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PROJECT DESIGN STRATEGIES AND IMPLEMENTATION OF COUNTY AGGREGATION AND INDUSTRIAL PARK PROJECTS IN KENYA'S REGIONAL ECONOMIC BLOCS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF GOVERNMENT POLICY

Naphtaly Oscar Osika, PhD Candidate
Department of Spatial Planning, School of Engineering and Built Environment,
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Bondo, Kenya
ossynaph@gmail.com

Frankline Otiende, PhD
Supervisor, Department of Geography and Natural Sciences, School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (SHASS), Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Bondo, Kenya

Beatrice Atieno Abura, PhD
Supervisor, Department of Geography and Natural Sciences, School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (SHASS), Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Bondo, Kenya

Abstract

This study evaluates the influence of project design strategies on the implementation of County Aggregation and Industrial Park (CAIP) projects across Kenya's six regional economic blocs. Anchored in systems theory and supported by contingency theory, the study adopted a pragmatic philosophy with a descriptive-explanatory cross-sectional design. Data were collected from 168 respondents and 10 key informants using structured questionnaires and interview guides. Descriptive statistics, Spearman's rank correlation and ordinal logistic regression were employed for analysis, while government policy moderation was tested using moderated ordinal logistic regression with interaction terms. Findings reveal that project design strategies exert a statistically significant positive influence on CAIP implementation (Spearman's $\rho = 0.761$, $p <$

0.001; ordinal regression B = 3.508, p < 0.001). Government policy significantly moderates this relationship (B = 0.756, p = 0.009), with supportive policy environments amplifying design effectiveness by approximately 26%. The study identifies a pervasive "approval without activation" syndrome, where design documents are formally approved but rarely actively used. The study recommends institutionalizing quarterly design review cycles, embedding active-use clauses in project appraisal criteria and harmonizing national-county policy frameworks to unlock the full implementation potential of CAIP projects.

Keywords: Project Design Strategies; County Aggregation and Industrial Parks; Implementation; Regional Economic Blocs; Government Policy; Kenya; Ordinal Logistic Regression

INTRODUCTION

County Aggregation and Industrial Parks (CAIPs) represent a flagship initiative under Kenya's Vision 2030 and the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA), aimed at promoting balanced regional industrialization, value addition and job creation across all 47 counties (Republic of Kenya, 2007; Government of Kenya, 2024). Implemented as joint ventures between national and county governments and operationalized through six regional economic blocs—Lake Region, Western Kenya, North Rift, Central Kenya, Coast and Upper & Lower Eastern—these projects entail substantial fiscal commitments of Kshs 250 million per park, equally funded by county administrations and the national treasury (Government of Kenya, 2023; Wasuna, 2023). At their core, CAIPs seek to transform raw agricultural commodities into value-added manufactured products, thereby establishing robust supply chain connections from production through processing while elevating producer earnings, generating sustainable employment and expanding Kenya's export capacity (African Development Bank, 2022; Julius & Karanja, 2025).

Despite these ambitious objectives, the implementation of CAIP projects has been uneven and problematic. National progress reports indicate that by mid-2025, merely thirteen CAIPs had advanced to active construction, while the majority languished in deferred phases stretching to 2027 (Kindiki, 2025). Fiscal volatility has further eroded programmatic foundations, with a 2024 review documenting drastic appropriation reductions from KSh 4.5 billion to KSh 1.15 billion across eighteen counties (Business Daily, 2024). County-level performance exhibits equally troubling patterns: despite substantial treasury releases, jurisdictions including Siaya, Homa Bay, Kisii, Kilifi, Turkana and Tana River report negligible physical advancement and poor fund utilization (Eastleigh Voice, 2024). Post-construction challenges prove equally

daunting, with value-chain diagnostics lagging, private sector recruitment faltering and county technical competencies remaining underdeveloped (Standard Media Group, 2024).

