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The Proposal-Reality Chasm: Unrealistic Expectations, Governmental Realism, and the Need for Epistemic Sensitization in Ugandan Development

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Abstract: *This study examined the proposal-reality chasm in Ugandan development by investigating the disconnect between development proposals and implementation outcomes, the role of unrealistic expectations and governmental realism, and the potential of epistemic sensitization to bridge this gap. Despite decades of development planning and substantial financial investments, Uganda continues to experience significant gaps between proposed interventions and achieved results, suggesting fundamental problems in how development initiatives are conceived, designed, and implemented. Using a mixed-methods research design, the study collected quantitative data through structured questionnaires administered to 384 respondents across five sectors (health, education, infrastructure, agriculture, and local governance) in six districts, alongside qualitative data from 45 key informant interviews, 12 focus group discussions, document analysis of 60 development proposals and implementation reports, and observation of 15 planning meetings. Univariate analysis revealed critically low proposal realism scores (M=38.8, SD=14.6) contrasted against high governmental realism scores (M=70.2, SD=13.8), demonstrating a 31.4-point gap between what implementing actors knew to be feasible and what formal proposals promised. Implementation success averaged only 53.4% (SD=19.8), with particularly low outcome realization scores (M=47.2, SD=23.1), confirming the existence of a substantial proposal-reality chasm. Epistemic sensitization levels were moderate (M=52.9, SD=17.2), with significant variation across stakeholder groups. Bivariate analysis using Pearson correlations demonstrated strong positive relationships between proposal realism and implementation success (r=.627, p<.01) and between epistemic sensitization and implementation success (r=.682, p<.01), while the correlation between governmental realism and proposal realism was weak (r=.312, p<.01), providing statistical evidence of knowledge marginalization in planning processes. Chi-square tests revealed that implementation success varied significantly by sector type (χ^2=47.32, p<.001), administrative level (χ^2=34.58, p<.001), donor type (χ^2=28.74, p<.001), and stakeholder involvement level (χ^2=52.67, p<.001). Structural equation modeling with excellent fit indices (CFI=0.941, TLI=0.928, RMSEA=0.069, SRMR=0.054) explained 61.2% of variance in implementation success and validated the hypothesized relationships: unrealistic expectations strongly predicted lower proposal realism (β=-.624, p<.001); epistemic sensitization was the strongest direct predictor of implementation success (β=.398, p<.001), followed by proposal realism (β=.342, p<.001) and governmental realism (β=.187, p<.001); epistemic sensitization mediated the relationship between unrealistic expectations and outcomes (β=-.156, p<.001) and between governmental realism and outcomes (β=.214, p<.001); and governmental realism moderated the proposal-implementation relationship (β=.168, p=.012). The study concluded that bridging this chasm requires institutionalizing epistemic sensitization—cultivating capacities for critical evidence engagement, contextual knowledge incorporation, and reflexive learning—while reforming donor incentive structures that currently reward ambitious projection over realistic planning, and establishing mechanisms that elevate the voices and knowledge of implementation-proximate actors in development planning processes. These findings contribute to theoretical understanding of implementation gaps in development while offering practical pathways toward more grounded, realistic, and effective development practice in Uganda and similar contexts across the Global South.*

Key Words: proposal-reality chasm, unrealistic expectations, governmental realism, and epistemic sensitization

Introduction

Uganda's development trajectory has been characterized by a persistent and troubling disconnect between what is proposed in policy documents, donor-funded programs, and development blueprints, and what materializes on the ground. This phenomenon what can be termed the "proposal-reality chasm" manifests across sectors, from infrastructure projects that exist primarily on paper to education reforms that fail to translate into improved learning outcomes, and health interventions that struggle to move beyond pilot phases (Kinyera, 2023; Nambassa & Qodir, 2024). At the heart of this chasm lies a complex interplay of unrealistic expectations embedded in development proposals, the stark realism of governmental capacity and political economy constraints, and a fundamental lack of what this study terms "epistemic sensitization"—the ability of development actors to critically assess, understand, and respond to the actual conditions, knowledge systems, and contextual realities that shape implementation outcomes (Arinze, 2024; Lipsky et al., 2016; Nambassa & Purnomo, 2024). This study interrogates the mechanisms through which this chasm is produced and sustained, examining how development proposals are conceived, designed, and funded with assumptions that frequently diverge from Uganda's institutional realities, resource constraints, and sociocultural contexts. It explores how governmental actors navigate between the optimistic projections demanded by donors and the pragmatic limitations they encounter daily, often resulting in performative compliance rather than substantive implementation (Okoed, 2023; Usman & Bashir, 2018; Waiswa et al., 2021). Furthermore, it argues that bridging this chasm requires a fundamental shift in epistemic orientation—a

sensitization of all development stakeholders to the knowledge, evidence, and contextual understanding necessary for realistic, implementable, and sustainable development interventions. Through this examination, the study seeks to contribute both to theoretical understandings of development implementation gaps and to practical pathways for more grounded, context-sensitive development planning in Uganda and similar contexts across the Global South.

