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Analysis of the Design–Implementation Gap in Public Anti-Corruption Policies in Afghanistan: Explaining Institutional, Structural, and Political Barriers during 2004–2021

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ABSTRACT

Corruption has been one of the most significant challenges to governance and the effectiveness of the administrative system in Afghanistan over the past two decades. Despite the enactment of laws and strategies, the establishment of specialized institutions, and the implementation of numerous anti-corruption programs, a substantial gap has persisted between the objectives envisaged in public policies and the outcomes achieved through their implementation. The present study aimed to analyze the design–implementation gap in public anti-corruption policies in Afghanistan and to explain the institutional, structural, and political barriers contributing to this gap during 2004–2021. In terms of purpose, the study was applied; in terms of nature, it adopted an analytical–critical orientation and employed a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through the analysis of policy documents and records, semi-structured interviews with 20 experts, and the examination of secondary statistical data related to corruption and governance. Qualitative data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and MAXQDA software, while quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistics and trend analysis. During the qualitative analysis process, 348 initial codes were extracted, which, following refinement and consolidation, were reduced to 86 concepts, 26 subcategories, 10 main categories, and ultimately five overarching dimensions. The findings indicated that the design–implementation gap was shaped by five dimensions: political factors, institutional and structural factors, legal and implementation-related factors, social and cultural factors, and the incompatibility of certain policies with the Afghan context. Instability of political support, interference by powerful actors, limited institutional independence and capacity, organizational overlap and duplication, weak coordination, incomplete or selective enforcement of laws, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, the influence of informal networks, and the insufficient alignment of certain policies with administrative capacity were among the most important barriers identified. Quantitative evidence further demonstrated that an increase in the number of laws, institutions, and formal anti-corruption measures was not necessarily accompanied by sustained improvements in corruption and governance indicators. Overall, the design–implementation gap in Afghanistan's anti-corruption policies was found to be multilevel and systemic in nature, and narrowing this gap requires simultaneous attention to the quality of policy design, institutional capacity and independence, non-selective enforcement of the law, accountability, and the alignment of policies with the country's political and administrative realities.

Keywords: corruption, public policy, design–implementation gap, anti-corruption policies, governance, Afghanistan.



Introduction

Administrative and political corruption is one of the complex issues of public governance whose consequences are not limited merely to the waste of financial resources or the reduced efficiency of government organizations; rather, it can also affect the institutional capacity of the state, the quality of public service delivery, the rule of law, citizens' trust, and the legitimacy of governance structures. This issue assumes greater importance in fragile states and conflict-affected countries because weak implementation capacity, the fragility of formal institutions, limited accountability mechanisms, and the influence of informal power networks can create conditions conducive to the reproduction of corruption. From this perspective, corruption cannot be regarded merely as individual misconduct or deviation from administrative rules; rather, in certain institutional environments, it develops into a structural phenomenon arising from the interaction among institutional weakness, power networks, political interests, and limitations in the accountability system (1).

Afghanistan during the two decades following 2004 constitutes an important case for examining this issue. During this period, the reconstruction of the state structure, development of the administrative system, and establishment of new governance institutions were pursued with extensive support from the international community, while a range of laws, strategies, institutions, and reform programs were simultaneously introduced to enhance transparency and combat corruption. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental problems of this period was that the expansion of formal structures and adoption of anti-corruption policies did not necessarily result in the proportionate realization of their objectives at the implementation level. Studies concerning Afghanistan have shown that weak administrative capacity, the influence of informal networks, political interference, and patron–client relations were among the factors constraining the implementation of anti-corruption policies (2).

From a public policy perspective, this situation shifts attention from the mere “existence of policy” toward the “quality of policy design and the manner of policy implementation.” The enactment of legislation, establishment of a specialized institution, or adoption of a national strategy cannot, in itself, be regarded as an indicator of anti-corruption policy success because policy effectiveness is achieved only when coherence exists among objectives, implementation instruments, responsible institutions, resources, monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and the conditions of the policy implementation environment. If a policy is designed without adequate consideration of implementation capacity, institutional relations, and the actual structure of power, it may encounter inefficiency during implementation despite possessing a relatively appropriate legal framework. The experience of fragile states also demonstrates that institutional weakness and limited state capacity make the implementation of anti-corruption reforms more difficult (1).

An examination of Afghanistan's experience indicates that the gap between formal policy design and practical realization constituted one of the key dimensions for understanding the ineffectiveness of anti-corruption policies. Singh (2016) demonstrates that formal anti-corruption strategies, bureaucratic reforms, and other related measures were implemented in an environment in which political elite intervention, patronage relations, and informal interest networks influenced the functioning of formal institutions. From this perspective, the problem cannot be reduced merely to the absence of anti-corruption laws or programs; rather, the manner in which formal policies interact with the actual structure of power and institutional relations must also be examined. In other words, an anti-corruption policy may contain clearly defined objectives and instruments at the formal level, yet when transferred into the

implementation arena, it may encounter a range of institutional, political, and structural constraints that divert implementation from its original objectives (2).

Another characteristic of Afghanistan's experience was the interconnection between anti-corruption policies, the state-building process, and the role of international actors. The extensive volume of foreign aid and the presence of international institutions created opportunities for developing administrative capacity and reforming public institutions; however, they simultaneously generated tensions between the requirements of state building and the objectives of anti-corruption policies. Marquette (2011), in examining Afghanistan's experience, demonstrates that tensions and contradictions existed between certain state-building approaches and anti-corruption objectives and that these two agendas were not always coordinated coherently. This issue highlights the importance of considering the political and institutional context of policy implementation, because transferring reform models without adequate adaptation to power structures, institutional capacities, and local conditions may constrain policy effectiveness (3).