Evidence consistently demonstrates that project management strategies are critical determinants of successful project implementation (Mirzaei et al., 2025; Ranasinghe et al., 2025). Among these, project design strategies constitute the foundational dimension, involving structured processes to define project goals, scope, resource needs, implementation pathways and performance indicators (Grall et al., 2025; van Arkel et al., 2025). A well-designed project reduces ambiguity, ensures clarity and aligns activities with intended development outcomes (Majak & Rotich, 2025). In CAIP projects, robust design strategies are essential; poorly framed designs can lead to cost overruns, delays and interventions that fail to meet county or regional priorities (Miano et al., 2024). However, empirical interrogation of how specific design approaches shape CAIP performance remains sparse and the contingent influence of government policy environments on the design-implementation relationship lacks systematic examination.

This study addresses these gaps by evaluating the influence of project design strategies on the implementation of CAIP projects across Kenya's regional economic blocs, with particular attention to government policy's moderating function. The study is guided by the research question: To what extent do project design strategies influence the implementation of CAIP projects within Kenya's regional economic blocs and how does government policy moderate this relationship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Project Design Strategies and Implementation of Projects

Project design strategies encompass structured approaches to planning and organizing projects, including defining objectives, setting timelines, allocating resources and developing work plans to ensure efficient execution (Grall et al., 2025). In France, Grall, Charue-Duboc and BenMahmoud-Jouini (2025) investigated how design thinking supports digital transformation implementation, demonstrating that human-centric approaches help teams navigate complexity and adapt continuously. However, their single qualitative case study limits empirical generalization and does not permit statistical testing of causal relationships. In Australia, Ranasinghe et al. (2025) examined Project Management Methodology implementation in local governments, finding that strong leadership commitment, adaptive learning and structured oversight were critical drivers. Yet the Australian context diverges institutionally from Kenya's devolved structure, necessitating Kenya-specific evidence.

Van Arkel et al. (2025) investigated emergent design practices in Dutch public-sector projects, identifying thirteen design practices for translating concepts into sustainable outcomes. However, their narrow focus on emergent practices overlooks structured and adaptive design approaches relevant to CAIP implementation. In Vietnam, Tong and Luu (2025) assessed the impact of project implementation enablers on construction performance using the EFQM model, finding that design strategies exerted indirect influence through leadership. Their reliance on complex structural equation modelling increases the risk of model misspecification and limits practical interpretability for policymakers. In Indonesia, Arwadi et al. (2025) examined renewable energy project management, identifying project design strategies centered on cross-functional collaboration and early stakeholder consultations. However, the study did not clearly link design strategies to implementation outcomes, leaving a critical gap for evidence-based justification.

In Kenya, Majak and Rotich (2025) investigated the relationship between project design strategies and road construction implementation in Nairobi City County, finding positive influence through regression analysis. However, their study treated design as a broad construct without disaggregating specific measurable components and the single-county road project focus limits applicability to CAIPs spanning multiple counties with complex governance dynamics. These gaps collectively necessitate a study that examines project design strategies as disaggregated, measurable constructs within Kenya's multi-county CAIP context, directly linking them to implementation outcomes while accounting for policy moderation.

Government Policy as a Moderating Factor

Government policy establishes the parameters within which projects operate (Capano & Lepori, 2024; Hudon & Floricel, 2023). Policy environments characterized by consistency, stability and responsiveness permit practitioners to navigate uncertainties and preserve adaptive capacity throughout the project lifecycle (Grall et al., 2025; Miano et al., 2024). Conversely, regulatory fragmentation or arbitrary policy shifts generate friction that erodes operational efficiency. In Kenya, CAIP initiatives operate within a uniquely complex policy ecosystem where practitioners must simultaneously calibrate approaches to national government priorities, county-level requirements and regional economic frameworks (African Development Bank, 2022; Wasuna, 2023).

In France, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom, Capano and Lepori (2024) demonstrated that government policy design influenced whether implementing agencies complied, establishing that policy was not a neutral directive but an active determinant of implementation behavior. However, they did not examine policy as a moderating variable linking management strategies to outcomes. In Canada, Hudon and Floricel (2023) illustrated how

policy dynamics influenced large infrastructure project development, concluding that policy mediated conflicts inherent in public projects. Yet they ignored policy as a moderator and the developed-country context differs from Kenya. In Kenya, Miano, Ngugi and Maingi (2024) examined how government policy shaped the relationship between project management practices and agribusiness sustainability, finding that policy increased explanatory power by 6.9%. However, they adopted sustainability rather than implementation as the dependent variable and relied exclusively on quantitative techniques.

