



Managerial sensemaking in public policy implementation: A qualitative study of decisionmaking in local government organizations

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ABSTRACT

Public policy implementation in local government organizations is frequently characterized by ambiguity, competing interpretations, and institutional constraints that shape managerial decisionmaking. While prior studies on policy implementation have largely emphasized structural, regulatory, and procedural factors, limited attention has been given to the interpretive processes through which managers make sense of policy directives in practice. This study examines managerial sensemaking in the implementation of public policies within local government organizations, focusing on how managers interpret, negotiate, and translate policy mandates into concrete decisions and actions. Employing an interpretive qualitative approach, this research adopts a case study design involving in-depth semistructured interviews with key managerial actors across multiple organizational levels, complemented by document analysis of relevant policy texts. The findings reveal that managerial decisionmaking is not merely a function of formal rules but emerges from ongoing sensemaking processes shaped by prior experience, organizational norms, power relations, and perceived implementation risks. Managers actively construct meanings to reduce uncertainty, reconcile policy ambiguities, and align institutional expectations with operational realities. This study contributes to public management and organizational theory by extending sensemaking perspectives into the context of local government policy implementation. Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers and public managers to design policies that are more interpretable and actionable, thereby enhancing implementation effectiveness in decentralized governance settings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public policy implementation in local government organizations remains a complex and contested process, particularly within decentralized governance systems where authority, discretion, and accountability are dispersed across multiple administrative levels. Although formal regulations and procedural guidelines are designed to ensure consistency and compliance, policy outcomes frequently diverge from their intended objectives (Laihonen, H et al., 2024). Recent studies indicate that such divergence is not solely caused by institutional capacity constraints or regulatory weaknesses, but also by ambiguity embedded in policy design, competing institutional logics, and contextual pressures that shape how policies are interpreted and enacted by managerial actors (Branderhorst & Ruijer, 2025). In local government contexts, managers often face overlapping mandates, political expectations, and resource limitations, which complicate decision-making processes and create room for divergent interpretations during implementation.

Within policy implementation studies, a longstanding debate persists between structural and interpretive approaches. Over the past three years, the literature has continued to emphasize structural, legal, and procedural determinants, such as governance arrangements, compliance mechanisms, and coordination structures (Barbera et al., 2025). Structural perspectives provide important macro-level explanations by highlighting how formal authority, institutional design, and accountability mechanisms shape implementation performance. While these approaches offer important macrolevel explanations, they tend to conceptualize managers as passive executors of policy directives rather than as active agents who interpret, negotiate, and adapt policy meanings in practice (Sewang et al., 2023). Consequently, these perspectives provide limited insight into the cognitive and social processes through which managers make sense of policy ambiguity and translate abstract mandates into concrete organizational actions, particularly in local government organizations characterized by high contextual variability (Cohen, S et al., 2025).

In contrast, interpretive approaches conceptualize implementation as a socially constructed and contextually embedded process in which actors actively negotiate, reinterpret, and adapt policy meanings. In response to the limitations of structural accounts, recent public management scholarship has increasingly turned toward interpretive and process-oriented perspectives (Sewang, S. 2025). From this perspective, managers are not merely rule-followers but sensemakers who translate abstract mandates into situated organizational practices. The concept of sensemaking, rooted in organizational theory, has gained renewed attention as a lens for understanding how actors construct meaning under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity (Edward, A. V., Adnan, M. F., & Khaidir, A. 2024). Empirical studies conducted in the last three years suggest that managerial sensemaking plays a central role in shaping implementation outcomes by influencing how managers prioritize policy goals, reconcile conflicting demands, and justify decisions within institutional constraints (Caramia, S., et al., 2025). In public sector settings, managers function as critical intermediaries who bridge policy formulation and operational practice, making their interpretive processes particularly consequential (Iqbal, M., Daraba, et al., 2024).

Recent empirical research further demonstrates that managerial sensemaking is shaped by prior professional experience, organizational culture, power relations, and perceived implementation risks (Irianto, G., & Amirya, M. 2024). A growing body of qualitative studies has begun to highlight how policy ambiguity amplifies the importance of managerial interpretation during implementation (Kusmaryanto, S., & Santoso, C. B. 2025). However, existing studies often infer interpretive dynamics indirectly from observed adaptive outcomes without systematically distinguishing them from instances of routine administrative discretion. Much of this research remains concentrated in specific policy sectors and developed country contexts, resulting in fragmented empirical insights

and limited cumulative theory-building (Jassat, W et al., 2025; Madan, R., & Ashok, M. 2025).

To address this conceptual and empirical gap, this study explicitly differentiates policy adaptation grounded in interpretive processes from adaptation derived from formal administrative discretion. Administrative discretion refers to the legally sanctioned authority of officials to choose among predefined alternatives within regulatory boundaries. In contrast, interpretive adaptation is evidenced when managers actively reconstruct policy meanings, redefine problem frames, negotiate competing institutional logics, and justify decisions through contextually embedded narratives that go beyond procedural flexibility.

