

**Institutional Barriers and
Enablers of Co-Production
in Fragile Governance
Contexts: Evidence from
Zimbabwe**



Research Article

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Abstract

Introduction: Co-production is becoming more and more acknowledged as a governance technique to improve public policy's responsiveness, legitimacy, and inventiveness. However, its actual use is frequently influenced and limited by deeply ingrained institutional realities in fragile political contexts. Examining these processes is crucial given Zimbabwe's history of centralized decision-making, limited civic space, and inconsistent reform initiatives. This study examines the institutional enablers and barriers that impact co-production's efficacy in Zimbabwe from 2019 to 2023, with a particular emphasis on stakeholder capacity, political climate, and governance structures.

Methodology: A mixed-methods approach was used, combining structured questionnaires (n = 60) with semi-structured interviews (n = 35) targeting policymakers, civil society actors, and local governance representatives. Purposive and snowball sampling employed ensured representation across sectors and regions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in JASP, while qualitative data underwent thematic coding.

Results: Barriers to effective co-production included bureaucratic inertia, politicization of participatory spaces, weak legal structures for citizen engagement, and limited stakeholder resources. These restraints often led to tokenistic consultations rather than genuine power-sharing. Conversely, enabling factors emerged were decentralised decision-making, supported by legal mandates, civic education initiatives, and donor-funded capacity-building programmes. Successful cases, such as participatory budgeting pilots and community-driven local development plans demonstrated that institutional support combined with inclusive facilitation could overcome entrenched obstacles.

Conclusion: The success of co-production in situations with fragile governance is significantly influenced by the institutional context. In Zimbabwe, embedding co-production in statutory frameworks, protecting civic space, and investing in stakeholder capacity are essential to transform symbolic participation into meaningful policy influence. These findings offer lessons for other politically constrained settings seeking to institutionalise collaborative governance.

Keywords: Participatory governance, Public value creation, Policy innovation, Stakeholder engagement, Civic space, Decision-making processes.

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, governance literature has increasingly recognised the inadequacy of purely hierarchical, technocratic approaches to policy-making in addressing complex and interdependent public problems (Gruendel, 2022; Zvoushe, 2023). Co-production, which divides responsibility for policy creation, implementation, and evaluation between public institutions and non-state players such as general populace, civil society organizations (CSOs), and private sector partners, has become a strong alternative in response. Through actively engaging diverse perspectives, co-production is believed to improve the contextual relevance of policies, improve their legitimacy, and speed up innovative solutions (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016; Torfing et al., 2019).

According to the Public Value Theory (Moore, 1995), public managers are strategic agents tasked with generating value that represents the goals of the

general populace rather than just administering current regulations. This theory shifts the focus from narrow efficiency metrics toward outcomes that enhance societal well-being, democratic legitimacy, and trust in institutions. Through including individuals in all phases of the policy cycle design, implementation, and evaluation co-production becomes a tool for bringing government action into line with public expectations. This is further supported by the Network Governance Theory (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016), which acknowledges that no one actor has complete control over the resources, expertise, or authority needed to handle complex issues in the modern governance environment. Networks of interconnected actors, including government agencies, civil society, the corporate sector, and community organizations, instead come up with solutions. These actors negotiate, share duties, and pool resources in non-hierarchical, horizontal interactions. For such networks to be successful,

reciprocity, trust-building, and ongoing communication are necessary.

Co-production has produced observable and quantifiable advantages in established democracies, indicating its capacity to improve public trust and the quality of governance. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, for instance, participatory budgeting fostered a long-lasting culture of accountability and cooperative priority-setting while simultaneously enhancing budgetary transparency and bolstering public confidence in municipal decision-making (Bartocci et al., 2023). Comparably, patient-led service design in the UK's National Health Service has resulted in increased patient satisfaction, better health outcomes, and a closer match between the demands of the patient and the services provided (Marshall & Bamber, 2022). Similar achievements have been documented in African settings. Through the mobilization of communities to gather and analyze education data, the Uwezo initiative in Kenya improved accountability, increased transparency, and promoted evidence-based reforms in nearby schools (Monk, 2020). The legitimacy of service delivery in Ghana has been reinforced by hybrid governance models that combine state power with community-based decision-making mechanisms, guaranteeing that public services

represent both local concerns and national policy objectives (Akaateba, Huang & Adumpong 2018).

Transferring these achievements into contexts that are politically fragile or unstable, however, is still quite difficult. Real collaboration is frequently hampered by structural barriers, such as ingrained power disparities, elite control of participation venues, inadequate institutional capacity, and constrained civic space. Such circumstances run the risk of turning participation into a symbolic exercise where public involvement is procedural rather than influential, (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2016; Nabatchi et al., 2017). This discrepancy between co-production's normative potential and actual application highlights the necessity of context-sensitive tactics that take into account underlying political and institutional limitations.

Zimbabwe represents a critical case for examining these tensions. Between 2019 and 2023, governance improvements such as the Zimbabwe Open Government Initiative (ZOGI) and the Public Finance Management Reform Programme (PFMRP) introduced formal participatory mechanisms meant at improving policy responsiveness. Yet, empirical evidence suggest that these processes often remain

tokenistic, with decision-making power concerted in central government structures (Tashu, 2024; Mawere & Nhemachena, 2016). Political interference, bureaucratic inertia, and insufficient legal frameworks for citizen engagement further weaken the potential of co-production to create transformative policy outcomes.

Existing literature on Zimbabwean governance has predominantly concentrated on sector-specific participation, such as community involvement in urban planning, health service delivery, or education sector decision-making. While these studies offer valuable micro-level insights, they often remain siloed, providing limited understanding of the broader institutional dynamics that cut across sectors. A parallel body of literature addresses the normative desirability of co-production, highlighting its potential to enhance legitimacy, inclusivity, and responsiveness. However, such discussions are frequently conceptual rather than empirical, relying on theoretical prescriptions without systematically testing

them against governance realities on the ground.

Consequently, there is a marked gap in evidence-based analysis that interrogates both the barriers and enablers shaping co-production within Zimbabwe's fragile political and institutional context. In particular, little is known about how factors such as bureaucratic structures, political culture, resource allocation, and legal frameworks interact to either facilitate or obstruct meaningful participation. This absence of cross-sector, empirically grounded research leaves policymakers and practitioners without the nuanced insights required to design reforms that are both contextually relevant and institutionally sustainable.

Without such evidence, reform initiatives no matter how well-intentioned risk being superficial: creating participatory mechanisms in form but not in function, and failing to embed collaborative principles into the deeper architecture of policy-making.

2. Research Objectives

Main Objective:

To assess the challenges and facilitators of effective co-production in Zimbabwean governance.

Sub-Objectives:

1. To identify the key institutional barriers that hinder co-production.
2. To examine the main institutional enablers that support co-production.
3. To explore how these factors shape the effectiveness of participatory policy-making

4. Literature Review

The effectiveness of co-production in governance is heavily influenced by institutional context. While the concept is often promoted as a tool for enhancing legitimacy, inclusivity, and policy innovation (Gruendel, 2022; Zvoushe, 2023), its practical application in fragile or politically constrained environments faces significant challenges (Beresford, et al 2021; Traetteberg & Enjolras, 2024). This section reviews existing literature on the institutional barriers that constrain co-production and the enabling conditions that support its success, with a focus on contexts similar to Zimbabwe.

