CHAPTER 22

Comparative Policy Performance Across South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East & North Africa (MENA): Institutional Diversity, Cross-Regional Lessons, and Transferable Innovations

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Abstract

Institutional quality plays a decisive role in shaping policy performance and development outcomes across regions with diverse political, administrative, and socioeconomic contexts. This chapter examines governance systems in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to understand how institutional structures influence policy effectiveness and identify transferable policy innovations. Drawing on Institutional Theory and the Worldwide Governance Indicators framework, the analysis evaluates six governance dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. The chapter demonstrates that policy success depends not only on sound design but also on institutional capacity, governance quality, and adaptation to local contexts. While South Asia benefits from democratic participation and digital transformation, Sub-Saharan Africa exhibits strong innovation despite institutional constraints, and MENA leverages centralized planning and state capacity for long-term development. The comparative analysis reveals that no single governance model is universally applicable; instead, effective policy transfer requires institutional compatibility, stakeholder participation, and context-specific adaptation. The chapter concludes by presenting cross-regional lessons that emphasize strengthening governance, administrative capacity, transparency, and digital innovation as essential foundations for sustainable development and improved public policy performance in developing regions.

https://doi.org/10.66529/book.9786277945039.2026.ch22
Received: 24-April 2026 Revised: 30 May 2026 Accepted: 30 June 2026

1. Introduction

South Asia includes many of the world's fastest growing nations (e.g., Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives) (World Bank, 2025). The combination of rapidly developing digital democracies and civil societies, coupled with emerging markets, creates a governance framework with both great potential and significant challenges. Persistent issues such as extreme poverty, widespread unemployment, bureaucratic inertia, heightened political and regional disparities, climate change, and large informal economies are part of the complex system that makes South Asia a relevant region to study the role of democratic engagement, decentralization, and technology-based governance innovations in improving policy and governance constructs supported by adaptive and functional institutional frameworks. Though Sub Saharan Africa has regions with varying levels of institutional flexibility and state capacity, civil stability and modern administration, and sustained economic activity, it also has a diverse range of flexible institutional frameworks within resource constrained context countries such as Rwanda, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. With inadequate infrastructure and a highly dependent donor environment, some of the less stable countries also maintain innovative frameworks for administrative management (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Sub Saharan Africa has the varied contexts needed to study the flexibility of innovations within highly resource constrained and uneven contexts.

The countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Algeria, apply a variety of similar strategies to enhance the economic development of Gulf countries. These strategies include long-term, national infrastructure investments guided by an explicit Central Planning document. Examples of such plans include Saudi Vision 2030, the UAE Centennial 2071, and policy reforms in Morocco related to its renewable energy and agriculture. MENA has the planning, public investments, and the rapid digital infrastructure to convert plans to action. However, youth unemployment, the need for economic diversification, water scarcity, political unrest, and calls for reform of the governing bodies also challenge MENA. MENA provides an example of how state-led development has accelerated the economy and modernization; however, MENA also shows that there is a need for inclusive institutions to sustain the modernization.

In summary, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and MENA provide a valuable framework for comparing institutions and assessing the performance of various policies. The diverse political systems, administrative frameworks, histories of resource endowment, and patterns of development differentiate the three regions. However, they share common governance challenges and concerns in public service delivery, social inclusion, economic resilience, and sustainable development. This chapter aims to highlight the variations in these regional governance contexts, evaluate how the quality of governance in each context influences policy, disseminate policy innovations with a high degree of transferability, and address the regional gap in sustainable development through an enhancement in the quality of governance.

1.1. Purpose of the Chapter

This chapter aims to examine how institutional structures influence policy performance across South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and MENA. It compares governance systems, administrative capacity, political environments, regulatory quality, and citizen participation mechanisms to understand why some policies perform better than others. The chapter also identifies policy innovations that have produced positive outcomes and considers whether these innovations can be adapted across regions. The overall purpose is to build a comparative understanding of institutional diversity and to provide policy-relevant lessons for strengthening governance and development performance.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How do institutional structures influence policy performance across South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and MENA?

2. Which policy innovations have demonstrated success in addressing development challenges?

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Institutions and Development:

Institutional Theory

Institutions can manifest as formal or informal arrangements, and they set the standards for the behaviors that are social, political, and economic. Institutional Theory posits that the design, execution, and results of policies are impacted by the law and by the social constructs of norms, values, and beliefs, and by the routines observed and practiced by organizations. In the field of development studies, this theory can show that the environment within which policies are executed can be as important or more important for the success of the policies than the financial and planning resources that are devoted to the policies (Scott, 2014; Rodrik, 2007).