Nevertheless, Afghanistan's public policy experience was not entirely uniform, and evidence of progress in certain areas of transparency can also be identified. For example, Guinn and Straussman (2016), in examining Afghanistan's budget reforms, found that strengthening the participation of the legislative institution and reforming the budget process could improve budget transparency even in fragile environments. This finding is important because it indicates that the fundamental problem is not simply "state fragility"; rather, institutional design, the allocation of roles, the strengthening of oversight mechanisms, and the compatibility of reform interventions with existing capacities also contribute to determining policy outcomes. Therefore, the analysis of anti-corruption policies should examine not only factors associated with failure but also the conditions under which certain reforms have produced different outcomes (4).

At the legal and judicial levels, the issue was also more complex than merely adopting new legislation. De Lauri (2013), in examining corruption, legal modernization, and judicial practice in Afghanistan, demonstrates that mechanisms of corruption can be reproduced through the interaction between social practices and formal legal structures. Such an analysis suggests that legal reform, when detached from the institutional and social environment, may fail to produce genuine changes in actors' behavior. Consequently, the gap between formal rules and actual practices should be regarded as an important component in analyzing the design–implementation gap in Afghanistan's anti-corruption policies (5).

This issue is also evident in official assessments of Afghanistan's anti-corruption reforms. The International Monetary Fund, in assessing Afghanistan's institutional and legal framework, referred to measures such as the development of legislation, strengthened asset declaration requirements, and the activities of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center in addressing serious corruption offenses; nevertheless, the assessment indicates that the creation of institutions and enactment of laws were not necessarily accompanied by equivalent implementation outcomes. Therefore, distinguishing between "formal commitments and structures" and "implementation outcomes" is fundamental to the evaluation of anti-corruption policies (6).

More recent studies of Afghanistan's governance experience have likewise emphasized the importance of political and institutional factors in explaining the limitations of reforms. Sultani (2024), in analyzing the failure to implement good governance in Afghanistan, identifies the concentration of power, weak institutionalization of governance mechanisms, and widespread corruption as among the factors influencing the performance of the country's administrative and political system. Such findings indicate that understanding the performance of anti-

corruption policies requires more than analyzing the text of laws and strategies; rather, their political and institutional implementation environment must also be taken into account (7).

Accordingly, the concept of the “design–implementation gap” can provide an appropriate framework for reassessing Afghanistan’s experience with anti-corruption policies. This gap emerges when discrepancies develop between the objectives and instruments envisaged in policy, on the one hand, and the capacities, institutional arrangements, behavior of actors, and actual implementation outcomes, on the other. Under such circumstances, a policy may formally emphasize transparency, oversight independence, accountability, prevention, and punishment, yet in practice, overlapping institutional mandates, limited independence of oversight bodies, weak coordination, the influence of political actors, or inadequate implementation capacity may prevent the realization of policy objectives. Therefore, examining the design–implementation gap makes it possible to move beyond a purely legal evaluation of policies toward an analysis of the actual mechanisms through which they operate.

The period from 2004 to 2021 was selected as the temporal scope of the study to allow changes in policies, responsible institutions, instruments employed, and their outcomes to be examined over a relatively long period.

On this basis, the central problem addressed in the present article is why, despite the formulation of laws, strategies, programs, and the establishment of multiple structures for combating corruption, a gap emerged between the formal design of policies and the realization of their objectives in practice. Focusing on three categories of institutional, structural, and political barriers, the article seeks to explain the mechanisms that created or intensified this gap during 2004–2021. Such an analysis can not only clarify Afghanistan’s anti-corruption policy experience but also contribute to a more precise understanding of why, in fragile institutional environments, public policy success depends less on increasing the number of laws and institutions than on coherent policy design, implementation capacity, institutional independence and coordination, accountability mechanisms, and the compatibility of policy with the actual structure of power.

Theoretical Foundations and Review of the Literature

In the public policy literature, corruption is not explained merely as illegal conduct or the individual misuse of public authority; rather, it is understood as a multilevel phenomenon that emerges through interactions among the behavior of agents, institutional structures, formal and informal rules, power networks, and the quality of governance. Accordingly, the analysis of anti-corruption policies requires moving beyond an approach that evaluates policy success solely in terms of legislation, institution building, or strategy formulation. The fundamental issue concerns how a designed policy is implemented within the actual structure of government and which factors create distance between formal objectives and practical outcomes. Within this framework, the “design–implementation gap” may be defined as the discrepancy between the objectives, instruments, and arrangements envisaged in a public policy and the manner in which they are actually realized in the implementation environment. This gap becomes more pronounced when policy design is incompatible with institutional capacity, the distribution of power, actors’ incentives, and the informal rules governing the implementation environment (8).

One of the major theoretical foundations for explaining corruption is principal–agent theory. According to this perspective, citizens or senior officials, acting as principals, delegate part of their authority to public agents; however, information asymmetry, weak monitoring, and divergent interests may create opportunities for agents to misuse public authority. Within this logic, combating corruption requires increasing transparency, strengthening monitoring, increasing the probability of detecting misconduct, reforming incentive systems, and enforcing

sanctions. Many conventional anti-corruption policies, ranging from the establishment of oversight and auditing bodies to asset disclosure requirements and stricter penalties, have been influenced directly or indirectly by this logic. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this approach depends on the existence of a principal who is itself free from corruption and possesses both the willingness and capacity to monitor the agent (9, 10).