Background to the Study

Uganda has been a significant recipient of development assistance since its economic and political rehabilitation in the late 1980s, with billions of dollars channeled through government programs, non-governmental organizations, and multilateral institutions. The country has demonstrated commitment to development through the adoption of numerous policy frameworks, including the National Development Plans (NDP I, II, and III), Vision 2040, and sector-specific strategies aligned with international development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (Jawarneh & Al-Alawi, 2023; Matyana & Thusi, 2023; Ronald & Julius, 2023). Despite this institutional architecture and substantial resource inflows, the translation of development proposals into tangible outcomes remains frustratingly limited across multiple sectors. The literature on development implementation in Uganda reveals recurring patterns: infrastructure projects that experience significant delays and cost overruns, social service delivery programs that fail to reach intended beneficiaries effectively, and capacity-building initiatives that produce certificates but limited functional capacity. Scholars have variously attributed these challenges to corruption, weak institutional capacity, political interference, and donor-driven priorities that misalign with local needs (Anam et al., 2023; Hazemba & Halog, 2021; Julius & Milly, 2025). However, less attention has been paid to the fundamental epistemic dimensions of this implementation gap—the ways in which knowledge production, assumption-setting, and reality assessment shape the feasibility and outcomes of development interventions.

The concept of "governmental realism" captures the lived experience of Ugandan civil servants, local government officials, and implementing agencies who must navigate between the aspirational language of development proposals and the material, political, and institutional constraints of their operating environment (Tianah, 2024). This realism is often dismissed as cynicism or resistance to change, when it may actually represent crucial contextual knowledge that is systematically excluded from planning processes. Meanwhile, "epistemic sensitization"—the cultivation of critical awareness about what is known, how it is known, and what contextual knowledge is necessary for effective action—remains underdeveloped among development planners, donors, and even some governmental actors who have internalized externally-driven planning logics (Breakfast & Phago, 2019; Julius & Audrey, 2025; Julius & Gracious Kaazara, 2025). The Ugandan context provides a particularly rich site for examining these dynamics due to its position as a "donor darling" in certain periods, its relatively stable political system that nonetheless features significant governance challenges, and its status as a lower-middle-income country with persistent development gaps. Understanding the proposal-reality chasm in Uganda thus has implications not only for the country itself but for development practice more broadly in contexts where external financing, ambitious goal-setting, and complex implementation challenges intersect.

Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of development planning, substantial financial investments, and the proliferation of technically sound development proposals, Uganda continues to experience a significant gap between what is proposed in development documents and what is actually implemented and achieved. This proposal-reality chasm manifests in various forms: projects that are never fully implemented despite funding disbursement, interventions that achieve outputs but not intended outcomes, and reforms that exist in policy but not in practice (Fahadi & William, 2023; Gracious Kazaara & Julius, 2024; Sarker & Islam, 2018; Telleria, 2023). While existing analyses have identified various factors contributing to implementation failures—including corruption, capacity constraints, and political economy dynamics—they have insufficiently examined the epistemic dimensions of this problem. The persistent nature of this chasm suggests a more fundamental issue: development planning in Uganda frequently operates on assumptions, knowledge claims, and expectations that are disconnected from the actual conditions, capacities, and complexities of the implementation environment. Development proposals are often crafted to meet donor requirements, conform to international best practices, or fulfill political imperatives, rather than being grounded in rigorous assessment of what is realistically achievable given existing constraints. Meanwhile, the experiential knowledge and realistic assessments held by implementing government agencies are frequently marginalized in planning processes or expressed only informally, creating a systematic bias toward over-promising and under-delivering (Hickey & Bukenya, 2021; Obuku et al., 2021). This problem has significant consequences. Financially, it results in inefficient use of scarce development resources and contributes to Uganda's growing debt burden. Institutionally, it erodes trust between government agencies, donors, and citizens, and creates perverse incentives that reward proposal-writing skills over implementation capacity. Developmentally, it perpetuates the very gaps in infrastructure, service delivery, and human capital that development interventions are meant to address. Most fundamentally, it represents a failure of learning—the proposal-reality chasm persists precisely because the epistemic conditions necessary for realistic planning and adaptive implementation have not been cultivated. Addressing this problem requires not just better project management or reduced corruption, but a fundamental reorientation toward epistemic sensitization that enables all development actors to engage with evidence, context, and realistic expectation-setting in more grounded and honest ways.

Main Objective of the Study

To examine the proposal-reality chasm in Ugandan development by analyzing the disconnect between development proposals and implementation outcomes, understanding the role of unrealistic expectations and governmental realism, and exploring how epistemic sensitization can bridge this gap to enable more effective and sustainable development planning and implementation.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the nature and extent of the disconnect between development proposals and implementation outcomes across key sectors in Uganda
2. To analyze how governmental actors navigate between the idealistic projections demanded by development planning processes and the pragmatic constraints they encounter.
3. To explore the concept of epistemic sensitization and identify practical pathways through which development stakeholders—including government agencies, donors, civil society, and communities—can cultivate the contextual knowledge.

Research Questions

1. What are the characteristic patterns of divergence between development proposals and implementation outcomes in Uganda, and how are unrealistic expectations generated and sustained in the development planning process?
2. How do governmental actors experience and navigate the tension between proposal-level projections and implementation-level realities, and what happens to their contextual knowledge and realistic assessments within formal development planning processes?
3. What constitutes epistemic sensitization in the context of Ugandan development, and what institutional, methodological, and capacity-building interventions could enable development stakeholders to engage more realistically with contextual evidence and implementation constraints?

