

Reconceptualising operational viability in education-focused non-governmental organisations (NGOs): A theoretical and empirical analysis from Zambia

Maimbolwa Namuchana¹
Gift Masaiti²
Kapambwe Mwelwa³

^{1*}maimbonamuchana@gmail.com

^{1,2,3}The University of Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Operational viability is viewed as an important factor in the performance and sustainability of education-orientated non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in low-income settings but is poorly theorised and under-investigated in practice. Based on evidence of mixed-methods in the case of Zambia, this article redefines operational viability as an emergent, relational and system-based capability and not a consequence of administrative efficiency per se. The research employed a convergent mixed-method design by analysing the data collected from a total of 222 participants (comprising 120 NGO employees and 102 Ministry of Education employees) in six education-orientated NGOs selected using purposive sampling. Exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression were used to analyse quantitative data, whereas thematic analysis was applied to qualitative interviews to identify the organisational and institutional processes that influence the delivery of programmes. The analysis is presented in the context of organisational resilience theory, institutional theory and systems thinking through the interaction of internal capacity, institutional alignment and systemic coherence to determine the viability of operations. The results show that the NGOs have comparably high internal governance, staffing, and performance management systems, but the operational viability is limited by the misalignment with the government planning processes, the implementation logics in line with donor-specified strategic incentives, and more comprehensive systemic resource bottlenecks. Such limitations reduce the possibilities for scalability, continuity, and long-term integration of NGO-supported programmes within national education systems. The study concludes that operational viability is not primarily a function of internal managerial competence but a governance condition shaped at the organisational-institutional interface. Programme sustainability depends on early co-design between NGOs and government actors, synchronisation of project cycles with public planning horizons, coordinated reporting and accountability systems, and institutionalised learning processes that extend beyond donor compliance. The article contributes to project and programme management scholarship by redefining operational viability as a system-level governance capability that enables programme continuity, scaling, and institutional integration in resource-constrained education systems.

Keywords: Education Non-Governmental Organisation, Operational Viability, Viability, Zambia

I. INTRODUCTION

Education-oriented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been the key players in designing and providing pedagogical support, foundational learning interventions, and system-strengthening works in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nomsenge, 2019; Brophy, 2020; Okine, 2022; Chisom et al., 2024). These interventions are usually introduced in the form of time-limited, donor-funded programmes, which are similar to portfolios of interdependent projects which operate alongside and within national education systems. Although the role played by NGOs in service delivery and innovation is now a well-known phenomenon, much less has been given to the circumstances under which such project-based interventions can be sustained as a working process even beyond individual funding cycles. A significant part of the existing studies on NGOs in education has revolved around financial sustainability, reliance on donors, and the outcomes of the programme (Choto et al., 2022; Tugyetwena, 2023). Such views, however, tend to have a narrow conceptualisation of viability, viewing it as administrative effectiveness or resource mobilisation without giving much importance to the organisational, institutional and systemic interactions that influence programme continuity and integration. This leads to the inability of education projects with high internal management to scale or adjust to government systems or maintain gains once external funding is stopped.

In this regard, the idea of operational viability goes beyond financial or technical competency. It can be described as the ability of an organisation to transform resources into resources through coherent and well-coordinated and institutionally aligned programme delivery in complex resource-constrained systems (Caratozzolo et al., 2024; Kurti

& Salavati, 2024; Lechler et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2021). In the case of project-based organisations like education NGOs, project continuity, adaptive capacity and long-term institutionalising programme outcomes are directly determined by operational viability. What low-income education systems have indicated is that project challenges are hardly ever technical in nature. Rather, they are imbued into more general institutional and systemic processes, such as miscongruent planning processes, fractured governance structures, and donor-funded implementation rationales (Mtika & Sosu, 2025). In Zambia, fiscal pressures, development cooperation trends and poor coordination between non-state and state actors affect the viability of education-oriented non-governmental organisations similarly (Chrine et al., 2020; Kachumi et al., 2025; Volmink et al., 2017). These circumstances provide conditions where technically well-managed programmes can hardly have continuity, coherence and system integration. The article attempts to fill in a gap in the literature by reconceptualising operational viability as an emergent, relational, system-based capability. The paper builds on convergent mixed methods research on education-centered non-governmental organisations working in Zambia and uses the theory of organisational resilience, institutional theory, and systems thinking to question the relationships between organisational capability, institutional alignment, and systemic coherence in influencing the sustainability of the programmes.