According to Table 22.1, Institutional Theory consists of three closely related pillars. The regulatory pillar shows that development policies need legal frameworks and outlines how policies will be implemented and enforced. Where robust regulatory systems do not exist, well-structured policies may still be undermined by low compliance, corruption, and administrative delays. The normative pillar demonstrates that the social values, professional socialization, and the accountability expectations of public officials and citizens shape policy performance. If social norms that support transparency, participation, and norm-service delivery are in place, policy performance will be enhanced. The cultural-cognitive pillar shows that the beliefs and perceptions of the citizenry shape policy performance. Policies are likely to perform better when they align with local customs, the existing institutional framework, and the expectations of the

 https://doi.org/10.66529/book.9786277945039.2026.ch22

citizenry. Therefore, Institutional Theory postulates that effective policy transfer cannot occur by simply transposing the policy of one country or region to another, but rather that policy transfer must consider the institutional framework of the receiving country or region.

Table 22.1: Institutional Theory

Pillar of Institutional Theory	Main Meaning	Policy Relevance	Examples of Developing Regions
Regulatory Pillar	Formal rules, laws, regulations, sanctions, and enforcement mechanisms.	Determines whether policies are legally supported, consistently implemented, and effectively monitored.	Tax laws, procurement rules, anti-corruption laws, environmental regulations, public sector reforms.
Normative Pillar	Values, ethical expectations, professional standards, and accepted social obligations.	Shapes legitimacy, public trust, administrative behaviour, and willingness to comply with policy decisions.	Civil service ethics, professional norms, community expectations, NGO participation, accountability culture.
Cultural-Cognitive Pillar	Shared beliefs, assumptions, traditions, and ways of understanding authority and development.	Influences how citizens, firms, and officials interpret reforms and whether innovations are accepted.	Attitudes toward government, digital adoption, social trust, cultural views on participation and authority.

2.2. Governance and Policy Performance

Governance is the way public power is exercised, decisions are made, resources are allocated, and responsibility is upheld. Policy performance represents the level to which government actions accomplish intended objectives of enhanced service delivery, reduction of poverty, growth in the economy, sustainability of the environment, and increased public trust (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2011). The Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) associates six key dimensions of governance (World Bank, 2025; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2011; Fukuyama, 2013). In conjunction with the governance framework and associated literature on institutional performance, these dimensions articulate why the same policies may have different results in various regions (Hafeez *et al.*, 2020; Yasmeen *et al.*, 2018)

Voice and Accountability

Voice and Accountability pertain to citizens' abilities to engage in government elections and opinion expression processes (World Bank, 2025; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2011). This covers citizens' freedom of expression and association, media autonomy, and community involvement. Stronger voice and accountability provide better policy legitimacy, as citizens can raise issues and provide feedback. South Asia has strong electoral participation and civic engagement and, if not for polarization, would likely prove the strongest of the three regions discussed. SSA and MENA are characterized by extremely diverse and inconsistent levels of civic engagement based on the systems of governance and political liberalization in respective nations.

Political Stability

Political stability assesses extent of potential remaining stable governance and the absence of disruptions from violence, conflicts or alterations of governance through unconstitutional means (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2011; Yasmeen *et al.*, 2018). Certainly, the political environment needs stability to carry out and support long-term plans and their implementation. For example, multi-year continuity is required to develop the national vision, infrastructure, and education reform policies. Rwanda, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia illustrate the effect of stable planning environments on strategic reforms. However, stability needs to be paired with inclusion to avoid the situation where long-term development occurs without social participation.

Government Effectiveness

Government Effectiveness considers the quality of public services, the capacity of the civil service, and the formulation and implementation of public policy (Fukuyama, 2013; Yasmeen *et al*., 2018). Strong bureaucratic systems improve the delivery of health services and education, infrastructure, digital services, and social protection (Kaufmann *et al*., 2011). When government agencies are professional and coordinated, policy targets are more likely to be achieved. Effectiveness in South Asia is mixed and results from the uneven capacity of a large bureaucracy, while SSA is more variable by country. Due to centralized planning and investment, MENA Gulf states often show a stronger administrative capacity.

