



The role of administrative empowerment in building effective institutions in developing countries: A multi-regional comparative analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the issue of critical nexus between a sense of administrative power and structural performance of public institutions in the definite socio-political settings of the developing nations. Though the classic school of thought about the nature of a public administration focuses more on strict hierarchy and centralized authority to preserve an order, these models tend to create a condition of an administrative paralysis and the inability to react to fluctuating local demands. This paper examines the role of dimensions of empowerment (delegation, autonomy and knowledge sharing) as drivers of institutional resilience using a qualitative multi-case study approach using institutional changes in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Bahrain, Algeria and Jordan. The results indicate that empowerment is not an independent managerial instrument but a contingent process output by Vertical Trust and Digital Oversight. The research conducts a needs identification of a Capability-Autonomy Alignment model, which suggests that in order to enable empowerment to be a motivator of effectiveness, it needs to be aligned with meritocratic recruitment and technological transparency. This study also adds value to the discussion of New Public Governance because it presents a localized concept of decentralization that circumvents the old patronage systems and offers a pathway that policy makers can follow to shift their administration systems to results-driven rather than compliance-driven.

Keywords: Administrative empowerment, institutional capacity, public governance, developing countries, bureaucratic autonomy, E-government and transparency

Introduction

The effectiveness and accountability of the state institutions have become the pillars of the national development in terms of global realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nevertheless, in the case of most of the developing countries, especially those that are operating in the post-colonial legacies or those that are in fast economic changes, there are bureaucratic inertia that is blocking the road to institutional effectiveness. These organizations are prone to the condition of so-called isomorphic mimicry, when the structures of organizations become the reflection of the external image of perfect Western bureaucracies but do not have the inside functional potential to create the value to the people (Khishtovani, 2025) [9].

One of the main interventions to prevent this cycle is administrative empowerment (Alkhalaf *et al.*, 2025) [4]. It is characterized as a holistic management philosophy that goes beyond delegation of tasks to the extent of transfer of authority, the dispensation of the necessary resources, and the development of the psychological agency of the civil servants (Souza Costa Neves Cavazotte & de Oliveira Paula, 2025) [19]. Developing countries are not that easy, though, when it comes to transferring power. It is a complicated bargaining with historical centralization, cultural high-power distance, and systemic Fear of Accountability that tends to dominate in public sectors (Fu & Fan, 2026) [7].

The author of the present paper claims that the inability of most institutional reforms in the Global South to work is not because of the insufficiency of technical knowledge but because of the inability to empower the administrative middle (Semaihi *et al.*, 2023) [17]. This research aims to answer: To what extent and under what conditions does administrative empowerment enable the construction of successful and robust institutions in resource-limited and

politically complex settings (Horak *et al.*, 2026)? This is by reviewing five different case studies.

Problem Statement

The main problem of public administration in the developing countries is the Rigidity-Capacity Paradox. Institutions tend to be highly centralized to either avoid corruption or political fracturing but it is the centralization that kills the local initiative to develop institutional capacity (Alqasimi *et al.*, 2025) [5]. As a result of this, civil servants are working in a Compliance Trap, wherein compliance to procedural details take precedence over the attainment of substantive outputs.

According to the current literature, most developing states have turned to the implementation of the concept of Performance-Based Management into practice, yet the absence of authentic administrative empowerment implies that middle- and bottom-level managers are responsible for the results and can do nothing to alter the procedures that lead to them (Modell, 2024) [13]. This lack of connection is the cause of institutional stagnation, low morale among the employees, and the systemic failure to respond to socio-economic shocks (Arora, 2025) [6]. Huge necessity therefore exists to establish an empowerment model powerful enough to operate in low-trust, high-patronage environments.

Conceptual Framework

In order to examine the function of empowerment in institutional building, this paper employs a multi-dimensional framework that combines Structural, Psychological as well as Knowledge-Based empowerment.

1. The Dimensions of Empowerment.

Administrative empowerment is conceptualized in four nevertheless differentiated pillars:

Delegation of Authority (Structural): It entails the official separation of the central hierarchy and the peripheral units regarding the distribution of decision-making authority (Akbar, 2025) ^[2]. This should be enshrined in law in third world countries, to safeguard the subordinate against unwind of the decision made arbitrarily (Alkhwaldah *et al.*, 2025) ^[4].