The limitations of principal–agent theory become more evident in environments where corruption extends beyond isolated conduct and develops into a systemic problem. Collective action theory responds to this limitation by arguing that, in societies characterized by pervasive corruption, the central problem is not necessarily insufficient information or weak monitoring; rather, actors believe that others will also follow corrupt rules, thereby making honest conduct costly and even irrational for the individual. Persson, Rothstein, and Teorell (2013) demonstrate that anti-corruption policies based on the principal–agent model may fail in contexts of systemic corruption because they misdiagnose the nature of the problem. When actors lack confidence that others will comply with formal rules, creating a new oversight institution or increasing penalties does not necessarily alter the prevailing equilibrium. Anti-corruption reforms must therefore target not only individual behavior but also mutual expectations, institutional trust, and the rules of the game governing the broader administrative and political system (9).

The institutional approach adds another layer to the explanation of this issue. From this perspective, the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies depends not solely on the quality of formal rules but also on the manner in which rules are implemented, the credibility of implementing institutions, the independence of oversight structures, and the interaction between formal rules and informal norms and arrangements. Fritzen (2005) demonstrates that reducing the success of anti-corruption reforms to the general concept of “political will” fails to explain the complexity of implementation processes because institutional context determines the extent to which actors possess the incentives or capacities necessary to implement reforms. Under conditions of widespread corruption, even actors responsible for designing and implementing anti-corruption policies may benefit from the continuation of certain existing arrangements. A distinction must therefore be made between the formal existence of policy and its credible implementation (8).

Recent research has reinforced this argument. Meyer, Luiz, and Fedderke (2024), focusing on the “rules of the game” and implementation credibility, demonstrate that the mere existence of formal institutions is insufficient to control corruption and that the credible and continuous enforcement of rules is decisive. From this perspective, if anti-corruption laws are enacted but their implementation is selective, unpredictable, or influenced by power relations, policy credibility declines and formal rules cannot change actors’ behavior in the intended manner. Consequently, the design–implementation gap should be understood not merely as a product of technical weaknesses within the executive apparatus but also as an outcome of the quality of institutional arrangements and the credibility of rule enforcement (11).

Taken together, these arguments indicate that systemic corruption cannot be explained through a single theoretical framework. Martinsson (2021), reviewing the debate between principal–agent theory and collective action theory, proposes a policy-centered approach emphasizing the combination of theoretical mechanisms and their adaptation to the type of corruption and the institutional environment. From this perspective, the principal issue is not which theory is independently correct; rather, it is necessary to determine the particular corruption mechanism against which an anti-corruption policy has been designed and whether the selected instruments are compatible with that mechanism and the policy implementation environment. This perspective is especially important for the study of Afghanistan because corruption in the country during the period under examination had both individual and

administrative dimensions and was simultaneously associated with power networks, patron–client relations, institutional capacity, and the political structure (10).

At the public policy level, a design–implementation gap emerges when the logic embedded in policy design is inconsistent with the actual logic of its implementation environment. Policymakers may formally define objectives, responsibilities, instruments, and enforcement mechanisms, yet final outcomes are shaped by organizational capacity, inter-institutional coordination, resources, actors' interests, power structures, and informal rules. Implementation failure therefore does not necessarily indicate inadequate implementers; rather, the policy itself may have been founded from the outset on assumptions inconsistent with actual environmental conditions. In anti-corruption policy, this issue is particularly important because those responsible for enforcing anti-corruption restrictions may themselves be embedded within existing structures of interest. Fritzen (2005) identifies this situation as one of the fundamental paradoxes of anti-corruption policy (8).

Very recent studies have continued to place this issue at the center of anti-corruption theorization. Meza and Pérez-Chiqués (2026) show that anti-corruption policymaking in contexts characterized by systemic corruption confronts a fundamental paradox: actors expected to change existing rules and arrangements may lack sufficient incentives to do so, while even the design and implementation of anti-corruption policies may be influenced by political competition and interests. This perspective underscores the importance of simultaneously analyzing “policy design,” “power structure,” and “implementers' incentives” and demonstrates that the study of anti-corruption policy remains incomplete without an examination of the politics of power surrounding it (12).

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to Afghanistan. During 2004–2021, anti-corruption policies were implemented in a context characterized simultaneously by state reconstruction, expansion of the administrative apparatus, extensive international assistance, insecurity, weak institutional capacity, and competition among power networks.

Within the Afghanistan-specific literature, Marquette's (2011) study is among the important contributions addressing the relationship between state building and anti-corruption efforts. Examining the Afghan experience, the study demonstrated that contradictions and inconsistencies existed between the state-building agenda and anti-corruption policies. In circumstances where the international community sought, on the one hand, to establish stability, strengthen the state, and cooperate with local actors and, on the other hand, emphasized combating corruption and promoting administrative integrity, some requirements of these two agendas could come into conflict. Marquette emphasizes the need for realism, attention to indirect strategies, and a long-term transition toward institutional integrity. The study demonstrates that anti-corruption policy cannot be analyzed independently of the broader logic of state building and political relations (3).

