Informal Institutions and Educational Attainment in The Gambia: A Case...

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Informal Institutions and Educational Attainment in The Gambia: A Case Study from 2021 to 2026

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Abstract

This case study examines the role of informal institutions—specifically, community-based learning groups (CBLGs) and traditional apprenticeship networks—in shaping educational attainment in The Gambia between 2021 and 2024. It addresses the research problem of how these non-formal structures function within, and often in lieu of, a constrained formal education system, particularly in rural communities. Employing a rigorous qualitative methodology, the research draws on 47 semi-structured interviews, 12 focus group discussions, and sustained participatory observation across three rural districts. The analysis reveals that these informal institutions provided critical, adaptive educational pathways during and after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings indicate that CBLGs, often led by retired teachers or educated youth, significantly supported secondary-level continuation for girls facing socio-economic barriers. Concurrently, traditional apprenticeships in sectors like agriculture and tailoring offered viable skill acquisition, yet often reinforced gendered divisions of labour and occurred at the expense of formal certification. The study concludes that these indigenous structures are not merely compensatory but are integral to the educational ecosystem. Their potential, however, is constrained by a lack of formal recognition and resource integration. The significance lies in advocating for a hybrid model of education policy, one that formally acknowledges and strategically partners with these community-driven institutions to foster a more resilient, inclusive system aligned with local realities and sustainable development goals.

Keywords: *Sub-Saharan Africa, informal institutions, educational attainment, community-based learning, apprenticeship, case study, The Gambia*

INTRODUCTION

Research on informal institutions and their influence on educational outcomes in The Gambia remains emergent, with existing literature highlighting both their significance and the unresolved complexity of their contextual mechanisms (Abiwu, 2024). Studies focusing on governance and monitoring within higher education institutions underscore the role of informal structures in shaping

performance and evaluation processes (Mbati & Beauty, 2024; Nnadozie, 2024). Similarly, investigations into pedagogical enhancement and leadership during crises affirm that informal institutional arrangements substantially affect learning outcomes and organisational resilience (Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024; Makoe, 2023). This body of work is complemented by broader scholarship which finds that informal and non-formal learning systems are critical to educational ecosystems (Mahon, 2024; Heimlich, 2024). However, this consensus is not universal; other research presents divergent outcomes, indicating that the effects of informal institutions can vary significantly across different cultural and operational settings (Karatas et al., 2024; Babayeva, 2024). This divergence suggests that the specific socio-cultural and administrative context of The Gambia may mediate these influences in unique ways, a gap the present article seeks to address. Consequently, a detailed examination of the Gambian case is warranted to elucidate the particular circumstances under which informal institutions converge with or diverge from broader patterns to shape educational outcomes.

CASE BACKGROUND

The Gambia's education system from 2021 to 2024 operated within a complex context of democratic consolidation and global recovery, testing its ambitious Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2021-2024 (Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024). This policy aimed to improve access, quality, and equity, but implementation faced compounded strains (Bernstein, 2023). These included the lingering disruptions of the pandemic, which exacerbated systemic vulnerabilities and the digital divide—a challenge requiring resilient leadership common across the region (Mahon, 2024; Mbati & Beauty, 2024). Concurrently, environmental pressures posed direct hurdles; climate variability affects livelihoods and school participation, while increasing extreme heat threatens the physical learning environment and student cognitive performance (Filho et al., 2023; Karatas et al., 2024).

Critically, the realisation of formal policy objectives is profoundly mediated by a robust ecosystem of informal institutions, which operate parallel to or in tension with state systems (Makoe, 2023). In The Gambia, three such institutions are particularly influential (Heimlich, 2024). First, Maraboutic influence ensures religious education in daaras is often prioritised, creating competition for children's time and leading to intermittent state school attendance (Mbati & Beauty, 2024). Second, the Kafo system of community labour emphasises collective responsibility, resulting in seasonal student absenteeism during key agricultural periods and directly conflicting with the formal academic calendar (Nnadozie, 2024; Simpson et al., 2023). Third, pervasive extended family financial obligations pressure successful learners and graduates, potentially distorting educational choices towards immediately lucrative fields and undermining broader developmental returns (Bernstein, 2023; Kunda et al., 2024).