The article proposes two main arguments: firstly, that operational viability needs not to be understood as an essential managerial feature but as a form of governance which is realised on the border between civil society organisations and state systems. Second, regardless of technical accuracy of execution, sustainability outcomes of project based educational interventions do not rely as much on the accuracy of technical execution but rather on cross-level harmonization of project cycles, institutional planning processes, and system-wide coordination mechanisms. Reconstructing operational viability as a relational governance construct, as opposed to an internal performance measure, this research study adds to the academic discussion on project and programme management and provides policy-relevant information on how to improve the sustainability of donor-funded education interventions in complex adaptive systems.

1.1 Research Questions

- i. What constitutes operational viability in education-focused NGOs?
- ii. How do organisational capability, institutional alignment, and systemic coherence interact to shape operational viability?
- iii. How does operational viability influence programme sustainability and system integration?
- iv. What governance and systemic conditions constrain or enable operational viability in Zambia?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Operational viability in education-oriented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is a multi-dimensional concept that cannot be sufficiently described with the help of one theoretical approach. NGOs are mainly project-based organisations, whereby they put in place time-limited, donor-funded programmes within the existing permanent government systems. Consequently, they are not only functionally determined by the inner organisational capacity, but also by the level of institutional accordance and system dynamics. To account for this complexity, the work combines the organisational resilience theory, the institutional theory, and the systems thinking that is based on the complex adaptive systems. Instead of considering these theories as a parallel exposition, the framework places them as a complementary lens, which is used to clarify different but intersecting aspects in various failure modes that influence the sustainability, project continuity, and scalability.

2.1.1 Organisational Resilience Theory: Adaptation Programmes to Shocks in Funding

The organisation resilience theory describes how organisations expect, absorb, adapt, and recover following any form of disruption in organisations, like fluctuations in funding, change of policies, and uncertainty in operations (Sinha & Ola, 2021; Vakilzadeh & Haase, 2020; Quendler, 2017). Resilience within a project-based environment takes the form of adaptive planning, flexible staffing, learning and responsive leadership, which allow programmes to survive external shocks. In the context of education-related NGOs, the resilience theory can be used to understand how organisations continue to deliver programmes when their donor funding is postponed, decreased, or redesigned. Resilience is related to leadership adaptiveness, organisational learning, and cross-functional coordination (Rydzewski, 2024; Coleman and ADIM, 2019). The capacities enable NGOs to reset the project activities, redistribute resources, and keep the implementation momentum going despite constraints.

Nevertheless, there is also a major limitation of resilience theory. Adaptive responses can be coping mechanisms and not institutionalised capabilities. Although these practices will aid in short-term continuity of the projects, they may not be translated into long-term programme integration or continuity. In project management terms, resilience describes

how projects withstand funding shocks, though not why programmes with good management still fail to scale and entrench into the state machinery. This restriction brings about the need to involve the institutional theory.

2.1.2 Institutional Theory: Divergent Planning, Reporting and Governance Systems

According to the institutional theory, organisational behaviour is determined by regulatory, normative, and cultural environments that provide legitimacy and resource accessibility (Fagbemi et al., 2025; Tugyetwena, 2023). In the case of project-based NGOs in education systems, the viability of the NGO is largely reliant on its alignment with the government planning cycles, reporting systems, and accountability systems. A second mode of failure is explained using this lens: the failure of NGO governance of the project and the institutional systems of the public sector to align. NGOs tend to work in line with donor-based rationales that focus on brief funding cycles, upward accountability and parallel reporting needs. In comparison, government institutions operate with a higher planning horizon, bureaucracy and legal mechanisms of accountability. At the point of divergence of these logics, the projects can be technically successful but poorly fitted into the national systems.

The institutional theory, therefore, is useful in explaining why programmes with high internal capacity have been constrained in terms of sustainability due to a lack of coherence in the coordination amongst their planning and poor ownership. NGOs have to find a way around their conflicting institutional requirements amid the donors, ministries, and communities (Fagbemi et al., 2025), usually without harmonising their governance structures. Although resilience theory describes the adaptation in projects, the institutional theory exposes the limited viability of projects in the face of misaligned governance environments, no matter how competent the organisations are. However, institutional theory is not sufficient to explain unplanned interrelations between several actors and multiple projects that are functioning concurrently within the education system. Systems thinking bridges this gap. All this suggests that there is a structural coordination breakdown at the interface between short-term project cycles and long-term permanent government planning systems, and not unwillingness or lack of communication between actors.

2.1.3 Systems Thinking, Complex Adaptive Systems: Parallel Project Unintended Consequences

The conceptualisation of education systems based on systems thinking is that they are complex adaptive systems that have interdependence, are non-linear, include feedback loops, and are emergent (Fowler & Mati, 2019; Nelles et al., 2021; Phillips and Ritala, 2019). Such systems have interaction of individual projects with each other and with the institutional structures in a way that can lead to unintended consequences.

