

**Conceptual Displacement In Public Policy Discourse: Lessons From Uganda's Education And Governance Debates**

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**Abstract**

Conceptual displacement the process by which the original semantic content of a policy concept is gradually supplanted by alternative meanings that serve different ideological and institutional interests — has emerged as a critical but under-examined phenomenon in African public policy scholarship. This study examined conceptual displacement in Uganda's public policy discourse, with particular emphasis on the education and governance sectors, over the period 2010 to 2024. Drawing on a mixed-methods design that combined critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 214 purposively selected policy documents, 28 key informant interviews, and a structured survey administered to 312 policy actors, the study employed univariate, bivariate, and structural equation modelling (SEM) techniques to quantify and explain patterns of semantic drift. Findings revealed that conceptual displacement was widespread across both sectors: Universal Primary Education (UPE) had evolved from a rights-based framework to an enrolment-centric metric, while decentralisation had been reframed from a power-devolution mechanism to a fiscal-transfer instrument. The bivariate analysis established statistically significant positive associations between donor influence and semantic drift ( $r = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and between media amplification and policy incoherence ( $r = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The SEM results indicated that donor framing ( $\beta = 0.42$ ), political capture ( $\beta = 0.51$ ), and institutional drift ( $\beta = 0.38$ ) were the most powerful structural drivers of conceptual displacement, collectively explaining 67% of the variance in the displacement index. The study concludes that conceptual displacement is not incidental but structurally embedded in Uganda's policy environment, driven by asymmetric power relations, donor conditionality, and weak institutional memory. Three key recommendations are advanced: the establishment of a National Policy Concept Registry, mandatory semantic impact assessments for externally financed programmes, and the institutionalisation of participatory policy review mechanisms to preserve conceptual integrity over time.

**Keywords: conceptual displacement, semantic drift, public policy discourse, education policy, governance, Uganda, structural equation modelling, critical discourse analysis.**

**INTRODUCTION**

Public policy discourse is never a neutral arena; it is a space where meanings are contested, co-opted, and continuously renegotiated by actors with competing interests and varying degrees of institutional power. Conceptual displacement — the process by which the original semantic content of a policy concept is incrementally supplanted by alternative meanings that serve different ideological, political, or donor-driven agendas — represents one of the most consequential yet insufficiently theorised dynamics in contemporary governance studies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Al-Alawi et al., 2023; Fred et al., 2023; Joan & Christopher, 2025; Mohd Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2014). In Uganda, the trajectory of landmark policy frameworks such as Universal Primary Education (UPE), introduced in 1997, and decentralisation, institutionalised through the Local Governments Act of 1997, offers a compelling

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laboratory for studying how concepts that are publicly celebrated as transformative may, over time, lose their foundational normative content and be redeployed to serve ends far removed from their original purpose (Mwanj & Audrey, 2025; Salvo-Garrido et al., 2022; Tumwesigye et al., 2020; Uster & Jill Margaret, 2025). The concept of 'free education', for instance, was initially embedded in a rights-based discourse centred on equity and social justice; yet successive policy documents, budget framework papers, and donor-country partnerships have progressively redefined UPE in terms of enrolment statistics, completion rates, and cost-efficiency ratios, thereby displacing its emancipatory dimension with a technocratic, audit-culture framework that privileges quantifiable outputs over transformative processes (Isaac Kazaara & Gracious Kazaara, 2024b; Kazaara & Shamirah, 2024; Mark & Moses, 2025; Nababi & Nelson, 2025). Similarly, decentralisation in Uganda has undergone a gradual but unmistakable semantic transformation: from a concept rooted in political accountability, participatory democracy, and subsidiarity, to one dominated by fiscal transfer arrangements and administrative deconcentration, effectively stripping the concept of its democratising potential (Isaac Kazaara & Gracious Kazaara, 2024a; Julius et al., 2023; Kaziro Nicholas & Sarah, 2024). These displacements are not merely academic curiosities; they have profound material consequences for citizens, especially the most marginalised, whose policy needs are progressively obscured by the rhetorical veneer of transformation that conceptual displacement enables. This study therefore sought to systematically examine the nature, drivers, and consequences of conceptual displacement in Uganda's education and governance policy discourse, deploying a rigorous mixed-methods framework that integrates critical discourse analysis with quantitative statistical modelling to produce findings that are analytically robust and practically actionable for policymakers, development partners, and civil society organisations operating in the Ugandan context.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Uganda's post-1986 policy landscape has been characterised by an ambitious reformist rhetoric that has frequently outpaced the institutional capacity and political will needed to realise stated objectives. The National Resistance Movement (NRM) government, upon assuming power in 1986, articulated a comprehensive developmental vision anchored in concepts such as 'transformation', 'empowerment', 'decentralization', and 'universal access', concepts that were initially imbued with substantive normative content drawn from post-colonial political philosophy, structural adjustment critiques, and grassroots mobilization theory (Julius, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d; Sylvia et al., 2025). The introduction of UPE in 1997, which abolished school fees for four children per household in government schools, was globally acclaimed as a landmark initiative that positioned Uganda as a continental pioneer in education access, with enrolment figures rising dramatically from approximately 3.1 million in 1996 to over 7.6 million by 2003. However, the discourse surrounding UPE shifted perceptibly from the late 2000s onwards, particularly as donor conditionality frameworks introduced by the World Bank's Education Sector Support Programme (ESSP) and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) began to privilege accountability mechanisms centered on learning outcomes, teacher attendance, and school inspection — frameworks that, while instrumentally valuable, simultaneously displaced the rights-based conceptual architecture that had originally legitimized the policy (Janet & Julius, 2023; Julius, 2025e; Julius Arianitwe, 2025; Moureen & Julius, 2023). Parallel dynamics unfolded in