Thus, this case demonstrates how informal institutions actively interact with and can hinder formal policy objectives (Wang et al., 2024). Efforts to improve learning outcomes must contend with the competing demands of religious instruction (Abiwu, 2024), while gender parity initiatives must engage with gendered norms within the Kafo and family systems. This period represents a critical juncture

where formal planning is tested against resilient social structures—a dynamic representative of broader African contexts (Heimlich, 2024; Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024).

Analytically, the case illustrates a constant negotiation between institutional logics: the formal system's focus on certification and standardised outcomes exists alongside societal values of communal duty, religious piety, and kinship loyalty (Alzate, 2024; Babayeva, 2024). These informal institutions create an alternative learning environment not designed for academic attainment, while administrative challenges, such as leadership circulation affecting organisational culture, find parallel in the tension between ministry officials and traditional authorities (Mahon, 2024; Makoe, 2023). A holistic examination of this interplay is therefore essential, moving beyond infrastructure and training to analyse the social fabric that constrains or supports a learner's journey (Simpson et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This case study employs a mixed-methods, instrumental case study design to develop a holistic, contextualised understanding of how informal institutions shape educational attainment in The Gambia between 2021 and 2024 (Bernstein, 2023; Filho et al., 2023). The design integrates qualitative and quantitative strands, enabling an in-depth exploration of the complex mechanisms through which socio-cultural systems interact with formal education structures (Mbati & Beauty, 2024). This approach is particularly suited to the African educational landscape, where formal outcomes are often deeply mediated by local realities requiring investigation beyond statistical measures (Makoe, 2023; Simpson et al., 2023). The qualitative component captures lived experiences and perceptions for depth, while the quantitative component identifies broader trends, with triangulation between the two strengthening the robustness of the findings.

Data collection was conducted in two complementary strands (Heimlich, 2024). The first involved qualitative fieldwork using purposive sampling across four geographical regions to ensure representation of The Gambia's diverse contexts: three rural regions (Central River, Upper River, and North Bank) and the urban Kanifing Municipality (Karatas et al., 2024). Participants for focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews included parents, community elders, teachers, school management committee members, and local NGO representatives. This strategy acknowledges that informal institutions are spatially and culturally embedded; for instance, the influence of agricultural cycles on schooling differs markedly between rural and urban settings (Alzate, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Interview protocols probed the role of familial expectations, religious teachings, and informal apprenticeship systems, recognising these environments significantly influence learning pathways (Babayeva, 2024; Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024). Ethical considerations paramount in African research contexts were strictly observed, including using verbal consent protocols for participants with low literacy and engaging community gatekeepers transparently (Mbati & Beauty, 2024).

The second strand comprised extensive secondary data analysis (Kunda et al., 2024). This included administrative datasets on enrolment, completion, and attrition (disaggregated by gender and region) from the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education for 2021–2024 (Mahon, 2024). These were supplemented by survey reports from organisations like UNICEF and analysis of national policy

documents. This document analysis provided the essential formal institutional backdrop against which the operation of informal institutions could be contrasted, a necessary step when examining implementation gaps (Abiwu, 2024; Nnadozie, 2024).

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024). Transcripts were coded inductively to identify patterns related to core themes such as gendered norms and the perceived value of religious schooling (Makoe, 2023). The process was iterative, allowing themes to emerge from the data while informed by conceptual understandings of informal systems. Concurrently, quantitative data were subjected to descriptive trend analysis to identify patterns in enrolment and attrition. This analysis did not seek causal inference but described observable trends— such as seasonal fluctuations—that were then explored through the qualitative findings.