Based on this view, another failure mode is formed: the disintegration and ineffectiveness of parallel project implementation. Although individual NGOs may be resilient, and their action adheres to the institutional rules, the aggregate impact of numerous uncoordinated projects can strain the government's capacity and create distortive incentives and system dysfunction (Clerkin and Quinn, 2018; Dass et al., 2020). Reporting systems that operate in parallel, conflict with each other, or have overlapping interventions may cause short-term benefits at the expense of long-term system operation. Systems thinking is why interventions that are effective at the project level do not give sustainable system-level results. It emphasizes the constraints of project optimization separately and the significance of coordination, feedback and learning throughout the programme portfolio. This viewpoint is consistent with the assumption that sustainability issues are usually structural bottlenecks rather than organisational failures (Fredriksen, 2023; Spivack, 2021).

2.1.4 Integrated Framework of Operational Viability

On the whole, these three theoretical approaches offer a consistent description of the viability of operations in interventions based on project-based teaching. The organisational resilience theory is the adaptation of programmes to funding and operational shocks by NGOs (Lechler et al., 2022). The institutional theory exposes the limitations of project continuity and ownership due to misaligned governance structures (Hamda & Kebede, 2021). Systems thinking reveals the unintended system-level outcomes of parallel projects, which destroy sustainability (Ndombi et al., 2020).

With the combination of these lenses, the concept of operational viability is transformed as an emergent, relational and system-embedded capability. It is neither an attribute of single projects or organisations, but a state that emerges between project capabilities, institutional arrangements and system dynamics (Midgley & Lindhult, 2021). This combined framework enhances project and programme management scholarship in a way that redirects the focus on project implementation to the governance and coordination processes that are necessary to maintain programme delivery in complex education systems (Fredriksen, 2023).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Operational Viability in Education-Focused NGOs

Operational viability has been investigated by empirical scholarship, using resource dependence, organisational adaptation, and sustainability outcomes. Resource Dependence Theory assumes that organisations must gain access to vital external resources and that asymmetric power relations influence the governance and strategy (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). In donor-based NGOs of education, viability thus connects to financial solvency, but to the extent that it is strategic autonomy in funding logics forced upon them by external demands.

Later studies prove that dependency pressures are addressed through reorganisation of governance structures and network relationships within organisations (Hillman et al., 2009). Adaptive governance then comes to the forefront of maintaining operations in volatility. The anticipatory resilience studies offer leaders flexibility, strategic alignment, and organisational culture as predictors of a nonprofit continuity (Singh et al., 2022). These conclusions indicate that operational stability depends on the internal capability, especially on governance routines and adaptive leadership. An equivalent body of literature focuses on the importance of institutionalisation as a sustainability indicator. According to the Perlman Robinson et al., (2021), the concept of durability is the formal integration of programmes into state systems. In this light, operational viability embraces not only managerial ability but also institutional absorption capacity. Together, these studies imply that the concept of operational viability incorporates the management of resources, adaptive governance, and institutional embedding. Nevertheless, there is still a fragmentation of the literature. The internal capability, external alignment, and system integration are discussed independently of each other, and the integration is not conceptualised as one. The relationship between these dimensions is still under-theorised, especially in aid-prone education systems.

2.2.2 Organisational Capability, Institutional Alignment, and Systemic Coherence

Even though the issue of organisational capability is often studied, its interplay with institutional settings is less systematically addressed. As Elbers and Arts (2011) show, the reorganization of the internal processes under conditions of the donors means that the capability as such is determined by the pressures of an institution. Equally, Arhin et al. (2018) demonstrate that credibility-building and strategic partnerships are the strategies which NGOs use to reduce the instability of funding. The implication of these studies is that capability is operationalised in terms of alignment processes and not in terms of existing outside of them. At the interface between the state and the non-governmental organizations, Makuwa (2004) observes that coordination failures and policy ambiguity are obstructions to effective collaboration in education sectors. Coherence of program then is limited by institutional misalignment despite the firm internal systems. Ostrom (2019) supports this point and notes that sustainability lies in institutionalizing practices in formal governance schemes. However, despite these observations, the interaction between internal capability, institutional fit, and system-level coordination is hardly ever modelled in the empirical research. Research usually separates one of the dimensions; capability, partnership or institutionalisation without investigating how misalignment at the levels creates fragmentation. The relationship dynamics that connect the project execution to system integration are thus not well defined.