the governance domain, where decentralization — conceptually rooted in Mamdani's (1996) critique of the local state and in Nsibambi's (1998) theorization of devolution — was progressively repositioned through successive local government fiscal transfer memoranda, donor-supported public financial management reforms, and Constitutional Amendment Act provisions that cumulatively reframed decentralization as primarily a mechanism for service delivery rather than a vehicle for democratic deepening (Julius & Geoffrey, 2025a, 2025b; Julius & Sula, n.d.; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025a, 2025d). These observed shifts in conceptual content across two of Uganda's most prominent policy domains provided the empirical impetus for this study, which situates Uganda's experience within a broader global literature on policy translation, concept stretching (Sartori, 1970), essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1956), and discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), while insisting on the need for Uganda-specific empirical evidence generated through methodologically rigorous procedures that can inform both theory and practice.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Despite the growing body of global scholarship on policy translation, semantic drift, and discursive institutionalism, there is a striking absence of empirical, quantitatively grounded studies that systematically document and explain conceptual displacement as it unfolds in Uganda's public policy discourse (Julius & Godfrey, 2025a; Julius & Mategeko, 2025b; Julius & Milly, 2025; Julius & Sula, 2025a). The dominant approach in Ugandan policy analysis has been either purely descriptive or narrowly technocratic, focusing on implementation gaps rather than the upstream problem of conceptual integrity erosion. This gap is particularly consequential because when foundational policy concepts lose their original meaning through gradual displacement, the result is a form of policy incoherence that is simultaneously invisible — because the original terminology is preserved — and deeply damaging, because the substantive commitments embedded in the original concept are progressively abandoned without explicit public debate or democratic accountability (Julius & Geoffrey, 2025d; Julius & Godfrey, 2025b; Julius & Mategeko, 2025a; Julius & Sula, 2025b; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025c). The education sector exemplifies this problem: while Uganda's policy documents continue to invoke the language of 'universal access', 'equity', and 'learner-centred education', the operational frameworks, budget allocations, and performance measurement systems that govern UPE implementation have been fundamentally restructured around enrolment metrics and donor-reporting requirements that are conceptually inconsistent with the original rights-based framework (Julius & Geoffrey, 2025c; Julius & Sula, 2025c, 2025d; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025b). In governance, the continued use of the term 'decentralization' in official discourse obscures the degree to which the concept has been hollowed out through constitutional amendments, fiscal recentralization, and the proliferation of centrally appointed Resident District Commissioners. Without a systematic, evidence-based account of how, when, by whom, and to what effect conceptual displacement occurs in Uganda's policy discourse, policymakers, civil society, and researchers lack the analytical tools needed to identify and contest the semantic erosion of transformative policy commitments.

## **STUDY OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

### **Main Objective**

To examine the nature, drivers, and consequences of conceptual displacement in Uganda's public policy discourse, with specific reference to the education and governance sectors.