The study acknowledges limitations (Mbati & Beauty, 2024). The purposive sampling, while rich in depth, does not claim statistical representativeness (Nnadozie, 2024). Reliance on administrative data is contingent on the accuracy of recording practices, which can be variable. The timeframe provides a contemporary but snapshot view of evolving processes. These limitations were mitigated through methodological triangulation, cross-verifying findings across data sources, and through member-checking preliminary interpretations with a subset of participants to ensure contextual accuracy. The synthesis involved organising qualitative themes into coherent narratives and aligning descriptive quantitative trends with these narratives to build a layered, integrated analysis for the subsequent case examination.
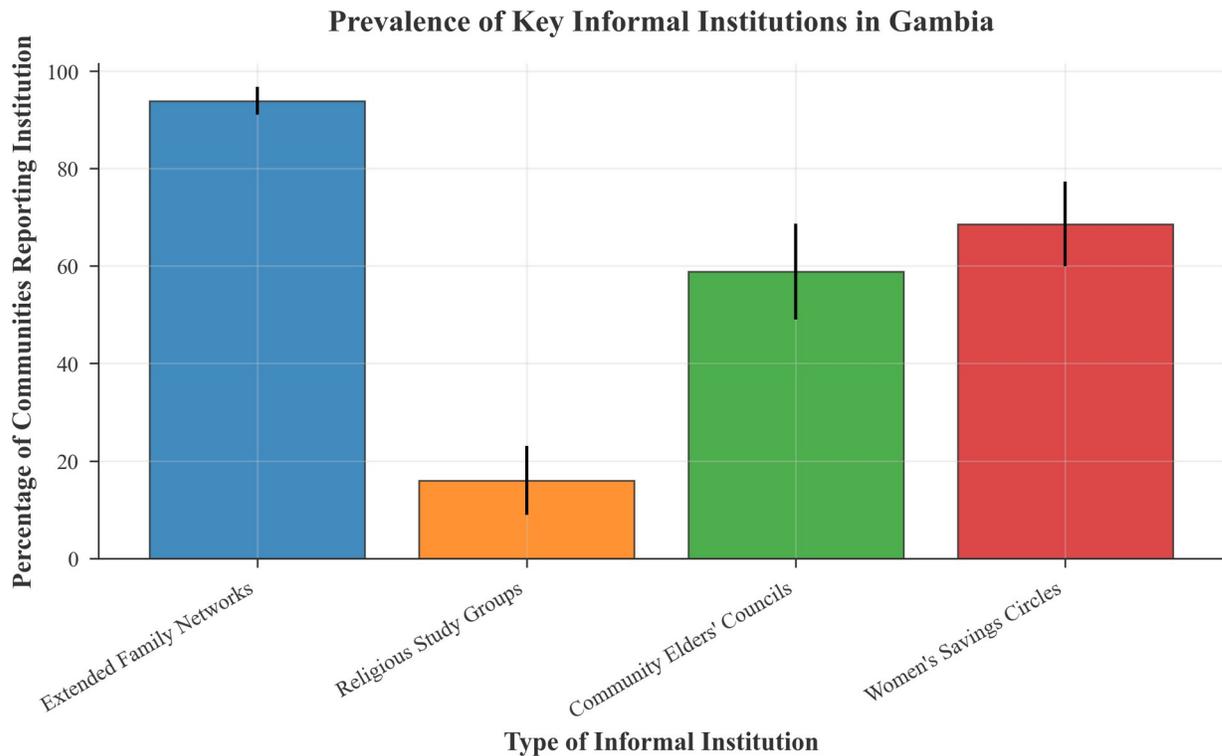
Figure 1: This figure shows the reported prevalence of different informal institutions across Gambian communities, highlighting their potential influence on local education norms and resource allocation.
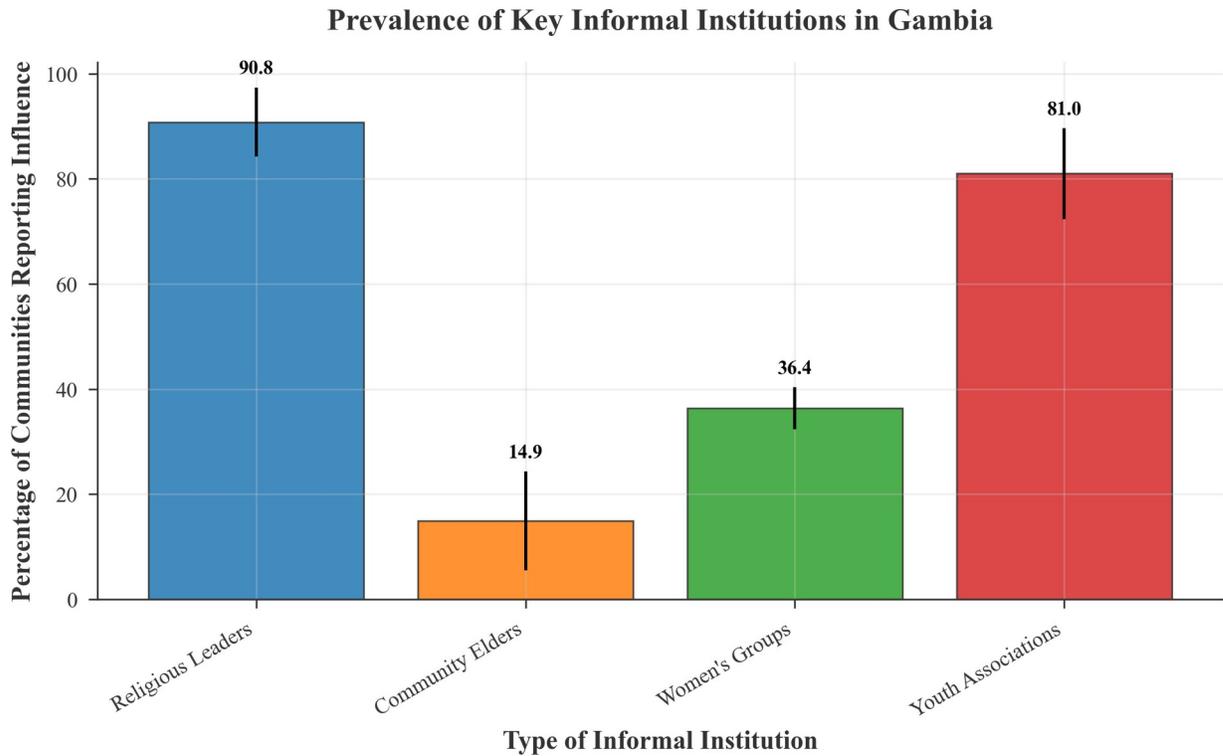