2.2.3 Operational Viability's Influence on Programme Sustainability and System Integration

The connection between programme sustainability and operational structures is becoming recognised but conceptually loosely defined. Dadu et al. (2024) discover that sustainability is more predicted by relational governance (especially donor relationship management) than by diversifying funding. Gul and Morandé (2023) warn not to give blanket sustainability prescriptions, as the outcomes are dependent on contextual conditions of governance. The participatory development scholarship also associates permanency with ownership by local people and embedding (McLean et al., 2019). The institutionalisation frameworks focus on formal incorporation into the public systems as the foundation of long-term persistence (Perlman Robinson et al., 2021). Although these studies find correlates of sustainability, they fail to theorise sustainability as a process of operational viability. The cause and effect relationships that exist between internal capability, institutional alignment and systemic coherence and programme continuity are poorly developed. Sustainability is being discussed as an outcome variable but does not explain the conditions of cross-level governance that facilitate it.

2.2.4 Governance and Systemic Conditions: A Constraint or Enabler of Operational Viability in Zambia

Conditions of contextual governance is critical in the determination of the NGO activity. The policy uncertainties and lack of coordination in the Southern African education systems are illuminated by Makuwa (2004). Arhin et al. (2018) show that funding volatility restructures the organisational behaviour in aid-dependent settings. Gul and Morandale (2023) also state that the strategies of sustainability cannot and should not be universal. All these studies indicate that the continuity in operations is facilitated by the existence of clarity in governance and fiscal stability, coordination mechanisms and institutional coherence. However, the interaction of these systemic constraints with

organisational capability in Zambia education sector is poorly researched. The interrelationship between donor schedules, state planning, and system-level capacity has not been represented as a coherent explanatory system.

In the literature, the concept of operational viability is implied and seldom conceptualised. The question of internal capability, institutional alignment, sustainability, and systemic context is looked into separately. The only dimension that has not been theorised adequately is the interaction of these dimensions to influence programme continuity and institutional integration. The gap is especially acute in the education systems that are marked by the dependence of donors and disjointed governance. The presentation of operational viability as a relational construct that is a product of the interplay between organisational capability, institutional alignment, and systemic coherence assists in moving beyond the determination of isolated determinants and the development of a multi-level governance account of sustainability.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

The research design that was used in this study is convergent parallel mixed-methods research (Cresswell, 2021), in order to explore the operational viability as a multidimensional concept that is organisational, institutional and at the same time systemic. The combination of quantitative measures and qualitative narration was necessary since operational feasibility can never be sufficiently estimated using quantitative or qualitative measures (Nevedal et al., 2024; Trischler, 2022). Although it is possible to measure and validate underlying dimensions of viability across organisations using survey data, qualitative evidence is needed to understand how these dimensions interact in practice, where NGO programmes and donor requirements meet government systems (Elbers & Arts, 2011; Knowles, 2023; Meijis & Koolen-Maas, 2022). This design, in turn, allowed the study to combine measurement and explanation as research on project and programme management studies has urged to study complex governance phenomena at various levels of analysis.

The mixed-method design is based on the analytical framework, which was created in the doctoral thesis of the author, who determined that financial resilience, operational viability, and sustainability are separate but interconnected constructs that need empirical confirmation and interpretation in a context. The data collection was carried out in parallel with quantitative and qualitative data using 222 respondents, and these data were independently analysed and combined during the interpretation efforts to attain analytical complementarity, and not methodological triangulation alone.

3.2 Unit of Analysis

The organisational-institutional interface in which education programmes are made and delivered is the major unit of analysis in the present study, instead of the NGO or the individual project itself (Menashy & Zakharia, 2022; Reinish, 2020; Silberstein and Spivack, 2023). Data were empirically gathered at both the organisational (NGO internal systems and practices) and institutional (Ministry of Education planning, coordination and oversight) levels. Operationally, the conceptualisation of analytical viability, however, is developed because of interactions between these levels.

It is this framing that shows how education NGOs are project-based, with the programmes being deployed using time-limited projects within permanent public sector systems (Cabrita et al., 2021; Colenso and Hai, 2024; Silberstein and Spivack, 2023; Spivack, 2021). Operational viability is then not considered as being a property of the individual project or organisations in isolation, but rather a relational capability that is influenced by organisational capacity, institutional alignment and systemic constraints. This method is aligned with the conceptual model of the thesis that places viability as a system-embedded state that determines programme continuity and integration.