Outside general conceptual arguments, co-production literature offers typologies that classify participation according to its form (consultative, collaborative, delegated), depth (inform, involve, empower), and locus (agenda-setting, implementation, evaluation) (Arnstein, 1969; Nabatchi et al., 2017). These typologies benefit to locate specific governance experiences on a continuum from symbolic inclusion to genuine power-

sharing. African governance scholarship adds an important layer by highlighting how political settlement dynamics and bureaucratic culture shape participation opportunities and determine whether reforms are consolidated or reversed (Booth, 2012; Hickey & Hossain, 2019). Integrating these perspectives enables this study to position Zimbabwe's current practices along these continua, as explored in the discussion section using the empirical evidence from interviews and surveys.

Institutional Barriers to Co-Production

Co-production in fragile governance contexts such as Zimbabwe faces several engrained institutional barriers that limit effective collaboration between state actors and citizens. Understanding these barriers is important because they shape the extent to which participatory governance can move beyond rhetoric to meaningful practice.

Bureaucratic inertia and resistance to change

In fragile governments, public administration systems frequently operate within strict hierarchical frameworks that are firmly rooted in historical patterns of centralized power. Owing to their intrinsic resistance to changes toward collaborative governance and power sharing, these systems are made to retain top-down control. This bureaucratic inertia shows up in Zimbabwe as a strong and enduring predilection for centralised decision-making, in which higher-level agencies decide on policy direction and resource allocation with little input from the public or lower administrative tiers. Since inclusive methods are rarely rewarded by institutional incentives, performance metrics, and promotion routes, civil servants working in this culture often exhibit risk aversion, or a reluctance to participate in participatory initiatives (Traetteberg, & Enjolras, 2024).

Lack of such incentives promotes a compliance-oriented mindset and deters experimenting with collaborative models. Consequently, this inertia not only hinders policy-making innovation but also erodes the institutional adaptability needed to meet the varied requirements of the society. Co-production is ultimately reduced to a rhetorical commitment rather than an operational reality as a result of the centralization of authority and the

avoidance of participatory approaches, which limit citizens' ability to significantly influence decisions. This bureaucratic rigidity is not isolated; it is reinforced by political interference, which further reshapes participatory platforms into partisan tools rather than inclusive spaces

Political interference and elite capture

Co-production practices are particularly susceptible to subversion by ruling elites in politically polarized situations. These elites may purposefully use participatory platforms to legitimize policies that have already been decided behind closed doors (Tashu, 2024). Known as tokenistic or symbolic involvement, this method gives the illusion of consultation while denying citizens actual decision-making authority (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2016). As stakeholders realize their efforts have no real influence, such performative involvement gradually erodes public trust and breeds cynicism and disengagement. Elite capture is a major factor in this dynamic, whereby politically connected people or organizations influence agenda-setting, dominate participatory forums, and stifle opposing viewpoints. In addition to marginalizing weaker voices, such as opposition leaders, grassroots community representatives, and marginalized social groups, this also skews representation by shifting policy priorities away from actual

community needs and toward vested political or personal interests (Nabatchi et al., 2017). Political meddling and elite capture have the combined effect of escalating already-existing disparities and gradually undermining democratic legitimacy. Co-production platforms run the potential of becoming extensions of party control rather than forums for inclusive discussion and collective decision-making, which would undermine their main goal and discourage genuine civic participation.

Weak legal and policy frameworks

Co-production is extremely susceptible to ad hoc implementation and sudden policy reversals during times of political upheaval due to the lack of robust statutory mandates for citizen engagement. Participatory governance frequently rests on the goodwill of individual leaders, the goals of ruling parties, or the short-term ambitions of donor programs in situations where it is not enshrined in legally binding legislation. In Zimbabwe, adoption has been inconsistent across sectors and regions due to a lack of comprehensive legal measures that clearly ensure participatory decision-making (Zvoushe, 2023). Since procedures that are tested in one area or industry are rarely repeated or institutionalized in another, this discrepancy compromises the scalability of effective projects. Participatory initiatives

are vulnerable to reversals when political environments change, finances are redistributed, or leadership changes if they lack a solid legal foundation. The inability of communities, civil society organizations, and even lower-level government officials to rely on persistent engagement mechanisms causes this fragility to disrupt current projects and undermine stakeholder confidence. Such ambiguity eventually deters financial and interpersonal investment in co-production processes, perpetuating a cycle in which involvement is viewed as optional rather than essential to governance. Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate co-production into legal frameworks to guarantee the legitimacy, continuity, and consistency of participatory governance.

Limited institutional capacity

Effective co-production depends not only on formal mandates but also on the presence of adequate resources, skilled facilitation, and organisational readiness to manage complex, multi-stakeholder processes. Many public entities in Zimbabwe are severely limited in their capacity to develop, implement, and maintain inclusive engagement strategies due to ongoing budgetary and technical restrictions (Knox, Marin-Cadavid & Oziri, 2025). These restrictions take the form of inadequate funding for community

gatherings, a shortage of qualified facilitators, restricted access to data used in decision-making, and insufficient oversight mechanisms to guarantee that public suggestions are implemented. These limitations are especially severe in rural areas, where technological obstacles like erratic internet connectivity and low levels of digital literacy coexist with logistical difficulties like long travel distances, inadequate road infrastructure, and restricted access to meeting locations (Gerlak et al., 2023). Rural residents suffer from a systemic disadvantage as a result, as their opinions are frequently ignored or underrepresented during policy discussions. Given that under-resourced processes find it difficult to transition from information-sharing to true co-design and shared decision-making, institutional capacity gaps thus not only restrict the scope of involvement but also impair its depth and quality. Instead of correcting current patterns of exclusion, co-production runs the risk of reiterating them in the absence of focused investments in human, financial, and technological capacity. Developing strong, context-sensitive co-production mechanisms that can adjust to various governance settings throughout Zimbabwe requires building this capacity.

Institutional Enablers of Co-Production

Despite these challenges, certain institutional factors have proven pivotal in enabling more effective and sustainable co-production in fragile governance settings. Recognizing and strengthening these enablers can help to address the barriers outlined above and foster more inclusive governance.

Legal mandates and policy reforms

A strong institutional foundation that can protect co-production from the ups and downs of political objectives and leadership transitions is established when formal legislation incorporates provisions for citizen engagement (Moore, 1995). By making participation a legal requirement rather than a leader-dependent, optional practice, such statutory requirements make sure that inclusive governance is difficult to dismantle during times of political unrest. Namibia's Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) program offers a powerful illustration of how legal frameworks can institutionalize collaborative governance in the African context. The CBNRM program has guaranteed the continuation of participatory structures and accountability procedures that allow communities to monitor and impact decision-making by giving them statutory rights over resource management (Heffernan, 2022). In addition to offering a clear mandate for

capacity-building and resource allocation, this legal grounding has assisted in defending participatory spaces against elite capture and policy reversals. Using a comparable strategy could greatly improve co-production projects' credibility and consistency in Zimbabwe. Unambiguous legislative measures would define decision-making authority, formalize citizen roles, and shield engagement platforms from capricious political meddling. Participation could shift from symbolic consultation to institutionalized, enforced, and effective governance practices if such measures force government entities to set aside funds for facilitation, feedback, and monitoring.

Decentralized decision-making structures

Decentralizing authority closer to the community level promotes context-sensitive decision-making and strengthens local ownership of governance processes (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016). In Zimbabwe, participatory budgeting pilots in municipalities have demonstrated how decentralization, combined with transparent and accountable processes, can improve innovation and responsiveness to local needs (Marumahoko, Chigwata & Nhede 2018). This structural shift reduces bureaucratic bottlenecks and creates more accessible

entry points for citizen involvement, crucial for sustaining co-production in diverse settings.

