

Determinants of Regional Development Planning in Emerging Regions: Evidence from Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State, Northwestern Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article examines the development planning process in the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State of Ethiopia and identifies factors influencing its effectiveness. A mixed-methods approach was employed, with data collected from 365 civil servants through surveys and 19 key informant interviews. Multistage stratified random sampling ensured representation across the regional, zonal, and woreda levels. The quantitative data were analysed using binary logistic regression, while the qualitative data were analysed thematically. The results revealed weaknesses such as a top-down approach, weak situational analysis, poor monitoring, and exaggerated reporting. The determinants of planning failure, measured as odds ratios, included infrastructure inaccessibility (OR = 4.4), inadequate financial allocation (OR = 6.8), lack of stakeholder participation (OR = 8.8), political instability (OR = 2.6), and weak innovative capacity (OR = 6.3). The study calls for a pragmatic planning approach that emphasises strong local stakeholder involvement to improve regional development planning.

Keywords

regional development, planning, determinants, mixed method

Introduction

The complexity of regional planning requires acknowledging that knowledge is shaped by existing situations that underscore practical implications (Hoch, 2002; Jon, 2020). That is why regional development planning has been driven by the need to address economic decline, low industrial development, and social and environmental issues (Beauregard, 2020; Glasson and Marshall, 2007). It is a tool for social and economic growth (Beauregard, 2020) as it informs decision-makers (Adams, 2005; Glasson and Marshall, 2007). Studies indicate that more than 80% of the world's population lives in countries with regional development plans. In 2018, 134 nations had regional development plans (Chimhowu, Hulme and Munro, 2019).

Most of the regional planning problems in developing countries remain unsolved (UNCRD, 2013; Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2017). These countries suffer from inequality due to unclear strategies for regional development (Ragheb and EL-Ashmawy, 2021) and political interference (Krumolz and Hexter, 2018). Comparative research across ten developing countries

confirms that political stability and institutional capacity critically shape regional development outcomes (Tiwari et al., 2025). In Turkey, for instance, regional development programmes have been terminated and the power of local authorities in regional development planning reduced (Akwei, Damoah and Amankway-Amoah, 2020; Gursoy and Edelman, 2017). Political constraints not only present a hurdle to regional development planning but also to its evaluation, as elected officials are often the sole decision-makers (Laurian et al., 2010). Studies of 169 countries over the period from 1960 to 2004 indicate that political instability reduces economic growth (Agmasie, 2022; Aisen and Veiga, 2011). It also threatens development by disrupting public services and weakening social cohesion (Smith, 2024). In the Global North, even stable regions such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway face challenges of remoteness, ageing populations, and workforce shortages despite strong innovation performance (OECD, 2025).

Limited financial resources for accessing data, along with limited experience, contribute to weak planning capacity and place pressure on planning processes (OECD, 2021). The availability of resources, as well as their utilisation within a region, influences regional development planning (Singh et al., 2021). Evidence indicates that southern African countries face an acute shortage of finance in formulating regional development plans (Chirisa, Odera and Gambe, 2024). Inadequate funding is among the most important challenges confronting regional institutions and hinders regional development planning in Niger (Baadom, Amakiri-Whyte and Aselemi, 2016). Conversely, targeted development financing in southern Madagascar has strengthened local governance and community resilience through integrated development plans, reaching 2.3 million beneficiaries (World Bank, 2025).

The dysfunctional institutions, inadequate capabilities, limited resource allocation, excessive reliance on outside resources, and lack of political stability have disrupted regional development planning, especially in Africa (UNECA, 2016). For example, due to poor planning, inadequate monitoring (Damoah, 2015), and very low stakeholder participation (Vordzorgbe and Caiquo, 2001), development projects frequently fail in Ghana. Similar factors have also been identified in Nigeria as challenges to regional development planning (Eja and Ramegowda, 2020). This suggests that unresolved regional planning issues in developing countries significantly hinder effective regional development planning. These problems arise from political interference, inadequate financial resources, and weak planning capacity. A further contributing factor is the mismatch of public policies, as stated by Steinhall et al. (2023): 'Wicked problems require integrated solutions, but public policies are still fragmented and do not match local conditions.'

In the Global North, top-down green transition policies do not always match local complexities. According to Traill and Cumbers (2025), sustainability policies in the EU prioritise the interests of corporate actors over local actors, drawing on the Latin American post-development discourse of *buen vivir* to promote place-based approaches to living well in harmony with local contexts.

Ethiopia has implemented various regional development plans to encourage sustainable economic growth and reduce poverty (Gebre-Egziabhere, 2000; National Planning Commission, 2016). Despite some gains from these development plans, economic growth has not translated into rapid structural transformation, and inequality increased between 2000 and 2016 (African Development Bank Group [ADBG], 2022). Limited stakeholder participation, a lack of clarity on the adopted planning approaches and strategies, and the absence of inter-sectoral linkage (Wazza, 2022; ADBG, 2022; Ybabe, 2019) have challenged the development planning in the country. This shows that, like other African countries, regional development planning in Ethiopia has faced challenges.

The Italian experience in managing European Regional Development Fund and National Recovery and Resilience Plan funds together offers important lessons on how multi-level governance can be used to address regional disparities. Buonaiuto (2023) emphasises that complementarity between financial instruments is essential to maximise the effectiveness of interventions, particularly in reducing intra-regional territorial disparities, as illustrated in a comparative analysis of Campania and Tuscany.

Since 2003, Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS) has prepared various regional development plans in response to national development initiatives. Despite its rich natural resources, the region lags behind the national average and remains highly dependent on agriculture (Gebre-Egziabhere, 2018). This disparity reflects a highly uneven economic structure. While the national

economy is relatively diversified, Benishangul-Gumuz remains largely agrarian in nature. Agriculture is the leading driver of the region's economic activity, contributing 60.82% of output, more than double the national average of 24%. In contrast, the service sector accounts for only 9.66% of the regional economy, compared with 40.8% nationally (Planning and Development Commission, 2021; Bureau of Finance and Economic Development [BoFED], 2021). This uneven structure, despite decades of planning efforts, is one of the main indicators of their limited effectiveness.