3.3 Quantitative Analysis and Construct validation

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and multiple regressions were used to analyse quantitative data in order to prove the structure and explanatory power of the operational viability as a latent construct (Capinding, 2024; Ruel et al. 2021). EFA was utilised as a theory-driven procedure to establish and validate the dimensionality of operational viability using the indicators formed on the basis of the conceptual framework created in the thesis. By using this method, the study was able to test empirically whether governance, staffing, monitoring, coordination and systems-related items grouped into coherent dimensions were in line with the theorized construct.

After construct validation, a regression analysis was applied to the hypotheses on the explanatory relationship between the results of operational viability and programme sustainability. As per the thesis, regression modelling was used to test the hypothesis on whether operational viability adds significance to sustainability when the relevant organisational issues are taken care of, which adds to the causal inference at the construct level as opposed to predicting the performance of each particular project. These analyses argue the theoretical statement of the study that viability is an enabling condition of programme continuity and not an outcome.



3.4 Qualitative Analysis and Explanatory Depth

Qualitative information collected through the interviews with key informants was analysed using a thematic analysis in order to explain the experiential and negotiated aspects of operational viability in the field (Loblay et al., 2021; Mubangizi & Adekanla, 2024). The thematic scope included the coordination processes, alignment of the planning activities, relations between the donors and governmental bodies, and adaptive strategies implemented in case of systemic constraints. The qualitative knowledge was then used to understand and put the quantitative trends into context, especially in circumstances where strong internal organisational capacity co-varied with weak programme integration or sustainability. This explanatory factor was crucial in identifying institutional misalignment and system-level bottlenecks that can never be seen by data available through surveys alone.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Operational Viability in Education-Focused NGOs

The results indicate that operational viability is a multidimensional construct comprising organisational project capability, institutional alignment, and systemic coherence. Quantitative data indicate that NGOs have strong internal project capabilities. The mean of the Operational Viability Index was high (M=4.00, SD=0.96), indicating that governance structures, staffing strategies, and internal control systems are generally institutionalised across organisations. Table 1 shows that the organisational project capability and systemic coherence have mean scores that are relatively high, but the institutional alignment has a lower mean, indicating a possible barrier to programme integration despite the existence of a high internal capacity.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Operational Viability Dimensions

Dimension	Mean	SD
Organisational Project Capability	4	0.96
Institutional Alignment	3.8	1
Systemic Coherence	4.16	0.85

The presence of governance structures, competent technical staff, and efficient monitoring and evaluation systems, corroborated by qualitative evidence, supports the existence of clear governance structures, skilled technical staff, and functional monitoring and evaluation systems. The respondents explained that there were clearly defined reporting lines, regular performance monitoring, and internal accountability systems through which projects are delivered. These attributes are good examples of project execution capacity, and these are in line with resilience-oriented practices that facilitate programme delivery under limited conditions.

However, the qualitative data also revealed the gaps in capabilities that undermine continuity between project cycles. These loopholes involve the reliance on short-term project-based staff, a lack of succession planning and turnover of external consultants to supply technical functions. These types of arrangements erode institutional memory and reduce the ability of the organisation to sustain programme momentum at times of funding changes. Internal systems, therefore, may help execute the project, but are characterised by low effectiveness in ensuring continuity of the programme longer than funding cycles. The evidence supports the fact that operational viability does not only entail financial prudence but also governance systems, staffing systems, surveillance capabilities, and consistency of relations with the state institutions.

4.1.2 Organisational Capability, Institutional Alignment, and Systemic Coherence

Though internal project strength is strongly evident, there is an issue of institutional fit that emerges as a major limitation to operational feasibility. Quantitative indicators are an indication of a moderate conformity to systems of government, but qualitative results indicate continued coordination failure between NGO project portfolios and the planning and reporting systems of Ministries of Education. According to the respondents in the ministry, it is always noted that NGOs involve the government actors in the project cycle when they are already late, when the funding has already been secured, and the project designs are already made. As one respondent noted:

“They want to develop the proposals on their own and once they are approved, that’s when they engage us, and they complain when we don’t fully own the programme.” (Key Informant, 1 October 2025)

From the Ministry’s perspective, this late-stage engagement limits alignment with national priorities, weakens ownership, and complicates integration into annual and medium-term planning cycles. Another respondent highlighted the importance of early co-design:

“If only we could start together, develop together, it would be easier.” (Key Informant, 18 September 2025)



However, there was a different limitation as expressed by NGO respondents. Although they recognized the importance of alignment, they indicated that they lacked clear, harmonized, and actionable priority frameworks that could be used to drive project design. NGOs explained that they depended on secondary sources of data, like Education Statistical Bulletins, to draw conclusions on what to do, instead of depending on multi-year plans developed with the joint articulation. One respondent explained:

“The ministry does not avail us with any key priorities they may have, so we base our projects on the prevailing challenges we see.” (Key Informant, 25 September 2025)

This tension is not associated with the collapse of communication, but a failure of coordination based on a lack of alignment between planning horizons, decision-making authority and accountability structures. NGOs work in the cycles of donor-funded projects that have a strict schedule and performance standards, and government systems work in the extended planning and bureaucratic procedures. Without common coordination mechanisms, such a reliance results in parallel planning, fragmented reporting structures and poor integration of programmes. Table 2 combines the quantitative trend with the qualitative data, demonstrating the presence of a strong internal project ability along with institutional and systemic losses of continuity of programmes.

