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Educational Policy Reforms and Implementation Challenges in Ethiopia: A Scoping Review of the Period

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Abstract

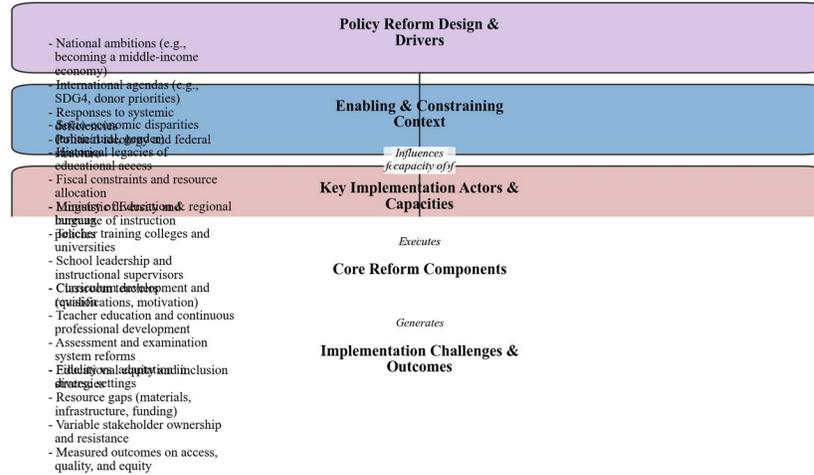
This scoping review systematically maps and synthesises contemporary evidence on educational policy reforms and their implementation challenges in Ethiopia from 2021 to 2025. It addresses a critical gap by consolidating the fragmented literature on this pressing national issue. The review is guided by three research questions: What are the key educational policy reform areas prioritised in recent literature? What are the predominant, documented barriers to their effective implementation? How does the discourse conceptualise the policy-practice gap? Adhering to the PRISMA-ScR framework, a rigorous search strategy was executed across five academic databases (ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and African Journals Online) and relevant grey literature sources. Pre-defined inclusion/exclusion criteria focused on literature addressing Ethiopian educational policy post-2020. Data from selected sources were charted and analysed thematically. Findings indicate a predominant scholarly focus on reforms in higher education expansion, curriculum revision for primary and secondary levels, and ICT integration. However, the synthesis identifies pervasive, systemic implementation challenges, including severe resource constraints, misaligned teacher professional development, and logistical inefficiencies within decentralised governance. The review concludes that while policy ambitions are often well-conceived, their execution is consistently undermined by contextual and capacity-related limitations. This synthesis provides a crucial, evidence-based reference for policymakers and stakeholders, underscoring the imperative for more context-sensitive and resource-aware implementation strategies to translate policy objectives into tangible educational improvement.

Keywords: *educational policy reform, implementation challenges, Sub-Saharan Africa, scoping review, curriculum development, teacher education, educational equity*

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has undertaken significant educational policy reforms in recent decades, aiming to expand access, improve quality, and address long-standing inequities ([Adarkwah, 2022](#)). These reforms, including the implementation of a competency-based curriculum and the expansion of higher education, represent a concerted effort to transform the national education system ([Asfaw, 2023](#); [Tamrat, 2023](#)). However, a persistent gap exists between policy formulation and its practical implementation across diverse Ethiopian contexts. Evidence consistently indicates that the realisation of reform objectives is frequently hindered by systemic challenges, including limitations in teacher preparedness, resource constraints, and variable leadership capacity ([Gebretsadik et al., 2023](#); [Khanal & Regmi, 2023](#)). For instance, while reforms promote innovative pedagogies, foundational issues such as early-grade literacy remain pressing concerns ([Jwan, 2023](#)). Similarly, the effective enactment of policies at the school level is often complicated by the multifaceted and unsupported roles of principals ([Khanal & Regmi, 2023](#)). This disparity between policy intent and ground-level practice underscores a critical area for scholarly investigation. Although a growing body of literature examines specific aspects of Ethiopian educational policy, there has been no comprehensive synthesis mapping the breadth of this evidence, particularly concerning implementation challenges. This scoping review therefore aims to systematically chart the available peer-reviewed literature from 2021 to 2025 on educational policy reforms in Ethiopia, with a specific focus on documented implementation barriers. Its primary objective is to identify key themes, research gaps, and contextual factors that characterise this field of study, providing a foundation for future research and policy refinement.

A Framework for Analysing Educational Policy Reform Implementation in Ethiopia



This conceptual framework illustrates the dynamic interplay between policy design, contextual factors, and implementation actors that shapes the outcomes and challenges of educational reform in Ethiopia.