Methods.

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively examine the proposal-reality chasm in Ugandan development. The research was conducted across three phases between March and November 2024, focusing on five key sectors: health, education, infrastructure, agriculture, and local governance in six districts representing different regions of Uganda (Kampala, Wakiso, Gulu, Mbarara, Mbale, and Kasese). The study population comprised 450 respondents including government officials at national and district levels, development partners and donor representatives, civil society organization staff, and community members involved in or affected by development projects. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 384 respondents for the quantitative survey, ensuring proportional representation across sectors and administrative levels, while purposive sampling was employed to select 45 key informants for in-depth interviews and 12 focus group discussions with 8-10 participants each. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires measuring variables including: proposal quality and realism (assessed through proposal assessment scores, assumption validity ratings, and contextual alignment indices), implementation outcomes (measured through project completion rates, output achievement percentages, and outcome realization scores), governmental realism (captured through constraint awareness scales, contextual knowledge assessments, and implementation feasibility ratings), and epistemic sensitization levels (evaluated using evidence utilization scores, contextual sensitivity indices, and critical assessment capacity measures). Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, focus group discussions with implementing teams and beneficiary communities, document analysis of 60 development proposals and their corresponding implementation reports from 2015-2023, and non-participant observation of 15 planning and review meetings.

Data analysis proceeded through multiple stages: qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and documents were transcribed, coded using NVivo 12 software, and analyzed thematically to identify patterns in expectation-setting, implementation challenges, and knowledge utilization; quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 24, beginning with univariate analysis to describe the distribution of key variables (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for proposal realism scores, implementation outcome measures, governmental realism indicators, and epistemic sensitization levels across sectors and administrative levels), followed by bivariate analysis using Pearson correlation coefficients to examine relationships between proposal characteristics and implementation outcomes, Chi-square tests to assess associations between categorical variables such as sector type and implementation success levels, and independent samples t-tests and ANOVA to compare epistemic sensitization levels across different stakeholder groups and organizational contexts. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was then employed to test the hypothesized relationships between latent constructs, specifically examining how unrealistic expectations in proposals (measured through indicators of assumption validity, resource requirement realism, and timeline feasibility) predicted implementation outcomes (measured through completion rates, output achievement, and outcome realization), how governmental realism (measured through constraint awareness, contextual knowledge, and feasibility assessment capacity) moderated these relationships, and how epistemic sensitization (measured through evidence utilization, contextual sensitivity, and critical assessment capacity) mediated the relationship between proposal characteristics and outcomes while also directly predicting implementation success. The SEM model was assessed using multiple fit indices including Chi-square/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), with path coefficients examined for significance and effect sizes to determine the strength and direction of relationships between constructs (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023).

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred through convergent analysis, where statistical patterns were interpreted in light of qualitative insights about mechanisms and processes, and through complementarity analysis, where qualitative data explained anomalies or unexpected patterns in quantitative results. Ethical considerations were addressed through obtaining approval from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, securing informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality through anonymization of responses, and providing participants with the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. The study's validity was enhanced through methodological triangulation, member checking of qualitative findings with selected participants, pilot testing of instruments with 30 respondents prior to full data collection, and use of established scales adapted to the Ugandan context, while reliability was ensured through Cronbach's alpha testing of scale items (all exceeding 0.70), inter-rater reliability checks for qualitative coding (achieving Cohen's kappa > 0.85), and test-retest reliability assessment with a subsample of 40 respondents after two weeks.

Results.

Table 1: Univariate Analysis of Key Study Variables (N=384)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Proposal Characteristics						
Assumption Validity Score (0-100)	42.3	15.8	12	78	0.21	-0.45
Resource Requirement Realism (0-100)	38.7	17.2	8	82	0.34	-0.38
Timeline Feasibility Rating (0-100)	35.4	16.9	5	76	0.28	-0.52
Overall Proposal Realism Index (0-100)	38.8	14.6	10	75	0.25	-0.41
Implementation Outcomes						
Project Completion Rate (%)	54.6	22.4	15	95	-0.18	-0.67
Output Achievement Score (0-100)	58.3	20.7	18	92	-0.12	-0.58
Outcome Realization Score (0-100)	47.2	23.1	10	88	0.05	-0.82
Overall Implementation Success (0-100)	53.4	19.8	15	90	-0.08	-0.71
Governmental Realism						
Constraint Awareness Scale (1-5)	4.12	0.78	2.1	5.0	-0.89	0.67
Contextual Knowledge Score (0-100)	71.5	14.3	35	98	-0.45	-0.23
Feasibility Assessment Capacity (0-100)	68.9	15.7	28	96	-0.38	-0.31
Overall Governmental Realism (0-100)	70.2	13.8	32	97	-0.42	-0.26
Epistemic Sensitization						
Evidence Utilization Score (0-100)	52.7	18.9	15	89	0.02	-0.64
Contextual Sensitivity Index (0-100)	56.3	17.4	18	91	-0.08	-0.55
Critical Assessment Capacity (0-100)	49.8	19.6	12	87	0.11	-0.69
Overall Epistemic Sensitization (0-100)	52.9	17.2	15	89	0.01	-0.62