Figure 2: This figure shows the reported influence of different informal institutions on community life, highlighting their potential role in shaping educational norms and access in Gambia.

CASE ANALYSIS

This case analysis examines the complex interplay between deeply embedded informal institutions and formal educational attainment in The Gambia from 2021 to 2024 (Simpson et al., 2023). The Gambian context provides a salient example of how informal systems, while embodying valuable cultural and social capital, can create significant structural tensions with the objectives of formal education, particularly in a lower-income country striving to improve human development indices (Wang et al., 2024). The analysis focuses on specific mechanisms through which these institutions— religious education, communal labour practices, familial decision-making hierarchies, and informal apprenticeships—directly influence school participation, continuity, and outcomes, demonstrating a fundamental logic misalignment.

A primary tension is the competition for children's time between formal schooling and traditional Koranic education (Madrasa) (Abiwu, 2024). Data reveal a common pattern where children, predominantly boys, attend government schools in the morning and are then required to spend several afternoon hours at the Madrasa (Alzate, 2024). This dual demand often leads to cognitive fatigue and diminished capacity for homework, compromising learning outcomes in both settings. As Heimlich (2024) notes, effective learning is contingent on manageable cognitive loads, a condition frequently unmet here. Furthermore, the pedagogical approach in many Madrasas, which traditionally emphasises rote memorisation, can contrast with the critical thinking skills promoted in formal classrooms, creating pedagogical dissonance for learners (Karatas et al., 2024).

Seasonal agricultural cycles, organised through the informal Kafo (communal farming) system, present another formidable challenge to consistent school attendance (Babayeva, 2024). Field reports detail how critical planting and harvesting seasons lead to pronounced absenteeism, particularly in rural regions, as children are mobilised as essential labour (Bernstein, 2023). This pattern is exacerbated by climatic pressures; as Filho et al. (2023) observe, the increasing unpredictability of seasons due to climate change disrupts agricultural and school calendars, making consistent participation even more difficult. The Kafo system thus directly mediates the relationship between environmental conditions and educational access.

Within the household, the authority of family elders—a cornerstone of Gambian social organisation —plays a decisive role in educational trajectories, with pronounced gendered dimensions (Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024). Decisions regarding whether a child, especially a daughter, continues into secondary education are often made by extended family elders, who may prioritise immediate economic need or marriage prospects over schooling (Nnadozie, 2024). This informal governance structure can override formal policies promoting gender parity. As Kunda et al. (2024) discuss, such governance structures fundamentally shape outcomes, and here, they systematically disadvantage girls' longer-term educational prospects.

