple government agencies, donor organizations, and

implementing partners must coordinate activities across boundaries. Evidence suggests that clear regulatory frameworks reduce transaction costs and enable project teams to focus on implementation rather than compliance. Policy effectiveness may also depend on enforcement consistency, government capacity, and alignment between national priorities and community needs. The literature establishes government policy as an important contextual factor influencing project success across diverse settings. However, theoretical understanding of how policy moderates specific resource management practices remains underdeveloped and requires more explicit modeling.

Substantial disagreement persists regarding the magnitude of policy influence relative to project-level competence and management capability. Some researchers argue that competent project teams can mitigate weak policy environments through adaptive strategies and stakeholder management (Kerzner, 2022). Conversely, other scholars contend that policy weaknesses overwhelm internal competence and create insurmountable barriers to effective implementation (Flyvbjerg, 2020; Ndakala & Muchelule, 2023). The literature remains incomplete because it does not empirically test these competing claims or model policy as a moderator. This gap is especially relevant in rural development contexts where project teams have limited bargaining power and depend on government support. Existing research has not adequately explained when supportive policies amplify the benefits of resource optimization and when weak policies neutralize them. The theoretical mechanisms through which policy exerts influence on the optimization-performance relationship require more systematic investigation. Our study offers novelty by modeling government policy as an interacting structural force rather than treating it as a background condition.

Donor Priorities as a Moderator of Resource Optimization and Project Performance

Donor influence is unavoidable in development projects, and contemporary research acknowledges that donor priorities shape project design and resource distribution (Bebbington, 2022; Lewis, 2022; Musyoki et al., 2025). Some studies argue that donor involvement improves accountability and performance through stricter oversight mechanisms and systematic auditing (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2021; Mark, 2024). Conversely, other research contends that donor-driven goals suppress local ownership and can reduce long-term project impact (Cooke & Kothari, 2020; Kabeer, 2022; Mosse, 2021). Donor influence produces both positive and negative effects

depending on alignment with community priorities and flexibility in implementation requirements. Evidence suggests that donor priorities can enhance accountability while simultaneously creating rigidity that constrains adaptive management and local responsiveness. The literature indicates that donor relationships shape not only resource availability but also how project teams allocate attention. Donor requirements may redirect project focus toward measurable outputs at the expense of broader development outcomes and community empowerment. The literature establishes donor priorities as significant but has not adequately explained when donor influence strengthens versus weakens performance.

Most existing research treats donor influence as a static environmental condition rather than a dynamic moderator explaining variation in effectiveness. This treatment limits both theoretical development and practical relevance, especially in rural projects where donor expectations may compete with needs. The literature has not empirically tested how alignment between donor priorities and community needs affects the translation of optimization into outcomes. Furthermore, research has not adequately examined how donor flexibility in reporting requirements influences project team capacity to optimize resources. The mechanisms through which donor priorities interact with planning, allocation, and utilization practices to produce performance variation remain theoretically underspecified. This gap is particularly significant because donor-funded projects operate under dual accountability systems that may create conflicting pressures. Our study contributes by filling this gap and offering a nuanced explanation of how donor priorities interact with project practices.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in a conceptual framework that demonstrates the causal relationship between resource optimization practices and project performance. The conceptual framework also acknowledges that the strength and direction of the relationship between resource optimization practices and project performance are shaped by the moderating variables related to the external environment and institutional context which are impact of government policy and flexibility in donor's priorities.