The univariate analysis revealed critically low scores across all proposal realism indicators, with the overall proposal realism index averaging only 38.8 (SD=14.6) on a 0-100 scale, suggesting that development proposals in Uganda were characterized by substantial unrealistic expectations. Timeline feasibility ratings were particularly problematic, with a mean of just 35.4 (SD=16.9), indicating that proposed implementation schedules were widely disconnected from realistic timeframes. Resource requirement realism scored similarly low at 38.7 (SD=17.2), demonstrating that proposals systematically underestimated the financial, human, and material resources necessary for successful implementation. The assumption validity scores (M=42.3, SD=15.8) further confirmed that foundational assumptions underpinning proposals were frequently invalid or unverified. The relatively low standard deviations across these measures, combined with near-zero skewness values (ranging from 0.21 to 0.34), indicated that unrealistic proposal characteristics were consistently distributed across the sample rather than concentrated in particular sectors or project types. The negative kurtosis values (ranging from -0.38 to -0.52) suggested flatter-than-normal distributions, meaning that both highly realistic and highly unrealistic proposals were relatively rare, with most clustering around the problematically low mean values.

Implementation outcomes painted a concerning picture of the proposal-reality chasm in action. Project completion rates averaged only 54.6% (SD=22.4), meaning that nearly half of initiated projects failed to reach completion, while outcome realization scores were even lower at 47.2 (SD=23.1), indicating that even when projects produced outputs, they frequently failed to achieve intended development outcomes. The output achievement scores (M=58.3, SD=20.7) were slightly higher but still indicated substantial implementation gaps. The overall implementation success index of 53.4 (SD=19.8) demonstrated that, on average, Ugandan development projects achieved barely half of their stated objectives. The negative skewness values for implementation variables (ranging from -0.18 to 0.05) suggested a slight tendency toward lower completion and achievement rates, while the negative kurtosis values (ranging from -0.58 to -0.82) indicated wide variation in outcomes, with substantial numbers of both complete failures and relative successes. In stark contrast, governmental realism scores were notably high, with the overall index at 70.2 (SD=13.8), constraint awareness at 4.12 on a 5-point scale (SD=0.78), and contextual knowledge at 71.5 (SD=14.3). The strongly negative skewness for constraint awareness (-0.89) indicated that most governmental actors possessed high awareness of implementation

constraints, yet this knowledge appeared systematically excluded from formal planning processes, as evidenced by the low proposal realism scores. Epistemic sensitization levels were moderate, averaging 52.9 (SD=17.2), suggesting considerable room for improvement in evidence utilization (M=52.7, SD=18.9), contextual sensitivity (M=56.3, SD=17.4), and critical assessment capacity (M=49.8, SD=19.6). The near-zero skewness and negative kurtosis across epistemic sensitization measures indicated wide variation in these capacities across the sample, with no clear concentration at either high or low levels.

These findings provided compelling empirical evidence for the existence and magnitude of the proposal-reality chasm in Ugandan development. The dramatic discrepancy between governmental realism scores (M=70.2) and proposal realism scores (M=38.8) represented a 31.4-point gap that quantitatively captured the disconnect between what implementing actors knew to be feasible and what was formally proposed and funded. This gap suggested a systematic failure in knowledge translation, where the experiential expertise and contextual understanding of governmental actors was not effectively incorporated into development planning documents. The consistently low proposal realism scores across all three component measures (assumptions, resources, and timelines) indicated that unrealistic expectations were not random errors but rather structural features of the development planning process in Uganda. This structural embedding of unrealism likely reflected multiple intersecting dynamics: donor requirements that prioritized ambitious targets and transformative rhetoric over realistic assessment, political pressures that demanded optimistic projections regardless of feasibility, and proposal development processes that incentivized technical sophistication and international best practice alignment over contextual grounding and honest constraint acknowledgment.

The moderate epistemic sensitization scores (M=52.9) occupied a middle position between the high governmental realism and low proposal realism, suggesting that while governmental actors possessed contextual knowledge, they lacked the institutional authority, methodological tools, or organizational cultures necessary to effectively assert this knowledge during planning processes. The slightly higher scores for contextual sensitivity (M=56.3) compared to evidence utilization (M=52.7) and critical assessment capacity (M=49.8) suggested that stakeholders recognized the importance of context but struggled to systematically incorporate contextual evidence into decision-making or to critically evaluate the feasibility of proposed interventions. The implementation outcome data provided stark confirmation of the consequences of unrealistic planning, with overall implementation success at only 53.4% despite presumably substantial investments of financial and human resources. The particularly low outcome realization scores (M=47.2) compared to output achievement scores (M=58.3) suggested that even when projects managed to produce deliverables, these outputs frequently failed to generate intended development impacts, possibly because the theories of change underpinning proposals were themselves unrealistic or insufficiently grounded in contextual understanding of how change actually occurs in Ugandan settings. The wide variation in implementation outcomes (as evidenced by standard deviations exceeding 20 points) indicated that while systemic factors created general tendencies toward implementation failure, specific project characteristics, sectoral contexts, or implementation approaches significantly influenced whether particular projects succeeded or failed, pointing to the importance of disaggregated analysis to identify success factors and failure modes.

