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Hollow Compliance Under Central Mandates: An Organizational Decoupling Model

Tran Dieu Linh¹, Dinh Tuan Anh Trinh^{1,2*}

¹ Faculty of Business Administration, College of Economics, Vinh University, 182 Le Duan, Ben Thuy, Vinh, Nghe An, Vietnam, linhtd@vinhuni.edu.vn

² Ph.D. Candidate, University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom

*Corresponding Author: Dinh Tuan Anh Trinh, Faculty of Business Administration, College of Economics, Vinh University, Vietnam, anhtdt@vinhuni.edu.vn, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9628-4775>

ABSTRACT: Subnational governments across Asia routinely meet the targets attached to central agricultural technology mandates while the capabilities those targets were meant to create fail to appear. Implementation theory anticipates shortfall and policy capacity theory anticipates under-delivery; neither anticipates compliance that is hollow. This note resolves the anomaly by importing the distinction between policy-practice and means-ends decoupling into the comparative study of subnational politics, and by identifying field opacity as the condition selecting between them. Its central move is to supply what field-level opacity accounts lack: a theory of why units facing the same regime, field and rules diverge. Four subnational conditions, fiscal autonomy, coordination, accountability horizon and analytical capacity, determine which form of decoupling occurs and how severe it is. Nine propositions are derived with falsification conditions, and Vietnam and China generate testable expectations. In opaque fields, tightening targets should widen rather than narrow the gap between compliance and achievement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Across Asia, provincial and county governments meet the quantitative targets attached to national high-technology agriculture programmes with a regularity that would satisfy any audit. Hectares are certified, zones are designated, enterprises are registered and reports are filed on schedule. What frequently fails to appear is the thing the targets were designed to produce: facilities that still operate at design capacity four years after commissioning, operators who can run them unaided, and output that reaches the market the programme intended. Compliance is full. Achievement is hollow.

Neither of the dominant frameworks anticipates this combination. Implementation theory, from Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) through Matland (1995), treats shortfall as the characteristic failure: mandates dissipate across clearance points, front-line discretion reshapes them, and the outcome falls short of intent. Policy capacity theory, in its most disciplined statement (Wu et al., 2015), predicts that weak capacity produces under-delivery. Both frameworks would recognise a province that builds half its quota. Neither has a ready account of a province that builds all of it and operates almost none.

For a comparative politics audience the anomaly is sharper still, because its most interesting form is variation. Units within the same regime, facing the same mandate and the same evaluation rules, diverge: one province's certified zones persist and another's decay, with no difference in the instrument applied to them. Field-level explanations hold the field constant and cannot reach this variation. The argument developed here is built to reach it.

The note resolves the anomaly in three moves. It imports the distinction drawn by Bromley and Powell (2012) between policy-practice decoupling, in which formal adoption is not followed by implementation, and means-ends decoupling, in which practices are implemented fully but bear no assessed relation to the ends they were meant to serve. It identifies field opacity, in the sense developed by Wijen (2014), as the condition that selects between the two, and adapts that account to hierarchical

rather than voluntary institutional pressure. And, where it departs from Wijen rather than applying him, it supplies the adopter-side theory his framework lacks: four subnational conditions that determine which form of decoupling occurs and how severe it becomes.

A candid statement of the evidentiary position is owed before proceeding. Four strands of published work support the components of the pattern. De Janvry et al. (2023) show that subjective performance evaluation in the Chinese bureaucracy generates influence activities and alters work behaviour, so that the evaluation instrument shapes conduct rather than merely recording it. Zhang et al. (2026) find that promotion incentives tilt municipal investment toward project categories with favourable visual effects in appraisal. Ye et al. (2024) report that weaker local capacity combined with higher implementing pressure is associated with distorted policy instruments in urbanisation pilots. Bevan and Hood (2006) trace how target regimes migrate effort toward the measured part of a task and away from the unmeasured whole. What does not exist is direct evidence on the outcome variable proposed here. No published dataset measures the functional persistence of agricultural technology facilities across localities at scale.