Table 2
Integrated Evidence on Operational Viability Across Project Cycles

Dimension	Quantitative Pattern	Qualitative Evidence	Project Management Implication
Organisational Project Capability	High mean scores on governance, staffing, and M&E	Strong internal controls, but reliance on project-funded staff	Strong execution, weak cross-cycle continuity
Institutional Alignment	Moderate scores; high variance	Late government engagement; unclear priorities	Coordination failure across planning cycles
Systemic Coherence	High internal systems, low external synchronization	Parallel reporting, competing timelines	Fragmentation across project portfolios

The late entry of governments, poor planning cycles and disjointed reporting lines creates structural friction between the NGOs and the Ministry of Education. The observed pattern of interaction can be summed up as the existence of high organisational capability and low institutional alignment, which led to the lack of system-embedding execution strength. Besides, strong internal control and fragmented governance dynamics generate fragmentation at portfolio levels. Operational viability thus becomes not a linear expression of internal capacity but a relational expression that is formed out of cross-level relationships.

4.1.3 Operational Viability, Programme Sustainability and System Integration

In the regression model, organisational capability, institutional alignment, and systemic coherence functioned as independent variables, while programme sustainability served as the dependent variable. The results indicate that excellent internal governance is not a sufficient factor in ensuring sustainability. NGOs have high performance in funding rounds; however, project-based staffing, ineffective succession plans, parallel reporting, and inappropriate alignment of planning horizons all lead to poor programme continuity. The patterns uphold the difference between the short-term project resilience and the long-term structural sustainability.

The evidence undermines project-based management presuppositions, resembling sustainability criticisms that the fidelity of implementation is the same as institutionalisation. Operational viability only plays a role in sustainability when systemic organisational structures are coordinated with governance cycles and enclosed in national planning cycles. In this way, sustainability becomes a conditional derivation of the viability of operations, but only when viability is directed to institutional congruence and systemic consistency.

4.1.4 Governance, Systemic Conditions and Operational Viability in Zambia

These data demonstrate structural limitations on the ecosystem level, donor-driven timeframes, infrastructure restrictions, geographic distribution, ICT limitations and disparities between the capacity of districts. These situations raise the marginal delivery costs and limit scalability, even in the case of sound financial stewardship. More specifically, the findings indicate that overall systemic constraints that impact the ecosystem of the entire education system affect the viability of operations.

The quantitative outcomes of internal control and information systems are relatively high ($M=4.16$, $SD=.85$), which means that NGOs have believable monitoring, procurement and reporting systems on the organisational level. However, these strengths do not entirely initiate system-level coherence. Qualitative data also determine donor-led implementation schedules, failing district-level resources, uneven sub-national capacity, and staffing within the Ministry

of Education to be stable, limiting elements to coherent implementation. These factors hamper the capacity of the NGOs to synchronise the project schedules related to government planning cycles and implement the programmes across the districts in a similar way. According to the respondents, parallel reporting necessitates competing schedules generated by the various NGOs working on the same system, usually demanding different donor demands, which overburdens the government. Even projects that are well run do lead to fragmentation in case there are poor coordination mechanisms among programmes. System-level results are therefore linked to the performance of many poorly correlated project cycles but not to the performance of the interventions.

These outcomes further suggest that structural circumstances limit the viability of operations, which cannot be controlled by an individual organisation or project team. Programme sustainability is therefore not only a matter of internal efficiency, but also the uniformity of governance, coordination and resource movement throughout the education system. Overall, the qualitative matrix prepared with the aid of the analysis in Figure 1 shows how the concept of operational viability is displayed at the edge of organisational project systems, institutional governance system arrangements, and system-level constraints.