Civic education and capacity-building

Improving stakeholders' understanding of governance frameworks, policy procedures, and negotiating techniques via focused training is essential to facilitating fruitful co-production (Wamsler, 2017). Initiatives to increase capacity give individuals and civil society actors the means to understand policy frameworks, express community objectives, and hold decision-makers responsible. Such initiatives help close the gap between the willingness of the general public to participate and the capacity to effectively affect results in situations where bureaucratic culture, procedural complexity, or technical jargon can alienate them. Programs funded by donors in Zimbabwe that combine facilitation training with civic education have shown measurable results. These programs enhance the quality of discussion by allowing communities to contest plans, offer evidence-based alternatives, and engage in equal-opportunity negotiations with government representatives. They also increase participation by making engagement procedures more accessible.

For Heffernan, (2022) capacity-building is a practical instrument that improves the mechanics of participation and an empowerment technique that alters power dynamics toward more equitable decision-making by promoting a deeper understanding of both rights and duties in governance. Without these measures, participation runs the risk of being shallow confined to merely attending meetings or controlled by more experienced elites who can take advantage of institutional procedures. Therefore, it is crucial to make consistent investments in civic education and the development of participation skills in unstable governance environments in order to minimize exclusion and change co-production from a formality to a meaningful, citizen-driven process.

Safe and inclusive engagement spaces

Creating purposeful forums that guarantee equal voice and protect dissent is important for building trust and sustaining long-term participation (Knox, Marin-Cadavid & Oziri, 2024). In fragile contexts, neutral venues and independent facilitation reduce fears of political payback and allow stakeholders to express different views openly. These safe spaces are key for overcoming mistrust and fostering the dialogue necessary for genuine co-production.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Although there is a wealth of information on barriers and facilitators of co-production in international literature, empirical studies that methodically look at how these elements interact within Zimbabwe's governance structure are conspicuously lacking. Studies that already exist typically fall into one of two categories: either they document discrete participatory initiatives, like those in urban planning, health, or education, without placing them within the larger institutional context, or they participate in normative discourses that promote co-production as a desirable governance model without critically examining the political and structural factors that influence its efficacy.

A substantial gap in the evidence is left by this absence of integrative, cross-sectoral study. Reform initiatives run the risk of becoming fragmented and focusing on treating symptoms rather than the underlying institutional architecture if it is not understood how barriers and facilitators coexist, reinforce, or neutralize one another. Such understanding is crucial for creating participatory frameworks that are robust and effective in fragile political environments like Zimbabwe, which are marked by centralized decision-making, shifting reform goals, and contested civic space.

Through empirically defining and analyzing the particular institutional elements that both facilitate and impede co-production in Zimbabwe's governance environment between 2019 and 2023, this study directly fills this gap. It provides a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of how co-production functions in practice by fusing quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews. It also identifies ways to turn co-production from symbolic consultation into a long-term mechanism for collaborative governance.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is grounded in Public Value Theory (PVT) and Network Governance Theory (NGT). Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive conceptual lens for examining co-production in governance, highlighting both the goals it seeks to achieve and the mechanisms through which it can be operationalised. However, both theories generally assume a baseline of functional institutions, which may not always exist in fragile contexts such as Zimbabwe; this limitation is revisited in the discussion and conclusion.

Public Value Theory was introduced by Mark Moore (1995) as a strategic framework for public management, shifting

focus away from narrow measures of efficiency towards the broader goal of creating value for the public. The theory parallels the private sector's concept of shareholder value but redefines the "shareholder" as the collective citizenry. PVT asserts that public managers act as strategic agents who must balance three interdependent elements, known as the strategic triangle:

1. Public Value Outcomes – Delivering policies and services that generate tangible benefits valued by society.
2. Legitimacy and Support – Securing endorsement from citizens, political leaders, and other stakeholders to ensure decisions are democratically valid.
3. Operational Capacity – Possessing the institutional resources, competencies, and organisational systems necessary to implement agreed policies effectively.

Within this framework, co-production is understood as a means of aligning state action with public priorities. Through involving citizens and stakeholders throughout the policy cycle design, implementation, and evaluation, PVT holds that governance can achieve greater legitimacy, accountability, and sustainability.

On the other hand, Network Governance Theory emerged from the recognition that many contemporary policy challenges are too complex for any single actor or institution to resolve alone. It emphasises governance through interconnected networks of public, private, and civil society actors, each contributing resources, expertise, and legitimacy to joint decision-making (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016).

Core Characteristics

- **Interdependence** – No single organisation holds all the authority or resources needed to address complex problems; collaboration is essential.
- **Horizontal Relationships** – Decision-making is negotiated among multiple actors, rather than imposed through hierarchical control.
- **Mutual Trust and Reciprocity** – Effective networks rely on relationship-building, shared norms, and cooperative problem-solving.
- **Joint Outcomes** – Policies and services are co-created, reflecting a blend of perspectives and resources.

NGT frames co-production as a governance process embedded within collaborative networks. Success depends on the ability of actors to share authority, resolve conflicts constructively, and coordinate efforts across organisational boundaries. The theory also highlights potential risks, including power imbalances, coordination difficulties, and the exclusion of less powerful stakeholders.

When combined, these theories offer a strong conceptual foundation for comprehending co-production in political environments that are unstable or fractured. While Network Governance Theory describes how it can be operationalized through cooperative structures, mutual accountability, and the strategic mobilization of diverse capacities, Public Value Theory frames the necessity of co-production ensuring governance generates outcomes that matter to citizens and enjoys democratic legitimacy. These theoretical viewpoints emphasize the practical routes and the normative necessity of integrating co-production as a sustainable governance solution in fragile environments like Zimbabwe, where political centralization and scarce resources limit popular engagement.

5. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework used to investigate the institutional facilitators and constraints influencing the efficacy of co-production in Zimbabwean government from 2019 to 2023. The strategy was created to capture the structural and experiential aspects of the phenomena and was guided by the primary goal of the study, which was to evaluate the obstacles and enablers of successful co-production in Zimbabwean governance. The research used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive picture of the institutional dynamics at work, acknowledging that governance processes are intrinsically complex and context-dependent. This methodological decision not only produced rich narrative narratives that disclose the underlying mechanisms via which these elements function, but it also made it possible to statistically identify the leading barriers and enablers.

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods cross-sectional design to investigate the institutional barriers and enablers of co-production in Zimbabwean governance between 2019 and 2023. The design was rooted in a pragmatic research paradigm, which, enables the integration of qualitative and quantitative strands to provide a more

comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018). Pragmatism was particularly relevant given that institutional barriers and enablers in governance are not only structural but also deeply embedded in political culture, administrative traditions, and stakeholder perceptions.

The quantitative component was designed to capture measurable trends in the prevalence and perceived significance of different institutional factors. It sought to determine which barriers and enablers were most consistently identified across a wide range of stakeholders. The qualitative component complemented this by exploring the “how” and “why” behind these patterns, enabling a deeper interrogation of lived experiences and contextual nuances. As Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) argue, such complementarity strengthens the interpretive power of the research by combining statistical generalisation with explanatory richness.

The cross-sectional nature of the design meant that data were collected at a single point in time from multiple sites across Zimbabwe. While this limited the ability to trace changes over time, it provided a robust “snapshot” of governance realities during a critical reform period.

Setting and Participants

The study took place during a governance reform era in Zimbabwe marked by initiatives such as the Zimbabwe Open Government Initiative (ZOGI) and the Public Finance Management Reform Programme (PFMRP). These initiatives were intended to institutionalise participatory mechanisms in policy design and implementation. However, preliminary document analysis and stakeholder consultations suggested that structural and political constraints often undermined their effectiveness.

To capture diverse institutional realities, the research was conducted in urban areas, peri-urban growth points, and rural areas. Community-level governance structures such as ward development committees and school development committees were also included to represent grassroots engagement contexts. This geographic spread was critical in revealing how barriers and enablers played out differently in metropolitan versus rural governance settings.