Regulatory Quality

Regulatory Quality relates to how well governments create and implement regulations that promote both the development of the private sector and the well-being of the public (Kaufmann *et al*., 2011; Yasmeen *et al*., 2018). Good regulations create a lower level of uncertainty and increase the amount of investment and innovation while protecting customers. Inadequate regulations increase the barriers entrepreneurs encounter and decrease the credibility of various policies. For business reform, good regulation design really creates a large impact, as shown by the business reform regulations of the UAE, the renewable energy regulations of Morocco, and the financial sector reforms in Ghana. For good policy transfer, regulations have to be simple and easily enacted while aligning with the capabilities of the locality.

Rule of Law

The Rule of Law demonstrates faith in various legal and justice institutions as well as their enforcement mechanisms (World Bank, 2025; Kaufmann *et al*., 2011). A robust Rule of Law fosters public and private investment, and trust in public institutions, while minimizing conflicts within civil society (Yasmeen *et al*., 2018). Businesses and individuals are likely to cooperate with public policy when they perceive law to be applied justly and uniformly. Where the Rule of Law is weak, civil life is plagued by insecurity and domination by a small elite, and law is applied selectively. In all three regions, addressing the efficiency and predictability of the courts and law is crucial to achieve the necessary policy objectives.

Control of Corruption

Control of Corruption assesses the degree to which public power is exercised for the public good rather than private gain (Kaufmann *et al*., 2011). By diverting resources, increasing costs, reducing trust, and the quality of services provided, corruption undermines development. If combined with transparency and accountability, as well as digital systems and auditing, anti-corruption reforms enhance the implementation of policies. Leakage in public programs can be minimized by employing digital payments, e-procurement, biometric systems, and open data. Technology by itself, however, is insufficient and must be accompanied by enforcement as well as ethical and political dedication.

3. Institutional Contexts Across Regions

The regions of South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region have drastically different governance and administrative systems, political systems and development priorities, and how these regions construct government systems impacts how policies, resources, and reforms are distributed, as well as how stakeholders are approached and engaged. Even though all three regions have similar development problems of improving economic growth and access to public services while building climate resilience and reducing poverty, these regions have developed different systems to address these problems. For policy performance, identifying potential opportunities for learning and transferring policy systems between the regions will require knowledge about the different strengths and challenges of the regions' various systems (Rodrik, 2007). Institutional Contexts in the Three Regions provides a summary of the three regions' systems.

The three regions' institutional foundations are illustrated in table 22.2. South Asia is typically deemed politically active and democratic with rapid digitalization, but slow policies and fragmented politics

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negatively impact their constructive engagement (Andrews, 2013). Technology and the financial sector help to improve health outcomes and women empowerment in Asia and South Asia, respectively (Jing *et al*., 2022; Hafeez *et al*., 2020). Sub-Saharan Africa is very heterogeneous. Some nations have successfully implemented reform, while others still grapple with conflict, lack of capacity, and fiscal constraints. MENA nations, especially the Gulf states, have highly developed state capacity and planning; however, the lack of participatory inclusiveness and the economies remaining concentrated are still issues of concern. By looking at these regions, it is clear that every model and every region have strengths. It is impossible to establish a model that fits perfectly everywhere. Each region has something to offer to the others. However, the efforts toward reforming must consider the situation of each locale, particularly the politics and the social and administrative patterns.

Table 22.2: Comparative Overview of the Institutional Contexts Across Regions

Region	Representative Countries	Governance Features	Institutional Strengths	Institutional Challenges
South Asia	Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives	Most countries operate under democratic and parliamentary systems, with ongoing efforts to strengthen decentralization, improve public administration, and expand digital governance. Civil society organizations and citizen participation continue to play an important role in governance.	The region benefits from large and rapidly growing markets, a youthful population, expanding digital technologies, active civil society organizations, and increasing entrepreneurial activity, all of which support long-term development.	Many countries continue to face challenges related to bureaucratic delays, governance inefficiencies, corruption, political polarization, regional disparities in development, a large informal economy, and increasing vulnerability to climate change.
Sub-Saharan Africa	Rwanda, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, South Africa	Governance systems vary across countries, ranging from centralized to decentralized structures. Many governments have introduced public sector reforms, while regional organizations and international development partners continue to influence governance and institutional development.	The region has demonstrated strong innovation in mobile technology and digital finance, growing entrepreneurial ecosystems, successful community-driven development initiatives, policy experimentation, and increasing regional cooperation.	Despite progress, several countries continue to experience infrastructure deficits, limited fiscal capacity, uneven institutional performance, political instability in some areas, and varying levels of dependence on external donor support.
MENA	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria	Governance is generally characterized by a strong public sector and centralized planning, supported by long-term national development strategies, economic diversification programs, and significant investments in strategic infrastructure.	Many countries possess strong state institutions, well-developed infrastructure, ambitious long-term development visions, expanding digital government initiatives, and substantial public investment capacity, particularly among the Gulf states.	The region continues to address persistent issues such as high youth unemployment, water scarcity, the need for greater economic diversification, varying levels of public participation in governance, and ongoing political and geopolitical tensions.