Singh (2016) examined anti-corruption strategies in Afghanistan more directly. Drawing on an analysis of formal anti-corruption strategies, bureaucratic reforms, and counter-narcotics policies, as well as insights from 70 semi-structured interviews conducted in Kabul, the study demonstrated that political intervention by elites, patron–client relations, patronage networks, and the linkage of certain illicit economic interests with structures of power had complicated efforts to combat corruption. These findings are particularly important for the present article because they show that a formal anti-corruption strategy is insufficient to control corruption when informal power structures retain the ability to influence its implementation (2).

Indeed, Singh's findings can be linked to collective action theory and the institutional approach. If corruption is reproduced through stable patronage networks and reciprocal power relations, a policy focusing solely on controlling

and sanctioning individual agents overlooks a significant part of the problem. Furthermore, if implementing institutions lack adequate independence or capacity, increasing the number of laws and oversight structures may expand the formal layer of policymaking without producing corresponding changes in performance. This explanation is consistent with Persson et al.'s (2013) argument regarding the limitations of conventional reforms in contexts characterized by systemic corruption and with Fritzen's (2005) perspective regarding the decisive role of institutional context (8, 9).

Studies relating to other areas of public policy in Afghanistan have likewise provided evidence regarding the importance of implementation gaps. For example, research on policy implementation in Afghanistan has shown that even where formal policy commitments exist, conflicts between institutional logics and environmental realities can distance implementation from intended policy objectives. Infrastructure weaknesses, regulatory fragility, environmental risks, and conflicting organizational priorities may transform what appears to be limited awareness or weak employee implementation into a rational response to institutional tensions. Although such research does not specifically address anti-corruption policy, its theoretical implication is relevant to policy analysis in Afghanistan: implementation gaps cannot be explained without understanding the institutional environment and the actual behavior of implementing actors (7).

Consequently, the literature indicates that three categories of factors may be distinguished in explaining the design–implementation gap in Afghanistan's anti-corruption policies, although in practice these factors interact extensively. First, institutional barriers include limited independence of oversight institutions, overlapping mandates, weak inter-institutional coordination, restricted implementation capacity, inadequate accountability, and non-credible or inconsistent enforcement of rules. Second, structural barriers include limited state capacity, the penetration of informal rules and networks, patron–client relations, fragility of the administrative structure, and the incompatibility of certain policy instruments with the country's actual conditions. Third, political barriers include intervention by powerful actors in policy implementation, conflicts of interest, weak sustained support for reforms, and the influence of power relations on the independence and functioning of anti-corruption institutions (2, 3, 8).

Despite the significance of previous studies, a distinct research gap remains evident. Some studies have focused on the nature of systemic corruption and the theoretical foundations of anti-corruption reform (9, 10); others have examined the role of institutional context and implementation credibility (8, 11); and Afghanistan-focused studies have primarily addressed state building, patronage networks, political interference, or general evaluations of anti-corruption strategies (2, 3). Few studies have integrated these elements within the specific framework of the “design–implementation gap” over the extended period from 2004 to 2021.

Accordingly, the theoretical framework of the present article is based on integrating three perspectives—principal–agent theory, collective action theory, and institutionalism—within the context of policy implementation analysis. Principal–agent theory explains weaknesses in monitoring and accountability and the possibility of abuse of authority; collective action theory clarifies why, under systemic corruption, changing individual behavior and increasing controls alone are insufficient; and the institutional approach demonstrates that formal rules are effective only when compatible with implementation capacity, actors' incentives, power structures, and informal rules within the environment. Consequently, the design–implementation gap in this article is conceptualized not as a single technical deficiency but as the product of interaction among institutional, structural, and political barriers. This theoretical synthesis provides a basis for analyzing how Afghanistan's formal anti-corruption policies, as they moved

from the design stage into the implementation arena, were influenced by institutional and political structures and why some of their intended objectives were not realized in practice.

Research Method

The present study was applied in terms of purpose, analytical–critical in nature, and employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The temporal scope of the study covered 2004–2021, while its spatial scope encompassed Afghan government organizations and institutions. The study primarily focused on analyzing the gap between the formal design and implementation of public anti-corruption policies and identifying the institutional, structural, and political barriers affecting this gap.

Research data were collected from three sources: official documents, expert interviews, and secondary statistical data. The documents examined included laws and regulations, decrees, national anti-corruption strategies, policy documents, implementation programs, performance reports of domestic institutions, and credible reports issued by international organizations relating to Afghanistan. Documents were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria such as direct relevance to the subject, inclusion within the study period, source credibility, and the availability of information concerning policy design, implementation, monitoring, or evaluation.

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 experts in public policy, governance, transparency, anti-corruption, and Afghanistan's administrative and political structures. Participants were selected purposively and, when necessary, through snowball sampling, and the interview process continued until theoretical and informational saturation was achieved. Qualitative data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis informed by the logic of public policy cycle analysis, institutional analysis, and systems analysis. Coding and data organization were conducted using MAXQDA software.

In the quantitative phase, secondary data included the Corruption Perceptions Index, Worldwide Governance Indicators, and performance information relating to anti-corruption policies and institutions during the study period. These data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, ratio comparisons, trend analysis, and quantitative content analysis. Finally, documentary, interview, and quantitative findings were integrated, and instances of inconsistency between the objectives and mechanisms envisaged in policies and the evidence regarding their implementation were identified as manifestations of the design–implementation gap. The factors explaining this gap were then classified and analyzed along three institutional, structural, and political dimensions.