Participants were drawn from three main stakeholder categories:

- i. **Government officials** — including policymakers, senior bureaucrats, and local authority managers who

were directly involved in policy formulation or service delivery.

- ii. **Civil society organisation (CSO) representatives** — spanning local NGOs, national advocacy networks, and donor-funded programmes focused on governance, accountability, and citizen engagement.
- iii. **Community-based governance actors** — including traditional leaders, ward development committee members, and representatives of grassroots initiatives.

Sampling Procedures

The study used purposive sampling to identify participants with direct and recent experience in co-production initiatives between 2019 and 2023. Purposive sampling ensured that data came from information-rich cases rather than random selections, which is especially important in politically sensitive research contexts (Wei, CHEAH & Yeik, KOAY 2022).

To supplement this, snowball sampling was employed, whereby initial respondents referred the researcher to other knowledgeable participants. This approach proved invaluable in rural and politically sensitive environments, where official contact lists were incomplete or trust had to

be established through personal networks (Raifman, et al 2022).

A total of 95 participants took part: 60 completed structured questionnaires and 35 participated in semi-structured interviews. This size and diversity allowed for sectoral, positional, and geographic variation, which Babbie (2016) notes is essential for capturing the multi-dimensional nature of governance phenomena.

Inclusion criteria required participants to have participated in at least one formal or informal co-production process within the study period. Exclusion criteria ruled out individuals whose roles were purely administrative or ceremonial with no substantive engagement in decision-making.

Data Collection Methods

Two main instruments were used for data collection.

Structured Questionnaires

The questionnaire was designed using both the international literature on co-production and contextual insights from Zimbabwe's governance structures. It contained Likert-scale items asking participants to rate the perceived importance of different institutional barriers and enablers, as well as closed-ended

demographic and sectoral questions. The instrument was pilot tested with a small group of governance practitioners to ensure clarity and cultural relevance. Reliability was further assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients reported in the Results section, confirming good internal consistency."

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted in English, Shona, or Ndebele, depending on participant preference, and ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. The interview guide was structured around four thematic areas:

- Governance structures and institutional arrangements;
- Political and legal environment;
- Stakeholder capacity and resources; and
- Case-based examples of barriers and enablers in practice.

This approach balanced consistency with flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on issues most salient to their experience. Interviews were conducted in neutral, safe spaces wherever possible to reduce social desirability bias and fear of reprisal.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Africa Research University Ethics

Committee. All participants were informed about the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the study before providing consent. In rural and low-literacy contexts, consent was obtained orally and documented in the presence of a witness. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning codes to participants, and identifying information was removed from transcripts. To enhance methodological rigour, inter-coder reliability procedures were applied during qualitative analysis, with a subset of transcripts double-coded to confirm consistency. Given the politically sensitive nature of the research, especially where governance critiques were involved, politically risky details were paraphrased or anonymised in reporting

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into JASP statistical software for analysis. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used to identify and rank the most prominent barriers and enablers.

For all multi-item constructs (such as barriers index, enablers index), internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The barriers index (7 items) had $\alpha = 0.83$, and the enablers index (6 items) had $\alpha = 0.81$, indicating good internal consistency. Where constructs

were formative rather than reflective (e.g., "select all that apply" barrier list), Cronbach's alpha was not reported, in line with recommendations by Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer (2001). Instead, item-level reporting was retained, as formative items capture distinct facets that need not be correlated.

Outside descriptive statistics, inferential analyses were piloted to test for differences across stakeholder categories (government, CSO, community). For "select all that apply" barrier and enabler items, Pearson's chi-square tests were used to assess differences in selection frequency by stakeholder category. Effect sizes were reported using Cramér's V. For the Likert-scale significance ratings (Table 2), non-parametric tests (Mann–Whitney U for two-group comparisons; Kruskal–Wallis H for three-group comparisons) were employed due to non-normality. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted with Bonferroni correction.

Shapiro–Wilk test results ($W = 0.805$, $p < .001$) indicated non-normal distribution of the Likert ratings ($n = 59$). Accordingly, central tendency and dispersion were reported as median = 4, IQR = [4–5], alongside mean (4.034) and SD (0.787). All subsequent analyses treated the variable as ordinal, using non-parametric tests and ordinal logistic modelling.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted separately on the barrier and enabler item sets to identify latent dimensions. Sampling adequacy was confirmed with the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) statistic (barriers = 0.79; enablers = 0.81), and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($p < .001$) for both. For barriers, three factors emerged: “political–legal constraints,” “bureaucratic capacity constraints,” and “resource constraints”, explaining 68% of variance. For enablers, two factors: “institutional policy supports” and “capacity collaboration supports” explained 64% of variance. Factor loadings > 0.40 were retained. Ordinal logistic regression was used to model predictors of high perceived significance (DV = Likert 4–5) including stakeholder type, location (urban/rural), and sector, with robust standard errors.

On the other hand qualitative data were analysed thematically using Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Qualitative data analysis followed a structured coding protocol. To ensure reliability, a subset (20%) of transcripts was double-coded by a second researcher, yielding a Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.82$, which

indicates strong inter-coder agreement. An initial codebook was developed deductively from the research questions and literature, then iteratively refined inductively as new themes emerged. An audit trail documented progression from initial codes → categories → overarching themes, with representative quotations maintained for transparency. Data saturation was monitored across stakeholder groups; no new themes emerged after the 30th interview, confirming saturation.

Triangulation was applied to integrate the two data strands. This allowed for the comparison of quantitative prevalence scores with qualitative narratives, ensuring that patterns were both statistically and contextually validated (Babbie, 2016). For example, the survey finding that “politicisation of participatory spaces” ranked among the top three barriers was corroborated by multiple interview accounts detailing agenda manipulation and elite capture in participatory forums.

To strengthen integration, a joint display matrix was constructed aligning the top-ranked barriers and enablers from the survey with convergent and divergent evidence from interviews. This facilitated side-by-side comparison, highlighting areas of agreement (e.g., funding as a top barrier in both strands) and divergence

(e.g., digital tools as enablers in interviews but not ranked highly in surveys), enabling

6. Results

This section presents the empirical findings from the mixed-methods investigation into the institutional barriers and enablers influencing co-production in Zimbabwe. The results are organised to first provide an overview of the sample characteristics, followed by quantitative and qualitative findings related to the challenges and facilitators of effective co-production in Zimbabwean governance. Quantitative data are reported in the form of descriptive statistics, frequencies, and percentages, while qualitative insights drawn from semi-structured interviews are presented using direct quotations to capture participant perspectives.

Overview of the Respondents

A total of 95 participants took part in the study, comprising 60 questionnaire respondents and 35 interview participants. The sample represented a diverse cross-section of governance actors drawn from government institutions, civil society organisations (CSOs), and community-based structures.

- Government officials accounted for approximately one-third of

richer interpretation of institutional dynamics.

participants and included policymakers, senior bureaucrats, and local authority managers directly involved in policy formulation or service delivery.

- Civil society representatives made up another significant segment and included local NGOs, national advocacy networks, and staff from donor-funded programmes focusing on governance, accountability, and citizen engagement.
- Community-based governance actors included traditional leaders, ward development committee members, school development committee representatives, and leaders of grassroots initiatives, ensuring perspectives from both formal and informal governance spaces.

Geographically, respondents were drawn from urban centres, peri-urban growth points, and rural districts across multiple provinces. This distribution allowed the study to capture variations in co-production experiences between metropolitan areas with more established institutional frameworks and rural areas where

logistical and technological constraints are more pronounced.