That absence is a real limitation, and it is also what the model predicts. Under evaluative opacity no actor has an incentive to construct the measure: the centre is audited on coverage, the locality is evaluated on target compliance, and the technology supplier is paid on commissioning. The pattern is structurally invisible rather than absent. A theory that explains the absence of evidence against it invites the charge of unfalsifiability, and the charge is met in two ways. Section 5 states observations that would count against the framework, none of which depends on data the model says will not be collected, and Section 7 specifies how the missing measure should be built.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 What the existing accounts assume

Implementation theory established shortfall as its organising problem at its founding. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) traced how a well-funded programme dissipated across a chain of clearance points, and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) specified the conditions under which central intent survives that chain. Lipsky (1980) showed that the operative policy is produced by front-line workers rationing scarce services. Matland (1995) reconciled the traditions by making their applicability conditional on the ambiguity and conflict of the policy itself. All four treat the gap between intent and outcome as a deficit of execution. None has a category for execution that is complete and empty.

Policy capacity theory disaggregates capacity into analytical, operational and political competences across individual, organisational and systemic levels (Wu et al., 2015), and it embeds an assumption this note calls monotonicity: more capacity yields more substantive performance, and less capacity yields visible under-delivery. Applied to subnational technology mandates the assumption fails on its own terms. Units with demonstrably weak analytical capability routinely achieve full formal delivery. Capacity theory can explain the absence of depth. It leaves the presence of breadth unexplained, and that is precisely the half of the phenomenon that requires explanation.

Comparative scholarship on Asian subnational governance supplies the ingredients without the mechanism. It has established that fiscal decentralisation lags administrative decentralisation (Liu et al., 2009; Li and Jiao, 2024) and that cadre evaluation and target responsibility arrangements structure local behaviour (Ahlers and Schubert, 2015; Tsai and Liao, 2020). Local experimentation functions as an instrument of the central policy process (Heilmann, 2008), and subnational institutional change carries measurable service consequences (Malesky et al., 2014). Wang and Bu (2026), analysing 282 Chinese cities, identify the configurations of institutional, organisational and individual conditions under which local governments adopt campaign-style enforcement, and find that such enforcement produced measurable reductions in air pollution. That finding matters here for a reason that becomes clear in Section 3. Air quality is a transparent field, and the note predicts that intensified compliance pressure produces achievement in transparent fields and hollowness in opaque ones.

One strand of this literature resembles the anomaly closely enough to be mistaken for it. O'Brien and Li (1999) show that Chinese local officials distinguish policies that must be executed from those they can safely ignore, and that the distinction tracks measurability. Resemblance notwithstanding, the phenomena differ. Selective implementation operates across policies and predicts non-implementation of the unmeasurable. The anomaly examined here operates within a single policy that is measurable, is therefore selected for execution on O'Brien and Li's own logic, and is executed in full. Their framework tells us

that a mandate expressed in hectares will be implemented. It does not ask what implementation consists of when the measurable quantity is a proxy for an objective that is not measurable. The two accounts are complements. Selective implementation explains which mandates are taken up, and means-ends decoupling explains what becomes of those that are.

2.2 Decoupling and the hierarchical setting

Meyer and Rowan (1977) showed that organisations adopt formal structures to secure legitimacy and buffer their technical core from them. Bromley and Powell (2012) argued that the intensification of auditing has made this classical decoupling harder to sustain, and that the characteristic contemporary form is means-ends decoupling: practices are implemented, resources are spent and activity is documented, but the link between practice and outcome is opaque, untested and often absent. Wijen (2014) supplied the antecedent. In opaque institutional fields, where causal chains are contested, effects are delayed and outcomes resist measurement, institutional actors respond with concrete rules, strong incentives and best-practice diffusion. Those responses secure compliance while eroding achievement, because they reward the countable proxy over the uncertain end.

Transferring this account from firms adopting voluntary standards to subnational governments executing central mandates requires three adjustments, and none is mechanical. First, the source of pressure differs. Firms retain the option of non-adoption; a province facing a central mandate does not. Removing the exit option should intensify compliance behaviour and therefore, on Wijen's own logic, intensify means-ends decoupling rather than moderate it.