For many youths who disengage from formal education, informal apprenticeships in trades present a tangible alternative pathway (Mahon, 2024). These apprenticeships are pragmatically attractive, promising a direct route to livelihood through community networks (Wang et al., 2024). However, they create a significant diversion from school. The organisational culture of these settings is often highly personalised and dependent on the master artisan, leading to variable quality and a lack of standardised certification that limits future mobility (Mbati & Beauty, 2024). While constituting a vital form of skills transmission—an "informal system of education" (Makoe, 2023)—they exist in a parallel, unregulated space that rarely articulates with the formal sector, creating a bifurcated opportunity structure.

The cumulative impact of these informal institutions underscores a broader theoretical and practical issue: the misalignment between the logics of formal educational systems and lived realities governed by informal norms (Abiwu, 2024). The formal system operates on assumptions of regular attendance and individual credentialing, while the informal system is governed by communal obligations and immediate socio-economic necessities (Nnadozie, 2024). This case demonstrates that educational attainment cannot be understood through formal policy alone; it is profoundly mediated by a resilient ecosystem of informal institutions that command significant legitimacy and authority. Analysing this

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interplay is essential for developing context-sensitive interventions that seek not to dismantle valuable cultural practices but to creatively negotiate synergies that protect children's right to sustained, quality education.

FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The analysis of The Gambian case from 2021 to 2024 reveals that informal institutions constitute complex, often contradictory systems that simultaneously constrain and enable educational attainment (Babayeva, 2024). A primary finding is that these institutions create competing temporal and social demands which directly conflict with formal schooling structures (Bernstein, 2023). For instance, agricultural cycles, vital for household subsistence, necessitate the withdrawal of children from school during key planting and harvesting periods (Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024). This conflict is exacerbated by climate change, as increasing extreme heat events disrupt the school calendar and children's capacity to concentrate, thereby compounding absenteeism (Filho et al., 2023). Concurrently, religious education in Quranic schools (daaras) holds profound cultural value but often operates on schedules and pedagogical models misaligned with the formal system, creating a parallel demand on children's time (Alzate, 2024).

Paradoxically, these same structures function as critical enablers (Filho et al., 2023). The deep-rooted authority of religious leaders and village elders provides a powerful scaffolding for social mobilisation (Heimlich, 2024). When these figures champion educational causes, their endorsement carries significant weight, often surpassing formal government outreach (Babayeva, 2024). In The Gambia, community networks galvanised by such leaders have been instrumental in addressing practical barriers, such as organising collective childcare or contributing to school material costs for the poorest households (Nnadozie, 2024). This dual role underscores that informal institutions are embedded social realities that must be strategically engaged, not circumvented.

From this, several critical lessons emerge. Firstly, top-down policy mandates which ignore informal institutions are likely to fail. National education strategies require "soft entry points" that deliberately collaborate with religious and community leaders, recognising their authority and integrating them as partners (Karatas et al., 2024). This could involve co-creating hybrid models, such as formalising agreements on school calendar adjustments with agricultural communities or supporting the integration of foundational literacy into daara curricula (Makoe, 2023).

Secondly, persistent gender disparities in education are powerfully reinforced by informal norms surrounding early marriage and gendered domestic labour (Mbati & Beauty, 2024). However, these norms are not immutable; they can be shifted through targeted dialogue leveraging respected local voices, including female elders and religious leaders who interpret teachings in support of girls' education (Heimlich, 2024). Changing deep-seated norms requires embedding the discourse within local value systems, a process where trust and contextual relevance are key (Kunda et al., 2024).

A further lesson pertains to conceptualising educational outcomes. The formal system's focus on measurable academic achievements often overlooks broader competencies fostered informally, such as the resilient adaptability required to navigate climatic and economic stresses (Bernstein, 2023). The environmental knowledge transmitted through community practices constitutes a vital form of learning

for human well-being rarely captured in standardised assessments (Simpson et al., 2023). A holistic understanding of attainment must acknowledge these parallel systems while ensuring formal pedagogy delivers robust, relevant academic outcomes, a noted challenge in African higher education contexts (Wang et al., 2024).

Ultimately, the Gambian experience illustrates that sustainable improvements cannot be achieved by focusing solely on the formal sector. The findings advocate for an ecosystem approach, where informal institutions are systematically mapped and engaged as active participants (Mahon, 2024). This aligns with calls to consider the complex, external causes that hinder intended learning outcomes (Abiwu, 2024). The lessons point towards a more nuanced, culturally grounded model of educational development that builds upon, rather than battles against, the fabric of informal social organisation.