Presentation of questionnaire findings

To identify the primary barriers hindering the implementation of co-production in Zimbabwe, respondents were asked the following question:

“What do you believe are the key challenges in implementing co-production in Zimbabwe? (Select all that apply)”

This question was designed to allow multiple responses, thereby capturing the multi-dimensional nature of institutional and structural obstacles. Respondents selected from a predefined list developed from the literature and pilot interviews, ensuring both conceptual relevance and contextual specificity. The quantitative findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Quantitative analysis of challenges in implementing co-production in Zimbabwe

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of Funding	41	23.84%
Limited Stakeholder Engagement	38	22.09%
Bureaucratic Barriers	35	20.35%
Cultural or Social Barriers	22	12.79%
Power Imbalances	19	11.05%
Communication Challenges	16	9.30%
Policy Inconsistency	1	0.58%

Source: Field data (2025)

Note: Since respondents could select multiple options, percentages exceed 100%. This note also applies to Table 3 (facilitators).

The data indicates that the most prevalent challenge is lack of funding (23.84%), followed closely by limited stakeholder engagement (22.09%), bureaucratic barriers (20.35%), cultural or social barriers (12.79%), power imbalances (11.05%), communication challenges (9.30%), and policy inconsistency (0.58%). The highest reported frequency was 41 for lack of funding, while the lowest was 1 for policy

inconsistency. Since respondents could choose more than one barrier, the sum of percentages exceeds 100%. The total number of selections across all respondents was 172, with a mean of 2.87 barriers selected per respondent. Ninety-five per cent confidence intervals (95% CI) for the top three barriers were as follows: lack of funding (23.84%, 95% CI = 17.8–29.9), limited stakeholder engagement

(22.09%, 95% CI = 16.2–28.0), and bureaucratic barriers (20.35%, 95% CI = 14.7–26.0).

These results supports that financial constraints and stakeholder inclusion gaps dominate the barrier landscape, while cultural, policy, and communication challenges, though present, are less frequently cited.

Furthermore, to evaluate the perceived impact of implementation challenges on

the overall success of co-production initiatives in Zimbabwe, respondents were asked to rate the significance of these challenges on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not significant at all, 5 = Very significant). The question below was asked:

On a scale of 1-5, how significant do you believe these challenges are in affecting the success of co-production initiatives?

A total of 59 valid responses were recorded and summarised in the table below.

Table 22: Perceived significance of challenges in hindering co-production success (n = 59)

Descriptive Statistics

On a scale of 1-5, how significant do you believe these challenges affects the success of co-production initiatives?	
Valid	59
Missing	1
Mode	4.000
Mean	4.034
Std. Deviation	0.787
Variance	0.620
Kurtosis	2.380
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.613
Shapiro-Wilk	0.805
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	< .001
Minimum	1.000

Descriptive Statistics

On a scale of 1-5, how significant do you believe these challenges affects the success of co-production initiatives?	
Maximum	5.000

The mode is computed assuming that variables are discreet.

Source: Field data (2025)

Full distribution of responses across the 1–5 Likert categories was: 1 = 2 respondents (3.4%), 2 = 4 respondents (6.8%), 3 = 8 respondents (13.6%), 4 = 26 respondents (44.1%), 5 = 19 respondents (32.2%). Given the Shapiro–Wilk statistic ($W = 0.805$, $p < .001$) and high kurtosis (2.380), the distribution is non-normal and leptokurtic, indicating clustering towards the high end. Median = 4, IQR = [4–5], reinforcing the interpretation that respondents generally perceive these challenges as highly significant. All subsequent statistical testing treated this as an ordinal outcome, with results reported from non-parametric tests and

ordinal logistic regression (see Methodology).

To identify the most influential enablers of co-production, respondents were asked to select the facilitators they believe play a critical role in enhancing co-production effectiveness in Zimbabwe. The results, based on multiple responses from stakeholders, are summarised in Table 3 from the question.

What are the main facilitators of effective co-production in Zimbabwean governance? (Select all that apply):

Table 3: Facilitators of effective co-production in Zimbabwean Governance

Facilitator	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strong leadership and political will	50	20.24%
Capacity-building and training	44	17.81%
Availability of resources	42	17.00%
Stakeholder commitment	40	16.19%
Legal frameworks and policies	36	14.57%
Trust and collaboration	35	14.19%

Source: Field data (2025).

Note: As explained for Table 1, percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select multiple options.

The data shows that strong leadership and political will emerged as the most frequently cited facilitator (20.24%), followed by capacity-building and training (17.81%), and availability of resources (17.00%). These three factors account for over 55% of all selected responses. Other significant enablers include stakeholder commitment (16.19%) and legal frameworks and policies (14.57%). Notably, trust and collaboration, though essential, received the lowest frequency (14.19%).

Since this was also a “select all that apply” item, percentages exceed 100% (total selections = 247, mean per respondent = 4.12). The top three enablers that is strong leadership and political will (20.24%), capacity-building and training (17.81%),

and availability of resources (17.00%) directly inform the recommendations.

- Strong leadership/political will supports embedding participation in law and protecting civic space.
- Capacity-building underpins stakeholder skills for negotiation, facilitation, and process management.
- Resource availability addresses the operational capacity gaps that undermine sustained engagement.

While the survey highlighted key barriers such as limited funding and weak citizen engagement, the interviews provided deeper insight into how these barriers are experienced in daily governance practice. The qualitative findings thus extend and contextualise the survey patterns, showing how institutional dynamics shape both barriers and enablers of co-production.

Presentation of interview findings

Constraints and Barriers to Effective Co-Production in Zimbabwe

(a) Structural and Institutional Weakness

Participants reported that while co-production is promoted, institutional

arrangements often lack the resources and support to make it effective:

“We are told to consult, but there is no budget or support. In the end, it’s just paper work.” (Male, 51, District Administrator)

(b) Political Culture and Elite Control

Several respondents indicated that participation is sometimes selective and influenced by political affiliation:

“Only ruling party people are called. Opposition people are ignored.” (Male, 51, Ward Councillor)

(c) Socio-Economic Disenfranchisement

Economic hardship was frequently mentioned as a reason for low citizen participation in policy processes:

“Even if people want to participate, hunger comes first. Who attends a policy meeting when they haven’t eaten?” (Male, 46, Ward Development Committee Member)

(d) Institutional Culture

A recurring concern was the absence of follow-up after consultations:

“We speak, but they never come back. Next year, they repeat the same meeting.” (Female, 39, CSO Officer)

Participants highlighted the consequences of this lack of feedback:

Opportunities and Facilitators of Co-Production in Zimbabwe

(a) Digital Civic Engagement and Youth Participation

“If people feel their voices are ignored, they just stop engaging. And it’s hard to bring them back.” (Male, 52, Urban Councillor)

(e) Donor Dependency

Civil society representatives reported that their inclusion often depends on donor requirements rather than institutional commitment:

“We are included when donors insist. Otherwise, we are invisible.” (Female, 38, NGO Coordinator)

(f) Positive Role of Bureaucracy

While many respondents described bureaucracy as a barrier, others provided examples where it enabled effective action:

“Ordinarily, obtaining approvals takes several months; however, in this instance, the bureaucratic procedures themselves facilitated the process, enabling the road to be repaired within three weeks of the community’s agreement.” (Male, 50, Local Authority Planning Officer)

“Because of strict reporting, what the community proposes actually gets into the district budget for the next year.” (Female, 38, Ward Committee Chairperson)

Respondents emphasised that new technologies and platforms have created opportunities for broader participation, particularly among younger citizens. ICT

tools such as mobile applications and online consultations were seen as enabling access for rural communities that might otherwise be excluded. At the same time, participants noted that young people are increasingly assertive in demanding accountability and transparency, often leveraging digital platforms to do so:

“With more ICT integration and remote consultations, we can reach rural communities without physical meetings.”
(Female, 41, ICT Officer, Urban Municipality)

“We are seeing young people who want to know how decisions are made and who demand to be heard. They are not like before.” (Male, 38, Civic Educator)

(b) Political and Institutional Shifts

Some participants highlighted reforms supporting decentralisation and citizen involvement, including collaborative projects across government, civil society, academia, and private actors. One respondent said:

“We’ve seen more collaboration recently like in curriculum reform or budgeting where government, civil society, and universities sit together from the start.”
(Male, 46, Education Planning Officer)

Discussion of Questionnaire Findings

The quantitative results highlight lack of funding (23.84%), limited stakeholder engagement (22.09%), and bureaucratic barriers (20.35%) as the most pressing hurdles to co-production in Zimbabwe. These findings indicate that while participatory rhetoric exists, the institutional environment remains under-resourced and administratively rigid, constraining meaningful stakeholder influence.