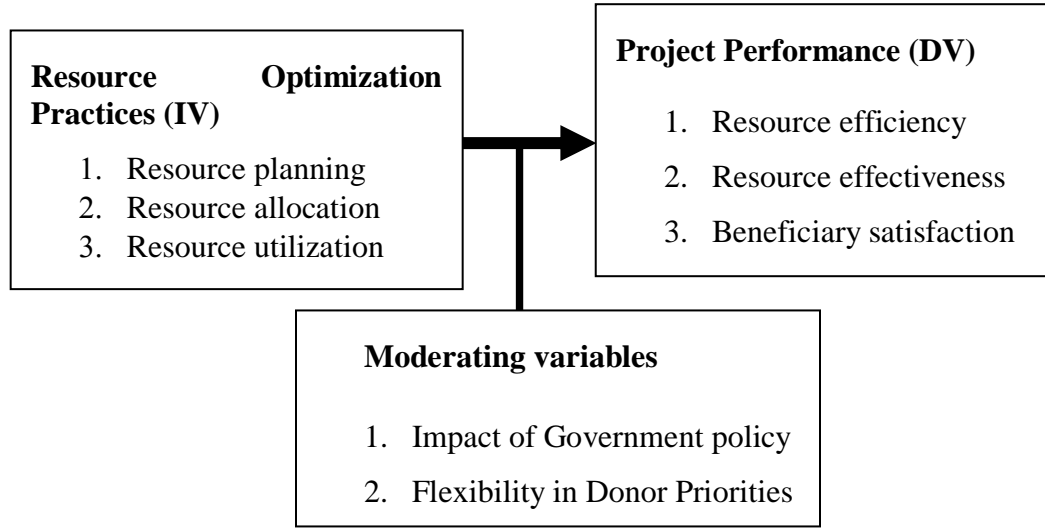


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) design to provide a transparent, replicable, and comprehensive synthesis of theoretical and empirical knowledge on the relationship between resource optimization practices and project performance. Following principles recommended for systematic reviews in project management and development studies (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007; Snyder, 2019), literature was identified through structured searches in major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, JSTOR, and Google Scholar using keyword combinations such as resource optimization, resource planning, resource allocation, resource utilization, project performance, donor priorities, government policy, and community-based development. Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed journal articles, books, or reputable institutional reports published between 2015 and 2025 that explicitly investigated resource optimization or project performance dimensions while excluding studies focusing solely on corporate environments without development relevance. More than eighty scholarly works were reviewed and synthesized through thematic analysis identifying patterns, convergent findings, divergent viewpoints, and research gaps. Given the study's anchoring in Contingency Theory, Stakeholder Theory, Resource-Based View, and Dynamic Capability Theory, a theory-informed analytic procedure integrated empirical results with theoretical expectations, culminating

in a refined conceptual model positioning government policy and donor priorities as moderating mechanisms.

RESULTS

The synthesis of theoretical and empirical literature generated five major thematic findings concerning resource optimization and project performance. Resource planning consistently emerges as foundational, reducing uncertainty, coordinating stakeholder actions, and anticipating operational constraints effectively. Studies report that higher planning maturity associates with improved timeliness, cost performance, and achievement of intended outcomes. However, disagreement remains whether planning remains effective in volatile or institutionally weak environments where constraints limit benefits. Resource allocation significantly influences project performance, with transparent and timely allocation improving productivity, reducing conflict, and enhancing trust. Nevertheless, disagreement emerges concerning donor involvement, with scholars debating whether oversight strengthens accountability or compromises relevance. Resource utilization directly drives performance by determining how efficiently inputs convert into outputs and outcomes for beneficiaries. Yet disagreement persists regarding whether utilization improvements are primarily under managerial control or shaped by structural constraints.

Government policy is widely described as an environmental determinant shaping how effectively project teams deploy available resources. Strong policy frameworks enhance coordination, reduce delays, and clarify roles, while weak environments create operational barriers. Despite this recognition, few studies empirically test policy as a moderating variable in optimization-performance relationships. The literature is especially nuanced on donor priorities, with scholars reporting that monitoring improves compliance while also distorting goals. However, literature rarely examines how donor priorities condition the effectiveness of optimization practices in development contexts. Donor influence is neither wholly positive nor wholly negative but depends on alignment with local needs. When synthesized, findings show that resource optimization practices consistently improve performance, but their effectiveness is not uniform. Variation can be explained by environmental fit, stakeholder power relations, operational capability, and adaptive responses.

Three critical gaps emerge: underrepresentation of rural community-based project environments, limited modelling of institutional forces, and lack of integrated theory. Existing research seldom integrates multiple theoretical lenses, resulting in incomplete explanatory models that cannot adequately explain success. Our results therefore justify modelling government policy and donor priorities as moderating forces shaping optimization effectiveness. This modelling offers theoretical contribution and practical relevance for policymakers, donors, and practitioners seeking to enhance effectiveness. The findings provide empirical grounding needed for refining the conceptual framework and advancing understanding of project performance. Future research should prioritize rural contexts, employ moderation analysis, and integrate contingency, stakeholder, and capability perspectives comprehensively.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that resource optimization practices are central to project performance, yet benefits vary across contexts. Internal management practices cannot be disentangled from the institutional environments in which projects are implemented. Government policy and donor priorities play critical moderating roles, with coherent frameworks enhancing optimization effectiveness. Weak or inconsistent policies can neutralize optimization impact, while misaligned donor priorities create distortions. Improving project performance requires dual focus on effective resource management and enabling institutional conditions. The refined conceptual model contributes to theory and offers practical guidance for policymakers, donors, and practitioners. Future empirical research testing this model will illuminate how projects achieve greater performance in resource-constrained environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Scholars should extend existing models by incorporating moderating mechanisms such as government policy and donor priorities. Future empirical work should employ analytical designs capable of testing these conditional effects in rural settings. Policymakers should develop coherent and supportive policy frameworks that enable project success through clear implementation guidelines. Strengthened accountability systems and decentralized capacity-building initiatives can create operational environments where project teams effectively translate optimization efforts. Donor agencies should adopt flexible, participatory, and context-sensitive funding and reporting

approaches to reduce misalignment with community needs. Project managers should treat optimization as an adaptive process, continuously aligning resource planning, allocation, and utilization practices. When optimization practices, donor influence, and government policy are aligned, development initiatives can achieve higher performance and effectiveness.

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