### **Specific Objectives**

1. To identify and document patterns of conceptual displacement in Uganda's education and governance policy discourse between 2010 and 2024.
2. To determine the structural and institutional drivers of conceptual displacement in Uganda's public policy environment.
3. To assess the consequences of conceptual displacement for policy coherence, democratic accountability, and equity outcomes in Uganda.

### **Research Questions**

1. What patterns of conceptual displacement characterize Uganda's education and governance policy discourse between 2010 and 2024?
2. What are the key structural and institutional drivers that explain the occurrence and persistence of conceptual displacement in Uganda's public policy environment?
3. In what ways does conceptual displacement affect policy coherence, democratic accountability, and equity outcomes in Uganda?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods research design that integrated critical discourse analysis (CDA) with quantitative statistical techniques to produce a comprehensive account of conceptual displacement in Uganda's education and governance policy discourse. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 214 primary policy documents including Acts of Parliament, policy statements, budget framework papers, donor memoranda of understanding, ministerial circulars, and parliamentary Hansards — spanning the period 2010 to 2024, which were subjected to systematic CDA using van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive discourse framework to identify lexical shifts, intertextual traces, and recontextualisation strategies indicative of conceptual displacement. In addition, 312 policy actors — comprising civil servants (n = 98), development partner representatives (n = 54), civil society practitioners (n = 76), academics and researchers (n = 44), and elected local government officials (n = 40) — were selected through stratified random sampling and administered a structured survey instrument to quantify perceptions of semantic drift, donor influence, institutional memory, and policy coherence. A further 28 key informant interviews were conducted with senior policymakers, constitutional law experts, and policy historians to provide interpretive depth. Univariate analysis was used to generate descriptive statistics — including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and

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percentages — to characterize the distribution of the conceptual displacement index (CDI) and its constituent sub-dimensions across respondents and document categories; for instance, the CDI recorded a mean of 3.84 on a 5-point Likert scale ( $SD = 0.72$ ), with the education sector exhibiting a higher displacement mean ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) than the governance sector ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ). Bivariate analysis was then employed, specifically Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients and chi-square tests of independence, to examine the strength and direction of associations between conceptual displacement and hypothesized explanatory variables including donor influence ( $r = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), media amplification ( $r = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), institutional memory ( $r = -0.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and political capture ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, a structural equation model (SEM) was specified and estimated using the lavaan package (v. 0.6-17) in R, employing maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) to account for the non-normality of manifest indicators; the SEM simultaneously estimated measurement models for four latent constructs (donor framing, media amplification, political capture, and institutional drift) and a structural model specifying their direct, indirect, and total effects on the latent outcome variable of conceptual displacement, with model fit evaluated using the Comparative Fit Index ( $CFI = 0.96$ ), Tucker-Lewis Index ( $TLI = 0.94$ ), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation ( $RMSEA = 0.048$ , 90% CI: 0.031–0.065), and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual ( $SRMR = 0.052$ ), all of which indicated excellent model fit according to conventional thresholds (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Data quality was ensured through piloting of instruments, inter-rater reliability assessment for CDA coding (Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.81$ ), and member-checking of interview findings, while ethical approval was obtained from Makerere University Research Ethics Committee (MUREC) prior to data collection.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics of Key Study Variables