Second, the audience differs, and an obvious counterargument must be met. A firm's decoupling is directed at external stakeholders who cannot see inside. A province's is directed at a superior principal holding formal inspection rights and sanction power, and it might be argued that hierarchy should therefore produce less decoupling, not more, since the principal can look. The argument fails on the opacity condition. Inspection rights are only as informative as the categories in which inspection is conducted, and under evaluative opacity those categories record breadth. A principal can verify that a facility exists, was built to specification and was commissioned. Verifying that it produces at design capacity four years later requires an instrument the system does not possess. Sanction power attaches to the countable dimension and reinforces the pathology. The principal is not credulous; the principal is structurally unable to verify the thing that matters while retaining the power to punish failure on the thing that does not.

Third, the unit is a jurisdiction rather than an organisation, so the buffering Meyer and Rowan describe operates across agencies rather than within one. Section 4 treats this as the coordination condition.

2.3 Three rival explanations

Three alternative accounts deserve consideration, since each would render the argument unnecessary if adequate. The first is rent extraction: hollow facilities are the residue of resources diverted in procurement, and the programme is a vehicle rather than an objective (Bardhan, 2002). This explains some cases and not the pattern. It predicts concentration of hollowness in high-value capital components, whereas the pattern includes low-value programmes with little extractive potential, and it predicts that hollowness should decline where audit intensifies, whereas the mechanism proposed here predicts that intensified compliance auditing widens the gap. These are opposed predictions and they are testable.

The second is capacity deficit: provinces build facilities they cannot operate because they lack the skill, and the remedy is training. This is partly right and is incorporated as the fourth condition below. It is insufficient because it cannot explain the compliance side of the anomaly. A province lacking the capacity to operate a technology package should be expected to build fewer of them, not the full quota.

The third is information asymmetry in its standard form: the province conceals poor performance from a centre that would sanction it if informed, and the remedy is monitoring. The mechanism below does not require concealment. Under evaluative opacity the province may report accurately against the indicator that exists and the centre may verify that report correctly, while neither possesses an operational measure of the outcome. Where a measurable part substitutes for an unmeasurable whole, distortion arises without anyone misreporting (Bevan and Hood, 2006), and closer monitoring of the existing indicator aggravates rather than corrects it.

A single observable implication distinguishes the proposed account from all three. The breadth-depth gap should vary across policy domains within the same locality, tracking the opacity of the field rather than the quality of the administration. None of the rivals predicts that.

3. Field opacity and the mandate design response

Opacity is established here rather than asserted, along three dimensions. Causal opacity refers to the contested link between adopting a technology and the agricultural outcome sought. A greenhouse is a bundle whose return depends on crop choice, agronomic skill, input supply, market access and climate, so an underperforming facility can be attributed to weather, prices, operator error or supplier quality, each attribution locally plausible and each weakening the sanction that would otherwise discipline poor selection. Temporal opacity refers to the lag between adoption and observable effect, which for orchard and infrastructure investments exceeds any evaluation window; within the period over which an official is assessed, the observable output is construction and designation rather than performance. Evaluative opacity refers to the difficulty of measuring the outcome itself. Hectares under high-technology production is measurable. Whether production on those hectares is technologically advanced in any substantive sense is not, absent a definition that is both operational and enforceable, and national programme definitions are typically neither.

Central governments respond to this opacity in exactly the way Wijen's account anticipates. Rules are concrete and uniform, expressed as hectares, zones and certified enterprises, applied across provinces differing sharply in agro-ecology and market access. Incentives are strong, operating through the cadre evaluation and target responsibility arrangements documented by Ahlers and Schubert (2015) and Tsai and Liao (2020). Best-practice dissemination is vigorous, and Heilmann (2008) shows it to be structural rather than occasional. In the vocabulary of Bali et al. (2022), the mandates are unusual in that the secondary procedural aspects of the instrument, namely reporting categories and evaluation routines, carry more behavioural force than its substantive content. The design is not deficient by its own lights. It is the design a rational centre selects when it cannot observe what it wants, and it is the design that generates the hollowness it is meant to detect.

Opacity is a matter of degree, and the argument requires that agricultural technology sit high on it relative to other fields the same authorities administer. Table 1 gives that ordering.