The region has the fewest manufacturing industries among the country's regional states, accounting for a 0.08% share (Yohannes, Matebu and Asrat, 2023). Despite the presence of regional development plans in the region for more than two decades, it is characterised by a low industrial and service sector share, with agricultural dominance. This raises questions regarding the effectiveness of development planning.

This research is based on pragmatic planning theory, which prioritises the integration of rational and communicative approaches in addressing the complexity of regional development planning (Guyadeen and Seasons, 2016b; Stefanović, Josimović and Hristić, 2018). Pragmatic planning calls for holistic situational analysis, stakeholder participation, and adaptive monitoring and evaluation systems (Beauregard, 2020; Stefanović, Josimović and Hristić, 2018). As Traill and Cumbers (2025) argue, in line with the Latin American post-development approach, development should be centred on the recognition and value of local knowledge and practice. Furthermore, wicked problems in regional development require policy alignment and systems thinking to avoid fragmented or 'patchwork' approaches (Steinhall et al., 2023).

This theoretical framework is particularly applicable to BGRS, where the interaction of political, economic, and social actors requires flexible and inclusive planning. In this study, pragmatic planning theory provides the analytical lens to examine planning in BGRS. We operationalise its pillars – holistic situational analysis, stakeholder participation, and adaptive monitoring – as measurable variables. This framework provides a way to test why top-down, non-participatory planning fails in contexts such as BGRS, where ethnic diversity, infrastructure gaps, and political volatility necessitate a more integrative approach consistent with pragmatic planning theory.

Previous studies by Gebre-Egziabhere (2018; 2000) note that Ethiopia's development planning focus shifted from national to inter- and intra-regional practices since 1991. Research by Leta (2017), Muluk, Danar and Kurniasih (2019) and Tegenu (2019) has assessed regional development planning and community engagement. Challenges in the Afar Region, such as health infrastructure and uneven budget distribution among *woredas*, are highlighted by EEA (2021). UNECA (2016) conducted a broad study on inclusive planning in Africa without a specific regional focus. There appears to be a gap in understanding the processes involved in preparing development plans and the factors determining them at the regional level. Current regional planning studies rely primarily on aggregate country-level data or secondary data (UNECA, 2016) instead of examining sub-national planning processes and local issues such as political interference, resource availability, and institutional capacity (Singh et al., 2021; Krumolz and Hexter, 2018). Although some studies have addressed related issues (e.g. EEA, 2021), there is still a limited in-depth understanding of plan formulation challenges in specific regions.

This study bridges these knowledge gaps by drawing on pragmatic planning theory (Beauregard, 2020; Stefanović, Josimović and Hristić, 2018) in the context of BGRS, using a mixed methods approach. We combine critical analysis with qualitative primary data (stakeholder surveys and interviews) to examine planning processes and identify local determinants of effectiveness. This provides new empirical evidence on planning dysfunction in under-studied African contexts and further refines the application of pragmatic planning theory in developing regions.

Despite existing studies on regional development planning, gaps remain in applying pragmatic planning theory to the political, financial, and institutional context of BGRS. This study thus aims to examine the extent to which regional development planning has been successful, and the major determining factors influencing it in BGRS. The findings will directly influence regional policymakers by identifying priority areas for reform (e.g. stakeholder engagement and infrastructural investment), inform federal policy on resource allocation, and support needs-responsive development, ultimately contributing to reduced inequalities and accelerated poverty alleviation in Ethiopia's less developed regions.

Methodology

Study Area Description

BGRS is one of Ethiopia's western states (Fig. 1), covering an area of 50,699 sq. km. The region has a population of 1,219,000, of which 50.78% are male and 49.22% are female, according to the 2022 population projection. It has annual temperatures from 23°C to 25°C in the lowlands and from 10°C to 15°C in the highlands, with most rainfall occurring in June, July, and August.

BGRS has considerable natural resources, including minerals and wildlife, as well as significant hydrological potential, such as the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). It also has large areas of unused land suitable for mechanised agriculture and irrigation, along with notable gold deposits across its administrative zones (BoFED, 2022).