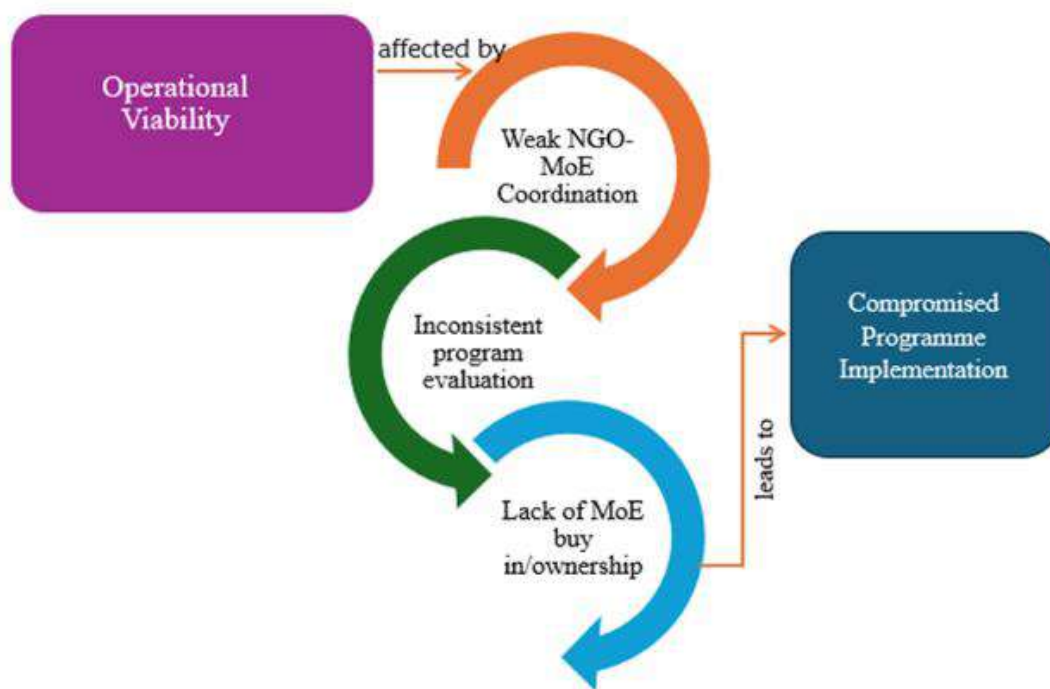


Figure 1
Operational Viability at Organisational-Institutional Interface

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Operational Viability as Governance Alignment Rather Than Managerial Strength

The results indicate that high internal capability does not necessarily translate into sustainability. In this research, NGOs had organised systems of governance, an official system of reporting, and technical proficiency in staffing. However, programme continuity was limited due to incompatibility with government planning cycles and donor-imposed schedules. This is a challenge to managerialist beliefs about project management, which identifies execution fidelity with long-term effect. The most conclusive explanation of this is in the institutional theory. According to research, sustainability does not only rely on performance but also on the alignment with current governance forms and political will (Donessouné et al., 2023; Ostrom, 2019). The structural constraint of institutional embedding is experienced when the cycles of NGO project operations are not in touch with state planning horizons (Bano & Oberoi, 2020). The notion of operational viability thus becomes not a feature of internal competence, but a performance of institutional congruence, which re-defines sustainability as a governance performance, as opposed to a technical performance (Choto et al., 2022).

4.2.2 Adaptation without Embedding: The Limits of Resilience

The paper also identifies the difference between short-term resilience and structural viability. Flexible staffing, internal controls, and responsive leadership were among the approaches that NGOs showed to adaptive responses to funding volatility. These results are consistent with Singh et al. (2022) and other organisational resilience literature, which focuses on adaptation in an uncertain environment (Țiclău et al., 2021; Witmer & Mellinger, 2016). Adaptive capacity on its own, though, would not guarantee system integration. Resilience in several instances served as a coping strategy rather than a pathway to institutionalisation. Pryce (2021) was of the view that adaptive resilience, in particular, was an important coping mechanism to change; this makes projects survive shocks but remain externally anchored. This distinction clarifies a theoretical boundary: resilience explains continuity under disruption but not embedding within formal governance systems. Operational viability, hence, does not just consist of adaptive capacity; it consists of alignment that transforms adaptation into institutional absorption.

4.2.3 Fragmentation as a System-Level Constraint

Other than the organisational and institutional dynamics, the results show systemic fragmentation as a constraint. The cumulative coordination burdens at the ministry level occurred due to parallel reporting organisations, donor-specific timelines, and overlapping intervention findings in tandem with (Mundy et al., 2010), which revealed that the lack of coordination among organisations posed a threat to programme continuity. Even the projects that were well-controlled added to the portfolio inefficiency. The explanatory leverage here is offered by systems thinking. In that light, findings of Phillips and Ritala (2019) conclude that project-level optimisation in complex adaptive systems is not a sure way of finding system-level coherence. Sustainability, therefore, does not occur as individual project performance; instead, viability is constrained by system-level feedback loops and capacity constraints that organisations cannot unilaterally address, and the analytical interest then moves away from single-organisation reform to cross-actor coordination processes (Struben & Kapmeier, 2023; Singh et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2021).