Table 1. Comparative field opacity across subnational policy domains

Domain	Causal opacity	Temporal opacity	Evaluative opacity	Predicted decoupling
Road construction	Low	Low	Low	Policy-practice, if any
Primary school enrolment	Low	Moderate	Low	Policy-practice, if any
Immunisation coverage	Low	Low	Low	Coupled
Vocational training	Moderate	High	High	Means-ends
High-technology agriculture	High	High	High	Means-ends
Digital government	High	Moderate	High	Means-ends

Table 1 is an ordering rather than a measurement. Its implication is that a single locality should display different profiles across domains simultaneously. A province with a functioning road programme and a hollow technology programme is not exhibiting inconsistent administrative quality but the predicted response to two fields of differing opacity, and that simultaneity is the observation most damaging to a generic capacity account. It is also why the finding of Wang and Bu (2026) that campaign-style enforcement reduced measurable pollutants sits comfortably with the argument. Where the outcome can be measured, compliance pressure buys achievement.

4. FOUR SUBNATIONAL CONDITIONS

Four conditions determine how a subnational unit responds to a concrete mandate in an opaque field. None is a cause of implementation failure. Each selects among responses that are all forms of compliance.

Fiscal autonomy (C1) denotes discretionary revenue relative to assigned responsibility. Where transfers finance acquisition but not operation, the unit faces a choice between substantive compliance, which commits future recurrent budgets to maintenance, and formal compliance, which acquires the assets and lets them degrade. Two features of the fiscal instrument push toward the second: the transfer is typically earmarked for capital, and reporting against it is complete at commissioning. Liu et al. (2009) document the local responses through which earmarked resources are absorbed into pre-existing priorities, and Li and Jiao (2024) show that central transfers do not necessarily reshape the subnational landscape in the direction their designers intend. The behavioural consequence is a bias toward assets whose degradation is not immediately visible, of which Zhang et al. (2026) document the investment-side counterpart.

Coordination capability (C2) denotes the ability of the agency holding the target to secure inputs it cannot command, since land allocation, credit, extension and market linkage sit in other agencies and other tiers. This is the jurisdictional analogue of Meyer and Rowan's buffering. Where coordination is weak, the responsible agency can produce the countable output on its own while the inputs that would make it functional sit elsewhere and are not produced. Compliance is achievable unilaterally; achievement is not. Shi (2017) documents the fragmentation this generates in Chinese social policy, and Ahlers et al. (2016) argue that effective local implementation has required reconfiguration of governance arrangements rather than stronger instruction. Diffusion complicates the condition further. Adoption through learning and adoption through imitation (Shipan and Volden, 2008) are observationally similar at adoption and diverge afterwards, and best-practice dissemination raises the adoption rate without raising the share of adoptions grounded in learning, a configuration Tai et al. (2024) illustrate for diffusion under urgency.

Accountability horizon (C3) denotes the period over which the responsible official is evaluated relative to the period over which the technology yields. Where evaluation rests on annually reported indicators, effort migrates to what can be counted within the window, which temporal opacity makes unrepresentative of achievement. Chen et al. (2024) show that performance signals in China are constructed from whatever the system records, and de Janvry et al. (2023) supply the microfoundation: subjective evaluation generates influence activities and reshapes bureaucratic effort. The environment is also layered. Qin and Christensen (2026) find that China's reform trajectory compressed the institutionalisation of traditional administration, New Public Management and post-NPM patterns into a nearly simultaneous process, so that target responsibility operates alongside older compliance logics rather than replacing them. Layering multiplies the indicators an official answers to without lengthening the horizon of any of them. Experimentation compounds the effect. Heilmann (2008) presents local trials as central to the policy process, and the incentive to pursue a visible, reportable innovation rewards novelty and documentation rather than the sustaining of a predecessor's programme.

Analytical capacity (C4) denotes the capability to assess whether a technology package fits local conditions before adopting it, and it is the condition that most directly governs the means-ends relation. Where it is absent, the means are selected from the supplier's catalogue and the best-practice list, and the relation between means and end is never assessed. Tan (2019) shows what is at stake: under an identical national payment reform, three Indonesian districts diverged materially because bureaucratic autonomy and district capacity differed. The case is from health rather than agriculture and the transfer is suggestive, but it indicates that within-country variation under a common mandate is real and measurable. Social science on digital agriculture (Klerkx et al., 2019) confirms that the assessment C4 requires is demanding and rarely resourced.