Research Findings

The findings were derived from the integration of three categories of data: policy documents and records, semi-structured interviews with experts, and secondary statistical data. Analysis demonstrated that the problem of anti-corruption policy in Afghanistan was associated less with the absence of policies, laws, or formal structures than with the gap between formal policy design and the capacity to realize such policies in implementation. Qualitative findings were organized into five dimensions: political; institutional and structural; legal and implementation-related; social and cultural; and policy fit and localization. Quantitative evidence also confirmed the existence of this gap during a substantial part of the study period.

Analysis of documents and expert interviews initially yielded 348 initial codes. After eliminating duplicate codes and merging semantically overlapping items, 86 concepts were generated. These concepts were organized into 26

subcategories and subsequently reduced to 10 main categories. At the final level, five principal dimensions were extracted.

Table 1. Stages of Reduction and Organization of Qualitative Data

Analysis Stage	Number	Result
Initial codes	348	Extracted from meaning units in documents and interviews
Concepts	86	Merging and refinement of similar codes
Subcategories	26	Grouping concepts with semantic similarity
Main categories	10	Integration and abstraction of subcategories
Final dimensions	5	Final structure of qualitative findings

The five resulting dimensions were not independent sets of factors; rather, reciprocal relationships were observed among them. For example, weak political support could constrain the independence of responsible institutions; limited institutional independence could, in turn, affect law enforcement; selective law enforcement could diminish public trust; and declining public trust could subsequently weaken participation and social oversight. Furthermore, the incompatibility of imported policies with implementation capacity and the actual structure of power reduced the likelihood that formal policy would be translated into implementation practice.

Table 2. Final Structure of the Dimensions and Categories of the Design–Implementation Gap

Dimension	Main Category	Key Components
Political	Political will and support	Continuity of political will, leadership support, prioritization of anti-corruption
Political	Political influence and instability	Intervention by powerful actors, politicization of anti-corruption, instability of decisions
Institutional and structural	Institutional capacity and independence	Organizational independence, specialized capacity, human resources, implementation authority
Institutional and structural	Institutional coordination and accountability	Multiplicity of institutions, duplication, weak coordination, ambiguity of responsibility
Legal and implementation-related	Quality of the legal framework	Legal coherence, enforcement mechanisms, clarity of mandates
Legal and implementation-related	Policy–implementation gap	Incomplete implementation, selective implementation, weak monitoring and follow-up
Social and cultural	Informal power structures	Influence networks, personal and group relationships, traditional arrangements
Social and cultural	Trust and accountability culture	Public trust, social acceptance, participation, and public demand for accountability
Policy fit and localization	Policy misalignment	Institutional transplantation, insufficient attention to domestic capacity, design–context gap
Policy fit and localization	Localization requirements	Institutional realism, stakeholder participation, adaptation to the political economy

The first category of findings concerned political factors. Data analysis demonstrated that the mere declaration of political will or adoption of anti-corruption programs was insufficient for policy realization. What mattered more during implementation was the continuity of political support, practical backing for implementing institutions, and acceptance of the outcomes of oversight activities. Where political support remained confined to the policy formulation and adoption stages, the gap between formal policy and actual implementation widened.

Conversely, intervention by powerful actors constituted one of the factors weakening policy implementation. Pressure on oversight institutions, interference in certain cases, and the politicization of anti-corruption measures could disrupt the equal application of policy. The findings further showed that managerial turnover, changes in political priorities, and the dependence of some programs on individual supporters reduced the continuity of reforms.

Table 3. Political Barriers Affecting the Design–Implementation Gap

Factor	Manifestation During Implementation	Consequence
Instability of political will	Reduced support following policy adoption	Interruption or weakening of implementation
Intervention by powerful actors	Pressure on implementing and oversight institutions	Reduced independence
Politicization of anti-corruption	Differential treatment of cases	Selective implementation
Managerial instability	Changes in managers and priorities	Discontinuity of reform programs
Dependence of policy on individuals	Reduced institutionalization of policy	Instability of policy implementation
Limited decision-making independence	Influence of external pressures	Reduced impartiality in law enforcement

Thus, the political dimension of the design–implementation gap operated in two different directions: sustained political support could strengthen policy implementation, whereas political influence, politicization of cases, and frequent managerial changes could reduce institutional independence and policy continuity.

The second category of findings concerned the institutional structure of policy implementation. Data analysis demonstrated that establishing multiple anti-corruption institutions without precisely defining the division of responsibilities and relationships among them sometimes resulted in duplication, overlapping jurisdictions, and ambiguous accountability. Moreover, the formal independence of an institution could be translated into actual independence only when the institution possessed specialized human resources, implementation authority, financial resources, and adequate support.

Table 4. Institutional and Structural Barriers

Component	Problematic Condition	Effect on the Design–Implementation Gap
Institutional independence	Limited practical independence	Greater susceptibility of policy implementation to influence
Specialized capacity	Shortage of specialized personnel	Reduced implementation quality
Human and implementation resources	Resource constraints	Reduced follow-up capacity
Multiplicity of institutions	Fragmented responsibilities	Duplication
Inter-institutional coordination	Weak communication among agencies	Disruption of the implementation chain
Clarity of responsibility	Overlapping mandates	Transfer or avoidance of responsibility
Institutional accountability	Weak accountability mechanisms	Reduced capacity for performance evaluation

This finding indicates that increasing the number of anti-corruption institutions does not necessarily increase anti-corruption governance capacity. What is decisive is a coherent institutional architecture, a clear division of responsibilities, practical independence, and the ability to translate legal mandates into implementation action.