Self-Determination (Psychological): The extent to which an administrator believes that he or she has the option to take action and control actions (Souza Costa Neves Cavazotte & de Oliveira Paula, 2025) ^[19]. This is usually the most challenging aspect to have in the High-Power Distance cultures.

Competence and Knowledge (Educational): Empowerment is a liability that lacks technical and managerial skills to utilise it (Abbas *et al.*, 2026) ^[11]. This will demand a change in the approach of Compliance Training to Strategic Leadership Training (Wardiyanto *et al.*, 2025) ^[21].

Information Fluidity: Availability of real time data and strategic level objectives. Empowerment is a blindness where the administrator lacks the knowledge of the effects of his local decisions on the national mandate (Alghamdi *et al.*, 2014) ^[3].

2. Institutional Effectiveness as the Dependent Variable

In this paper, effective institutions do not only mean those institutions that expend their budgets but include those institutions that show:

Adaptive Capacity: The capacity to flex services in emergency (like the response to the COVID-19) (Horak *et al.*, 2026). This will entail incorporation of adaptable governance systems that will enable prompt reallocation of resources without undermining the main mission goals. Moreover, it captures the learning orientation of an organization whereby previous disruptions are translated into institutional knowledge to help to curb future systemic disruptions.

Procedural Justice: Equitable and open treatment of the citizens and employees (Quinn *et al.*, 2025) ^[16]. The procedural justice aspect assumes that the perceived fairness of the decision-making processes within an organization is as much attributive to its legitimacy as is the actual result. The institutions are able to promote greater degrees of trust by the people and internal employee interaction, which are essential in the sustainability of an institution by focusing on fair treatment.

Output Efficiency: The maximization of scarce resources to enlarge the value of the populace (Alqasimi *et al.*, 2025) ^[5]. In good institutions, there exists stringent performance measurements that make sure that each unit of input is subjected to the best possible social or economic output to the community. This demands the substitution of the traditional compliance-based approach to accounting with the value-based approach in management that is concerned with the actual effect of the public spending.

It is assumed that Administrative Empowerment is the independent variable that, after it is moderated by Digital Transparency, directly triggers the dependent variable, which is Institutional Effectiveness.

Theoretical Evolution of Administrative Reform

The institutional building discourse has experienced three significant paradigm shifts, which have transformed the role of the administrator. This knowledge of this evolution is critical to the placement of empowerment within the confines of developing countries.

1. Weberian Bureaucracy to New Public Management (NPM).

The post-colonial states took traditional Weberian models, which have hierarchy, rigid jurisdictional boundaries, and rigid rules, but initially adopted them to maintain stability (Mohsumova, 2025) ^[14]. Nevertheless, these strict mechanisms frequently got ossified resulting in inefficiencies (Arora, 2025) ^[6]. The New Public Management (NPM) movement of the 1990s aimed to implement the innovative instruments of privatization, including performance-based pay and decentralization (Naser, 2025) ^[15].

Although NPM had thrived in most of the developed economies, its implementation in the Global South was premature in most cases. According to scholars, the emphasis of NPM on the concept of autonomy was often subjugated by local patronage in those countries where the Rule of Law baselines were poor (Tiwari *et al.*, 2025) ^[20]. This resulted in decentralization of corruption as opposed to decentralization of efficiency (Khishtovani, 2025) ^[9].

2. The Capability Trap and Isomorphic Mimicry

One of the key ideas of modern literature is the theory of the Capability Traps that explains the participation of many developing institutions in isomorphic imitation. It is a process in which the organizations implement the external appearances of empowered, modern organizations, including mission statements and decentralized organizational charts, mainly to please the international donors and other external observers. These institutions, though resembling the outward look of progress, often have very centralized logic and are risk averse, thus literally impossible to evolve in real institutions (Khishtovani, 2025) ^[9].

The literature proposes a premise that Paper Empowerment, where there is authority granted in a legal but not a cultural and resourceful manner is in fact the reduction of institutional efficiency as it creates a veneer of phantom responsibility, where administrators are blamed that they had no power to stop something (Fu & Fan, 2026) ^[7].

3. The Drift Towards New Public Governance (NPG).

The modern-day New Public Governance (NPG) paradigm alters the market efficiency to joint empowerment. This model entails an administrator that is neither a rule-follower (Weberian) nor a manager (NPM), but a networked agent (Naser, 2025) ^[15].