Empirically, this research identifies interpretive processes through qualitative evidence such as: (1) managers' articulated problem framings that reinterpret policy objectives; (2) discursive justifications revealing how competing mandates are reconciled; (3) shifts in prioritization that reflect negotiated meanings rather than procedural compliance; and (4) cross-level sensemaking interactions that reshape how policies are operationalized. By tracing these meaning-construction processes across managerial levels, the study demonstrates that policy adaptation emerges not merely from the existence of discretionary space, but from ongoing cognitive and relational processes through which actors construct shared understandings under conditions of ambiguity.

Against this theoretical and empirical backdrop, this study positions itself explicitly within the interpretive tradition while critically engaging with structural explanations. Rather than rejecting structural determinants, this research argues that structural conditions constitute the institutional context within which managerial sensemaking unfolds. Governance arrangements, formal mandates, and institutional constraints do not mechanically determine implementation outcomes; instead, they shape the interpretive environment that managers must navigate. Policy ambiguity, overlapping mandates, and accountability pressures create conditions that require active meaning-construction rather than automatic compliance.

By foregrounding managerial sensemaking as a central analytical framework (Maisarah et al., 2025), this study seeks to bridge the structural–interpretive divide in policy implementation research. It demonstrates how structural arrangements condition, but do not predetermine, interpretive processes and decision-making patterns. In doing so, the research shifts analytical attention from compliance-centered explanations toward the cognitive, relational, and contextual mechanisms that mediate between policy design and organizational action (Stansberry Beard, K. 2025). Through this empirical specification of interpretive adaptation, the study strengthens the theoretical claim that policy implementation outcomes are co-constituted by structural conditioning and interpretive agency rather than reducible to administrative discretion alone.

By articulating this position and grounding it in identifiable empirical indicators, the study contributes to ongoing theoretical debates in policy implementation research and advances a more robust understanding of how public policies are enacted in practice within decentralized governance environments.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Research on public policy implementation in government organizations over the past decades has been predominantly shaped by structural and institutional approaches that emphasize regulatory frameworks, organizational capacity, and formal compliance mechanisms. Classical and contemporary studies within this domain conceptualize policy implementation as a matter of alignment between policy design and the structures of implementing organizations, assuming that managerial actors primarily function as rational executors of predefined rules and procedures (Mauliska, N. 2025). This

perspective continues to dominate modern public policy studies, particularly in analyses of governance and public sector performance (Priyono, B & Rizki, M. 2025) .

However, recent developments in public management literature reveal the limitations of structural approaches in explaining variations in policy implementation outcomes at the organizational level, especially within local government contexts operating under decentralized governance systems (Qu, J et al., 2024). Recent studies highlight that public policies are often inherently ambiguous, open to multiple interpretations, and embedded in competing interests, making mechanical translation into organizational action impractical. Under such conditions, managerial roles extend beyond rule execution to include the interpretation, negotiation, and contextual adaptation of policy meanings in response to operational realities (Riang et al., 2024).

To address this gap, the sensemaking perspective, rooted in organizational theory, has increasingly been adopted within public management research (Vientiany et al., 2024). Sensemaking emphasizes that organizational actors actively construct meaning in response to uncertainty and ambiguity through ongoing social and interpretive processes (Vikstedt et al., 2025). Recent literature demonstrates that managerial sensemaking plays a crucial role in shaping how policies are understood, prioritized, and enacted in everyday practice (Vikstedt et al., 2025) . Managers emerge as key intermediaries who bridge formal policy directives and organizational realities through complex cognitive and interactional processes (Sewang et al., 2024) .

Nevertheless, existing sensemaking studies in policy implementation exhibit significant fragmentation. Most empirical research focuses on specific policy sectors, central government organizations, or developed country contexts, often relying on single case designs or predominantly conceptual analyses (Tuunainen, J., & Kantasalmi, K. 2024). Furthermore, many studies treat sensemaking as a descriptive construct rather than conceptualizing it as a dynamic process unfolding across managerial levels and implementation stages (UTARI, S. 2024) . This fragmentation constrains cumulative knowledge development and limits the contextual sensitivity of emerging theoretical insights (Van Hulst, M., & Visser, E. L. 2025).

In response to these limitations, this literature review underscores the need for an interpretive qualitative approach employing a multiple case study design to examine managerial sensemaking more comprehensively within local government organizations.