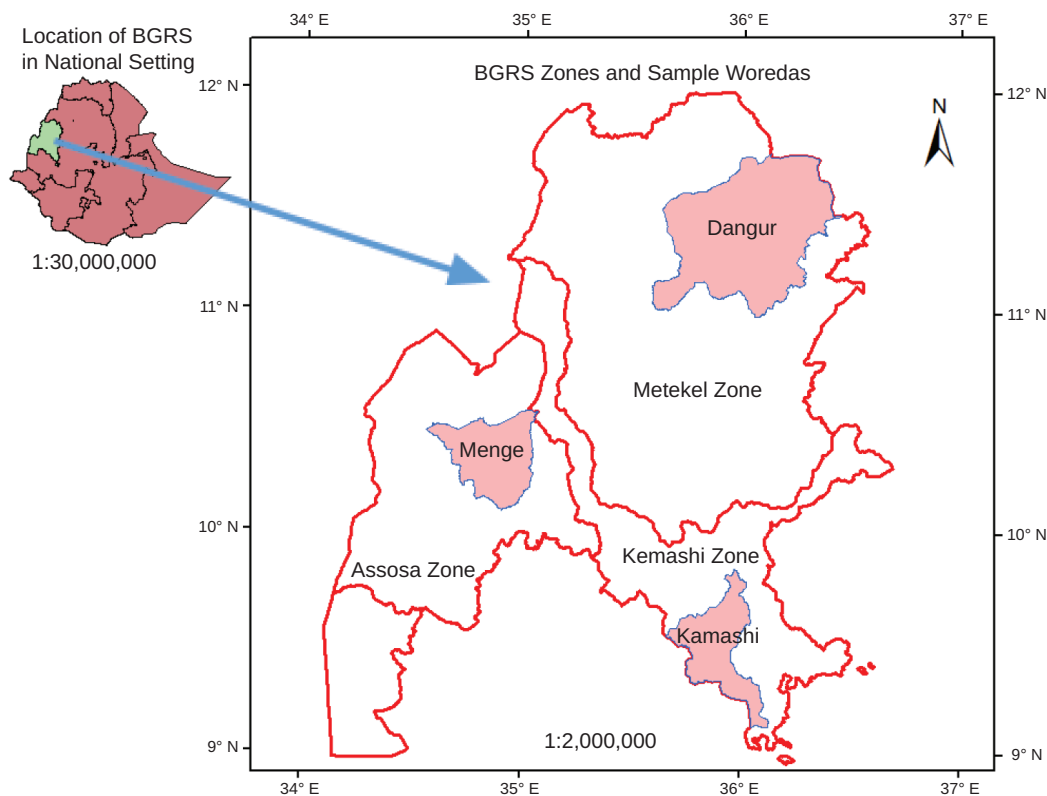


Fig. 1. Study area

Source: Ethio-GIS

The region includes three zones¹, 21 woredas², 1 special woreda, three town administrations, and 535 *kebeles*³. According to the 2021 civil service report, there were 35,272 civil servants, of which Assosa, Metekel, and Kemash zones accounted for 12,187, 12,713, and 4,936, respectively. The regional bureaus account for 4,031 civil servants, and 1,412 civil servants are employed in Assosa town.

BGRS, which is rich in natural and human resources, has the potential to become a significant contributor to national development (BoFED, 2022). However, this diversity has also contributed to conflicts, political instability, and resource exploitation, particularly in relation to the construction of the GERD on the Abay River (Adugna and Debala, 2023). Given the unique characteristics of the region, it requires a development plan that is both theoretically and empirically grounded and aligned with its specific local context.

¹ A zone is the largest administrative area next below the BGRS. The zones are Metekel, Assosa, and Kemashi zones.

² A woreda is an administrative district below the zone level.

³ A kebele is the smallest administrative unit in the region, below the woreda level.

Methods

The study used a mixed-method approach with a concurrent design to integrate quantitative and qualitative methods (Al-ababneh, 2020; Dawadi, Shrestha and Giri, 2021). The data were obtained from primary sources through questionnaire surveys and interviews. The study used Likert-scale questionnaires, which were distributed to civil servants in regional bureaus, Metekel Zone, Dangure Woreda, and Gilgele Beless Town Administration. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with officials and experts at each government level to collect qualitative data. Nineteen KII were conducted using pre-determined open-ended interview questions. The number of interviewees was determined based on data saturation.

The data collection process involved recruiting eight data collectors and four supervisors across different administrative tiers. Training on data management techniques was provided, and permissions were obtained from relevant authorities before conducting data collection at the office level.

Sampling

The focus of the study was civil service employees in BGRS because the preparation of development plans predominantly involves civil servants. We used a multistage stratified sampling method. First, we selected the existing three zones – Assosa, Metekel, and Kemashi – along with the regional sectors. Then, we randomly selected one woreda from each zone because the woredas in each zone follow similar regional development planning practices. Accordingly, from Metekel Zone we selected Dangure Woreda, from Asossa Zone Mengie Woreda, and from Kemmashi Zone Kemash Woreda. In addition, Gilgel Beless Town Administration was randomly selected from the three town administrations in the region. Sample units within these sectors were then randomly selected to avoid bias.

Sample Size

The total civil servant population in the sample frame from which the sample units were drawn was 3,449. The sample size was calculated using the Yemane formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N e^2} \quad (1)$$

where n is the sample size, N is the total population, and e is 0.05, representing the margin of error at the 95% confidence level. The minimum calculated sample size was 359. The final sample size, including a 10% non-response rate, was 395. To determine the sample size across the 55 bureaus and offices, proportional sampling was used ($395/3449 = 0.115$).

Description of Variables

Regional development planning is a composite variable that includes situational analysis, plan formulation, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting systems (UN-Habitat, 2018). It is measured on a scale of very low (<50%), low (50–59%), medium (60–74%), high (75–89%), and very high (>90%). A binary outcome was derived from the composite score (across the five indicators) to enable logistic regression analysis. Effectiveness was coded as 1 (success) for scores >60 and 0 (failure) for scores <60 (BoFED, 2021).

Ketelaar, Manning and Turkisch (2007) affirm that performance rating systems are programme-specific: US agencies employ modified five-level scales (e.g. unsatisfactory to outstanding), whereas Canada applies discrete levels (Level 0 = unable to Level 4 = exceeded). Likewise, UNDP (2024) employs varying ranges across programmes (e.g. >80% = 'very high' in some models; >90% in others). Our cut-offs (<50% = very low, 50–59% = low, 60–74% = medium, 75–89% = high, >90% = very high) are adopted from BoFED (2021), the official regional planning authority of BGRS. This follows international best practice, whereby executives and line managers are responsible for developing performance criteria (Ketelaar, Manning and Turkisch, 2007, p. 58). Likewise,

our categories are derived from locally prepared guidelines for BGRS development planning and are contextually appropriate.

Independent Variables

- Skilled labour (SL): Operationalised as having the necessary skills to function effectively (OECD, 2021), measured on a percentage scale; coded as high if $\geq 60\%$.
- Funds allocation (FA): Operationalised as effective allocation of funds, measured on a percentage scale; coded as high if $\geq 60\%$.
- Stakeholder participation (SP): Defined as participation of communities, NGOs, and the private sector, measured on a percentage scale; coded as high if $\geq 60\%$.
- Infrastructure (IF): Defined in terms of communication (internet and phone access) and quality of roads, measured on a percentage scale; coded as high if $\geq 60\%$.
- Political capacity/stability (P): Conceptually defined inversely in terms of the incidence of conflict, frequent administrative changes, corruption, lack of accountability, and institutional inefficiency (composite score), expressed as a percentage scale; coded as high (stability/capacity) if $\geq 60\%$.
- Innovative capacity (INC): Contextually defined (Svetikas, 2014) by the presence of local firms, creation of organisations, and the nature of inter-organisational relationships, expressed as a percentage scale; coded as high if $\geq 60\%$.
- Physical factors (PF): Defined by settlement patterns, climate, and topography (composite score), expressed as a percentage scale; coded as high (favourability) if $\geq 60\%$. This standardised measure ensures specificity, measurability, and contextual relevance for the Benishangul-Gumuz region.

The 60% threshold was chosen based on the legislative benchmark in BGRS's operational policy (BoFED, 2021). In addition, empirical analysis of our data showed that 60% functions as a cut-off point, below which units experienced significantly higher failure rates, consistent with industry-specific standards (Karevold, 2021). The rationale for this cut-off is that using locally grounded standards enhances validity by accounting for contextual differences in local conditions (Nuraeni et al., 2021).