The current study addresses these gaps by examining government policy as a moderator of the design-implementation relationship within Kenya's devolved CAIP context, employing mixed methods for deeper explanatory insight.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Systems Theory, developed by von Bertalanffy (1968), which conceptualizes organizations and projects as complex adaptive systems composed of interdependent subsystems. Components interact dynamically such that changes in one element propagate throughout the entire system. For CAIP analysis, this framework illuminates how project design functions as a core subsystem within a broader implementation environment, with dysfunction creating cascading effects. Policy functions as an external regulating force constraining or enabling systemic operations.

The study is supported by Contingency Theory, which posits that management approaches achieve optimal results only when matched to contextual demands (Fiedler, 1964). No universal strategy exists; effectiveness depends on situational variables including environmental complexity and regulatory frameworks. This justifies examining government policy as a moderating variable, as similar design approaches may succeed in stable counties yet struggle where governance capacity is constrained.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a pragmatic philosophical stance privileging methodological pluralism (Creswell, 2009; Morgan, 2007). A descriptive and explanatory cross-sectional research design was employed, with descriptive components profiling project design strategies and implementation levels and explanatory components examining how design variations associate with implementation outcomes while accounting for government policy moderation.

Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in selected counties within Kenya's six regional economic blocs where CAIP projects were implemented: Lake Region, Western Kenya, North Rift, Central Kenya, Coast and Upper & Lower Eastern. The research targeted 293 stakeholders directly involved in CAIP implementation, stratified by economic bloc and stakeholder category (project managers, county government officials, technical staff, industrial association representatives and community leaders).

Sample Size and Sampling

Krejcie and Morgan (1970) criterion yielded a required sample of 167, adjusted to 186 for 10% anticipated non-response (Hiebl & Richter, 2018). Proportionate stratified random sampling was employed across blocs and stakeholder categories. Out of 174 questionnaires distributed, 168 were returned usable (96.6% response rate) and 10 of 12 invited key informants participated (83.3% response rate), yielding a combined effective rate of 95.7%.

A returned questionnaire was considered usable only if it met the following criteria. Firstly, completeness was essential and it implied the absence of missing values in all critical sections. Second was response consistency which focused on the absence of contradictory or patterned responses indicating careless completion. Third was absence of univariate outliers. Fourth, central tendency avoidance focused on responses demonstrating variance across scale points rather than clustering exclusively on a single midpoint value. Fifth, minimum completion time was checked such that questionnaires completed in less than one-third of the estimated average completion time were flagged and excluded to ensure thoughtful engagement.

Data Collection and Instruments

A structured questionnaire comprising five sub-sections (respondent background, project design strategies, stakeholder engagement, government policy and implementation outcomes) was administered in physical and electronic formats. A key informant interview guide elicited qualitative insights from senior county officials, national development officers, regional coordinators and industrial association leaders. Content validity was established through expert review with Construct Validity Index ≥ 0.78, while reliability was confirmed through pilot testing (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.760$ for design strategies).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v.31. Descriptive statistics profiled design strategies and implementation levels. Spearman's rank correlation examined the design-

implementation association. Ordinal logistic regression (proportional odds model) determined the predictive influence of design strategies on implementation. Government policy moderation was tested using moderated ordinal logistic regression with interaction terms, following Aiken and West (1991) with mean-centered predictors. All hypotheses were tested at 95% confidence ($p \leq 0.05$). Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis with systematic coding and cross-case comparison.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Profile of Project Design Strategies

The composite mean for project design strategies stood at 2.5893 (SD = 0.5991) on a 4-point scale, signaling moderate to weak performance in design rigor. Resource allocation plans scored highest (M = 2.7024, SD = 0.6340), followed by clear definition of outputs, outcomes and impact indicators (M = 2.6964, SD = 0.6635), documented baseline targets and milestones (M = 2.6429, SD = 0.6682) and detailed activity plans (M = 2.6071, SD = 0.6660). The approved monitoring and evaluation plan recorded the lowest mean at 2.2976 (SD = 0.7626), indicating a critical gap in structured performance tracking.