Mapping the four onto the framework of Wu et al. (2015) clarifies what is claimed. C1 is a systemic constraint on operational capability. C2 is organisational, at the meeting of operational and political competence. C3 is systemic and political, belonging to the evaluation architecture. C4 lies at the intersection of analytical competence with individual and organisational capability, and is the most amenable to direct intervention. Three of the four lie at least partly outside the control of the unit whose performance is assessed. Where a province underperforms on a technology mandate, the inference that its administration is deficient is available but not warranted without evidence distinguishing the conditions. The conditions also interact. Coordination partially substitutes for analytical capacity, since a locality connected to research institutions can borrow judgement it does not hold. And analytical capacity is of little value where the horizon is short, because assessed judgement that a technology does not fit yields a recommendation to decline, and declining is costly under annual evaluation. A province may therefore possess analytical capacity and not use it, which appears in data as a capacity deficit and is in fact an incentive effect.

5. THE OPACITY-DECOUPLING MODEL

Figure 1 presents the model. It runs from mandate design through the subnational filter to a decoupling type and an observed profile, with field opacity operating both as a moderator of the filter and as a shaper of mandate design, and with reported performance feeding back into subsequent target setting. Order of operation matters. Opacity shapes the instrument the centre selects. The instrument sets compliance pressure. C1 sets the outer boundary of what substantive compliance would cost; C3 determines what the locality is rewarded for producing within that boundary; C2 determines whether the inputs for substantive compliance can be assembled; C4 determines whether the means selected have been assessed against the end. The decoupling type follows from the configuration, not from any single condition. Proposition labels in the figure mark where each claim stated below attaches to the model.

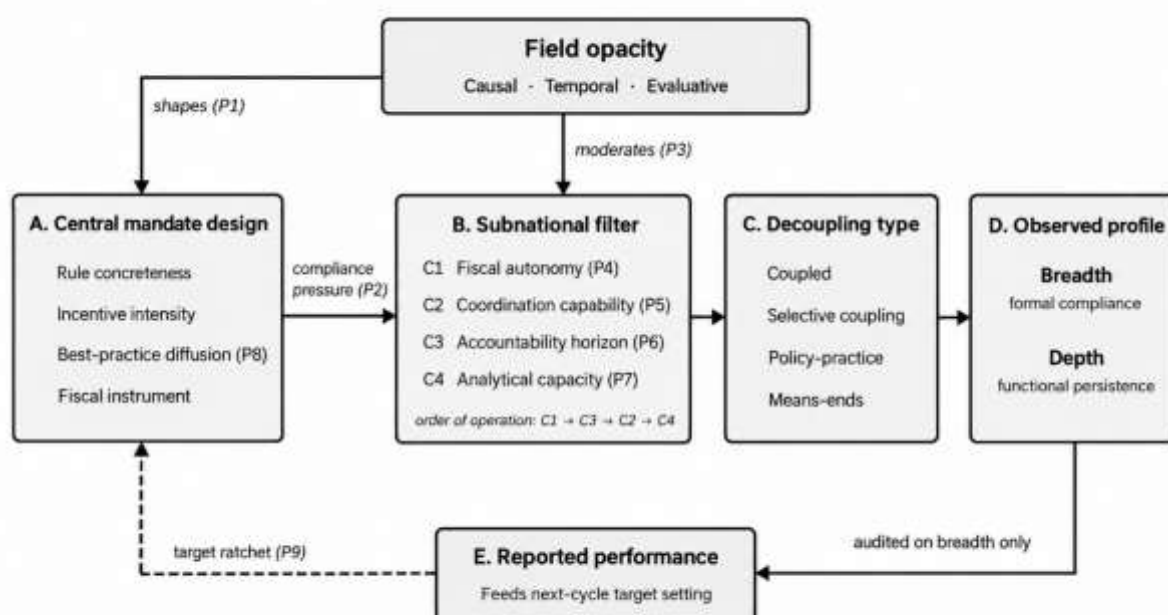


Figure 1. The opacity-decoupling model of subnational implementation.

Two dimensions specify the outcome. Breadth denotes formal compliance: hectares certified, zones established, enterprises registered. Depth denotes functional persistence: facilities operating at designed capacity after three to five years, operators competent to manage them unaided, output reaching intended markets. Official evaluations capture breadth almost exclusively, which is an element of the mechanism rather than an incidental measurement weakness. Crossing the dimensions yields Table 2.