Table 2: Bivariate Analysis - Correlations and Group Comparisons

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Proposal Realism Index	1					
2. Implementation Success	.627**	1				
3. Governmental Realism	.312**	.445**	1			
4. Epistemic Sensitization	.558**	.682**	.523**	1		
5. Constraint Awareness	.284**	.398**	.891**	.487**	1	
6. Evidence Utilization	.512**	.645**	.476**	.924**	.441**	1

Note: ** $p < .01$

Chi-square Tests: Implementation Success by Categorical Variables

Variable	Categories	Implementation Success Level	χ^2	df	p-value	Cramer's V
Sector Type	Health, Education, Infrastructure, Agriculture, Governance	Low (n=128), Medium (n=151), High (n=105)	47.32	8	<.001	.248
Administrative Level	National, District, Sub-county	Low (n=128), Medium (n=151), High (n=105)	34.58	4	<.001	.212
Donor Type	Multilateral, Bilateral, Government-funded	Low (n=128), Medium (n=151), High (n=105)	28.74	4	<.001	.193
Stakeholder Involvement	Low, Medium, High	Low (n=128), Medium (n=151), High (n=105)	52.67	4	<.001	.261

ANOVA Results: Epistemic Sensitization by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	n	Mean	SD	F	df	p-value	η^2
Government Officials (National)	89	48.3	16.8	18.42	4, 379	<.001	.163
Government Officials (District)	112	51.7	15.9				

Donor Representatives	67	45.2	18.4				
Civil Society Organizations	78	58.9	16.2				
Community Representatives	38	61.4	17.6				

Post-hoc Tukey HSD: Community Representatives and CSOs scored significantly higher than Government Officials (National) and Donor Representatives ($p < .01$)

The correlation analysis revealed strong and highly significant positive relationships between proposal realism and implementation success ($r=.627$, $p<.01$), demonstrating that more realistic proposals were substantially more likely to achieve their stated objectives. This large effect size provided quantitative validation of the study's central thesis: the proposal-reality chasm directly undermined implementation effectiveness. The correlation between epistemic sensitization and implementation success was even stronger ($r=.682$, $p<.01$), suggesting that stakeholder capacity to engage with evidence, assess context, and think critically about feasibility was the most powerful predictor of implementation outcomes among the variables measured. Notably, governmental realism showed a moderate positive correlation with implementation success ($r=.445$, $p<.01$), but this relationship was substantially weaker than that of epistemic sensitization, indicating that merely possessing contextual knowledge and constraint awareness was insufficient—stakeholders also needed the epistemic capacity to effectively deploy this knowledge in planning and decision-making processes. The correlation between proposal realism and governmental realism was significant but relatively weak ($r=.312$, $p<.01$), providing further statistical evidence of the disconnect between what governmental actors knew to be realistic and what appeared in formal proposals. The strong correlation between governmental realism and constraint awareness ($r=.891$, $p<.01$) confirmed that the construct of governmental realism was indeed closely tied to awareness of implementation constraints, while the similarly strong correlation between epistemic sensitization and evidence utilization ($r=.924$, $p<.01$) validated the measurement of epistemic sensitization through evidence engagement practices.

The chi-square analyses demonstrated that implementation success varied significantly across multiple categorical dimensions. Sector type showed a significant association with implementation success ($\chi^2=47.32$, $p<.001$, Cramer's $V=.248$), with post-hoc examination of standardized residuals revealing that health and education sectors had disproportionately higher representation in the low implementation success category, while agriculture and local governance projects were overrepresented in medium and high success categories. This sectoral variation suggested that the proposal-reality chasm manifested differently across domains, possibly reflecting different degrees of technical complexity, political sensitivity, or donor involvement patterns. Administrative level also significantly predicted implementation success ($\chi^2=34.58$, $p<.001$, Cramer's $V=.212$), with national-level projects showing higher rates of low implementation success compared to district and sub-county projects, which tended toward medium and high success. This pattern suggested that proximity to implementation contexts and reduced bureaucratic complexity at lower administrative levels partially offset other resource and capacity constraints. Donor type demonstrated significant associations with outcomes ($\chi^2=28.74$, $p<.001$, Cramer's $V=.193$), with multilateral donor-funded projects showing the highest concentration in the low success category, bilateral projects distributed more evenly, and government-funded projects skewing toward medium success levels, possibly reflecting differences in oversight intensity, reporting requirements, or flexibility for adaptive implementation. Most notably, stakeholder involvement level showed the strongest association with implementation success ($\chi^2=52.67$, $p<.001$, Cramer's $V=.261$), with high stakeholder involvement projects dramatically overrepresented in the high success category, suggesting that participatory planning and implementation processes helped bridge the proposal-reality chasm by incorporating diverse knowledge sources and enabling adaptive responses to emerging challenges.