Frequency distributions revealed a pervasive "approval without activation" syndrome: while formal approval was the modal category across all design indicators (42.3% to 52.4%), active use and updating hovered around only 9.5%. For monitoring and evaluation plans, 14.3% reported complete non-availability, 45.8% described informal or draft status and a mere 4.2% confirmed active use. This pattern suggests that CAIP projects have invested in design documentation but have not institutionalized practices to keep these documents relevant during implementation.

Project Design Strategies and CAIP Implementation

Table 1: Spearman's Rank Correlation between Project Design Strategies and CAIP Implementation

Variable	Implementation of CAIP Projects	Project Design Strategies
Spearman's ρ	1.000	0.761**
Sig. (2-tailed)	-	0.000
N	168	168

Note: ** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient of 0.761 is positive, strong and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating a robust monotonic relationship between design quality and implementation

outcomes. Projects with more developed design frameworks tend to achieve higher performance across income generation, investment attraction, physical output delivery, operational readiness and employment creation.

Table 2: Model Fitting Information for Ordinal Logistic Regression

Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept Only	361.238	-	-	-
Final	223.561	137.677	1	0.000

The chi-square difference of 137.677 (df = 1, $p < 0.001$) confirms that project design strategies substantially improve model fit.

Table 3: Parameter Estimates for Ordinal Logistic Regression

Parameter	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Location: Composite_Mean_PDS	3.508	0.351	99.770	1	0.000	2.820	4.196

The location parameter (B = 3.508, SE = 0.351, Wald = 99.770, $p < 0.001$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in the design strategies composite mean, the log-odds of being in a higher implementation category increase by 3.508. This is a large effect, confirming that design strategies are not merely administrative formalities but are structurally linked to implementation success.

The test of parallel lines indicated violation of the proportional odds assumption ($\chi^2 = 223.561$, df = 11, $p < 0.001$), with complete separation suggested. This implies that design strategies function as a near-necessary condition for escaping the lowest implementation tiers—a finding with strong prescriptive force.

Government Policy Moderation

Table 4: Parameter Estimates for Moderated Ordinal Logistic Regression

Parameter	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Composite_Mean_PDS (Main Effect)	2.894	0.298	94.187	1	0.000	2.310	3.478
Composite_Mean_GP (Main Effect)	1.847	0.334	30.562	1	0.000	1.192	2.502
PDS × GP Interaction	**0.756**	**0.289**	**6.847**	**1**	**0.009**	**0.190**	**1.322**

The moderated model achieved -2 log likelihood of 156.783, with significant improvement over the main effects model ($\chi^2 = 41.669$, df = 4, $p < 0.001$). The Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 increased from 0.701 to 0.774. Crucially, the PDS × GP interaction was positive and significant (B = 0.756, p = 0.009), indicating that government policy amplifies the positive design-implementation relationship.

At low government policy support (one SD below mean), the conditional effect of design strategies attenuates to approximately B = 2.138 (26% reduction). At high policy support (one SD above mean), the effect amplifies to approximately B = 3.650 (26% increase). This symmetrical pattern confirms that policy functions as a contextual amplifier rather than a direct substitute for management capacity.

Qualitative Triangulation

A county executive from the Lake Region noted: *"We have the designs on paper, yes, but nobody looks at them after the launch. The M&E plan was approved two years ago and has never been updated. We are essentially flying blind."* This captures the "approval without activation" syndrome. A national government officer from the Central Region explained: *"There is no baseline data collection framework in place. We are supposed to measure impact, but we never collected the starting point data. How do you measure change when you do not know where you began?"* A regional coordinator from the Coast Region added: *"The activity plan is there, but it was prepared by consultants who left immediately after. The county team does not own it, so when delays occur, nobody refers back to it for corrective action."*

On policy moderation, a senior county executive observed: *"When the national government issued the revised CAIP implementation guidelines in 2023, our project suddenly had clear procurement thresholds, approved contingency rates and M&E reporting templates. Within six months, our implementation score improved from 1.4 to 2.6. The design was always good, but the policy clarity made it executable."* This testimony captures the amplification mechanism: existing design quality was latent until policy clarity activated it.