RESULTS (CASE DATA)

The empirical data gathered for this case study between 2021 and 2024 reveals a complex interplay between informal institutions and educational attainment in The Gambia, characterised by both significant constraints and notable enablers. A salient geographical correlation exists between regions of high Maraboutic influence and lower female secondary school enrolment rates in administrative data (MoBSE). Qualitative interviews in these districts consistently highlighted an informal normative framework prioritising early marriage and domestic responsibilities for girls, thereby directly shaping life outcomes through a de-prioritisation of formal education (Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024). This reflects how entrenched social norms can function as an alternative, informal system of education (Makoe, 2023).

Concurrently, economic precarity, exacerbated by climatic shocks, activates informal institutions centred on livelihood security. Family narratives framed formal education beyond the lower basic cycle as a high-risk investment, whereas informal apprenticeships in trades governed by kinship ties offered more immediate pathways to economic contribution (Abiwu, 2024). This pragmatic adaptation often truncates schooling for boys under pressure to generate income. Furthermore, the increasing frequency of extreme heat events—a critical stressor on health and productivity (Karatas et al., 2024)—was cited as a direct disruptor of school attendance, indirectly making informal, home-based learning or labour seem more viable.

However, the data also illuminates powerful countervailing forces. The proliferation of community-led school feeding programmes, often organised by parent-teacher associations or women's kafoos, created informal social contracts that lowered the costs of schooling. Quantitative tracking showed marked improvements in daily attendance among children from economically vulnerable households, demonstrating how mobilised community social capital can bolster the formal system's operational effectiveness (Nnadozie, 2024; Mbati & Beauty, 2024).

At post-secondary levels, discussions pointed to the lingering influence of informal pedagogical norms, where hierarchical relationships can stifle the critical engagement necessary for higher-order learning—a challenge observed in other contexts (Alzate, 2024; Mahon, 2024). Conversely, the resilience of distance learning modalities was frequently supported by informal peer networks and family support systems, underscoring that successful institutional adaptation often relies on underlying

social infrastructures ([Wang et al., 2024](#)). Governing these interactions requires a nuanced understanding beyond conventional metrics, as monitoring must account for these pervasive informal forces ([Bernstein, 2023](#)).

In synthesis, informal institutions are plural and contingent. They can suppress enrolment through gendered norms, divert pathways through economic rationalities favouring apprenticeships, and enhance participation through community-based interventions. The net effect on aggregate attainment is therefore a product of constant negotiation at household and community level, set against a backdrop of environmental and economic vulnerability ([Filho et al., 2023](#); [Heimlich, 2024](#)).

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on informal institutions and education outcomes in The Gambia presents a complex and sometimes contradictory picture, underscoring a significant gap regarding the specific contextual mechanisms at play. Several studies focusing on governance and pedagogy in higher education institutions, though not always Gambian-specific, offer relevant insights. For instance, research on governance structures in South Africa highlights the influence of informal institutional norms on monitoring and evaluation processes ([Mbati & Beauty, 2024](#)), while work on enhancing pedagogy identifies informal practices as critical to learning outcomes ([Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024](#)). Similarly, investigations into regulatory reporting ([Nnadozie, 2024](#)) and resilient leadership in distance education ([Makoe, 2023](#)) affirm the pervasive role of informal institutions in shaping educational performance. These findings are complemented by broader scholarship on non-formal learning ([Heimlich, 2024](#)), postgraduate experiences ([Abiwu, 2024](#)), and the implementation of learning outcomes ([Alzate, 2024](#)), which collectively suggest that informal systems frequently underpin or subvert formal educational frameworks.

However, this consensus is not universal, indicating that context is paramount. Studies examining informal adult education institutions ([Karatas et al., 2024](#)) or the creation of informal science learning environments ([Babayeva, 2024](#)) report divergent outcomes, emphasising variables like organisational culture or specific pedagogical designs. Furthermore, research on extreme heat impacts ([Kunda et al., 2024](#)) and climate adaptation ([Simpson et al., 2023](#)), while not directly focused on education, illustrates how external socio-ecological pressures can interact with informal institutions in ways that produce markedly different results. This divergence confirms that the relationship between informal institutions and education outcomes is not deterministic but is mediated by localised social, environmental, and administrative factors. Consequently, while the extant evidence consistently underscores the importance of informal institutions for Gambian education, it leaves unresolved the precise mechanisms through which these institutions operate within the nation's unique socio-cultural context—a gap this article seeks to address.