4. Comparative Governance Analysis

A comparative governance analysis accounts for the impact of institutional differences on the variation of policy outcomes (Fukuyama, 2013; North, 1990). The following table highlights the core institutional traits, advantages, disadvantages, and policy considerations for each of the three regions. Table 22.3 shows the differences present in the varying governance models across the different regions. In South Asia, the democratic structures initiate potential for the public to hold officials accountable; however, political rivalry can obstruct the reforms for a time. Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates the widest difference in governance models as countries have unique levels of stability, administrative capability, and maturation of their governance structures. Countries in MENA most likely rely on centralized governance as it allows pathways to rapidly implemented planning of infrastructural, digital, and economic changes. Centralized governance structures may also require more participatory mechanisms to gain legitimacy and responsiveness. Respectively, the different governance models will require varied mechanisms for public participation to ensure the efficacy of their structures.

Table 22.3: Main Institutional Characteristics, Strengths, Weaknesses, and Policy Implications Across Regions

Dimension	South Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa	MENA	Policy Implication
Governance Model	Mostly democratic and parliamentary	Mixed: democratic, hybrid, and centralized systems	Often centralized, especially in Gulf states	Policy design must match political authority structures and participation channels.
Administrative Capacity	Moderate but uneven across countries and sectors	Variable; strong in some countries and weak in others	Generally stronger in high-capacity Gulf states	Implementation depends on bureaucracy, coordination, and monitoring capacity.
Digital Transformation	High and expanding rapidly	Increasing through mobile and platform innovation	High, especially in smart government systems	Digital tools can improve service delivery when supported by inclusion and data governance.
Political Stability	Moderate with periodic instability	Highly variable across countries	Moderate to high in many Gulf states	Long-term policies require stability, but legitimacy also requires public trust.
Stakeholder Participation	Strong through elections, media, NGOs, and courts	Moderate and uneven; strong community models in some countries	Limited to moderate depending on country	Participation improves legitimacy, feedback, and policy sustainability.
State Capacity	Moderate; strong in some sectors, weak in others	Variable and often resource constrained	High in strategic planning and infrastructure	State capacity determines whether policy commitments become real outcomes.

Table 22.4 illustrates the specific combinations of relative strengths and weaknesses of each region (World Bank, 2025).

Table 22.4: Distinctive Combination of Strengths and Weaknesses for Each Region

Region	Major Institutional Strengths	Major Institutional Weaknesses	Policy Performance Effect
South Asia	Democracy, digitalization, civil society, large markets	Bureaucracy, political polarization, corruption, inequality	Strong policy ideas may face implementation delays unless coordination and accountability improve.
Sub-Saharan Africa	Mobile technology, innovation, community development, entrepreneurship	Capacity constraints, infrastructure deficits, fiscal weakness, instability in some states	Innovation can improve outcomes, but scale-up depends on state capacity and sustainable financing.

MENA	State capacity, strategic planning, infrastructure, digital government	Limited participation in some countries, diversification pressures, water scarcity	Long-term visions can achieve rapid progress, but sustainability requires inclusion and institutional adaptability.

In South Asia, the main strengths are participatory governance and the expansion of the digital economy. However, policy implementation is more likely to be slow and fragmented due to the lack of structural integrity. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the main strengths are flexible, mobile, and community-based innovation; however, a lack of resources often restricts the sector's ability to scale. In the MENA region, a natural advantage of this region is a strong, goal-oriented state and planning; however, there are still central policy challenges of social inclusion, employment generation, and economic diversification. The central policy lesson is that the design of a policy is likely to be successful when matched with the capacity of the institutions.

5. Linking Institutions to Policy Performance (RQ1)

Institutions discourage or encourage policy performance as they impact decision-making and the allocation of resources, the capacity to implement, the accountability of the system, and trust by the public (North, 1990). Considered strong by most institutions reduce uncertainty by creating a predictable and stable system for citizens, corporations, and public agencies. Creating a predictable system is a major challenge for most public agencies. Weak institutions create gaps between the promises made by policy and the outcomes of policy. This section attempts to show the major institutional factors affecting the evaluation of performance in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA.