Data Analysis

Initially, a five-level ordinal scale – very low ($<50\%$), low (50–59%), medium (60–74%), high (75–89%), and very high ($\geq 90\%$) – was used during data collection. For analytical purposes, these categories were dichotomised into a binary outcome (success/failure) using a 60% threshold ($\geq 60\%$ = success; $<60\%$ = failure). Principal component analysis (PCA) was used to preserve the underlying structure of the scale during the binary conversion. This approach enabled logistic regression modelling, which is suitable for examining regional development planning (Boateng, 2019; Sani, Soon and Cheah, 2022; Yohannes, Matebu and Asrat, 2023), as presented in Equation 2.

Separate binary logistic regressions were conducted for each planning component (situational analysis, formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting) to identify phase-specific determinants. This approach was grounded in pragmatic planning theory (Beauregard, 2020; Stefanović, Josimović and Hristić, 2018), which treats these components as functionally distinct phases with unique patterns of failure. This distinction is further supported empirically by the differential effects of the determinants (Results, Table 2). The overall model of planning performance is presented in Equation 2:

$$\frac{\ln[\text{prob}(\text{RDP})]}{1-\text{prob}(\text{RDP})} = b_0 + b_1\text{SL} + b_2\text{FA} + b_3\text{SP} + b_4\text{IF} + b_5\text{PI} + b_6\text{INC} + b_7\text{P}(2) \quad (2)$$

where:

RDP = success of regional development planning

SL = skilled labour

FA = funds allocation

SP = stakeholder participation

IF = infrastructure

PI = political instability

INC = innovative capacity

P = physical factors

These variables are directly related to the guiding pillars of pragmatic planning theory: stakeholder engagement (communicative rationality), situational analysis (rational–technical appropriateness), and infrastructure and monitoring and evaluation systems (adaptive capability). Their operationalisation enables us to statistically test the applicability of pragmatic planning theory in the region.

We used thematic analysis for the qualitative data by transcribing the interviews and organising the findings into four themes: regional situation analysis, plan formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting system. These themes were integrated with the quantitative results.

Ethical Issues

We obtained informed consent from all participants regarding confidentiality and privacy. All participants were informed about the objectives of the research, potential conflicts of interest, and the intended use of the findings in a manner that protects their personal information.

Results and Discussion

Respondents' Profile

The results shown in Table 1 reveal that 283 respondents were males (77.5%) and 82 were females (22.5%). The majority held a bachelor's degree (78.9%), followed by a master's degree (13.2%) and a diploma (7.9%). In terms of work experience, 6.3% had less than five years, 36.2% had five to ten years, 28.2% had 11 to 15 years, and another 28.2% had over 15 years. Regarding salary, 53.4% earned below a monthly salary of 7,184 Birr, while 42.2% earned above the mean. Out of 395 total respondents, 365 completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 92.4%.

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents

Variables	Respondents	
	Frequency	Percent
Sex		
Male	283	77.5
Female	82	22.5
Educational level		
Diploma	29	7.9
Bachelor's degree	288	78.9
Master's degree	48	13.2
Work experience		
Below 5 years	23	6.3
5–10 years	132	36.2
11–15 years	103	28.2
Above 15 years	103	28.2
No response	4	1.1
Salary (below/above mean = 7,184 Birr)		
Below mean	195	53.4
Above mean	154	42.2
No response	16	4.4

Source: Own elaboration.

Regional Plan Preparation Performance

Plan Preparation

The overall assessment of regional development planning was profoundly negative, with **78.1% of civil servants rating it as unsatisfactory**. A closer examination of the components reveals a systemic failure: **the foundational stage of situational analysis was considered unsuccessful by over 80% of respondents**. The subsequent stages of plan formulation (77.3%) and reporting (72.9%) were also judged to be failing by a large majority. Although slightly better, the monitoring and evaluation component was still rated as unsuccessful by more than half of the respondents (54.8%).

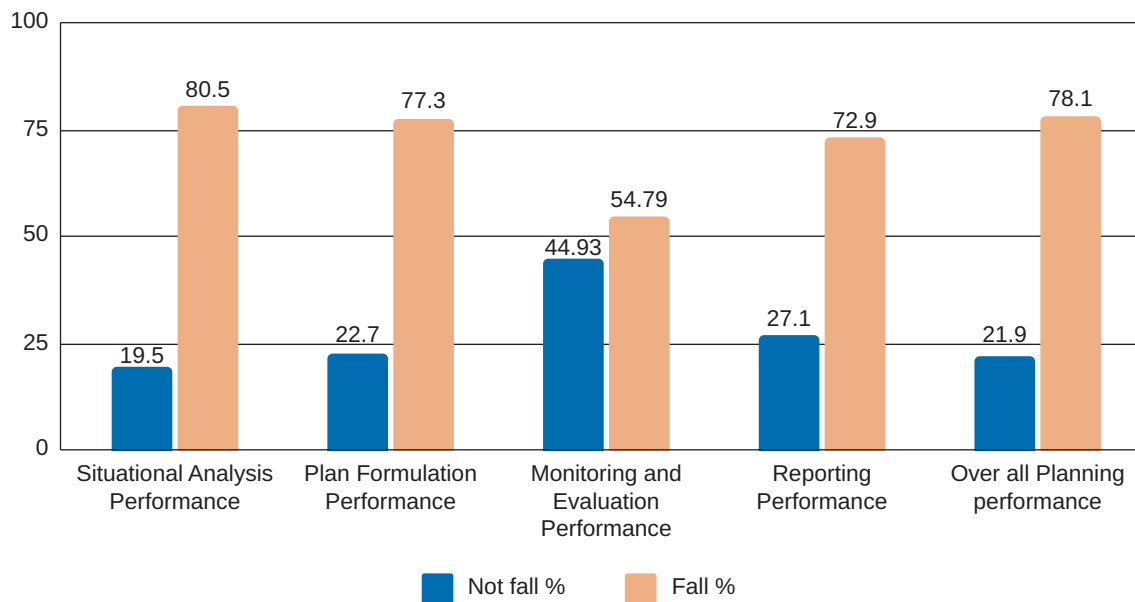


Fig. 2. Regional development planning performance (%)

Source: Field survey data.