The prominence of funding shortages suggests that even where political will exists, co-production efforts are undermined by an inability to finance consultation processes, community meetings, facilitation, and follow-up actions. The high ranking of limited stakeholder engagement indicates that procedural inclusion is inconsistent, with entire segments of the population either excluded or unable to participate due to logistical or socio-economic barriers. Bureaucratic barriers including lengthy approval processes, unclear mandates, and siloed departments further weaken implementation, limiting agility in responding to local needs.

Conversely, the top enabling factors, strong leadership and political will (20.24%), capacity-building and training (17.81%), and availability of resources (17.00%) reflect an awareness among

respondents that co-production requires both supportive governance and practical tools to translate participation into impact. Leadership commitment is particularly critical in fragile political contexts, where institutional norms and priorities are often shaped from the top down.

The Likert scale analysis (mean score 4.034) suggests that respondents view these challenges as highly significant, indicating that without structural reforms, co-production will remain a symbolic exercise rather than a transformative governance tool.

These results are consistent with earlier research on Zimbabwe's governance constraints. Mawere & Nhemachena (2016) and Kurebwa (2013) both observed that co-production initiatives are hindered by resource scarcity and centralised administrative structures. Similarly, Nabatchi et al. (2017) argue that underfunded engagement processes risk becoming tokenistic, echoing the high ranking of limited stakeholder engagement in this study.

Internationally, similar patterns are observed in fragile governance contexts. For instance, Wamsler (2017) found in post-conflict settings that lack of resources and bureaucratic resistance often undermine otherwise promising

participatory frameworks. The ranking of bureaucratic barriers mirrors findings from the Ghanaian and Kenyan cases reviewed by Akaateba, Huang & Adumpon (2018) and Monk (2020), where control and procedural rigidity centralised innovation despite formal participatory channels.

From a PVT perspective, each barrier aligns with a specific side of the strategic triangle:

- Funding shortages and limited institutional capacity weaken operational capacity by constraining resources, staff skills, and process continuity.
- Bureaucratic barriers reduce the delivery of public value outcomes by slowing innovation and limiting responsiveness.
- Politicisation and exclusion undermine legitimacy/support by eroding trust and perceived fairness.

The identified enablers reverse these effects: political will restores legitimacy, capacity-building strengthens operational capacity, and legal frameworks sustain both legitimacy and outcome delivery over time.

On the enabling side, the emphasis on leadership and political will supports

Moore's (1995) Public Value Theory, which identifies committed leadership as a prerequisite for aligning institutional action with citizen priorities. It also reinforces Network Governance Theory's emphasis (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016) on building trust and capability across diverse actors to achieve effective co-production.

A key strength of the questionnaire findings lies in their multi-dimensional scope, capturing both obstacles and enabling conditions from a broad cross-section of governance stakeholders. The multiple-response design allowed for a nuanced picture of co-production's operational environment in Zimbabwe.

However, there are limitations. The fixed response options, while grounded in literature and pilot interviews, may have constrained respondents from identifying less obvious or emerging challenges. Additionally, as participation was purposive rather than random, the results are indicative rather than statistically generalisable. Some responses may also reflect perceptions of barriers rather than measurable institutional realities, especially in politically sensitive areas such as elite capture or political interference.

Discussion of Interview Findings

The interview data deepen understanding of the questionnaire patterns by illustrating how institutional and political dynamics shape lived experiences of co-production. The most dominant themes: structural and institutional weakness, political culture and elite control, and socio-economic disenfranchisement point to a governance environment where participation is procedurally encouraged but substantively constrained. Participants' accounts reveal that lack of resources is not an abstract budgetary figure but a tangible obstacle, where consultations are unfunded and follow-up is absent, reducing engagement to "just paperwork." The fragmented mandates and siloed structures described by participants contribute to NGT's coordination costs failure mode, where excessive procedural layers and unclear responsibilities delay decision-making and limit responsiveness.

Political selectivity in participation, where only ruling party affiliates are invited, confirms that engagement processes are often politicised, undermining inclusivity and trust. This dynamic represents an NGT power concentration failure mode, where decision-making authority is monopolised by a restricted set of actors, preventing the reciprocity and diversity of input required for effective network governance. Socio-economic hardship further compounds

exclusion, as basic survival needs take precedence over policy involvement. This resonates with the observation that co-production cannot be separated from broader socio-economic realities hungry citizens are unlikely to prioritise attending governance meetings.

The qualitative findings also highlight institutional culture issues, such as repeated meetings without feedback or policy change, which erode trust and motivation to participate. The absence of follow-up and feedback reflects an NGT weak reciprocity failure mode, in which the lack of sustained exchange between actors diminishes trust and reduces incentives for future engagement. The role of donor dependency emerges strongly: some CSOs report that they are only invited into processes when external funders insist, signalling a lack of intrinsic institutional commitment to engagement.

On the enabling side, interviewees pointed to digital technologies, youth activism, and emerging institutional collaborations as positive shifts. The uptake of WhatsApp, Facebook Live, and SMS platforms indicates potential for overcoming geographic and resource constraints. Youth engagement characterised by greater civic literacy and assertiveness could inject new energy into co-production, while examples of government civil

society–university collaborations show that inclusive decision-making is possible when institutional will aligns with resources.

These themes align with existing Zimbabwean literature. Tashu (2024) and Mawere & Nhemachena (2016) both highlight political interference, elite capture, and weak institutional follow-through as chronic impediments to participatory governance. The finding that participation is often selective based on political affiliation is consistent with Nabatchi et al. (2017)'s caution that co-production can become a tool for legitimising predetermined decisions rather than a genuine exercise in power-sharing.

The socio-economic barrier echoes Wamsler's (2017) work in low-income contexts, where poverty limits the time and capacity citizens can dedicate to engagement. The donor-driven inclusion dynamic mirrors critiques by Loeffler & Bovaird (2016) that externally funded participation can create dependency, with little domestic institutionalisation.

Conversely, the positive narratives around ICT-based engagement are in line with findings from digital civic innovation studies in Kenya and South Africa, where mobile platforms have expanded participation to previously marginalised groups (Mocca, 2020). The observed youth activism

resonates with Monk's (2020) documentation of growing youth-led accountability initiatives in East Africa.