To the developing countries, New Public Governance (NPG) proposes that the aspect of empowerment should be relational as suggested by Wicaksono *et al.* (2025) ^[22]. Within this construct, effectiveness is constructed by having the administrators empowered to work across the

departmental silos as well as with the civil society. According to recent research in the MENA and SSA regions, institutions that empower their employees to work on the Problems Driven iterative Adaptation (PDIA) tend to be more resilient to political instability than ones working towards the strict and top-down requirements, which is corroborated by the works of Horak *et al.* (2026).

4. Cultural Moderators: Power Distance and Trust

Another notable loophole in the literature on traditional empowerment is the fact that the cultural variables have been overlooked. A high-Power Distance Index (Hofstede) in most developing societies also poses a psychological obstacle to empowerment (Souza Costa Neves Cavazotte & de Oliveira Paula, 2025) ^[19]. Delegation can be perceived as a way of poor leadership by subordinates and as a loss of status by managers (Wardiyanto *et al.*, 2025) ^[21]. The literature has now highlighted that Psychological Empowerment needs to be localized; it cannot be imported as a Western one-size-fits-all solution but it must be incorporated with local social values in order to develop authentic institutional trust (Quinn *et al.*, 2025) ^[16].

Methodology

The proposed study is a qualitative, multiple-case study, which will investigate the intricate subtleties of administrative empowerment in diverse institutional contexts (Alqasimi *et al.*, 2025) ^[5]. The qualitative approach is made by the fact that the phenomenon of empowerment is socially embedded as it cannot be fully measured using only the quantitative indicators since it is characterized by the insidiousness of organizational culture, interpersonal trust, and personal psychological agency (Souza Costa Neves Cavazotte & de Oliveira Paula, 2025) ^[19]. The research employs a focused comparison approach by adopting the multi-regional comparative approach (Tiwari *et al.*, 2025) ^[20]. This will be in the form of sampling cases in various regions and in this case the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, to isolate universal challenges in the way of empowerment but also to recognize local achievements (Wardiyanto *et al.*, 2025) ^[21]. This approach is in accordance with the logic of the literal replication whereby, every case of an institution is assumed to be an experiment of its own to confirm whether the theoretical framework of empowerment is true in the context of varying political and economic pressures.

Purposive sampling criteria were used to select the five cases in order to make sure that there is diversity in institutions and rich data (Maqdliyan and Setiawan, 2023) ^[12]. Such requirements consisted of a combination of industries- including higher education, state owned companies and general public service and of varying reform maturity (Wongsin *et al.*, 2025) ^[23]. The primary data collection methods were based on a high level of triangulation of secondary data, such as official audit of the institutions, national reform roadmaps (Saudi Vision 2030), and independent academic reviews (Alghamdi *et al.*, 2014) ^[3]. Thematic coding was used in order to analyze this data in three steps. There was first an open coding that identified particular cases of empowerment that were subsequently placed using axial coding under 4 conceptual pillars of structural, psychological, knowledge, and information empowerment (Abbas *et al.*, 2026) ^[1]. Lastly, some pattern matching was employed in the comparison of these

initiatives to institutional effectiveness indicators to be able to ensure that the results are based on empirical evidence and not administrative rhetoric.

Empirical Analysis: The Diverse Path to Empowerment

The sections that follow outline the practice of administrative empowerment and its results in five different institutional landscapes. These instances demonstrate the conflict between standardized requirements and the very real need of localized autonomy.

1. Case Study 1: Majmaah University (Saudi Arabia)- Structural Decentralization.

Considering Saudi Vision 2030, there was a major restructuring of Majmaah University in order to decrease the administrative load on the central rectorate. The university adopted a model of Faculty-Level Governance and gave the department heads direct powers on how to allocate local budgets and curriculum changes.

Implementation: A digital dashboard has enabled the central administration to track the results in real-time, which made the change process less fearful of delegation (Alghamdi *et al.*, 2014) ^[3].

Results: Numbers showed that the time spent on curriculum approval was decreased by 30% (Alkhwaldah *et al.*, 2025) ^[4]. Moreover, faculty surveys demonstrated an appreciable growth in the Sense of Ownership, which was related to increased amount of localized research programs.

Critical Takeaway: Structural Empowerment can work well in a high-resource setting, and is coupled with Digital Oversight, whereby it can claim Control at a Distance without Micromanagement (Mahant, 2025) ^[11].