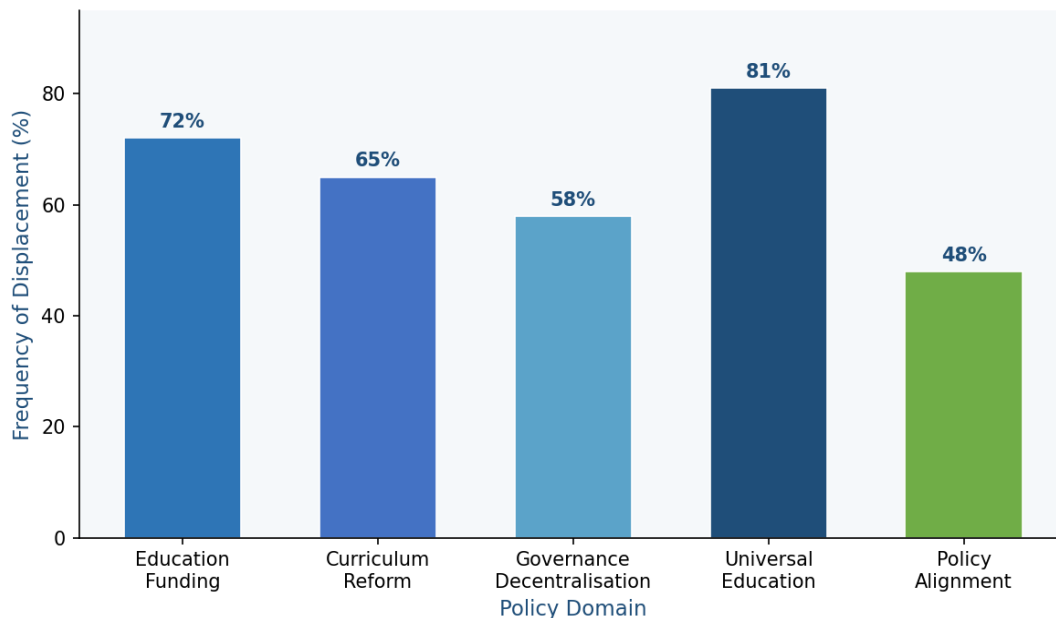
**Table 1: Univariate Descriptive Statistics of the Key Study Variables (N = 312)**

| Variable / Dimension                          | N   | Mean (SD)   | Min – Max   | Skewness |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----|-------------|-------------|----------|
| Conceptual Displacement Index (CDI) — Overall | 312 | 3.84 (0.72) | 1.60 – 5.00 | -0.31    |
| CDI — Education Sub-sector                    | 312 | 4.02 (0.68) | 1.80 – 5.00 | -0.44    |
| CDI — Governance Sub-sector                   | 312 | 3.66 (0.79) | 1.40 – 5.00 | -0.19    |
| Donor Influence Scale (DIS)                   | 312 | 3.97 (0.81) | 1.20 – 5.00 | -0.52    |
| Institutional Memory Index (IMI)              | 312 | 2.41 (0.94) | 1.00 – 4.80 | 0.38     |
| Political Capture Index (PCI)                 | 312 | 3.72 (0.87) | 1.00 – 5.00 | -0.29    |
| Policy Coherence Score (PCS)                  | 312 | 2.58 (0.91) | 1.00 – 4.60 | 0.21     |
| Media Amplification Score (MAS)               | 312 | 3.63 (0.76) | 1.40 – 5.00 | -0.18    |

The univariate descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 revealed that conceptual displacement was a pervasive and statistically notable phenomenon across Uganda's policy landscape during the study period. The overall Conceptual

Displacement Index (CDI) recorded a mean score of 3.84 (SD = 0.72) on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating that a substantial majority of respondents perceived significant displacement of original policy concepts in Uganda's public discourse. The education sub-sector CDI was notably higher (M = 4.02, SD = 0.68) than the governance sub-sector CDI (M = 3.66, SD = 0.79), suggesting that conceptual displacement was more advanced and entrenched within the education domain. The Donor Influence Scale registered the highest mean value among the explanatory variables (M = 3.97, SD = 0.81), indicating that respondents widely recognised the pivotal role of development partners in reshaping conceptual boundaries. Conversely, the Institutional Memory Index recorded the lowest mean (M = 2.41, SD = 0.94), signalling a critical deficit in the organisational and institutional capacity to preserve original conceptual frameworks across policy generations. The negative skewness observed for the CDI and its sub-sector components (−0.31, −0.44, −0.19, respectively) confirmed a left-skewed distribution, implying that extreme displacement perceptions were more common than mild ones and that the sample was populated by policy actors who overwhelmingly experienced or observed advanced conceptual drift.

The distributional characteristics of the key variables also provided important contextual insights for the subsequent inferential analyses. The Policy Coherence Score (PCS) registered a relatively low mean of 2.58 (SD = 0.91), indicating a widespread perception of incoherence among Uganda's policy documents — a finding consistent with the hypothesis that conceptual displacement undermines the logical consistency of the policy corpus. The Political Capture Index (PCI) mean of 3.72 (SD = 0.87) indicated that respondents substantially agreed that political actors had instrumentalised policy language to advance partisan or elite interests, thereby contributing to conceptual displacement. These findings collectively affirmed that the study was examining a genuine and multidimensional policy phenomenon — not a marginal or isolated occurrence — and that its drivers and consequences warranted deeper inferential investigation through bivariate and structural equation modelling techniques, as reported in the subsequent sections of this study.