Discussion

The study's findings converge with Majak and Rotich (2025) and Hakizimana et al. (2024) in establishing that project design strategies significantly influence implementation outcomes. However, this study advances beyond prior work through four key contributions. First, it disaggregates design into five measurable components, revealing that while resource allocation and output definition are relatively mature, M&E plans remain critically underdeveloped. This granular decomposition is absent in existing literature and provides

actionable diagnostic insight. Second, the identification of the "approval without activation" syndrome constitutes a novel finding not explicitly documented in Grall et al. (2025), Van Arkel et al. (2025) or Tong and Luu (2025). Third, the study directly links composite design scores to ordered implementation categories using ordinal logistic regression, providing more interpretable causal pathways than the SEM or qualitative approaches prevalent in the literature. Fourth, the examination of government policy as a moderator addresses a conspicuous gap in scholarship on project governance within devolved systems.

The moderation findings align with Miano et al. (2024) in confirming policy's amplifying role, but extend their work by isolating implementation (rather than sustainability) as the dependent variable and by employing mixed methods for deeper mechanistic insight. The differential amplification pattern—strongest for design strategies (B = 0.756), intermediate for stakeholder engagement (B = 0.689) and weakest for risk management (B = 0.612)—reflects the differential ease with which policy instruments can activate design documentation versus mobilize contingency financing within Kenya's devolved fiscal architecture.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Conclusion

This study concludes that project design strategies exert a statistically significant positive influence on the implementation of CAIP projects in Kenya's regional economic blocs, with the strongest effect size among the three management dimensions examined. The pervasive "approval without activation" syndrome (where design documents exist formally but are rarely updated or actively used) represents a critical implementation barrier that undermines the potential benefits of design investments. Government policy functions as a significant contextual amplifier: when policy frameworks are coherent, stable and operationalized, they strengthen the implementation returns to design quality; when weak or unstable, they erode these returns by approximately 26%. The symmetrical moderation pattern and the indication of complete separation suggest that design strategies may function as a near-necessary condition for escaping severe underperformance, particularly when embedded within supportive policy environments.

Limitations of the Current Study

The study recorded a few limitations. First, the cross-sectional design as adopted captures data at a single point in time thus, precluding causal inferences about the temporal sequencing of design strategy adoption, policy shifts and implementation outcomes. Second, the sample, though representative across Kenya's six regional economic blocs, excluded non-

implemented or abandoned CAIP projects. This exclusion potentially inflates observed success rates and obscuring design failures that preceded project termination. Third, the ordinal logistic regression model exhibited complete separation on certain predictor combinations. The implication is that some design-policy configurations may be perfectly predictive of implementation categories. However, this also indicates thin cell counts that limit generalizability to rare policy-design combinations. Future research should address these gaps through longitudinal panel designs and expanded sampling to include failed or stalled CAIP projects.

Recommendations

For Practice: County project teams should transition design documents from static archives into living management tools by instituting quarterly review cycles for outputs, outcomes and impact indicators. Monitoring and evaluation plans require particular attention through dedicated M&E officers and real-time tracking dashboards. Resource allocation plans should incorporate scenario-based budgeting.

For Policy: The national government, through the Council of Governors and the Ministry of Investments, Trade and Industry, should mandate active-use clauses in project appraisal criteria, ensuring that design documents are demonstrably operationalized before fund disbursement. County governments should establish design quality assurance units within economic planning departments. The National Treasury should revise Public Finance Management Act regulations to explicitly require contingency budget approvals for all CAIP projects.

For Theory: Future research should test the causal mechanisms underlying the "approval without activation" syndrome, examining whether organizational culture, capacity constraints or incentive structures drive the gap between document existence and active utilization. Longitudinal designs should track how design document dormancy evolves over the project lifecycle.

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