The third dimension directly concerned the gap between legal rules and their actual implementation. Although various laws and regulations relating to corruption were enacted during the study period, the findings demonstrated that legal coherence, clarity of institutional mandates, and the existence of effective enforcement mechanisms were more important than the mere number of laws.

Table 5. Legal and Implementation Dimensions of the Policy–Implementation Gap

Area	Identified Condition	Result
Legal coherence	Fragmentation or inconsistency among certain rules	Difficulty in implementation
Clarity of mandates	Overlapping responsibilities	Institutional conflict
Enforcement mechanisms	Gap between legal rule and enforceability	Reduced legal effectiveness
Law enforcement	Incomplete implementation	Failure to fully realize objectives
Equality in enforcement	Selective implementation	Reduced policy credibility
Monitoring	Weak monitoring of policy implementation	Persistence of deviations
Follow-up	Weak continuity after identification	Gap between detection and final outcome

Accordingly, one of the clearest manifestations of the design–implementation gap arose when a requirement was stipulated in law, yet no practical mechanism existed to enforce it or its enforcement was not applied equally across different actors.

The findings demonstrated that anti-corruption policies were not implemented in a social vacuum. Informal power networks, personal and group relations, and ethnic and traditional affiliations could influence the functioning of formal rules. Conversely, public trust, civic demand for accountability, and civil society participation could complement formal monitoring mechanisms.

Table 6. Social and Cultural Factors Affecting Policy Implementation

Category	Main Theme	Effect on Policy
Influence networks	Effect of informal relationships on decisions	Weakening of formal rules
Ethnic and traditional relations	Influence of social affiliations	Reduced administrative impartiality
Personal and group relations	Preference for relationships over rules	Damage to meritocracy
Attitudes toward corruption	Normalization of certain behaviors	Reduced social sensitivity
Public trust	Trust in institutional impartiality	Increased or reduced citizen cooperation
Public demand for accountability	Demand for transparency and accountability	Strengthening of social oversight
Social participation	Role of civil society and citizens	Complementing formal oversight

One important finding of the article concerned the gap between certain policy models and the actual capacity of their implementation environment. The principal issue was not a conflict between international standards and localization; rather, the central question was how standards of transparency and accountability could be adapted to Afghanistan's political, administrative, institutional, and social structures.

Table 7. Areas of Policy Misalignment with the Afghan Context

Area	Identified Condition	Consequence	Reform Requirement
Political	Insufficient attention to actual power networks	Limited implementation independence	Institutional safeguards against interference
Administrative	Gap between policy and bureaucratic capacity	Incomplete implementation	Capacity-sensitive policy design
Institutional	Multiplicity and overlap of structures	Duplication	Coherent institutional architecture
Legal	Gap between rules and enforceability	Formalization without substantive effect	Practical enforcement mechanisms
Social	Insufficient attention to informal relationships	Reduced impact of formal rules	Context-sensitive mechanisms
Cultural	Limited attention to trust and norms	Weak social participation	Strengthening a culture of accountability

Trend analysis of formal measures indicated that the density of anti-corruption policymaking increased during the period under study. The annual average number of formal measures rose from 1.67 in the first period to 2.33 in the second period and 3.50 in the third period; thus, the intensity of formal measures in the third period was more than twice that of the first period. Nevertheless, the increase in the number of laws, strategies, and structures was not accompanied by a proportionate resolution of problems relating to institutional independence, coordination, enforcement, and political influence.

Table 8. Changes in the Density of Formal Anti-Corruption Measures

Period	Annual Average of Formal Measures	Status
First period	1.67	Lower density
Second period	2.33	Increased policy activity
Third period	3.50	Highest policymaking density

Examination of the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) showed that Afghanistan's position during the first part of the study period underwent a substantial decline. Afghanistan's score decreased from 2.5 out of 10 in 2005 to 1.3 in 2009. Following the change in the index scale in 2012, the country's score rose from 8 out of 100 in 2012 to 19 in 2020; nevertheless, this relative improvement did not move Afghanistan out of an unfavorable position in perceptions of corruption.

Table 9. Selected Trend in Afghanistan's Corruption Perceptions Index

Year	CPI Score	Scale	Rank
2005	2.5	0–10	117 of 159
2007	1.8	0–10	172 of 180
2008	1.5	0–10	176 of 180
2009	1.3	0–10	179 of 180
2010	1.4	0–10	176 of 178
2011	1.5	0–10	180 of 183
2012	8	0–100	174 of 176
2013	8	0–100	175 of 177
2014	12	0–100	172 of 175
2015	11	0–100	166 of 168
2016	15	0–100	169 of 176
2017	15	0–100	177 of 180
2018	16	0–100	172 of 180
2019	16	0–100	173 of 180
2020	19	0–100	165 of 180

Analysis of governance indicators likewise demonstrated that the increase in formal anti-corruption measures was not accompanied by sustained improvement in governance capacity. For example, the percentile rank for government effectiveness declined from 28.9 in 2004 to 18.2 in 2021. The political stability indicator also remained at relatively low levels across all observations examined.

Table 10. Selected Trends in Afghanistan's Governance Indicators

Year	Government Effectiveness	Political Stability
2004	28.9	28.5
2008	18.9	22.6
2012	22.2	23.1
2014	21.7	26.3
2016	23.8	23.5
2018	19.6	21.8
2020	18.0	21.7
2021	18.2	24.0

This finding was consistent with qualitative results relating to weak state capacity, limited institutional independence, political instability, and the policy–implementation gap.