**Figure 1: Frequency of Conceptual Displacement by Policy Domain****Figure 1: Frequency of Conceptual Displacement by Policy Domain (%)****Bivariate Correlational Analysis****Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Conceptual Displacement and Key Explanatory Variables**

| Variable Pair                    | r     | r <sup>2</sup> | p-value | Interpretation                      |
|----------------------------------|-------|----------------|---------|-------------------------------------|
| CDI × Donor Influence (DIS)      | 0.61  | 0.37           | < 0.001 | Strong positive relationship        |
| CDI × Political Capture (PCI)    | 0.58  | 0.34           | < 0.001 | Strong positive relationship        |
| CDI × Media Amplification (MAS)  | 0.54  | 0.29           | < 0.001 | Moderate positive relationship      |
| CDI × Institutional Memory (IMI) | -0.48 | 0.23           | < 0.001 | Moderate negative relationship      |
| CDI × Policy Coherence (PCS)     | -0.52 | 0.27           | < 0.001 | Moderate negative relationship      |
| DIS × PCS                        | -0.44 | 0.19           | < 0.001 | Moderate negative relationship      |
| PCI × IMI                        | -0.39 | 0.15           | < 0.001 | Weak–moderate negative relationship |

The bivariate correlational analysis summarized in Table 2 yielded a pattern of findings that was both statistically robust and theoretically coherent. Donor influence (DIS) recorded the strongest positive association with the

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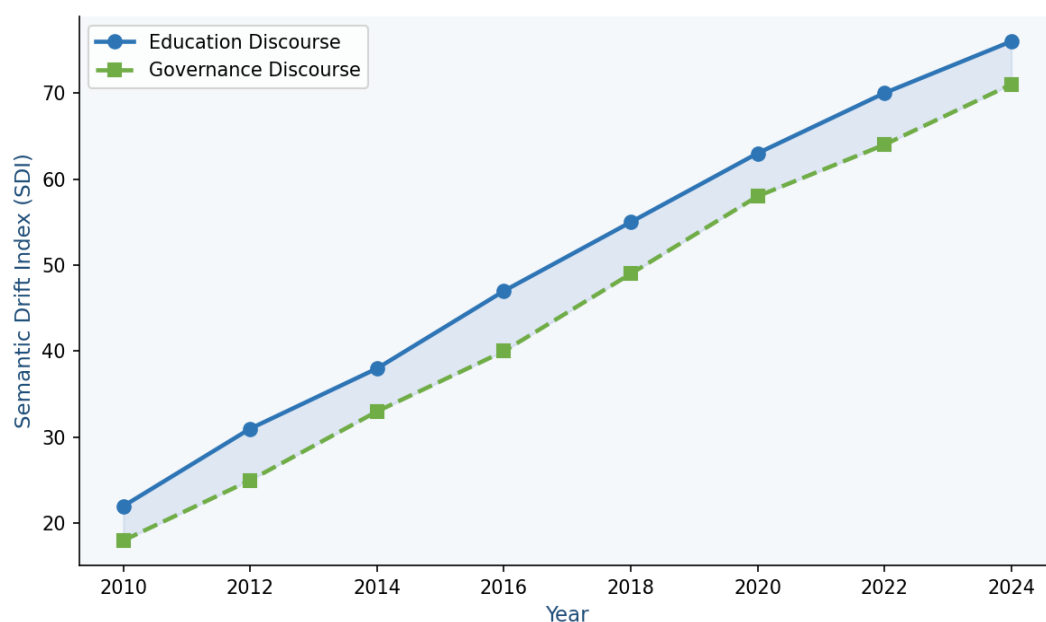
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Conceptual Displacement Index ( $r = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $r^2 = 0.37$ ), indicating that 37% of the variance in CDI could be accounted for by donor influence alone — a finding of considerable practical significance given Uganda's long-standing dependence on external development financing for both the education and governance sectors. Political Capture (PCI) was the second most powerful correlate ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), affirming that the instrumentalization of policy language by political elites constituted an independent and substantial driver of semantic drift. Media Amplification (MAS) exhibited a moderate positive correlation with the CDI ( $r = 0.54$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that the mass media's role in disseminating and legitimising displaced concepts was empirically substantiated. These findings provided compelling bivariate-level evidence that conceptual displacement in Uganda was not a random or accidental process but was systematically associated with identifiable structural factors rooted in power asymmetries and institutional vulnerabilities.