A key strength of the interview findings is their rich contextual detail, which gives texture to the numerical trends from the questionnaire. Direct quotations vividly capture the human experience of governance constraints, moving beyond abstract categories. However, there are limitations. The qualitative sample (n = 35) was purposive, and while diverse in sector and geography, it cannot claim to represent all stakeholder perspectives. Political sensitivity may have influenced responses, with some participants potentially withholding criticism or framing issues cautiously. Additionally, while interviews surfaced examples of enabling factors,

they did not quantify their prevalence, making it difficult to gauge scale.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

To strengthen integration between the quantitative and qualitative strands, the main barriers and enablers are summarised in Table 4 below. The table links survey frequencies with illustrative interview quotes and positions each factor within the Public Value Theory (PVT) strategic triangle and Network Governance Theory (NGT) failure modes. This joint display highlights how quantitative patterns are reinforced and explained by qualitative narratives, providing a more comprehensive understanding of institutional dynamics.

Table 4: Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings with Theoretical Mapping

Barrier / Enabler	Quantitative Evidence (%)	Illustrative Quote	PVT Dimension	NGT Failure Mode / Enabler
Lack of Funding (Barrier)	23.84% (most cited)	"We are told to consult, but there is no budget or support. In the end, it's just paper work." (District Administrator, Male 51)	Operational Capacity	Coordination Costs
Limited Stakeholder Engagement (Barrier)	22.09%	"Only ruling party people are called. Opposition people are ignored." (Ward Councillor, Male 51)	Legitimacy & Support	Power Concentration

Bureaucratic Barriers (Barrier)	20.35%	“Ordinarily approvals take months; but in this case bureaucracy enabled the road repair in 3 weeks.” (Planning Officer, Male 50)	Public Value Outcomes	Can hinder (coordination costs) or enable (streamlining)
Strong Leadership & Political Will (Enabler)	20.24% (top enabler)	“We’ve seen more collaboration recently... government, civil society, and universities sit together from the start.” (Education Planning Officer, Male 46)	Legitimacy & Support	Enabler: builds reciprocity
Capacity-Building & Training (Enabler)	17.81%	“With more ICT integration and remote consultations, we can reach rural communities without physical meetings.” (ICT Officer, Female 41)	Operational Capacity	Enabler: reduces coordination costs
Trust & Collaboration (Enabler)	14.19% (lowest but key)	“If people feel their voices are ignored, they just stop engaging.” (Urban Councillor, Male 52)	Legitimacy & Support	Reciprocity (trust cycle)

Source: Field data

This joint summary confirms that barriers such as funding shortages, weak engagement, and bureaucratic hurdles primarily undermine operational capacity and legitimacy, consistent with PVT. Meanwhile, enablers like leadership, capacity-building, and trust-building strengthen these dimensions, mitigating NGT failure modes. The integration of strands underscores that co-production outcomes depend not only on resource and

institutional capacity but also on inclusive and trust-based engagement processes.

Linking Institutional Barriers and Enablers to Public Value Theory

This study's findings indicate that each institutional barrier and enabler operates on specific dimensions of Public Value Theory's (PVT) strategic triangle. Politicisation of participatory spaces and

elite capture primarily erode the legitimacy and support side of the triangle, as citizens lose trust and disengage from governance processes. Funding shortages, inadequate capacity, and limited resources undermine operational capacity, making it difficult for institutions to sustain co-production initiatives. Bureaucratic rigidity and poor follow-through affect both operational capacity and the delivery of public value outcomes, reducing the tangible benefits perceived by stakeholders.

Conversely, the enablers identified in this study work to restore these dimensions. Strong leadership and political will rebuild legitimacy/support by signalling institutional commitment to inclusive governance. Capacity-building initiatives, whether donor-driven or domestically supported, strengthen operational capacity through skills development and process management. Embedding co-production in legal frameworks addresses legitimacy/support by formalising participatory rights and strengthens public value outcomes by ensuring consistent policy application across sectors. Figure 1 presents a conceptual diagram mapping these linkages, illustrating how targeted reforms can simultaneously rebuild multiple sides of the strategic triangle.

Network Governance Failure Modes

Within Network Governance Theory (NGT), the Zimbabwean case reveals three recurrent “failure modes” that weaken collaborative capacity:

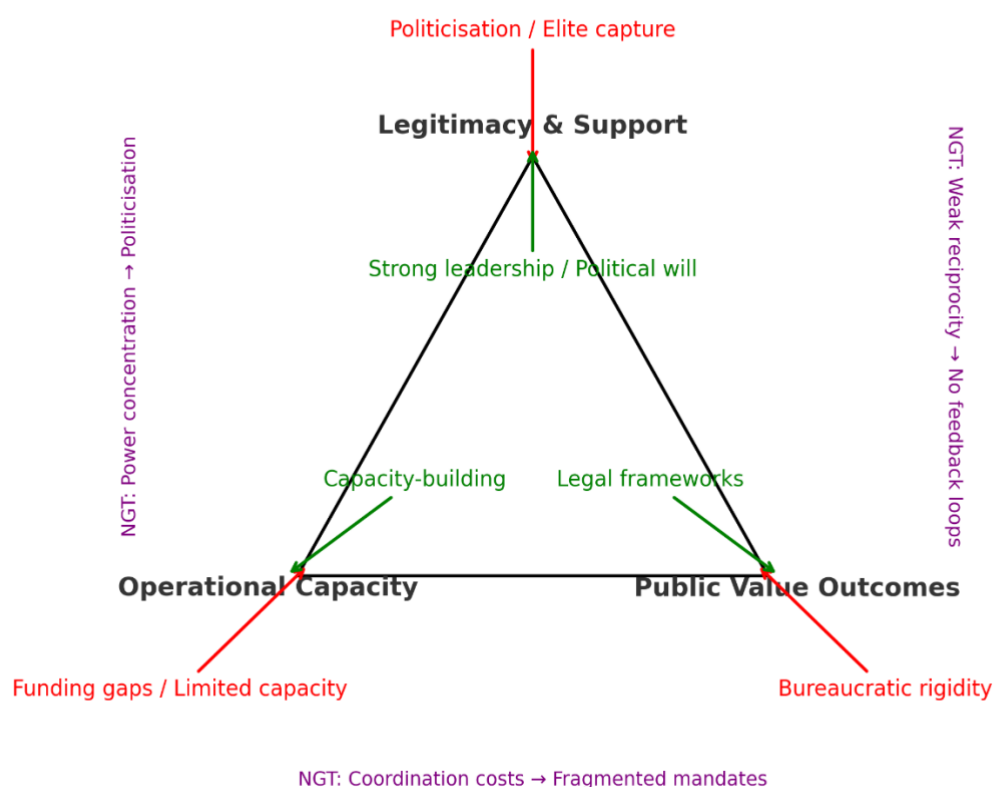
- **Coordination costs** – Fragmented mandates, overlapping jurisdictions, and siloed bureaucratic units increase transaction costs and slow decision-making.
- **Power concentration** – Gatekeeping and elite capture concentrate decision-making authority in a narrow set of actors, undermining diversity of perspectives.
- **Weak reciprocity** – The absence of sustained feedback loops, coupled with mistrust between actors, reduces the willingness of stakeholders to invest time, information, and resources into future engagements.

The recommendations later in this paper address these failure modes by combining legal safeguards, capacity-building measures, neutral facilitation, and ICT-enabled platforms to create more resilient and inclusive governance networks. However, in fragile political contexts such as Zimbabwe, persistent political interference significantly constrains the reciprocity and mutual trust on which

network governance depends. Instead of enabling inclusive negotiation, networks are often captured by dominant actors, reducing their ability to function as horizontal spaces of collaboration. This highlights a limitation of NGT when applied in highly politicised environments, where power asymmetries prevent the balanced

exchange of resources and perspectives assumed in the theory. Recognising these constraints is critical for adapting network governance approaches to fragile states, where safeguarding autonomy of participatory spaces becomes a prerequisite for reciprocity

Figure 1: Mapping Barriers and Enablers to Public Value Theory and NGT



Source Designed by Researcher

Mapping of institutional barriers and enablers to the three components of Public Value Theory's strategic triangle, with associated Network Governance Theory failure modes. Red arrows indicate how barriers weaken specific sides of the

triangle; green arrows show how enablers strengthen or restore them; purple annotations highlight network-level risks.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings from questionnaire reinforce the argument in Public Value Theory that effective co-production depends on resource availability, strong leadership, and shared accountability. They also support Network Governance Theory's assertion that bureaucratic inflexibility and fragmented institutional capacity can limit the benefits of collaborative governance.