Analysis of the performance of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center indicated that the creation of a specialized structure increased the capacity to examine and adjudicate major cases; however, a substantial gap remained between potentially reviewed cases and cases transferred to the formal adjudication stage. By late 2017, 53 of 386 potentially reviewed cases had been referred, corresponding to a referral rate of 13.7%. By March 2018, this rate had increased to 17.5%.

Table 11. Selected Performance Indicators of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center

Period	Potential Cases Reviewed	Cases Referred	Referral Rate
Late 2017	386	53	13.7%
March 2018	416	73	17.5%

Judicial data also indicated increased activity by the Center. From the beginning of its operations through 2017, 21 cases involving 83 defendants had been adjudicated. By September 2018, the number of adjudicated cases had increased to 39, while the reported number of convicted individuals had reached approximately 122.

Table 12. Evidence of the Judicial Performance of the Anti-Corruption Center

Period	Indicator	Value
August 2016–2017	Cases adjudicated	21
Same period	Number of defendants	83
Same period	Defendants acquitted	11
By September 2018	Cases adjudicated	39
By September 2018	Reported convicted individuals	Approximately 122
September–December 2018	Primary court cases	23
September–December 2018	Appeal cases	20
September–December 2018	High-level court cases	12

Examination of financial resources demonstrated that expenditures related to anti-corruption activities in Afghanistan were not located under a single, fixed budget line; rather, a substantial portion was embedded within broader programs concerning governance, financial system reform, accountability, judicial reform, and institutional capacity building. Therefore, the amounts associated with different programs cannot be aggregated and interpreted as the “total anti-corruption budget.”

Table 13. Examples of Financial Resources Related to Transparency and Anti-Corruption

Program	Period	Reported Amount	Type of Relationship
Afghanistan Integrity Initiative	2013–2016	USD 13.69 million	Direct
Local Governance Program, 2016 expenditure	2016	USD 6.26 million	Transparency and accountability
Fiscal Performance Improvement Support Project	From 2017	USD 100 million	Financial reform and prevention
Second Public Financial Management Reform Project	Through 2017	USD 114.13 million	Financial reform, procurement, and governance
Justice System Support Program	2016 report	USD 247.14 million	Rule of law and judicial reform
Effective Reform for Civil Accountability	2016 report	USD 51.30 million	Accountability
Justice Training Transition Program	2016 report	USD 47.76 million	Justice system reform
Support for the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee	2016 report	USD 3 million	Anti-corruption

To examine co-movement between the Corruption Perceptions Index and the WGI Control of Corruption indicator during 2012–2021, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was calculated. The result indicated a correlation coefficient of 0.58, reflecting a moderate positive relationship. However, the significance level was 0.079; therefore, the relationship was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 14. Correlation Between CPI and WGI Control of Corruption

First Variable	Second Variable	Number of Observations	Correlation Coefficient	Significance Level	Result
Corruption Perceptions Index	WGI Control of Corruption	10	0.58	0.079	Moderate positive relationship; not significant at the 0.05 level

Integration of the findings demonstrated that the principal characteristic of Afghanistan's anti-corruption policymaking experience was the simultaneous "expansion of formal structures" and "persistence of implementation constraints." The number of formal policies and measures increased and new specialized institutions were created, yet evidence from governance indicators, institutional performance, and expert interviews showed that legal and institutional expansion did not automatically reduce the implementation gap.

Table 15. Integrated Evidence on the Design–Implementation Gap

Area of Formal Design	Evidence at the Implementation Stage	Nature of the Gap
Increase in laws and policies	Persistent implementation weakness	Law–practice gap
Creation of specialized institutions	Limited independence and capacity	Structure–performance gap
Provision for monitoring	Weak follow-up and reporting	Monitoring–accountability gap
Emphasis on law enforcement	Incomplete or selective implementation	Rule–implementation gap
Expansion of formal reforms	Persistent weak governance indicators	Action–outcome gap
Transfer of international standards	Limited domestic capacity	Design–context gap
Formal support for anti-corruption	Political intervention and instability	Commitment–practice gap
Creation of accountability mechanisms	Weak trust and participation	State–society gap

The combined findings demonstrated that the design–implementation gap in Afghanistan's anti-corruption policies was not the product of a single factor but emerged from the interaction among multiple levels of barriers. At the political level, weak continuity of support and intervention by powerful actors contributed to the gap; at the institutional level, weak capacity, limited independence, and inadequate coordination were influential; at the legal and implementation level, weak enforcement mechanisms and selective implementation played important roles; at the social level, informal networks and weak trust were significant; and at the contextual level, the incomplete adaptation of certain policies to Afghanistan's actual capacities and structures contributed to the formation of the gap.