The ANOVA results revealed significant differences in epistemic sensitization across stakeholder groups ($F(4,379)=18.42$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.163$), with a medium-to-large effect size indicating that stakeholder identity substantially influenced epistemic capacities. Community representatives demonstrated the highest epistemic sensitization ($M=61.4$, $SD=17.6$), followed closely by civil society organizations ($M=58.9$, $SD=16.2$), while donor representatives exhibited the lowest scores ($M=45.2$, $SD=18.4$), even lower than national government officials ($M=48.3$, $SD=16.8$). This finding was particularly striking and counterintuitive given that donor representatives typically possessed higher educational credentials and greater access to international expertise and evidence databases. The pattern suggested that epistemic sensitization was not primarily a function of technical training or access to global knowledge, but rather reflected groundedness in local contexts, engagement with implementation realities, and organizational cultures that valued experiential learning and contextual adaptation. District government officials scored higher ($M=51.7$, $SD=15.9$) than their national-level counterparts, further supporting the interpretation that proximity to implementation contexts enhanced epistemic capacities. The post-hoc Tukey tests confirmed that community representatives and CSO staff possessed significantly higher epistemic sensitization than both national government officials and donor representatives ($p<.01$), while no significant differences existed between government levels or between CSOs and community representatives, suggesting a fundamental divide between implementation-proximate actors (communities, CSOs, district officials) and planning-dominant actors (donors, national officials) in their epistemic orientations toward development work.

The bivariate analyses provided crucial evidence regarding the mechanisms through which the proposal-reality chasm influenced development outcomes in Uganda. The strong correlation between proposal realism and implementation success ($r=.627$) demonstrated that unrealistic proposals did not simply reflect optimistic aspirations but actively undermined implementation effectiveness, likely through multiple pathways: unrealistic timelines created rushed implementation that compromised quality;

unrealistic resource estimates led to underfunding of critical activities; and invalid assumptions meant that project logics were fundamentally flawed from inception. However, the even stronger correlation between epistemic sensitization and implementation success (r=.682) suggested that the solution to the proposal-reality chasm lay not simply in making proposals more conservative or pessimistic, but in fundamentally enhancing the epistemic capacities of development actors. Epistemic sensitization appeared to enable stakeholders to navigate the inherent uncertainties of development work, to recognize when proposals diverged from realistic expectations, to adapt implementation strategies when confronted with unexpected constraints, and to learn from implementation experiences in ways that informed subsequent planning cycles. The moderate correlation between governmental realism and epistemic sensitization (r=.523) indicated that while these constructs were related—both involved engagement with contextual realities—they were distinct phenomena: governmental realism primarily captured constraint awareness and feasibility assessment, while epistemic sensitization additionally encompassed evidence utilization, critical thinking, and reflexive learning capacities.

The finding that epistemic sensitization was highest among community representatives and civil society organizations, rather than among donor representatives and national government officials who typically dominated proposal development processes, illuminated a fundamental power-knowledge paradox in Ugandan development. Those stakeholders with the least formal authority in development planning possessed the greatest epistemic capacities for realistic assessment and contextual engagement, while those stakeholders with the most power to shape proposals exhibited the weakest epistemic sensitization. This inversion helped explain how unrealistic proposals persisted despite high governmental realism: the knowledge held by implementing actors and communities was systematically marginalized in favor of the perspectives of donors and national policymakers whose distance from implementation contexts reduced their epistemic groundedness. The sectoral variations in implementation success suggested that the proposal-reality chasm was not uniformly distributed but reflected sector-specific political economies, with health and education—heavily donor-influenced sectors with complex service delivery chains and strong political visibility—experiencing the widest chasms, while agriculture and local governance—sectors with more direct implementation pathways and stronger community engagement traditions—achieved relatively better alignment between proposals and outcomes. The finding that stakeholder involvement level showed the strongest association with implementation success (Cramer's V=.261) suggested a potential intervention pathway: processes that brought together diverse stakeholders, particularly those that genuinely incorporated the perspectives of implementation-proximate actors, could help bridge epistemic divides and produce more realistic, implementable plans. However, the chi-square analysis alone could not determine whether stakeholder involvement caused improved outcomes or whether certain types of projects (perhaps inherently more feasible ones) attracted higher stakeholder engagement, pointing to the need for the more sophisticated causal modeling provided by the structural equation analysis.

Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling Results

Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Acceptable Threshold	Interpretation
χ^2/df	2.847	< 3.0	Acceptable
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	0.941	> 0.90	Good fit
TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index)	0.928	> 0.90	Good fit
RMSEA	0.069	< 0.08	Acceptable
SRMR	0.054	< 0.08	Good fit

Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesized Path	Standardized β	SE	CR	p-value	Result
Direct Effects					
Proposal Realism → Implementation Success	.342**	.048	7.125	<.001	Supported
Governmental Realism → Implementation Success	.187**	.052	3.596	<.001	Supported
Epistemic Sensitization → Implementation Success	.398**	.051	7.804	<.001	Supported
Unrealistic Expectations → Proposal Realism	-.624**	.041	-15.220	<.001	Supported
Mediation Effects					
Unrealistic Expectations → Epistemic Sensitization → Implementation Success	-.156**	.038	-4.105	<.001	Supported
Governmental Realism → Epistemic Sensitization → Implementation Success	.214**	.044	4.864	<.001	Supported
Moderation Effect					
Governmental Realism × Proposal Realism → Implementation Success	.168*	.067	2.507	.012	Supported
Indirect Effects (Total)					
Unrealistic Expectations → Implementation Success (via all paths)	-.368**	.052	-7.077	<.001	Supported

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

Variance Explained (R^2)

Endogenous Variable	R^2	Interpretation
Proposal Realism	.389	38.9% variance explained by unrealistic expectations
Epistemic Sensitization	.467	46.7% variance explained by governmental realism and unrealistic expectations
Implementation Success	.612	61.2% variance explained by all predictors in the model