Table 2. Decoupling types, generating conditions and observable implications

Profile	Decoupling type	Generating configuration	Observable implication
High breadth, low depth	Means-ends	Opaque field, high compliance pressure, thin C1 and C4	Full target attainment with high facility abandonment by year 4
Low breadth, low depth	Policy-practice	Weak C2 with weak central enforcement	Projects funded but not commissioned; formal non-attainment

Profile	Decoupling type	Generating configuration	Observable implication
Low breadth, high depth	Selective coupling	Strong C4 with moderate compliance pressure	Declared under-attainment; surviving facilities perform at design
High breadth, high depth	Coupled	Adequate C1, institutionalised C2, long C3, strong C4	Attainment with persistence; predicted to be rare

Classical decoupling in Meyer and Rowan's sense corresponds to the second row, and the argument of Bromley and Powell (2012) is that intensified auditing has made the first row more prevalent than the second. That claim, transferred to this setting, is the note's central expectation.

Nine propositions follow, stated so that they can fail.

P1. The greater the field opacity confronting a subnational implementer, the greater the ratio of breadth to depth attained, holding fiscal resources constant.

P2. Compliance pressure, operationalised as the concreteness of targets combined with the intensity of career consequences, is positively associated with breadth and, above a threshold, negatively associated with depth.

P3. The relationship in P2 is conditional on opacity. Where the field is transparent, compliance pressure raises breadth and depth together. The interaction, not the main effect, carries the theoretical claim. Partial evidence exists on both branches: Ye et al. (2024) report distorted instruments under pressure with weak capacity in an opaque field, and Wang and Bu (2026) report measurable environmental gains under campaign pressure in a transparent one. Neither study varies opacity, and the design in Section 7 is intended to.

P4. Fiscal autonomy (C1) moderates the breadth-depth gap through recurrent cost coverage: the gap narrows as the share of operating cost the unit can fund from discretionary revenue rises.

P5. Coordination capability (C2) moderates the gap through input assembly: the gap narrows where a standing cross-agency body with its own budget exists.

P6. Accountability horizon (C3) moderates the gap through evaluation timing: the gap narrows as the evaluation window lengthens relative to the technology's yield period.

P7. Analytical capacity (C4) moderates the gap through means selection: the gap narrows where technology choice is subject to independent assessment before adoption.

P8. Adoption through learning and adoption through imitation are indistinguishable at adoption and diverge in depth after three years, with imitative adoptions displaying lower persistence.

P9. Reported breadth in one target cycle raises the target set in the next, so that under sustained opacity the breadth-depth gap widens across cycles rather than converging.

Three assumed conditions bound the model. The central mandate must be genuine rather than symbolic; the subnational tier must have administrative substance rather than function as a conduit; and the technology must have performance that is in principle observable. Four observations would count against the framework. If breadth and depth correlate positively across localities facing the same mandate, the central claim fails. If the gap is unrelated to the four conditions after controlling for generic governance quality, the disaggregation adds nothing. If intensified compliance auditing narrows rather than widens the gap, the rent extraction account is the better explanation and P2 is wrong in direction. And if localities that decline unmeasurable mandates also decline measurable ones, the behaviour is selective implementation in O'Brien and Li's sense and this note adds nothing to it.

6. GENERATING EXPECTATIONS: VIETNAM AND CHINA

This section applies the model to generate expectations, not to report findings, and the distinction is maintained in every sentence.

The Vietnamese mandate is concrete and datable. Decision 1895/QĐ-TTg of 17 December 2012 approved the national programme for high-technology agriculture, Decision 575/QĐ-TTg of 4 May 2015 approved the master plan for high-technology zones, and Decision 738/QĐ-BNN-KHCN of 14 March 2017 set the criteria by which production qualifies. One feature of the 2015 plan bears directly on the argument. Its stated target combines completion of technical infrastructure with effective operation of at least ten zones, so the mandate contains a depth element in its own wording. What the reporting apparatus records is the count. The gap identified here is therefore not a gap between central intent and local behaviour but between what the instrument asks for and what its measurement apparatus can register.