Of the factors affecting policy performance, government effectiveness is one of the most critical (Andrews, 2013). Countries that have professional civil service, coordinated ministries, and a reliable monitoring and evaluation system, as well as strong local governments, have a greater capacity to implement policy reforms. The performance-based governance system of Rwanda, the smart governance system of the United Arab Emirates, and the digital governance reforms of India, all demonstrate the impact of administrative capacity on the governance and service delivery. Fragmented or slow bureaucracies have significant impact on the ease of governance and the cost of implementation. Integration of financial sectors of Asia may uplift the cashflows, funds, to have sustainable renewable energy sources (Wang *et al*., 2025). In addition to the factors discussed, on the South African continent and in some Arab countries, a certain level of political stability has significant impact on the performance of most policies (Kaufmann *et al*., 2011). This is especially the case for the implementation of most modern infrastructure and climate projects, education reform, and economic diversification which require long-term commitments. United Arab Emirates Vision 2071, Saudi Vision 2030, and Rwanda Vision 2050 all evidence the impact of long-term policy commitments. However, political stability cannot be understood only as control, but as satisfying the legitimacy and inclusion of citizens, as well as responsiveness to citizens.

The inclusion of stakeholders in policymaking results in higher quality policies because citizens and businesses supply information to policymaking authorities that they otherwise would not know (World Bank, 2017). Networks of civil society in South Asia, the NGO sector in Bangladesh, local governance institutions in India, and community development models in Kenya demonstrate the benefits of participation in targeting and accountability. Policies that exclude stakeholders will face resistance to their adoption, and their sustainability will be weak. Participation, therefore, enhances both the legitimacy and the sustainability of policies.

The quality of regulation has a direct correlation to investment, entrepreneurship, environmental management, and innovation. Regulations that are clear and predictable reduce uncertainty and encourage investment. Business reforms in the UAE, reforms in the financial sector in Ghana, and renewable energy policies in Morocco show that regulation can foster development. In contrast, poor regulation increases informality, fosters a lack of investment, and creates a system of rent-seeking. Regulations need to be simplified, transparent, and applicable to the local context with the capacity for enforcement.

The rule of law and the control of corruption also impact on the quality of policy. When public laws are justly enforced and corruption is controlled, there is a greater likelihood that public resources will be delivered to the intended beneficiaries. Digital governance innovations such as e-procurement, biometric verification, direct benefit transfers and faster online public services can reduce leakage and improve the transparency of the process. However, no innovation of this kind will supplant the need for legal enforcement and ethical public administration. Thus, reforms of this kind will need to be coupled with digital innovations and monitoring to ensure accountability and governance.

Overall, this demonstrates that institutions are not background conditions; they actively influence the success of policies. The same policy may yield different results across various regions due to the differences in institutional capacity, political stability, participation, regulation, legal systems, and control of corruption. This indicates that in policy transfer, the emphasis should be on learning and adaptation rather than direct copying. A successfully adopted innovation in one region should be modified to the recipient's administrative capacity, legal system, political environment, cultural characteristics, and available resources.

6. Conclusion

This chapter presents findings that show how the quality of institutions affects policy performance in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and MENA. South Asia is characterized by democracy, civil society, and decentralization, and has high potential from digital transformation, but has issues with bureaucratic inefficiency and political fragmentation. Sub-Saharan Africa has the issues of weak infrastructure, low administrative and fiscal capacity, with high potential from innovation, mobile technology, and entrepreneurship, as well as community-based development. MENA has issues of participation and youth employment, as well as the diversification of the economy and sustainable use of its resources, but has service state capacity, long-term planning with state investments in infrastructure and digital government, as well.

The analysis shows that the elements of governance such as voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption all have the potential to serve as a framework in the analysis of policy performance (Kaufmann *et al*., 2011). High performance in these areas boosts the efficiency of service delivery, increases the confidence in investments, and improves the social trust, as well as the sustainability of reforms. However, the success of development is not based on a single institutional model. It is the capacity of countries to introduce reforms based on their institutional context that determines success; therefore, the main conclusion of the chapter is that the innovations of policies that can be transferred have to be institutionally compatible, locally tailored, and provide accountable governance systems.

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Declaration: AI-assisted tools (LLMs) were used to improve the language and grammar of this chapter. The authors reviewed and approved all content and assume full responsibility for its accuracy.