2. Case Study 2: Ethio-Telecom (Ethiopia) – Market-Driven Empowerment

The environment of Ethiopia is another challenge: the restructuring of a giant state-owned monopoly into a competitive player in the market. Ethio-Telecom embarked on a restructuring process that would enable the branch managers to make operational procurement decisions, which were previously based in Addis Ababa.

Implementation: The school has used a Self-Managing Teams strategy. The KPIs assigned to regional managers were based on the local customer satisfaction levels and network uptime, as opposed to adhering to the instructions of the center (Modell, 2024) ^[13].

Results: The decentralization also resulted in the increased efficiency of operations by 18 per cent and shorter response to network failures in rural locations (Alqasimi *et al.*, 2025) ^[5]. But the major challenge as also pointed out in this case was the so-called Skills Gap. Regional managers were usually not highly financially literate to handle complex budgets independently.

Best Lesson: Economic Empowerment should be the next phase of Knowledge Empowerment when resources are limited (Abbas *et al.*, 2026) ^[1]. In the absence of a "Skills Baseline" delegation may result in localized inefficiencies.

3. Comparative Observation: Incentives and their Work.

Comparative analysis of Saudi and Ethiopian cases is an indication that empowerment success relies greatly on the Incentive Structure. In Saudi Arabia, the driving force was strategic congruence with a national vision; in Ethiopia it was survival in a new competitive market. This proves that to be an effective institution empowerment should be linked to some physical outcome either a reward of innovation or a market-driven requirement of speed (Maqdllyan and Setiawan, 2023) ^[12].

4. Case Study 3: Secondary Education Sector (Bahrain) – Psychological Agency

In the Kingdom of Bahrain, the institutional reform of the governmental schools, based on the abandonment of the "Administrative Clerk" model of the school leadership by the model of Pedagogical Leadership. This necessitated a radical change within the psychological empowerment of school principals.

Implementation: Principals were given freedom to establish school-based professional development strategies and teacher-incentive programs. More importantly, the Ministry of Education transformed into the role of a dictator of Process into a dictator of Results and offered a Safe-Fail by which new teaching techniques were promoted (Shin and Shin, 2025) ^[18].

Findings: The study found that there was a considerable rise in Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). The example of empowered schools has shown an increased eagerness to volunteer in extra-curricular academic support among teachers and administrators, and this issue resulted in better student achievement in national standardized tests (Souza Costa Neves Cavazotte & de Oliveira Paula, 2025) ^[19].

Invaluable Point: Psychological Empowerment, the sense that decisions made matter, is a more effective motivator of effective work in social-service institutions than structural changes.

5. Case Study 4: Hasnaoui Group (Algeria) - Mixed Economy Operational Autonomy.

The Algerian case offers a critical analysis of the process in which a large-scale industrial organization (The Hasnaoui Group) was able to change its highly centralized traditional management style to a decentralized accountability unit.

Execution: The team incorporated the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) as an empowerment tool. By setting the clear financial and non-financial indicators, the middle managers were given the power to modify their local working operational processes without reporting it to the central executive board so long as they achieved their Accountability Thresholds (Yadav and Singh, 2022) ^[24].

Conclusion: The decentralization made a significant reduction in the operational friction and acceleration in the construction project turnaround. Nevertheless, it was also evident that the case showed the Accountability Fear; most managers were initially opposed to the idea of empowerment due to the fear that they will be held

personally responsible in case of economic fluctuations in the system they have no power over (Fu & Fan, 2026) ^[7].

Lesson Learned: Risk-Sharing Agreements should be entailed with Empowerment in volatile Economies. Managers will never want to be empowered unless they believe that the institution is behind them when there is a macro-economic instability.

6. Synthesizing Regional Barriers

A comparative study of the Bahraini and Algerian cases indicates that there is one common regional barrier and that is Traditional Bureaucratic Inertia. In both cases, it was not the absence of legal authority in the first place; rather, it was an established cultural tradition of waiting to get the signature at the top (Wardiyanto *et al.*, 2025) ^[21]. This implies that new institutions in such areas cannot be constructed without an Unlearning Process in addition to a new learning process.