Practically, the prominence of funding and capacity constraints suggests that technical fixes alone are insufficient; institutional reform and fiscal commitment are essential. The relatively lower ranking of "policy inconsistency" (0.58%) may indicate that respondents see implementation gaps as more pressing than policy design issues a point that could guide donor and government priorities.

Furthermore, the emphasis on capacity-building as a facilitator suggests that targeted training for both government officials and community stakeholders could significantly enhance co-production outcomes. Building facilitation skills, negotiation capacity, and process management expertise could help overcome both engagement and bureaucratic barriers.

On the other hand, from a Public Value Theory perspective, the findings from

interviews suggest that Zimbabwe's co-production deficit is not merely a technical gap but a deeper failure to align institutional action with citizen priorities due to weak legitimacy and accountability mechanisms. The persistent absence of feedback loops undermines trust, an essential component of public value creation.

Under Network Governance Theory, the interviews illustrate how political gatekeeping distorts network inclusivity, concentrating power within partisan actors and weakening the diversity of perspectives. However, examples of collaborative curriculum reform and budgeting show that when network nodes (e.g., government, CSOs, academia) interact on equal footing, co-production can yield innovative and context-responsive outcomes.

Practically, the findings suggest that reforming engagement processes requires more than opening participatory spaces. It demands neutral facilitation, protection against political exclusion, consistent feedback, and integration of ICT to lower participation barriers. Youth mobilisation presents a strategic opportunity for policy actors to build sustained, cross-generational engagement.

The convergence between quantitative and qualitative strands strengthens confidence in the findings. Funding constraints, stakeholder exclusion, and bureaucratic hurdles dominate as barriers; political will, capacity-building, and resources are the most recognised enablers. However, instances of enabling bureaucracy show that structural constraints are not immutable, they can be adapted to support co-production under the right conditions.

Caution is needed when interpreting “what works.” Given the cross-sectional design, the study cannot claim that any single enabler causes improved co-production outcomes. Instead, the data point to plausible mechanisms, for example, statutory mandates may protect participation from political reversal; decentralisation may reduce gatekeeping; targeted capacity-building may increase stakeholder influence. These mechanisms merit testing in longitudinal or experimental designs

Policy relevance and recommendations

The recommendations emerging from this study embedding participation in law, ensuring sustainable funding, building capacity, and protecting inclusive spaces are strongly aligned with the top three enablers identified in the survey:

- Strong leadership and political will (supports embedding participation in law and protecting civic space)
- Capacity-building and training (addresses skills gaps for negotiation, facilitation, and collaborative process management)
- Availability of resources (ensures operational capacity for sustained engagement)

To enhance implementability, these recommendations are organised into a sequenced roadmap:

Quick Wins (within 12 months)

- Introduce transparent participant selection guidelines to ensure political neutrality in engagement processes (Responsible actors: Local Authorities, CSOs).
- Allocate modest but dedicated budget lines for engagement activities within existing departmental budgets (Responsible actors: Ministry of Finance, Local Authorities).
- Launch targeted facilitation and negotiation skills workshops for ward-level and municipal governance actors (Responsible actors: CSOs, donor partners).

Medium-Term Actions (1–3 years)

- Embed statutory requirements for public participation within relevant Acts, ensuring that participatory spaces are protected from political interference (Responsible actors: Parliament, Ministry of Justice).
- Expand donor–government partnerships for sustained capacity-building programmes targeting both state and non-state actors (Responsible actors: Donors, MoF, Local Authorities).
- Develop ICT-enabled feedback loops (e.g., WhatsApp, SMS, online portals) to institutionalise two-way communication with communities (Responsible actors: Ministry of ICT, Local Authorities).

Structural Reforms (3–5 years)

- Establish an independent oversight body to monitor and evaluate compliance with statutory participation requirements (Responsible actors: Parliament, Auditor-General’s Office, CSOs).
- Secure multi-year funding commitments for participatory governance initiatives in the national budget (Responsible actors: MoF, Parliament).

- Integrate participation metrics into performance evaluation frameworks for senior public officials (Responsible actors: Public Service Commission, Local Authorities).

Through sequencing reforms in this way, actors can pursue achievable short-term actions while laying the groundwork for systemic changes. Assigning clear responsibility to relevant institutions ensures accountability, while aligning recommendations with the top enablers increases the likelihood of both uptake and sustainability.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the use of purposive and snowball sampling may have introduced selection bias, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, reliance on self-reported perceptions means that the data may be subject to respondent bias. Given the political sensitivity of governance issues in Zimbabwe, some participants may also have withheld criticism or provided socially desirable responses, which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

A further theoretical implication is that both Public Value Theory (PVT) and Network Governance Theory (NGT) assume a baseline level of functional institutional

capacity, trust, and rule enforcement. In fragile states such as Zimbabwe, these assumptions may not fully hold. Weak statutory enforcement, political interference, and resource scarcity often distort or prevent the reciprocity and accountability on which both theories depend. This does not invalidate their use, but it highlights the need to adapt PVT and NGT frameworks when applied to fragile contexts, emphasising protective safeguards and contextual modifications rather than assuming fully functional governance structures.”

Finally, as a cross-sectional study, the findings identify associations rather than causality. The relationships observed between institutional barriers, enablers, and governance outcomes should therefore be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than causal effects. These limitations do not negate the contribution of the study, but they do suggest the need for future longitudinal and comparative research to strengthen causal inference and assess the robustness of the findings across contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the institutional barriers and enablers shaping the efficacy of co-production in Zimbabwe’s fragile governance context between 2019 and

2023. Using a mixed-methods approach, it found that while participatory governance is formally encouraged, its practical implementation remains constrained by funding shortages, limited stakeholder engagement, bureaucratic rigidity, politicisation of participatory spaces, and socio-economic exclusion. These challenges reflect deeper structural and cultural norms that prioritise control over collaboration, often reducing co-production to a symbolic exercise.

At the same time, evidence from both survey and interview data shows that co-production can thrive where strong leadership, political will, adequate resources, and capacity-building are present, supported by inclusive engagement mechanisms. Positive examples, such as participatory budgeting pilots, youth-led civic initiatives, and ICT-enabled consultations, demonstrate that institutional reform, when paired with genuine stakeholder empowerment, can overcome entrenched barriers.

Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, these findings should be interpreted as identifying plausible mechanisms rather than proven causal relationships. Mechanisms such as statutory mandates to protect participatory spaces, decentralisation to reduce gatekeeping, and targeted capacity-building to

strengthen stakeholder influence offer promising directions for reform but require further longitudinal or experimental testing.

Ultimately, the Zimbabwean case underscores that in politically constrained environments, co-production's success depends less on the mere existence of participatory platforms and more on institutional commitment, operational capacity, and inclusivity in their implementation. These lessons hold relevance for other fragile governance contexts seeking to institutionalise collaborative decision-making and foster sustainable public value creation.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while Public Value Theory and Network Governance Theory provide useful lenses, they require adaptation in fragile contexts, where political capture, resource scarcity, and weak reciprocity must be explicitly safeguarded against for co-production to succeed.

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