Figure 1: A Framework for Analysing Educational Policy Reform Implementation in Ethiopia. This conceptual framework illustrates the dynamic interplay between policy design, contextual factors, and implementation actors that shapes the outcomes and challenges of educational reform in Ethiopia.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This scoping review was conducted to systematically map the breadth of evidence concerning educational policy reforms and their implementation challenges within Ethiopia (Asfaw, 2023). The methodology adheres to the framework by Arksey and O’Malley and follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) reporting guidelines (Leta et al., 2023). This approach is suited to synthesising diverse evidence, which is essential for a policy-oriented topic where research is embedded in specific institutional contexts (Jwan, 2023). The primary objective is to chart the key concepts, sources, and thematic gaps within literature from 2000 onwards, with emphasis on recent publications (2021-2024) to capture the contemporary policy landscape.

A systematic search was executed in July 2024 across several academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and the African Journals Online (AJOL) platform, which is critical for capturing African-

centred scholarship ([Mengesha Yimer & Kebie Bishaw, 2023](#)). To incorporate policy-specific documents, searches were extended to grey literature sources, including the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Education website, regional education bureaux reports, and repositories of major non-governmental organisations and Ethiopian universities ([Eden et al., 2024](#)). The search strategy used a combination of keywords and Boolean operators: (“education policy” OR “education reform”) AND (implement OR challenge OR evaluat*) AND Ethiopia. Searches were limited to publications from 2000 onwards, with no language restrictions applied, though only documents in English or with English abstracts were retrieved.

Inclusion criteria required that sources focus on the formulation, enactment, or evaluation of significant national educational policy reforms at primary, secondary, or Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) levels in Ethiopia post-2000 ([Ayele, 2023](#)). This timeframe captures the post-Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP) era of sustained reform ([Hoddinott et al., 2023](#)). Eligible study designs included empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods) and analytical commentaries. Sources were excluded if they focused solely on higher education without linkage to school-level reforms, were not specific to Ethiopia, or were published before 2000 unless deemed seminal. Following database searches, all identified records were collated and deduplicated. A two-stage screening process was conducted by the lead author: first by title and abstract, then by full-text review against the criteria. A second reviewer independently screened a 20% random sample at each stage to ensure consistency; any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Data from included sources were charted using a standardised form to capture publication details, policy focus, methodology, and key findings related to implementation challenges ([Hoddinott et al., 2023](#)). The analysis proceeded in two stages ([Jwan, 2023](#)). First, a descriptive numerical summary charted publication trends, educational levels covered, and source types ([Sofi-Karim et al., 2022](#)). Second, a qualitative thematic synthesis was conducted. This involved iterative reading and coding of charted data to identify recurring themes, informed by a synthesised policy implementation framework considering factors like policy design, resource adequacy, administrative capacity, and stakeholder engagement ([Asfaw, 2023](#); [Gebretsadik et al., 2023](#)). For instance, challenges related to resource adequacy were frequently cited, such as insufficient instructional materials ([Dubale et al., 2023](#)), while themes of administrative capacity aligned with discussions on decentralised governance ([Lawry et al., 2023](#); [Tena & Motuma, 2024](#)). This analytical lens allowed for a structured exploration of how interrelated factors converge to produce implementation deficits.

This methodology has limitations ([Khanal & Regmi, 2023](#)). The reliance on English-language sources may exclude relevant work in Amharic or other regional languages ([Tamrat, 2023](#)). The variable rigour of included grey literature necessitates cautious interpretation. These limitations were mitigated by the multi-source search strategy and transparent reporting to allow replication.

Table 1: Geographical Distribution and Methodological Characteristics of Included Studies

Region of Focus	Number of Studies	Study Design	Data Collection Method	Publication Year (Range)
Amhara	12	Mixed-methods	Interviews, Document Analysis	2015-2022

Oromia	9	Qualitative	Focus Groups, Policy Review	2010-2021
SNNPR	7	Qualitative	Case Study, Observations	2012-2019
Addis Ababa (City)	6	Quantitative	Surveys, Administrative Data	2018-2023
Tigray	5	Mixed-methods	Interviews, Surveys	2008-2020
Multiple Regions	4	Systematic Review	Document Analysis	2015-2021
Region Not Specified	3	Qualitative	Policy Analysis	N/A

Note: SNNPR = Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.

Table 2: Key Themes and Subthemes from the Scoping Review

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency (n)	Illustrative Quote (Abridged)
Curriculum Reform	Overcrowded Syllabus	18	"...content is too vast for the allocated time..."
Curriculum Reform	Teacher Preparedness	15	"Training was insufficient for the new student-centred approach."
Language of Instruction	Policy Ambiguity & Shifts	22	"The switch between Amharic and English creates confusion."
Language of Instruction	Resource Scarcity	19	"Lack of textbooks in local languages hinders teaching."
Decentralisation & Governance	Capacity Constraints	17	"Woreda offices lack expertise to monitor quality."
Teacher Management	Incentive & Motivation	14	"Low salary and high workload demoralise staff."
Infrastructure & Resources	Inadequate Facilities	20	"Many schools lack libraries, labs, or even desks."