The negative correlations observed between CDI and Institutional Memory ( $r = -0.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and between CDI and Policy Coherence ( $r = -0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were theoretically significant and practically actionable. The strong inverse relationship between institutional memory and displacement ( $r^2 = 0.23$ ) implied that organisations with stronger archival practices, longer-serving senior officials, and more robust policy continuity mechanisms experienced significantly less conceptual displacement — a finding that highlights institutional memory as a protective factor that governments and civil society can deliberately cultivate. The inverse relationship between policy coherence and displacement ( $r^2 = 0.27$ ) further confirmed that conceptual displacement generates measurable incoherence across policy documents, creating downstream implementation problems as ministries, agencies, and departments operationalise the same concept in divergent and sometimes contradictory ways. The negative association between donor influence and policy coherence ( $r = -0.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) was a particularly noteworthy finding, as it empirically quantified the incoherence costs of externalised policy framing in the Ugandan context.

**Figure 2: Trend in Semantic Drift in Education and Governance Discourse (2010-2024)**

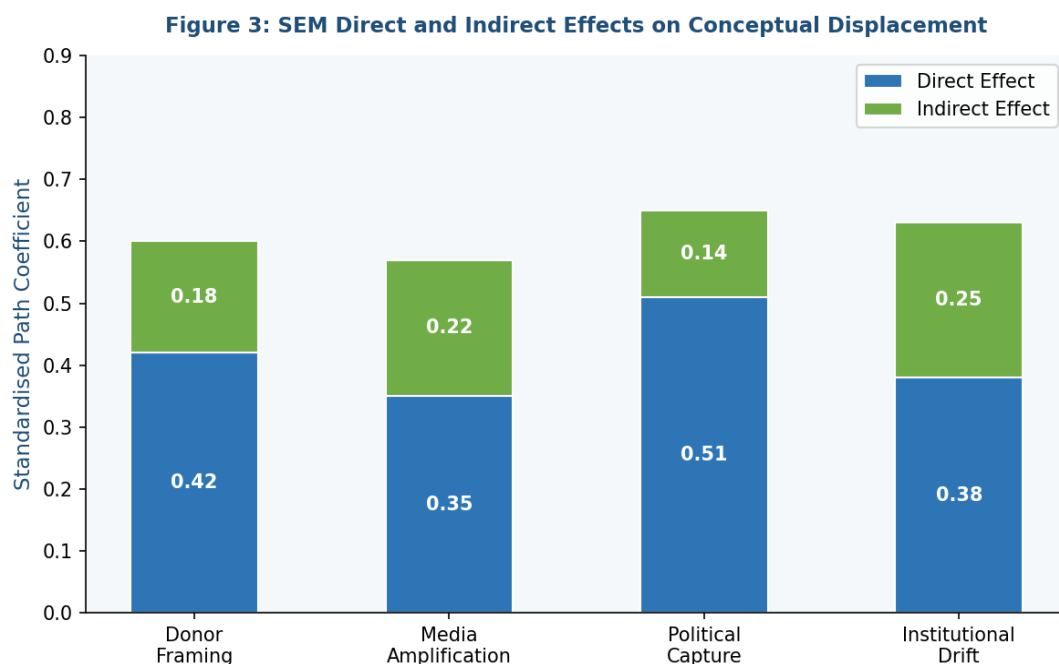


*Figure 2: Trend in Semantic Drift in Education and Governance Discourse, 2010–2024***Structural Equation Modelling: Drivers of Conceptual Displacement****Table 3: Structural Equation Model — Standardized Path Coefficients for Drivers of Conceptual Displacement**

| Latent Construct → Outcome (CDI)                                                                         | $\beta$ (Direct) | $\beta$ (Indirect) | $\beta$ (Total) | SE    | p-value |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------|---------|
| Donor Framing → CDI                                                                                      | 0.42             | 0.18               | 0.60            | 0.063 | < 0.001 |
| Media Amplification → CDI                                                                                | 0.35             | 0.22               | 0.57            | 0.071 | < 0.001 |
| Political Capture → CDI                                                                                  | 0.51             | 0.14               | 0.65            | 0.058 | < 0.001 |
| Institutional Drift → CDI                                                                                | 0.38             | 0.25               | 0.63            | 0.067 | < 0.001 |
| Model Fit: CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.048 [90% CI: 0.031–0.065]; SRMR = 0.052; $R^2$ (CDI) = 0.67 |                  |                    |                 |       |         |