The structural equation model demonstrated excellent overall fit to the data, with all fit indices meeting or exceeding conventional acceptability thresholds. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio of 2.847 fell comfortably below the 3.0 threshold, indicating that the hypothesized model adequately represented the covariance structure in the observed data. The CFI (0.941) and TLI (0.928) both exceeded the 0.90 criterion for good fit, confirming that the model explained substantially more variance than a baseline null model. The RMSEA of 0.069 was within the acceptable range below 0.08, suggesting reasonable approximation error, while the SRMR of 0.054 indicated minimal discrepancy between observed and model-implied correlations. These fit statistics collectively validated the theoretical framework underlying the study, confirming that the relationships among unrealistic expectations, proposal realism, governmental realism, epistemic sensitization, and implementation success operated in the hypothesized configuration. The model's ability to explain 61.2% of the variance in implementation success (R^2=.612) represented a large effect size by Cohen's standards and demonstrated that the constructs examined in this study captured the majority of systematic variation in development outcomes, leaving approximately 39% of variance attributable to factors not included in the model such as corruption, external shocks, or measurement error.

The path coefficients revealed a complex web of relationships that illuminated how the proposal-reality chasm emerged and influenced outcomes. Unrealistic expectations exerted a strong negative effect on proposal realism (β=-.624, p<.001), confirming that when development planning processes were characterized by overly ambitious goals, insufficient constraint acknowledgment, or invalid assumptions, the resulting proposals systematically diverged from realistic assessments of what could be achieved. This large standardized coefficient indicated that unrealistic expectations were the dominant predictor of proposal quality, explaining 38.9% of variance in proposal realism. Among the direct predictors of implementation success, epistemic sensitization showed the strongest effect (β=.398, p<.001), followed by proposal realism (β=.342, p<.001), with governmental realism demonstrating a smaller but still significant direct effect (β=.187, p<.001). These relative magnitudes confirmed the interpretation from bivariate analyses that epistemic sensitization was the most powerful driver of implementation effectiveness. The significant mediation effect of epistemic sensitization on the relationship between unrealistic expectations and implementation success (β=-.156, p<.001) demonstrated that unrealistic expectations harmed outcomes not only through producing unrealistic proposals but also through undermining the epistemic capacities necessary for effective implementation—possibly because environments dominated by unrealistic expectations discouraged evidence-based thinking, realistic assessment, and honest feedback about implementation challenges. The positive mediation effect through which governmental realism influenced implementation success via epistemic sensitization (β=.214, p<.001) suggested that constraint awareness and contextual knowledge among governmental actors supported the development of broader epistemic capacities, which in turn enhanced outcomes.

The significant moderation effect (β=.168, p=.012) revealed that governmental realism strengthened the relationship between proposal realism and implementation success, meaning that when governmental actors possessed high constraint awareness and contextual knowledge, realistic proposals translated more effectively into successful implementation, while when governmental realism was low, even relatively realistic proposals struggled to achieve their objectives. This interaction effect highlighted the importance of implementation capacity and contextual expertise beyond proposal design. The total indirect effect of unrealistic expectations on implementation success (β=-.368, p<.001) demonstrated that even after accounting for direct effects, unrealistic expectations exerted substantial negative influence through mediating pathways, with the total effect (direct plus indirect) representing a large negative impact on development outcomes. The finding that epistemic sensitization explained 46.7% of its variance through governmental realism and exposure to unrealistic expectations suggested that epistemic capacities were not simply individual attributes but were shaped by organizational contexts and planning environments, with supportive conditions (high governmental realism, fewer unrealistic pressures) fostering epistemic development, while hostile conditions (disconnect between knowledge and proposals, pressure for optimistic projections) undermining it.

The structural equation modeling provided the most comprehensive and theoretically sophisticated evidence for the study's central arguments about the proposal-reality chasm in Ugandan development. The model validated the conceptual framework by demonstrating that unrealistic expectations, proposal realism, governmental realism, and epistemic sensitization operated as distinct but interrelated constructs that collectively explained the majority of variance in implementation outcomes. The finding that epistemic sensitization was the strongest direct predictor of implementation success (β=.398) had profound implications for development practice: improving outcomes required not simply better technical proposal writing or more honest constraint acknowledgment, but fundamental cultivation of epistemic capacities—the ability to critically engage with evidence, to question

assumptions, to incorporate contextual knowledge, and to adapt based on learning. This suggested that development effectiveness interventions should prioritize capacity building in critical thinking, evidence utilization, and reflexive practice over traditional training in project management tools or sectoral technical knowledge, though these remained important. The strong negative effect of unrealistic expectations on proposal realism (β=-.624) quantified the mechanism through which development planning processes systematically produced the proposal-reality chasm: when donors, politicians, or development agencies imposed expectations for transformative impacts, ambitious targets, or adherence to best practice models regardless of contextual feasibility, the resulting proposals necessarily diverged from realistic assessment of achievable outcomes.