Determinants of Regional Development Planning

We ran a binary logistic regression model to examine the determinants of overall performance in development planning. The model yields a statistically significant likelihood-ratio chi-square test ($\chi^2(7) = 67.41, p < .001$). The analysis included 365 observations, with a pseudo- R^2 of 0.166, indicating that the predictor variables explain 16.6% of the variation in regional development planning performance. The log-likelihood value of -169.04 further supports the model's robustness. Significant predictors ($p < .05$) are marked with asterisks (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$) in Table 2.

As Table 2 shows, the odds of regional development plan failure due to infrastructure inaccessibility are 4.36 times higher (odds ratio = 4.36; 95% CI: 1.39–13.68). The odds of failure associated with inadequate finance allocation are 6.85 times higher (odds ratio = 6.85; 95% CI: 2.87–16.36). Furthermore, the odds of failure due to lack of stakeholder participation are 8.76 times higher (odds ratio = 8.76; 95% CI: 2.78–27.56). Similarly, the odds of failure attributed to political instability are 2.61 times higher (odds ratio = 2.61; 95% CI: 1.01–6.71). The likelihood of failure due to low innovative capacity is 6.28 times higher (odds ratio = 6.28; 95% CI: 2.35–16.73).

To determine which components of development planning – regional situational analysis, plan formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting systems – are most affected by the determinant factors, we conducted separate logistic regression analyses for each dependent variable (Table 3).

Table 2. Determinants of regional development planning in BGRS, Northwestern Ethiopia, 2024.

Determinant variables	Odds ratio	p-value	95% CI	
Lack of skilled labour	0.919	0.807	0.466	1.811
Inaccessibility of infrastructure	4.366	*	1.390	13.680
Insufficient finance	6.848	***	2.867	16.361
Lack of stakeholder participation	8.760	***	2.785	27.560
Political instability	2.610	*	1.015	6.715
Limited innovative capacity	6.278	***	2.355	16.728
Physical factors	0.800	0.531	0.397	1.601

Note: High = failure event (coded 1).

Source: Field survey data.

Table 3. Determinants of situational analysis, plan formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting systems

Determinants of regional situational analysis	Odds ratio	p-value	95% CI	
Lack of skilled labour	1.51	0.237	0.761	3.014
Inaccessibility of infrastructure	11.905	**	2.769	51.190
Insufficient finance	8.045	***	3.111	20.801
Lack of stakeholder participation	7.740	***	2.657	22.548
Political instability	1.994	0.152	0.775	5.133
Limited innovative capacity	7.439	***	2.527	21.901
Physical factors	0.685	0.297	0.336	1.396
Determinants of plan formulating	Odds ratio	p-value	95% CI	
Lack of skilled labour	1.288	0.319	0.783	2.115
Inaccessibility of infrastructure	1.529	0.202	0.796	2.935
Insufficient finance	3.085	***	1.696	5.614
Lack of stakeholder participation	2.230	*	1.215	4.090
Political instability	2.419	**	1.282	4.563
Limited innovative capacity	2.132	*	1.161	3.915
Physical factors	0.6079	0.083	0.346	1.067
Determinants of monitoring and evaluation	Odds ratio	p-value	95% CI	
Lack of skilled labour	1.068	0.845	0.554	2.058
Inaccessibility of infrastructure	6.471	**	2.047	20.453
Insufficient finance	6.888	***	2.900	16.356
Lack of stakeholder participation	7.550	***	2.701	21.103
Political instability	2.168	0.088	0.892	5.268
Limited innovative capacity	9.305	***	3.366	25.721
Physical factors	0.6386	0.197	0.323	1.261
Determinants of the reporting system	Odds ratio	p-value	95% CI	
Lack of skilled labour	1.335	0.324	0.752	2.368
Inaccessibility of infrastructure	2.340	*	1.010	5.417
Insufficient finance	3.899	***	1.938	7.845
Lack of stakeholder participation	4.907	***	2.092	11.501
Political instability	2.189	**	1.003	4.778
Limited innovative capacity	3.558	**	1.626	7.784
Physical factors	0.871	0.669	0.464	1.638

Source: Field survey data.

Regional Situational Analysis

Table 3 indicates that weaknesses in conducting regional situational analysis are associated with inaccessibility of infrastructure, insufficient financial allocation, lack of stakeholder participation, and limited innovative capacity. The odds of failure in regional situational analysis due to infrastructure inaccessibility are 11.91 times (odds ratio = 11.91; 95% CI: 2.77–51.19). The odds of failure resulting from insufficient finance allocation are 8.05 times higher (odds ratio = 8.05; 95% CI: 3.11–20.80). Moreover, the odds of failure due to insufficient stakeholder involvement are 7.74 times higher (odds ratio = 7.74; 95% CI: 2.66–22.55). Additionally, the odds of failure associated with limited innovative capacity are 7.44 times higher (odds ratio = 7.44; 95% CI: 2.53–21.90).

The qualitative results strongly support this, indicating a deep-seated lack of meaningful situational analysis. Key informants repeatedly stated that no formal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis is conducted. Where analysis does occur, it is limited to desk-based assessments carried out by committees, which are not grounded in local realities and remain largely on paper. As one interviewee noted: 'There is no situational analysis... It could be done at the regional level sectors by committees that do not consider grassroots level reality or the engagement of the concerned stakeholders' (Interviewee F). This illustrates how the lack of stakeholder engagement (OR = 7.74) undermines the first rational-technical pillar of pragmatic planning.

A consistent finding from the interviews is that almost all key informants reported a lack of tangible regional situational analysis in the preparation of regional development plans. A SWOT analysis was not conducted in a systematic or research-based manner. While some interviewees acknowledged that planning committees had carried out situational analysis, past SWOT exercises often remained on paper.