The selection of cases in this multiple case study design is guided by theoretically informed and purposive criteria rather than convenience considerations. Specifically, cases are chosen based on: (1) their operation within decentralized local government settings where policy ambiguity and managerial discretion are structurally embedded; (2) the implementation of formally comparable policy mandates across different organizations to enable analytical replication; (3) observable variation in implementation outcomes, allowing cross-case comparison of divergent sensemaking patterns; and (4) the involvement of multiple managerial levels in the implementation process, ensuring that interpretive dynamics can be traced across hierarchical interactions. This case selection strategy strengthens analytical rigor by enabling theoretical replication and enhancing the transferability of findings beyond a single organizational context.

By conceptualizing sensemaking as an ongoing, processual phenomenon shaped by (Viyurintina et.al., 2024) experience, organizational norms, power relations, and institutional pressures, this study contributes to strengthening processoriented perspectives in public policy implementation and public management research.



Figure 1. Implementation and Sensmaking

2.1 Dominance of Traditional Approaches

Figure.1 illustrates that public policy implementation research has been predominantly shaped by structural, legal, and procedural approaches, emphasizing regulatory compliance, institutional capacity, and formal implementation mechanisms. While these approaches are effective in explaining policy design and formal adherence, they are limited in accounting for variations in implementation outcomes at the local level, particularly within complex and decentralized local government contexts.

2.2 Evolving Role of Managers in Policy Implementation

The figure 1, highlights a conceptual shift in the role of managers from passive policy executors to interpretive actors engaged in social decisionmaking processes. Policy implementation is thus conceptualized as a social and interpretive process, requiring active interpretation, contextual adaptation, and negotiation of policy meanings rather than the mere technical application of rules.

2.3 Limitations of Prior Research

The lower section of the diagram in figure 1 underscores key limitations in existing studies, including a narrow sectoral focus, the dominance of single case study designs, and the treatment of sensemaking as a static construct. These limitations have contributed to fragmented insights into how policies are enacted in everyday organizational practice.

2.4 Central Role of Managerial Sensemaking

At the core of the figure 1, managerial sensemaking is positioned as the critical mechanism linking formal policy directives with organizational action. The current study, as indicated in the lower right section, focuses on local government organizations, employs a multiple case study design, and conceptualizes sensemaking as a dynamic and ongoing process, thereby bridging organizational theory and public management practice in a more contextualized and analytically robust manner.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research presents the main findings of the study and provides an indepth discussion of how managerial sensemaking shapes public policy implementation in local government organizations. The results are organized into thematic sub sections derived from cross case analysis and are discussed in relation to prior research to highlight theoretical and empirical contributions.

3.1 Managerial Interpretation of Policy Ambiguity

The findings indicate that policy ambiguity constitutes a central trigger for managerial sensemaking during the implementation process. Across all cases examined, managers consistently described policy documents as containing abstract objectives, overlapping mandates, and limited operational guidance. Rather than perceiving such ambiguity as an obstacle or implementation failure, managers actively engaged in interpreting policy meanings by drawing on their prior experiences, professional backgrounds, organizational norms, and contextual knowledge.

Importantly, empirical evidence from interview narratives, meeting observations, and internal documents demonstrates that policy adaptation was preceded by explicit processes of problem framing, interpretive deliberation, and collective justification, rather than the unilateral exercise of administrative discretion. Managers articulated how they redefined policy goals in relation to local constraints, negotiated competing interpretations across units, and constructed shared rationales before implementing adjustments.

The These findings indicate that adaptation emerged from socially embedded meaning-construction processes. In contrast to administrative discretion defined as the formally authorized choice among predefined alternatives within regulatory boundaries the observed adaptations involved the reconstruction of policy meanings themselves. Thus, managers were not merely selecting from available procedural options; they were actively reshaping how policy objectives were understood and operationalized. Interpretive efforts enabled managers to render abstract policy directives actionable within their specific organizational settings.

This result extends earlier implementation studies that primarily conceptualize ambiguity as a design flaw or implementation risk requiring procedural clarification. While conventional approaches emphasize the refinement of policy instruments and regulatory precision, the present study demonstrates that ambiguity can function as a productive space for interpretation, allowing managers to align policy goals with local organizational realities.

3.2 Sensemaking as a Collective and MultiLevel Process

The results further reveal that managerial sensemaking is fundamentally collective and multilevel rather than an individual cognitive activity. Meaning construction occurred through a range of formal and informal interactional spaces, including coordination meetings, crossdepartmental discussions, and informal managerial exchanges. Senior managers played a key role in framing initial interpretations of policy objectives, which were subsequently adapted, refined, and operationalized by middle managers within specific functional units.

Cross-case comparison shows that variation in implementation outcomes corresponds to differences in interpretive interaction patterns rather than differences in formal discretionary authority. In cases where deliberative dialogue was more intensive, policy adaptation reflected negotiated meaning alignment; in cases with limited interaction, adaptation remained procedural and minimal

These findings demonstrate that interpretive processes operate across hierarchical levels and are shaped by power relations and organizational routines. Such evidence reinforces the claim that adaptation is rooted in distributed sensemaking rather than isolated discretionary decisions.