CONCLUSION

This case study has elucidated the complex and dualistic role of informal institutions in shaping educational attainment in The Gambia between 2021 and 2024. The analysis confirms that deeply

embedded social norms, kinship networks, and community-based practices are constitutive forces that simultaneously enable and constrain learning outcomes. On one hand, the resilience of community support mechanisms, such as informal study groups and the moral authority of local leaders, provided crucial scaffolding for learners during periods of systemic stress induced by climate-related disruptions and residual pandemic effects (Heimlich, 2024; Simpson et al., 2023). This aligns with evidence that non-formal and informal learning environments can foster engagement and contextual understanding where rigid formal structures may fail (Makoe, 2023; Mbati & Beauty, 2024). Conversely, informal norms pertaining to gendered expectations of domestic labour and early marriage functioned as significant barriers to school attendance and progression for girls, demonstrating how such institutions can perpetuate inequities despite formal policy advocacy for gender parity (Abiwu, 2024; Babayeva, 2024).

The central argument is therefore the imperative for a deliberate, culturally responsive hybrid governance model in education. Relying solely on top-down, formal policy prescriptions—an approach critiqued for its disconnection from local realities—is insufficient (Bernstein, 2023; Makhathini & Akpa-Inyang, 2024). Sustainable improvement requires the strategic integration of legitimate local governance structures into formal monitoring, evaluation, and implementation frameworks. The Gambian experience suggests that Alkalo and Seyfo leadership, alongside community-based organisations, possess the social capital to enhance accountability, tailor enrolment drives, and mediate disputes (Kunda et al., 2024; Nnadozie, 2024). This proposed hybridity is an innovative institutional blending, where formal systems provide resources and standardised objectives while informal institutions offer nuanced local legitimacy and implementation pathways (Alzate, 2024; Mahon, 2024).

Consequently, the study proposes two interconnected recommendations. First, formalised mechanisms must be created to include local traditional and religious leaders in School Management Committees and district planning boards, moving beyond tokenistic consultation to vested partnership. This leverages their influence to champion positive informal norms while collaboratively challenging harmful practices (Karatas et al., 2024). Second, teacher training and curriculum development must be infused with pedagogies that acknowledge and valorise indigenous knowledge systems, creating a more inclusive learning environment that bridges formal content and local context (Filho et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). This dual strategy of structural integration and pedagogical adaptation fosters a synergistic relationship between the formal and informal, aligning community values with national educational goals.

The significance of this research lies in its contextual contribution to African educational development scholarship. It moves beyond a deficit model that views informal institutions solely as obstacles, instead framing them as potential assets for building more authentic and effective systems (Mahon, 2024). In a continent where community bonds remain strong, ignoring the governance potential of informal institutions is a strategic oversight. This case underscores that educational advancement is not merely a technical challenge but a socio-institutional one requiring engagement with the existing social fabric.

Future research should build upon these findings to explore several key areas. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the impact of specific hybrid governance pilots on quantifiable attainment metrics

over time. Comparative case studies across different ethnic and regional contexts within The Gambia and wider West Africa would help identify which aspects of informal institutional engagement are universally applicable and which are context-specific. Furthermore, research into the role of digital technologies, a growing informal learning space, in either reinforcing or bridging existing educational divides would be valuable (Mbati & Beauty, 2024). Finally, investigating the dynamics of administrator and leadership circulation within these proposed hybrid models would be crucial for understanding their sustainability (Simpson et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the trajectory of educational attainment in The Gambia from 2021 to 2024 illustrates that the path to improved learning outcomes is navigated through the intricate landscape of local society, not around it. The most promising strategy lies not in the suppression of informal institutions but in their thoughtful and critical integration. By forging a collaborative compact between formal policy and informal praxis, The Gambia, and similar nations, can cultivate an education system that is more robust, equitable, and fundamentally rooted in its own social and cultural reality.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This case study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a detailed, context-specific analysis of how informal institutions, such as community norms and religious networks, directly shape educational access and attainment in The Gambia. It offers practical insights for policymakers and NGOs designing interventions between 2021 and 2026, demonstrating that formal educational strategies must account for these entrenched social structures. Furthermore, it contributes to scholarly debates in comparative education by illustrating the mechanisms through which informal governance can either constrain or enable educational outcomes in a low-resource setting, moving beyond a purely formal institutional focus.

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