There is no situational analysis on the ground while preparing the regional development plans; it could be done at the regional level by committees without considering grassroots realities or the engagement of the concerned stakeholders. (Interviewee F)

Plan Formulation

As Table 3 shows, the factors associated with weaknesses in plan formulation include insufficient financial allocation (odds ratio = 3.09; 95% CI: 1.70–5.61), lack of stakeholder participation (odds ratio = 2.23; 95% CI: 1.22–4.09), political instability (odds ratio = 2.42; 95% CI: 1.28–4.56), and limited innovative capacity (odds ratio = 2.13; 95% CI: 1.16–3.92).

Interviews with key informants revealed that regional development planning follows a top-down approach, where plans are initiated by the federal government and adopted at lower levels of governance without meaningful grassroots input. Most respondents indicated that these plans are federal initiatives that overlook local needs and realities. As one interviewee noted: 'The plans come directly from the government without being incorporated into the regional development plan from the grassroots level' (Interviewee J).

The interviews indicate minimal stakeholder involvement in the planning process. Many interviewees stated that community members are rarely consulted, resulting in plans that are disconnected from local needs. As one interviewee noted: 'There is no active stakeholder participation in the preparation of the plans... they are based on their perceptions' (Interviewee K).

Notably, such a top-down, non-participatory process is nearly universal across all administrative levels. As a regional bureau expert stated, 'The planning process, particularly the reporting part, is assumed to be the responsibility of planning professionals, with leaders showing no interest' (Interviewee B), while a woreda participant remarked that such consultations are merely 'formalities'. This systemic exclusion at the formulation stage contributes to its vulnerability (OR = 2.23; Table 3) and represents a significant failure of the communicative rationality component.

The interviews reaffirm the top-down approach, with plans derived from federal initiatives and cascaded down without input from the grassroots level. As Interviewee J stated: 'The plan comes directly from the government (top-down approach). No new ideas are incorporated into the regional development plan from the grassroots level.' This confirms that the absence of stakeholder participation is not only a statistical predictor but also a lived reality, reflecting a failure of communicative rationality in planning.

All key informants noted the absence of a clear development theory or model guiding regional development planning. Interviewee E expressed this concern as follows: 'Even though the region has significant primary economic resources such as agriculture, minerals, and forests, there is a lack of guiding theory or principles that link these resources to industry.'

Monitoring and Evaluation

Weaknesses in the monitoring and evaluation component of regional development planning are associated with infrastructural inaccessibility (odds ratio = 6.47; 95% CI: 2.05–20.45), insufficient finance allocation (odds ratio = 6.89; 95% CI: 2.90–16.36), lack of stakeholder participation (odds ratio = 7.55; 95% CI: 2.70–21.10), and limited innovative capacity (odds ratio = 9.31; 95% CI: 3.37–25.72) (Table 3).

The KII revealed weak monitoring and evaluation at various levels of governance, characterised by a lack of follow-up, limited continuous support, and a weak culture of evaluation, resulting in superficial assessment. Inadequate and infrequent follow-up and support discouraged honest feedback from experts. As Interviewee H expressed: 'Formerly, I used to read the development plans, but now I ignore them because I perceive every activity as nominal and for show.'

One interviewee illustrated the issue of weak follow-up and inadequate feedback by referring to a specific case involving a contractor for project X, who was responsible for implementation on behalf of both the government and the contractor: 'The project was reported as completed, but it did not exist on the ground due to the absence of continuous follow-up' (Interviewee F).

The qualitative findings shed light on these statistical correlations by indicating that poor monitoring and evaluation result from a lack of continuous follow-up and a weak culture of evaluation. This has led to a lack of genuine participation, with one interviewee stating, 'Initially, I used to read the development plans, but now I ignore them because I feel that every activity is performed nominally and for show' (Interviewee H). More seriously, weak monitoring and evaluation may contribute to opportunities for corruption, as illustrated by a case in which a project was 'reported as completed but did not exist on the ground... due to the absence of continuous follow-up' (Interviewee F).

This disengagement reflects a broader issue: the monitoring and evaluation process is perceived as a nominal, ceremonial procedure rather than a meaningful instrument for learning and adaptation. The organisational culture, together with concerns about accurate reporting, fundamentally constrains adaptive management processes. The qualitative evidence suggests that a fear- and compliance-driven reporting environment helps explain how infrastructural and financial translate into weak monitoring and evaluation implementation, consistent with the quantitative findings (OR = 6.47; 6.89).

Reporting System

A weak reporting system is associated with inaccessibility of infrastructure (odds ratio = 2.34; 95% CI: 1.01–5.42), insufficient financial allocation (odds ratio = 3.90; 95% CI: 1.94–7.85), lack of stakeholder participation (odds ratio = 4.91; 95% CI: 2.09–11.50), political instability in the region (odds ratio = 2.19; 95% CI: 1.00–4.78), and limited innovative capacity (odds ratio = 3.56; 95% CI: 1.63–7.78) (Table 3).

The interviews revealed inconsistent practices, political interference, and a lack of accountability in the reporting system. Most respondents reported substantial differences in reporting formats across sectors, which created confusion. One interviewee explained (Interviewee D): 'The reporting system is not uniform; forms change every year.' Reports at kebele and woreda levels are often manipulated for political interests, leading to inflated results. The absence of verification mechanisms allows unreliable reports to be accepted. As one interviewee noted: 'The existing reports are more about promotion than actual reporting; we are in an era of photo exhibition rather than actual reporting, presenting only exaggerated or selectively positive results' (Interviewee D).

This theme of reporting in exchange for political advancement is closely linked to broader systemic problems, including frequent staff turnover and patronage-based recruitment driven by 'nepotism and bribery' rather than merit. These factors contribute to the erosion of institutional knowledge

and capacity, and create strong incentives for the manipulation of information. Overall, these observations illustrate how political instability operates in practice, leading to the weakening and gradual breakdown of institutional capability.

The interviews indicate that reporting issues arise from inconsistencies and political influence. The absence of verification systems enables the use of unreliable reports. As Interviewee D stated: 'The existing reports from bottom to top are false reports... Whether the plans are implemented or not, smart reports that are exaggerated or only positive aspects are selectively reported.' This statement highlights the effects of political instability (odds ratio = 2.19), which can turn the reporting system into a tool for political promotion.