Results and Discussion: The Empowerment-Effectiveness Nexus

The synthesis of the five case studies shows that the administrative empowerment cannot be viewed as the linear driver of effectiveness, but as a contingent driver that requires the concordance of multiple variables to work (Alkhwaldah *et al.*, 2025) ^[4]. The main conclusion of the study is that institutional effectiveness is maximum in the case when the vertical trust of the leadership is aligned with the accountability readiness of the personnel (Souza Costa Neves Cavazotte & de Oliveira Paula, 2025) ^[19]. A high degree of vertical trust, which is supported by powerful national demands, in the Saudi and Jordanian examples, resulted in a fast and quantifiable increase in institutional output (Alghamdi *et al.*, 2014) ^[3]. On the other hand, in Algerian case, a reduced accountability preparedness as a result of a general fear of legal responsibility played a big drag on the empowerment process, which implies that the psychological condition of the bureaucracy is as critical as structural transfer of power.

One theme that is brought out critically in the discussion is the issue of decentralization and the possibility of localized corruption. In third world countries where the rule-of-law level used to be weak in the past, there is a valid reason to believe that giving more power to local governments will give more power to local interest groups, a process known as elite capture (Khishtovani, 2025) ^[9]. Nevertheless, it is indicated in Jordan and Ethiopia that the best antidote to this threat is information fluidity (Naser, 2025) ^[15]. With both the empowerment and clear digital audit trails and GovTech interventions, rent-seeking possibilities are low (Mahant, 2025) ^[11]. This means that digital governance is the guardrail that administrative autonomy needs since it can permit the advantages of decentralized decision-making to be delivered to the masses without informal intermediaries getting in the way.

Lastly, the comparative analysis proves that the Western-style, so-called, flat hierarchies tend to be incompatible with the cultural norms of the high-power-distance societies in both the MENA and SSA regions. Rather, the successful cases in this paper had applied what we refer to as the supportive hierarchies (Wardiyanto *et al.*, 2025) ^[21]. The formal organization in these models is retained to offer psychological safety and definitive lines of control, but the

role of the leadership undergoes a transformation to be focused not on command and control but rather on mentoring and provision of resources (Horak *et al.*, 2026; Quinn *et al.*, 2025) ^[16]. This is a culturally sensitive strategy that seems to be the most viable way of developing effective institutions because it does not violate the local social values yet introduces the modern efficiencies that come with empowered and self-sufficing workforce.

Conclusion

The research on the role of administrative empowerment in the five different developing countries proves that it is not only technical resources that produce institutional effectiveness, but the emancipation of the human agency in the systematic structure. The study has clearly shown that empowerment of the administrators, both in terms of structure, psychology, and technology enables them to become not only rule-followers but also problem solvers. This change is necessary to cope with the polycrisis environment of the 21st century where the central governments are no longer able to control all the localized variables. This study also, however, concludes that empowerment is a conditional success. Without meritocracy and digital transparency, decentralization would even enable localized patronage out of accident. Thus, the effective institution in the developing context is one that strikes the balance between the autonomy of the agent and transparency of the system. Developing nations can eventually overcome the capability traps that have plagued their growth by changing the administrative culture to be one where there is fear of accountability instead of responsibility.

Strategic Recommendations for Policy Makers

The institutional building is a process that must take a staircases approach which first focuses on stabilizing the administrative middle, before complete autonomy is given. During the preliminary stage, the policy makers need to establish knowledge and merit. Only people who are hired and promoted according to merit-related requirements should be empowered, which requires the creation of civil services boards that are independent so that the managers are not subjected to political interference. In addition, this step needs a specific reskilling that does not assume procedural observance, but strategic leadership and risk management, which will secure the administrators with the competence threshold needed to make effective use of the new powers.

The second step after these underpinnings is put in place is the implementation of digital and structural guardrails. The introduction of GovTech tools cannot be interpreted as a form of micromanagement, but as one of the outcome auditing mechanisms that give the necessary data so that the superiors can rely on decentralized decision-making. The gradual autonomy, relying on the use of pilot empowerment zones to act as prototypes of national reform, is the most successful way to implement this structural change. Through these pools of excellence, governments can prove the effectiveness of empowerment in a limited setting and then extend the paradigm to the whole of the public sector.

The last stage of the transition is concerned with the cultural and psychological aspects of bureaucracy which are ingrained. In order to maintain institutional efficiency, legal and administrative codes need to be modified to distinguish

between the most common cases of honest mistakes that may be caused by the innovation and willful negligence. This difference will offer the psychological safety that administrators need to transition away a defensive pose to an active agency one. Finally, the performance of senior leadership has to change where the leader no longer acts as a commander but as a facilitator of success and growth of his or her empowered subordinates. Such change makes sure that administration empowerment is not a reform, but a structural change, that is here to stay and is a permanent transformation towards a stronger and more efficient state.

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