Vietnamese provinces satisfy the boundary conditions. They carry substantial delivery responsibility over land use planning, zone designation, investment incentives and extension, and provincial governance variation is durable (Malesky, 2004). Revenue authority is limited, transfers are substantial and often earmarked, and state sector reform has produced contested agendas rather than settled allocations of authority (Painter, 2005; Malesky et al., 2014). Three features sharpen the expectations. Land use conversion above specified thresholds requires higher-level approval, introducing a clearance point that raises the cost of substantive compliance without raising that of formal compliance. Credit depends substantially on state-owned commercial banks whose collateral practices centre on land use rights rather than production assets, which binds C1 independently of provincial budget position. And the agency structure changed in 2025. Provincial departments of agriculture and rural development merged with departments of natural resources and environment, following the corresponding ministry merger effective 1 March 2025. The merger removes the coordination interface between agricultural planning and land allocation while leaving intact the interface with science and technology, which remains a separate department holding the certification and assessment functions most relevant to C4. Because the change was imposed nationally rather than chosen locally, it is also a candidate source of identifying variation.

The expected profile is means-ends decoupling as the modal outcome, with breadth high and depth low. One comparative expectation is non-obvious and testable. Malesky et al. (2011) identify differences in how authority is distributed within the Vietnamese and Chinese party-states, with Vietnam displaying a more collective and less concentrated pattern. Collective structures diffuse both credit for success and liability for failure. If C3 operates as specified, Vietnamese provinces should show lower variance in implementation profiles than Chinese counties, with fewer instances of both aggressive experimentation and spectacular failure. A single-country application cannot establish the interaction in P3 nor the ratchet in P9. It shows the model's conditions to be present and its expectations coherent, which is the appropriate use of the case and its limit.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND A TEST PROGRAMME

The binding constraint in this field is measurement rather than conceptualisation, so the agenda is specific about design. The enabling item is a depth index combining operational status, capacity utilisation, operator competence, market linkage and survival to year three. A coding protocol operationalising these indicators, the breadth counterpart and the four conditions is available on request. Two of its design features are not obvious. Depth indicators must be verified rather than reported, since a registration record evidences breadth and not depth. And no depth indicator may be estimated from a breadth indicator, because that builds the expected result into the measurement. P1 and P3 require an independent opacity measure at domain level, permitting within-locality comparison across policy fields, because the interaction cannot be identified from variation in localities alone. P4 to P7 are configurational claims and are better matched to fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis than to regression, as Wang and Bu (2026) do for a neighbouring question in this journal. P9 requires a panel across successive target cycles. P6 invites comparison of appointment-based and election-based subnational accountability across Vietnamese provinces, Chinese counties and Indonesian districts, for which Tan (2019) shows the district-level variation to be tractable.

For policy, the implication runs against current practice. Where evaluation rests on breadth alone, means-ends decoupling and coupled implementation are indistinguishable in official reporting and the cheaper of the two is rewarded; adding depth verification changes the incentive at modest cost, since it requires revisiting existing sites rather than surveying new ones. Where transfers finance acquisition but not operation, reserving a share for operation addresses C1 directly. Most uncomfortably, the analysis implies that tightening targets and intensifying incentives, the standard response to under-performance, should be expected in opaque fields to widen rather than narrow the gap between compliance and achievement. What the argument recommends instead is a shift from rule concreteness toward outcome specification with local discretion over means, coupled with independent technical advisory capacity so that discretion is exercised on an assessed basis. In the vocabulary of Bali et

al. (2022), the reform required is to the secondary procedural aspects of the instrument rather than to its substantive content, which is the less visible and less contested part of a policy mix.

8. CONCLUSION

Uneven progress in high-technology agriculture across Asia is ordinarily posed as a question about farmers, technologies or markets, and where it is posed as a question about government it becomes a question about local administrative quality. The argument here relocates it. The question is one about the fit between an instrument and the opacity of the field to which it is applied, and about the subnational conditions that determine how a unit responds when the fit is poor. Three moves carry the resolution. Means-ends decoupling is imported from organisational institutionalism and adapted to hierarchical pressure; field opacity is identified as the antecedent selecting between decoupling forms; and four subnational conditions are reframed as selectors of decoupling type rather than barriers to implementation, which supplies the adopter-side theory that field-level opacity accounts lack. The framework is analytically derived and untested, which is why the observations that would count against it are stated. The question it poses is tractable, and the propositions indicate how it might be answered.

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