The interviews reveal challenges in development planning, preparation, and reporting across multiple levels of governance. All interviewees highlighted a lack of involvement of key stakeholders in the planning process, with the prevailing view that it is primarily the responsibility of planning experts. This has contributed to the fabrication of reports by experts due to pressure placed on them. As Interviewee B stated: 'Planning and reporting are considered the duty of planning experts, with leaders paying little attention and focusing on day-to-day activities. This pressure forces planning experts to produce manipulated reports.'

While regression results do not show a statistically significant relationship between manpower and the variables of situational analysis, plan formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting systems, the key informant interviews reveal important gaps. This apparent contradiction, according to the interviews, stems from the perception that planning is the sole responsibility of experts, with limited attention from leaders. As Interviewee B stated: 'Every burden regarding planning and reporting is left on the shoulders of planning experts... This forces planning experts to produce manipulated reports.'

The interviews further highlight a high turnover rate of political appointees, while expert selection is often affected by nepotism and bribery. This suggests that although manpower is not statistically significant in the regression model, its utilisation, support, and integrity are highly problematic in practice. Most interviewees also pointed to a limited understanding of development planning among political leaders, resulting in weak feedback mechanisms and low engagement with development plans, which reduces effectiveness. Additionally, frequent changes in senior bureau leadership disrupt institutional continuity, making it difficult for new leaders to become familiar with planning and reporting procedures.

Discussion

The findings indicate that regional development planning in BGRS is at risk, with 78.1% of responses rating it as unsatisfactory. Key components – such as situational analysis, plan formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and the reporting system – are all underperforming (Fig. 2). This supports the assertion that many regional planning challenges in developing countries remain unsolved (UNCRD, 2013; JICA, 2017). Similar findings have been reported in southern Africa and Iran, where regional planning systems are weak (Chirisa, Otero and Gambe, 2024; Shakoori, 2016). In India, 55% of respondents rated district-level development plans as inadequate (Jayamani, 2024). In Poland, the regional planning system is characterised by diagnostic errors (OECD, 2021). Compared with these contexts, BGRS shows even more pronounced gaps in basic planning components that require urgent attention.

Low performance across the components of the development processes is evident, as 80% of respondents indicated that no situational analysis was conducted before the formulation of development plans, meaning that internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats, were not identified. This contrasts with Beauregard's (2020) emphasis on data-driven situational analysis as the foundation of effective planning. A comprehensive, data-driven situational analysis is essential for assessing factors that may affect the success of development planning (Beauregard, 2020; Svetikas, 2014). This finding is consistent with evidence from Poland, where regional development planning suffers from weak data (OECD, 2021) due to inadequate regional analysis.

Yet another key concern is the top-down approach, which limits stakeholder involvement. The regional development plan is prepared hierarchically, from the federal government level down to the district level. This contradicts the participatory planning principles highlighted by Stefanović, Josimović and Hristić (2018) and the pragmatic, integrative approaches suggested by Guyadeen and Seasons (2016b). Chimhowu, Hulme and Munro (2019) note that plans produced in this way often lack an evidence-based foundation and clear monitoring mechanisms, which is consistent with pragmatic planning theory's view that no single approach can adequately address the complexity of planning (Etzioni, 1967). A study in Ethiopia has also identified a lack of clarity in the adopted planning approaches and strategies (Ybabe, 2019). International experience suggests that multilevel governance could address such discrepancies when funding instruments are effectively synchronised (Buonaiuto, 2023).

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are crucial for reviewing regional development planning, as they provide essential information for decision-making and performance improvement (UNDP, 2009). However, these mechanisms are insufficient in BGRS. As Guyadeen and Seasons (2016a) found in their evaluation framework study, the lack of ex-post appraisal is a common weakness in planning systems in developing countries. Qualitative results indicate a lack of active follow-up, support, and thorough evaluation processes, consistent with findings from the OECD (2021). This also contradicts the UNDP (2009) view that monitoring should be a continuous process with regular feedback loops. Ineffective evaluation systems limit the ability to identify weaknesses (Amalia, 2019). This pattern is also commonly observed in many African countries (UNECA, 2016).

Lastly, the performance of the reporting system was rated very low, with 72.9% of respondents describing it as unproductive. Most participants noted that reports are often inaccurate or inflated due to political influence and a lack of accountability. This is in line with Gursoy and Edelman (2017) in Turkey and Krumolz and Hexter (2018), who highlight issues of political intervention in planning systems in low-income countries. Karevold (2021) further supports this, finding that low-performing institutions (around 60% success) are more likely to exaggerate reports than higher-performing ones (around 85% success), with higher rates of dishonesty among lower achievers.

The weaknesses in regional planning in BGRS may risk stagnating economic growth and increasing poverty, potentially leading to social discontent and migration. As inferred by Glasson and Marshall (2007), such planning failures can trap regions in cycles of underdevelopment. This may also hinder the region's ability to attract investment, reinforcing this cycle of underdevelopment.

The findings indicate systemic problems in regional development planning in BGRS, marked by low performance across key components: situational analysis, plan formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and the reporting system. The absence of comprehensive situational analyses limits the identification of internal and external constraints, leading to misaligned development strategies. Top-down planning restricts stakeholder engagement, while weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms reduce the effectiveness of implementation. Additionally, a weak reporting system worsens issues of transparency and accountability. Collectively, these shortcomings could contribute to stagnating economic growth, rising poverty levels, and social unrest, thereby perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment.

Determinant Factors

Inaccessibility of infrastructure and inadequate financial allocation increase the likelihood of failure in regional development planning by 4.40 and 6.85 times, respectively (Table 2). The absence of stakeholder participation increases the likelihood of failure by 8.76 times. Political instability and low innovative capacity are also contributing factors to planning failure.

The interview findings further indicate a lack of stakeholder participation, which causes a gap between development plans and local needs. They also highlight unreliable reporting, limited understanding of development planning among political leaders, high turnover among bureau heads, and nepotistic appointment of experts as additional factors affecting planning performance.