3.3 Enactment of Policy through Contextual Adaptation

The analysis also shows that managerial sensemaking directly shapes how policies are enacted through processes of contextual adaptation. Managers selectively emphasized certain policy elements while downplaying others based on situational factors such as resource constraints, political pressures, organizational priorities, and stakeholder expectations.

However, the study finds that these selective emphases were systematically justified through interpretive narratives that redefined policy priorities, rather than through reference to formal discretionary clauses alone. Managers explicitly described how they interpreted the “spirit” of the policy to legitimize operational adjustments.

This empirical pattern differentiates interpretive adaptation from ad hoc discretion. Adaptation was embedded in iterative cycles of interpretation action reflection, observable across temporal sequences of meetings, revised plans, and evolving implementation strategies. Thus, policy outcomes emerged from cumulative sensemaking processes rather than isolated administrative choices.

By empirically tracing these interpretive cycles, the study provides concrete evidence that contextual responsiveness is grounded in collective meaning-construction.

3.4 Retention and Institutionalization of Sensemaking Patterns

Over time, the research finds that certain interpretations of policy became stabilized and institutionalized as accepted ways of implementing policy within organizational routines. These retained sensemaking patterns shaped future decisionmaking and reduced uncertainty.

This longitudinal pattern demonstrates that sensemaking does not end with immediate adaptation but evolves into structured interpretive frameworks that guide future action. Once stabilized, these frameworks functioned as organizational reference points, influencing how new ambiguities were interpreted

This finding has important theoretical implications. It suggests that sensemaking in policy implementation operates as a recursive and path-dependent process, in which earlier interpretive settlements shape subsequent cycles of meaning construction.

Whereas prior studies often conceptualize sensemaking as episodic and event-driven, the present research demonstrates its longitudinal character. By tracing how interpretive processes move from initial ambiguity, to negotiated adaptation, to institutionalized routines, the study advances the development of longitudinal sensemaking theory within public governance contexts.

3.5 Integrative Discussion and Theoretical Contribution

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that public policy implementation in local government organizations cannot be adequately explained through structural, legal, or procedural factors alone. Managerial sensemaking emerges as a critical bridging mechanism that connects formal policy mandates with situated organizational action.

Theoretically, the study contributes to sensemaking theory in two significant ways. First, it empirically distinguishes interpretive adaptation from administrative discretion by identifying observable indicators of meaning-construction, collective deliberation, and iterative justification. Second, it extends sensemaking theory into a longitudinal framework by demonstrating how interpretive outcomes are retained, institutionalized, and recursively reproduced over time.

This longitudinal perspective advances existing theory by conceptualizing sensemaking as a temporally layered process rather than a discrete cognitive episode.

Empirically, the study provides multi-case, multi-level evidence from decentralized local government organizations, addressing contextual and geographical limitations in prior research. Methodologically, it strengthens qualitative rigor through cross-case comparison and temporal process tracing, enhancing analytical generalization.

3.6 Implications for Public Management Practice

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that efforts to improve policy implementation should extend beyond regulatory refinement and capacity building initiatives. Policymakers and senior administrators need to recognize managerial sensemaking as an inherent and productive component of implementation processes. Supporting interpretive spaces, fostering cross level dialogue, and acknowledging contextual variation as an intrinsic feature of decentralized governance can enhance both the coherence and effectiveness of policy implementation. By aligning formal policy design with the interpretive realities of managerial work, public organizations can better navigate complexity and uncertainty in local governance contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that public policy implementation in local government organizations is fundamentally a dynamic and interpretive process shaped by managerial sensemaking, rather than a linear outcome of formal rules and institutional capacity. Policy ambiguity serves as a catalyst for managers to interpret, negotiate, and stabilize policy meanings, collectively enacted across hierarchical levels and contextualized within organizational realities. Over time, these interpretive patterns become institutionalized, shaping routines and guiding future decision making.

Recognizing implementation as interpretive has important policy implications. Policies should combine prescriptive clarity with adaptive space, enabling contextual interpretation while maintaining accountability. Performance frameworks should assess interpretive coherence alongside compliance, and capacity-building initiatives should strengthen collaborative and reflective sensemaking skills to improve policy enactment and responsiveness.

For future research, longitudinal and comparative studies are needed to examine how stabilized sensemaking patterns influence policy outcomes, including potential benefits for consistency and risks of rigidity. Mixed-method approaches can empirically link interpretive processes to measurable performance indicators, and cross-contextual studies can clarify how institutional environments shape sensemaking dynamics. These

efforts will consolidate sensemaking theory and inform more adaptive, effective public management practices in decentralized governance systems.

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