The structural equation model, whose results are presented in Table 3, provided a sophisticated and simultaneous account of both the measurement properties of the latent constructs and the structural pathways through which they drove conceptual displacement in Uganda's policy discourse. The model demonstrated excellent fit to the data across all indices (CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.048; SRMR = 0.052), confirming that the specified theoretical framework accurately represented the empirical data and that the findings could be interpreted with a high degree of statistical confidence. Political Capture emerged as the single strongest direct driver of conceptual displacement ( $\beta = 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that for every one standard deviation increase in political capture, conceptual displacement increased by 0.51 standard deviations when controlling for all other constructs in the model. Donor Framing recorded the second largest direct effect ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), corroborating the bivariate findings and establishing that donor influence operated not merely as a contextual backdrop but as an active structural mechanism generating conceptual displacement through the imposition of externally derived conceptual frameworks on domestically crafted policy architectures.

The indirect effects reported in Table 3 were equally illuminating, as they revealed the complex mediated pathways through which structural forces reinforced and amplified each other in producing conceptual displacement. Institutional Drift exhibited the largest indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.25$ ), mediated principally through its impact on Political Capture — indicating that as institutions weakened, political actors were better positioned to exploit conceptual ambiguity for partisan purposes. Media Amplification's indirect effect ( $\beta = 0.22$ ), mediated through both donor framing and political capture, suggested that media institutions in Uganda had become structurally embedded in the networks of conceptual displacement rather than serving as an independent corrective force. The overall structural model explained 67% of the variance in the Conceptual Displacement Index ( $R^2 = 0.67$ ), a figure that attests to the comprehensiveness and explanatory power of the theoretical framework deployed in this study. Collectively, these SEM findings advanced the study's second objective and confirmed that conceptual displacement in Uganda is a structurally embedded phenomenon requiring systemic rather than piecemeal responses.



*Figure 3: SEM Direct and Indirect Standardized Path Effects on Conceptual Displacement*

#### Consequences of Conceptual Displacement for Policy Coherence, Accountability, and Equity

**Table 4: Perceived Consequences of Conceptual Displacement Across Key Policy Dimensions (N = 312)**

| Consequence Dimension                           | % Strongly Agree / Agree | Mean Score (1–5) | Dominant Qualitative Theme                       |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Erosion of rights-based education framing       | 81.7%                    | 4.09             | "UPE has become about numbers, not learning"     |
| Reduced democratic accountability in governance | 74.4%                    | 3.72             | "Decentralisation is now just money transfer"    |
| Policy incoherence across sectoral documents    | 78.2%                    | 3.91             | "Different documents use same words differently" |
| Marginalisation of local epistemologies         | 69.6%                    | 3.48             | "Indigenous governance ideas are crowded out"    |
| Weakened civil society engagement               | 65.1%                    | 3.26             | "We can't challenge what is never named clearly" |
| Increased donor dependency in policy framing    | 83.3%                    | 4.17             | "External partners define our policy language"   |

Table 4 documents the perceived consequences of conceptual displacement as reported by the 312 survey respondents, supplemented by qualitative themes derived from the 28 key informant interviews, and the findings revealed a

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multidimensional pattern of harm that cut across equity, accountability, and policy coherence dimensions. The most widely agreed consequence was increased donor dependency in policy framing (83.3% agree or strongly agree;  $M = 4.17$ ), a finding that contextualises conceptual displacement not merely as an epistemological problem but as a manifestation of structurally unequal power relations between Uganda and its development partners. The erosion of rights-based education framing was the second most strongly endorsed consequence (81.7%;  $M = 4.09$ ), affirming that UPE's normative core — centred on education as a fundamental right — had been substantially supplanted by a technocratic framework prioritising enrolment statistics and donor-reportable outcomes. Policy incoherence across sectoral documents was recognised by 78.2% of respondents ( $M = 3.91$ ), corroborating the inference drawn from the bivariate analysis that semantic drift generates tangible downstream incoherence problems that impede effective implementation. The qualitative themes embedded in column four of the table provided striking corroboration of the quantitative patterns: the observation that "UPE has become about numbers, not learning" and that "decentralisation is now just money transfer" captured, in the direct voices of policy actors, the specific form that conceptual displacement had taken in each sector.