Prolonged conflict in the region has significantly challenged the formulation of development plans. Financial constraints support Singh et al. (2021), who argue that resource availability and utilisation are essential for regional development planning. Similar challenges have been reported

in Southern African Countries (Chirisa, Odera and Gambe, 2024) and Niger (Baadom, Amakiri-Whyte and Aselemi, 2016). Targeted financing can strengthen local governance when properly aligned (World Bank, 2025). However, even stable regions face infrastructure and workforce challenges (OECD, 2025). Inaccessibility of infrastructure, particularly transport and communication networks, adversely affects development planning (Rosik and Wójcik, 2023). Moreover, low stakeholder participation is a significant determinant of planning failure, as evidenced in Ghana and Nigeria (Eja and Ramegowda, 2020; Vordzorgbe and Caiquo, 2001), as well as in national-level planning in Ethiopia (Wazza, 2022). This supports Stefanović, Josimović and Hristić (2018), who emphasise that adequate public participation is essential.

Political instability challenges effective planning, as it limits decision-makers to elected officials (Laurian et al., 2010). A study in Turkey shows that political influence in development planning has led to disorder and reduced the authority of local governments (Gursoy and Edelman, 2017). In Ghana, regional development programmes have been terminated due to political instability (Akwei et al., 2020). Krumolz and Hexter (2018) further note that planning in developing countries is often weak due to the limited influence of planners and political interference. Research also shows that political stability is a fundamental determinant of regional development outcomes (Tiwari et al., 2025). These governance failures represent wicked problems that require an integrated response (Steinhall et al., 2023).

Limited innovative capacity highlights the need to foster innovation. The regional development plan fails to stimulate innovation due to the absence of clear policies promoting cooperation and networking among institutions. Policies that encourage collaboration and networks can enhance innovative firms (OECD, 2011). The formulation of plans also lacks integration with research and educational institutions, weakening innovative capacity, a pattern consistent with findings in Saudi Arabia (Almughairy, 2019). The innovation gap appears wider than in Saudi Arabia (Almughairy, 2019), where at least 34% of plans included university linkages. BGRS's minimal integration with academia aligns with Björn and Markus's (2015) 'peripheral region' condition, where weak innovation systems tend to reinforce dependency.

The interaction of these factors – financial resources, stakeholder participation, infrastructure, political stability, and innovation – highlights the need for a holistic approach to regional development planning.

Synthesising Pragmatic Planning Theory and Empirical Failures

The pillars of pragmatic planning theory reveal points of critical failure in the study context. The abandonment of rational-technical foundations is reflected in weak situational analysis (80.5% reported failure). Missing stakeholder engagement (OR = 8.76) indicates a communicative breakdown, while inadequate monitoring and evaluation (54.8% failure) reflects weaknesses in adaptive capacity. Qualitative evidence places these findings in context: local feedback is constrained by top-down decision-making (Interviewee J), and political interference undermines evidence-based monitoring and evaluation (Interviewee F).

Although the assumption of institutional capacity is challenged in the BGRS context, the findings confirm the relevance of pragmatic planning theory's emphasis on integrating rational, communicative, and adaptive pillars. Political instability (OR = 2.61) and infrastructure inaccessibility (OR = 4.37) constrain adaptive capacity, suggesting that the application of pragmatic planning theory in emerging regions must first address systemic constraints before its integrative framework can function efficiently. These results support Traill and Cumbers (2025), who argue that top-down policies often overlook local complexities in favour of powerful interests rather than community needs. A locally grounded, knowledge-based approach further supports our finding that stakeholder engagement (OR = 8.76) is a key determinant of success and therefore essential.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

While existing studies often rely on aggregate national data or focus on generic challenges, this study provides a novel, multidimensional analysis of regional development planning failure

by situating the investigation within the specific political, economic, and institutional context of the BGRS. Its main contribution lies in the methodological and theoretical synthesis adopted: it moves beyond the identification of constraints by operationalising and empirically testing the core pillars of pragmatic planning theory – rational analysis, communicative participation, and adaptive capacity – within a single, underexplored African region. By quantifying the odds of failure associated with determinants such as stakeholder participation (OR = 8.8) and political instability (OR = 2.6), and situating these results within qualitative evidence of top-down pressures and manipulated reporting practices, the study reveals the interconnected nature of these factors. The approach not only identifies what is going wrong but also explains how and why these variables interact to undermine the entire planning cycle.

The determinants influencing regional development planning in the BGRS have important implications. Insufficient financial resources indicate that a strong funding framework is essential for effective regional development planning. Low stakeholder participation highlights the need for more inclusive strategies. Urgent investment in infrastructure, particularly in transport and communication, is also necessary to support planning processes. Additionally, political dynamics can disrupt decision-making, while weak innovation capacity points to a gap in integrating research, educational institutions, and relevant sectors.

Moving beyond general planning prescriptions, our findings highlight context-specific actions, ranked in order of impact magnitude. First, participatory budgeting should be enforced at kebele and woreda levels to address the most significant failure factor: stakeholder participation (OR = 8.76). Second, a regional planning fund with conflict-weighted allocations should be established to reduce budgetary gaps (OR = 6.85) associated with monitoring and evaluation weaknesses (54.8%). Third, satellite-based monitoring and evaluation systems should be introduced in remote areas to address infrastructure constraints (OR = 4.37), given that inaccessibility increases the odds of monitoring and evaluation failure by 6.5 times. Fourth, a minimum three-year tenure for planning bureau heads, alongside independent report verification, should be introduced to reduce political interference (OR = 2.61), which contributes to distorted reporting.

Crucially, BGRS requires the sequential activation of pragmatic planning theory pillars: participation enables locally grounded analysis, which in turn supports adaptive monitoring and evaluation. This study therefore confirms the value of pragmatic planning theory as a diagnostic tool for understanding planning failures while refining its application. In emerging regions, effective implementation requires pre-emptive investment in contextual enablers such as depoliticised institutions and basic infrastructure.

Limitations of the Study

One of the main methodological limitations of this study is its initial reliance on civil servants' perspectives. Although this group was purposively sampled because they are directly involved in the planning and implementation of regional development processes, their perceptions may not be entirely objective. Their responses may be influenced by their position within the institutional hierarchy, departmental interests, or a tendency to attribute system failures to external factors. To minimise this limitation, the study employed data triangulation by cross-verifying findings from a large-scale survey with in-depth qualitative interviews. Furthermore, the consistency and breadth of reported systemic failures by officials directly involved in the process provide a degree of internal validation of the findings. However, further research is needed to include external stakeholders such as community representatives, private sector actors, and NGO managers in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the planning system.

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