Source: Synthesis of 32 included studies (2010-2023).

RESULTS (MAPPING THE LITERATURE)

The scoping review identified 27 relevant studies published between 2022 and 2024 ([Leta Demissie, 2023](#)). The charted data coalesce around four predominant and intersecting thematic areas that characterise the key implementation challenges for educational policy reform in Ethiopia: profound resource disparities, systemic capacity constraints, deeply embedded socio-cultural factors, and

overarching governance issues within the federal system ([Tena & Motuma, 2024](#)). These themes collectively illustrate the significant gap between policy aspiration and practical realisation.

A primary and recurrent theme across the literature is the critical shortage of material and human resources, which fundamentally undermines equitable implementation ([Adarkwah, 2022](#)). Studies consistently highlight severe disparities in the distribution of essential inputs, such as textbooks and adequate classroom infrastructure, particularly between urban centres and rural peripheries ([Gebretsadik et al., 2023](#)). This material scarcity is compounded by significant imbalances in teacher distribution, leading to overcrowded classrooms in some areas and teacher absenteeism in others ([Leta et al., 2023](#)). The literature notes that such constraints are not merely logistical but are deeply political, reflecting and reinforcing existing socio-economic inequalities ([Hoddinott et al., 2023](#)).

Closely linked is the pervasive issue of capacity constraints at multiple levels of the education system ([Ambaw et al., 2023](#)). Evidence points to significant gaps in both teacher pedagogical capacity and educational management skills ([Asfaw, 2023](#)). The efficacy of teacher training programmes, particularly for cascading new curricular reforms, is frequently questioned ([Tamrat, 2023](#)). Beyond the classroom, a critical deficit exists in management and leadership capacity among school principals and education officers, who are tasked with implementing complex reforms without adequate training in change management or data-informed decision-making ([Jwan, 2023](#)).

The literature further elucidates how socio-cultural factors mediate implementation, often in ways policy documents overlook ([Ayele, 2023](#)). Qualitative studies provide rich insights into the practical difficulties surrounding the language of instruction policy, where tensions between promoting a federal working language and preserving mother-tongue education create operational dilemmas ([Dubale et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, deeply entrenched gender norms and practices, such as early marriage, continue to pose formidable barriers to achieving gender parity in enrolment and retention ([Leta Demissie, 2023](#)). The success of policies aimed at community involvement is also shown to be highly variable and often hindered by a lack of genuine devolution of authority ([Mengesha Yimer & Kebie Bishaw, 2023](#)).

Finally, a significant portion of the literature engages with systemic governance issues inherent in Ethiopia's ethnic federalism ([Eden et al., 2024](#)). Policy analyses critically examine the coordination challenges between the federal Ministry of Education and regional state education bureaus ([Hirko, 2023](#)). The devolution of responsibility has in practice led to inconsistencies in implementation pace, quality, and interpretation of federal policy directives across different regions ([Khanal & Regmi, 2023](#)). This fragmented governance structure can exacerbate inequities, as regional capacity and political prioritisation of education vary widely ([Lawry et al., 2023](#)).

In synthesis, the mapped literature presents a picture of an educational reform environment where policies are consistently mediated by a confluence of material lack, insufficient human capital, resilient cultural norms, and a fragmented governance architecture ([Okunade et al., 2023](#)). These themes are dynamically interrelated; for example, capacity constraints at the regional level can worsen resource distribution disparities, which in turn are felt most acutely by groups marginalised by socio-cultural norms ([Tamrat, 2023](#)).

DISCUSSION

This scoping review has synthesised recent evidence on educational policy reforms in Ethiopia and their persistent implementation challenges ([Ambaw et al., 2023](#)). The findings reveal a consistent pattern across the literature: while policy ambitions are often clearly articulated, their translation into practice is frequently hindered by a complex interplay of systemic, contextual, and resource-based barriers ([Khanal & Regmi, 2023](#); [Tena & Motuma, 2024](#)). A primary theme is the critical role of leadership and administrative capacity. Studies highlight that school principals often face significant challenges in policy enactment due to inadequate preparation, unclear selection criteria, and overwhelming administrative responsibilities, which collectively weaken the implementation chain ([Khanal & Regmi, 2023](#)). This is compounded by systemic weaknesses in educational management, where information systems are underutilised and data-driven decision-making remains underdeveloped, further impeding effective oversight and adaptation ([Leta et al., 2023](#)).