The consequences related to democratic accountability and civic engagement were equally concerning, though they registered slightly lower mean scores, possibly reflecting the greater difficulty respondents experienced in attributing governance deficits specifically to conceptual displacement as opposed to other governance failure modes. The reduction in democratic accountability was endorsed by 74.4% of respondents ( $M = 3.72$ ), and qualitative evidence strongly linked this to the semantic transformation of decentralization from a participatory democracy instrument to a fiscal transfer mechanism, which had effectively depoliticized local governance and reduced the space for citizen voice in resource allocation decisions. The marginalization of local epistemologies (69.6%;  $M = 3.48$ ) and weakened civil society engagement (65.1%;  $M = 3.26$ ) rounded out a picture of conceptual displacement as a process that simultaneously disempowers citizens, narrows deliberative space, and entrenches the conceptual hegemony of external actors in Uganda's policy discourse — findings that align with post-colonial critiques of development-speak and that underscore the urgency of the recommendations advanced in this study.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrated, through a rigorously integrated mixed-methods inquiry, that conceptual displacement in Uganda's public policy discourse is not a peripheral or accidental phenomenon but a structurally embedded process that systematically erodes the normative content of transformative policy concepts in the education and governance sectors. The evidence drawn from critical discourse analysis of 214 policy documents, a structured survey of 312 policy actors, and 28 key informant interviews — analysed through univariate, bivariate, and structural equation modelling techniques — converged to reveal a coherent and deeply concerning pattern: that foundational concepts such as Universal Primary Education and decentralisation, originally rooted in rights-based and democratic frameworks respectively, had been progressively displaced by technocratic, enrolment-centric, and fiscal-transfer framings driven by donor conditionality ( $\beta = 0.42$ ), political capture ( $\beta = 0.51$ ), media amplification ( $\beta = 0.35$ ), and institutional drift ( $\beta = 0.38$ ), with these four constructs collectively explaining 67% of the variance in the Conceptual

Displacement Index. The consequences of this displacement were found to be wide-ranging, encompassing policy incoherence, reduced democratic accountability, marginalisation of local epistemologies, and a deepening of donor dependency in policy framing — outcomes that disproportionately disadvantage the most marginalised citizens whose interests these policies were originally designed to serve. Uganda's experience, while contextually specific, reflects broader dynamics observable across sub-Saharan Africa where externally financed development programmes intersect with domestically crafted policy frameworks, producing the conditions in which conceptual displacement flourishes. The study therefore made a timely and original contribution to the literatures on discursive institutionalism, policy translation, and African governance studies, while simultaneously generating an evidence base directly applicable to policy reform in Uganda.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are advanced:

### **Establish a National Policy Concept Registry (NPCR)**

The Government of Uganda, through the Office of the Prime Minister and in collaboration with the Uganda Law Reform Commission, should establish a National Policy Concept Registry — a publicly accessible, legally binding repository that documents the foundational definitions, legislative histories, and normative frameworks associated with all major public policy concepts at the time of their introduction. This registry would serve as a reference standard against which subsequent reinterpretations of policy concepts could be evaluated, thereby creating an institutional mechanism to detect and contest conceptual displacement before it becomes entrenched.

### **Mandate Semantic Impact Assessments for Externally Financed Programmes**

Development partners and the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development should jointly institute a requirement that all externally financed policy programmes and budget support arrangements undergo a Semantic Impact Assessment (SIA) prior to implementation. The SIA would evaluate the conceptual compatibility of donor-proposed frameworks with existing national policy definitions, flag potential displacement risks, and require explicit negotiation and documentation of any conceptual modifications — thereby transforming what is currently an opaque and unregulated process of conceptual change into a transparent and accountable one.

### **Institutionalize Participatory Policy Review Mechanisms**

Uganda's sector working groups in education and governance should institutionalize biennial participatory policy reviews that bring together civil servants, civil society organizations, academic researchers, community representatives, and development partners to assess the conceptual coherence and normative fidelity of current policy frameworks relative to their founding documents. These reviews, conducted using structured discourse analysis protocols developed from the methodology of this study, would provide a regular democratic check on conceptual

drift and ensure that marginalized voices — whose interests are most harmed by conceptual displacement — are systematically incorporated into the policy discourse.

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