Table 16. Final Summary of Barriers to the Design and Implementation of Policies

Dimension	Central Issue	Mechanism Creating the Gap
Political	Weak sustained political will and political intervention	Failure to convert formal commitment into continuous implementation support
Institutional and structural	Weak capacity, duplication, and limited independence	Inability of formal structures to fully perform assigned functions
Legal and implementation-related	Weak enforcement mechanisms and selective implementation	Discrepancy between adopted rules and implementation behavior
Social and cultural	Informal networks and weak trust	Weakening of formal rules and social oversight
Local and contextual	Incompatibility of certain imported policies	Gap between policy instruments and the country's actual capacity and structure

Overall, the findings demonstrated that during 2004–2021 the principal problem of anti-corruption policymaking in Afghanistan cannot simply be characterized as a "shortage of policy." The increasing density of policies, creation of specialized institutions, and allocation of resources during parts of the period indicate that substantial formal capacity had developed; however, weak institutional independence and coordination, political intervention, incomplete or selective enforcement of laws, limited implementation capacity, the influence of informal networks, and the incompatibility of certain policies with the Afghan context prevented the full conversion of this formal capacity into sustainable implementation outcomes. Consequently, the design–implementation gap in Afghanistan was systemic and multilevel in nature, emerging from the interaction among policy, institutions, law, power structures, and the social context.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyze the gap between the design and implementation of public anti-corruption policies in Afghanistan and to explain the institutional, structural, and political barriers affecting this gap during 2004–2021. The overall findings demonstrated that the principal challenge of anti-corruption policymaking in Afghanistan cannot simply be attributed to the absence of laws, strategies, or specialized institutions. During the study period, the scope of formal governmental interventions against corruption expanded, and numerous laws, programs, strategies, and institutions were established; however, this expansion of formal capacity did not result in a proportionate increase in implementation capacity or sustained improvement in outcomes. The annual average number of formal measures also increased across the different periods, while problems concerning institutional independence, coordination, enforcement, and political influence remained prominent in the qualitative data.

Qualitative analysis revealed this gap across five dimensions: political; institutional and structural; legal and implementation-related; social and cultural; and policy fit and localization. In the political dimension, unstable political support, intervention by powerful actors, politicization of anti-corruption measures, and managerial changes were among the factors limiting the continuity and impartial implementation of policies. The findings demonstrated that the issue was not merely the presence or absence of political will; rather, the ability to convert political support into sustained backing for implementing institutions, preserve their independence, and accept the outcomes of oversight activities was of fundamental importance.

At the institutional and structural levels, the establishment of specialized organizations and institutions without practical independence, specialized capacity, adequate human resources, a clear division of responsibilities, and inter-organizational coordination did not fully resolve the implementation problem. The multiplication of institutions in the absence of coherent institutional architecture sometimes created overlapping mandates, duplication, and ambiguity of responsibility. The findings therefore demonstrate that increasing the number of anti-corruption institutions cannot, in itself, be equated with increasing institutional anti-corruption capacity.

At the legal and implementation levels, the gap between adopting rules and realizing them in practice was one of the most evident problems identified. Legal coherence, clarity of mandates, and enforcement mechanisms could contribute to reducing corruption only when accompanied by continuous, equal, and monitorable enforcement. Incomplete or selective implementation and weak monitoring and follow-up meant that part of the legal capacity established at the formal level was not translated into corresponding implementation outcomes.

Quantitative evidence was consistent with this interpretation. Despite increased policy activity, governance indicators did not demonstrate sustained and comprehensive improvement. For example, the percentile rank for government effectiveness declined from 28.9 in 2004 to 18.2 in 2021, while political stability remained at relatively low levels throughout the observations examined. Although relative improvement in the Corruption Perceptions Index was observed from 2012 to 2020, Afghanistan's overall position remained unfavorable. However, because the scale of the Corruption Perceptions Index changed in 2012, direct comparisons between the periods before and after that year should be made cautiously.

Analysis of the performance of specialized institutions similarly revealed this gap at the implementation level. The activities of the Anti-Corruption Justice Center demonstrated increased specialized capacity for examining major cases, yet the discrepancy between the number of potentially reviewed cases and those referred to formal adjudication indicated that creating a specialized institution alone does not guarantee completion of the policy

implementation chain. The effectiveness of such an institution depends on independence, resources, follow-up capacity, and the ability to convert preliminary investigation into prosecution, adjudication, and enforcement of judicial decisions.

The findings further demonstrated that part of the design–implementation gap resulted from insufficient adaptation of certain policies to the characteristics of their implementation environment. The gap between policy and bureaucratic capacity, the multiplicity and overlap of institutional structures, insufficient attention to actual power networks and informal relationships, and limited consideration of trust and social norms reduced the implementability of certain policies. From this perspective, localization does not mean abandoning international standards; rather, it involves adapting the principles of transparency, accountability, and the rule of law to Afghanistan’s institutional capacity, power structure, and social conditions.

Overall, the principal conclusion of the study is that the design–implementation gap in Afghanistan’s anti-corruption policies was multilevel and systemic in nature. Weak sustained political will could reduce institutional independence; limited institutional independence and capacity could disrupt law enforcement; incomplete or selective implementation could undermine public trust; and weak public trust and social participation could, in turn, constrain the capacity for public oversight. Likewise, a policy designed without sufficient consideration of actual power structures and administrative capacity may face implementation constraints even where it possesses an appropriate legal framework.

Accordingly, narrowing the design–implementation gap requires moving away from an approach centered on “increasing laws and institutions” toward one focused on strengthening the quality of policy implementation. Such an approach must simultaneously address the independence and capacity of implementing institutions, institutional division of responsibilities and coordination, non-selective law enforcement, monitoring and accountability, reduced opportunities for informal networks to exert influence, and policy design consistent with the country’s actual capacities. Ultimately, the findings of this study demonstrate that the effectiveness of anti-corruption policy is determined not only by the quality of the policy text but also by the degree of compatibility among “policy design,” “institutional capacity,” “power structure,” and “actual implementation conditions.”

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Authors’ Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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