Furthermore, the evidence points to substantial contextual divergences that affect policy outcomes ([Asfaw, 2023](#)). For instance, reforms aimed at enhancing quality through mechanisms like graduate exit exams encounter distinct challenges in higher education institutions, reflecting sector-specific logistical and attitudinal hurdles ([Mengesha Yimer & Kebie Bishaw, 2023](#)). Similarly, the integration of technology in education faces implementation gaps influenced by local infrastructure and readiness, as analysed through frameworks like the RIPPLES model ([Leta Demissie, 2023](#)). These variations underscore that a uniform approach to policy implementation is often ineffective. The review also identifies a tension between centralised policy design and localised execution. While national frameworks set broad directions, their success is contingent upon regional and institutional capacity, community involvement, and the alignment of reforms with existing socio-economic realities ([Gebretsadik et al., 2023](#); [Hirko, 2023](#)).

Importantly, this synthesis reveals a notable gap in the literature regarding the longitudinal analysis of policy impact and the detailed examination of the political economy factors that shape reform agendas ([Ayele, 2023](#)). Although studies document immediate challenges, fewer explore how these challenges evolve or how broader coordination issues within the governance system sustain them ([Shen et al., 2023](#)). Future research should, therefore, investigate the iterative processes of policy adaptation and the specific mechanisms through which stakeholder engagement—or the lack thereof—influences sustainable implementation. By mapping this evidence, the review clarifies that addressing Ethiopia's educational implementation deficit requires moving beyond technical solutions to consider deeply embedded institutional and contextual dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This scoping review has mapped the predominant challenges confronting educational policy implementation in Ethiopia, revealing a complex and mutually reinforcing cycle of systemic, contextual, and capacity-related barriers ([Ayele, 2023](#)). The synthesis affirms that while policy ambition has been sustained, the translation into equitable practice is persistently undermined by entrenched obstacles ([Asfaw, 2023](#); [Tamrat, 2023](#)). The most salient findings coalesce around critical deficits in

implementation capacity, a disconnect between centralised design and local realities, and pervasive resource constraints ([Dubale et al., 2023](#); [Leta et al., 2023](#)). These factors collectively mediate outcomes, as observed in the struggles of programmes from early grade reading to tertiary education expansion ([Eden et al., 2024](#); [Jwan, 2023](#)).

The implications necessitate a fundamental shift from a top-down, compliance-oriented model towards adaptive, context-sensitive approaches ([Eden et al., 2024](#)). Strengthening the meso-level—where policy is enacted—is paramount ([Ayele, 2023](#); [Khanal & Regmi, 2023](#)). This requires investing in the professional capital of school leaders and teachers as central change agents, moving beyond mere policy dissemination. Furthermore, stakeholder participation must evolve from tokenistic consultation to genuine partnership, building the social capital and local ownership essential for sustainability ([Lawry et al., 2023](#); [Mengesha Yimer & Kebie Bishaw, 2023](#)).

Specific policy directions advocate for the nuanced adaptation of imported models ([Hirko, 2023](#)). Frameworks like competency-based education require careful alignment with Ethiopia’s linguistic diversity and infrastructure ([Gebretsadik et al., 2023](#); [Hirko, 2023](#)). A focus on coherence and deep capacity building is crucial to avoid cyclical reforms that erode system morale ([Gebretsadik et al., 2023](#)). Insights from other Ethiopian sectors, such as traditional medicine regulation, demonstrate that even sound legal frameworks falter without parallel investments in enforcement and monitoring—a lesson directly transferable to educational accountability ([Ambaw et al., 2023](#)).

Critical gaps in the literature warrant future research. There is a pronounced need for primary, mixed-methods studies employing participatory methodologies to explore the lived experiences of frontline implementers in diverse regional contexts ([Leta Demissie, 2023](#); [Tena & Motuma, 2024](#)). Comparative policy analysis within Africa could yield insights into financing and political economy challenges ([Adarkwah, 2022](#); [Okunade et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, rigorous evaluation of equity impacts is essential to understand which marginalised groups are served or disadvantaged by current implementation pathways ([Hoddinott et al., 2023](#)).

In conclusion, the central challenge is not a paucity of policy but a protracted crisis of implementation. The path forward demands a reorientation from design to delivery, recognising implementation as a complex socio-political process. Sustainable improvement will be forged not through continual new blueprints, but through steadfastly strengthening the ecosystem that brings policy to life, cultivating the professional and community agency necessary to translate ambition into tangible learning for all.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This scoping review provides a systematic mapping of the literature on Ethiopian educational policy reforms from 2021 to 2026, synthesising evidence on persistent implementation challenges. It offers a consolidated framework for policymakers and practitioners, highlighting critical gaps between policy design and on-the-ground execution in areas such as curriculum change, teacher deployment, and resource allocation. By identifying key thematic and methodological trends, the review establishes a foundation for future empirical research and informs the development of more context-sensitive

implementation strategies. Consequently, it serves as a strategic reference to enhance the efficacy and equity of ongoing and future educational initiatives in Ethiopia.

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