4.2.4 Relational Governance as the Core Mechanism of Sustainability

This relationship between capability, alignment and systemic coherence shows a relational process behind sustainability (Marques & Martins, 2025). A combination of diversification strategies alone, relative to more relational governance, which includes structured engagement between NGOs and ministries, was more impressive than empirical evidence that backs relationship management and predicts durability better than financial restructuring (Dadu et al., 2024; Makeche & Chowa, 2023; Robinson et al., 2023). This logic is also strengthened by the work of participatory development scholarship that defines institutional ownership as the driving force behind programme sustainability (Donessouné et al., 2023; Kinsbergen et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2019; Lee, 2017). In the cases where the structure of co-design and shared accountability was not evident at the early stages, sustainability results were poor, even with efficiency within the organisation (Poncin, 2024; Ndombo et al., 2021). Operational viability, therefore, works as a relational state of governance which comes to life when the organisational ability is converted to institutional alignment and embedded in system-wide structures of coordination (Singh et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2021).

4.2.5 Governance Architecture and Contextual Constraint

Lastly, the findings highlight the effects of contextual conditions of governance on viability limits. Scalability of otherwise healthy programmes was constrained by donor schedules, infrastructural bottlenecks and skewed sub-national capacity (Baldwin et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2019). Sustainability plans thus cannot be prescribed in general, but they need to be tuned to both governance architecture and systemic capacity (Gul & Morandé, 2023; Struben & Kapmeier, 2023). This supports the general theoretical thesis: the structural predisposition of operational viability. Fragmented ecosystems in governance cannot be replaced by internal reform only (Ansell et al., 2024; Eckel, 2023). Viability turns into a cross-level feature which relies on harmonised planning periods, institutionalised coordination platforms and system-sensitive donor practices (Meijs & Koolen-Maas, 2022; Singh et al., 2022).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The paper redefines operational viability in education-oriented NGOs as a relational government state, as opposed to a managerial quality. Based on the evidence of mixed methods as evidenced in Zambia, the results prove that the operational viability is not concentrated within the financial stewardship, technical competence, and administrative efficiency. Rather, it comes to the place of convergence between organisational capability, institutional alignment and systemic coherence. Theoretically, the article contributes to the scholarship of project and programme management in three aspects. First, it moves the locus of viability out of the organisational level to the cross-level governance interface, demonstrating that sustainability depends on the congruency between the donor-funded project

cycles and state planning systems. Second, it merges the organisational resilience, institutional theory and systems thinking into a coherent explanatory methodology that explains the different but interacting failure modes, adaptive coping without institutionalisation, institutional misalignment despite internal capability and systemic fragmentation despite project-level success. Third, it places sustainability as not a result of technical fidelity, but as an emergent quality of coordinated governance structures in complex adaptive education systems. Empirically, the study demonstrates that programme continuity requires high internal governance capacity, which is not sufficient. Even technically efficient interventions find it difficult to scale or institutionalise where there is no linkage between project timelines, reporting structures, and accountability mechanisms and the government systems. Operational viability thus acts as a pre-qualifier to sustainability, but not when incorporated into consistent institutional and systemic structures.

What it means in the bigger picture is that the issues of sustainability in the donor-funded education programmes are not necessarily on the technical side, but the structural mismatch in governance. It is significant to strengthen internal organisational systems, yet without preliminary co-design, harmonised horizons of planning, and mechanisms of coordination on the system level, project-based interventions will not become part of the national systems. Reconceptualising operational viability as a system-based governance construct, this work gives a conceptual ground to investigate sustainability, going beyond financial sustainability or managerial efficiency. This relational model should also be further tested in future studies using various aid-dependent features to investigate how the differences in the governance architecture influence the sustainability of education interventions.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the indication of late institutionalization and moderate scores on institutional alignment, the current research suggests that the formal institutionalization of early co-design protocols between the NGOs and the Ministry of Education (MoE). The study also recommends that project cycles should be calibrated with the government planning horizons to increase the alignment of development projects and national policy horizons. Permanent NGO-MoE coordination platforms at both national and sub-national levels should be set up, and jointly created monitoring dashboards, which should be open to both NGOs and governmental officials. Enhance learning-oriented MEL systems by institutionalising reflective learning processes, which go beyond donor or project reporting as well as the codification of lessons learned into policy briefs to aid system uptake and ongoing improvement.

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