The mediation analyses revealed that the proposal-reality chasm was not simply a problem of poor proposal design but reflected deeper epistemic dysfunctions in development systems. The negative mediation through epistemic sensitization (β=-.156) demonstrated that unrealistic expectations created environments hostile to honest assessment, critical thinking, and evidence-based planning, effectively corroding the epistemic cultures necessary for realistic planning and adaptive implementation. This finding suggested that reform efforts focused solely on improving proposal quality without addressing the underlying expectation-setting dynamics and epistemic environments would likely fail, as the systemic pressures generating unrealistic proposals would persist and undermine even well-intentioned planning improvements. The moderation effect through which governmental realism enhanced the proposal-to-implementation relationship (β=.168) indicated that contextual knowledge and constraint awareness among implementing actors functioned as critical implementation capacities that determined whether even realistic proposals succeeded—highlighting that the proposal-reality chasm had two sides: unrealistic proposals certainly undermined implementation, but even realistic proposals required implementation environments characterized by contextual expertise and adaptive capacity. The relatively modest R^2 for proposal realism (38.9%) suggested that while unrealistic expectations were the dominant influence on proposal quality, other factors such as institutional incentives, donor requirements, political pressures, or technical capacity also shaped proposals, pointing to the multifaceted nature of the proposal development process. The high R^2 for implementation success (61.2%) demonstrated that the model's constructs captured most systematic variation in outcomes, validating the study's theoretical focus while acknowledging that contextual factors, implementation shocks, and stochastic variation accounted for the remaining variance. Collectively, these findings pointed toward a theory of development implementation failure centered on epistemic disconnection: when development systems separated knowledge from decision-making, marginalized contextual expertise, and imposed unrealistic expectations that discouraged honest assessment, they systematically produced proposals disconnected from implementation realities and undermined the epistemic capacities necessary for adaptive, effective development practice.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively examined the proposal-reality chasm in Ugandan development through a mixed-methods investigation that integrated quantitative measurement of 384 stakeholders across five sectors with qualitative insights from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The findings provided compelling empirical evidence that development proposals in Uganda were systematically characterized by unrealistic expectations, with proposal realism scores averaging only 38.8 out of 100, while implementation success rates hovered around 53.4%, confirming the existence of a substantial gap between what was proposed and what was achieved. The research established that this chasm was not simply a matter of poor technical design or inadequate resources, but reflected deeper epistemic dysfunctions in development planning systems. The structural equation modeling demonstrated that unrealistic expectations exerted strong negative effects on both proposal quality (β=-.624) and, through mediation pathways, on implementation outcomes (total effect β=-.368), while epistemic sensitization emerged as the most powerful predictor of implementation success (β=.398), surpassing even proposal realism in its influence. Critically, the study revealed a troubling paradox: governmental actors possessed high constraint awareness and contextual knowledge (M=70.2), yet this "governmental realism" was systematically excluded from formal proposals, resulting in a 31.4-point gap between what implementers knew to be feasible and what planning documents promised. The finding that community representatives and civil society organizations demonstrated significantly higher epistemic sensitization than donor representatives and national government officials illuminated a power-knowledge inversion whereby those stakeholders most distant from implementation contexts wielded the most influence over proposal development, while those closest to implementation realities—and possessing the epistemic capacities most conducive to realistic planning—were marginalized in decision-making processes. The research demonstrated that bridging the proposal-reality chasm required not merely technical improvements in proposal writing or incremental capacity building, but fundamental transformation of development planning cultures to prioritize epistemic sensitization: cultivating organizational and systemic capacities for critical evidence engagement, honest constraint acknowledgment, contextual knowledge incorporation, and reflexive learning from implementation experience. By quantifying the magnitude of the chasm, identifying its epistemic roots, and demonstrating the centrality of epistemic sensitization to development effectiveness, this study contributed both theoretical advances in understanding implementation gaps and practical pathways toward more grounded, realistic, and ultimately more successful development practice in Uganda and comparable contexts across the Global South where similar dynamics of unrealistic expectation-setting, knowledge marginalization, and implementation failure persistently undermine development aspirations.

Recommendations

Institutionalize Epistemic Sensitization in Development Planning Processes: Development agencies, government ministries, and donor organizations should establish mandatory epistemic sensitization training and assessment protocols for all personnel involved in proposal development, appraisal, and approval. This should include structured capacity building in evidence-based planning,

critical assumption testing, contextual analysis methodologies, and reflexive practice, with particular emphasis on creating organizational cultures that reward honest constraint acknowledgment and realistic feasibility assessment rather than optimistic projection and ambitious target-setting.

Reform Donor Requirements and Incentive Structures to Prioritize Realism Over Ambition: International donors, multilateral agencies, and development financing institutions should fundamentally revise proposal requirements, approval criteria, and performance metrics to explicitly value realistic planning, honest constraint acknowledgment, and adaptive implementation over ambitious targets, transformative rhetoric, and adherence to international best practices that may be contextually inappropriate.

Establish National Development Realism Observatory and Epistemic Quality Assurance Mechanisms: The Government of Uganda should establish an independent Development Realism Observatory tasked with systematically tracking proposal-implementation gaps across sectors, conducting epistemic quality assessments of major development proposals, and publishing annual reports on the state of planning realism and epistemic sensitization in Ugandan development. This observatory should develop and maintain standardized instruments for measuring proposal realism, governmental realism, and epistemic sensitization, while providing technical assistance to ministries and implementing agencies in applying these tools during planning cycles.

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