

Perceived Fairness, Transparency and Efficiency of the Treasury Single Account (TSA) in Decentralised Public Financial Management: A Qualitative Study and Policy Implications for the South West Region of Cameroon.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1014MG0122>

Received: 01 June 2026; Accepted: 06 June 2026; Published: 23 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper assesses how stakeholders in decentralised public financial management (PFM) perceive the fairness, transparency and efficiency of the Treasury Single Account (TSA) in the South-West Region of Cameroon, and it translates those perceptions into an actionable policy agenda for the Ministry of Finance (MINFI). It aims to determine what stakeholder perceptions imply for the legitimacy and operational success of centralised treasury reforms in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and in Cameroon in particular.

Design/Methodology/Approach: An embedded single-case qualitative design was used, with data analysed through qualitative content analysis to generate thematic categories validated by respondents' quotations and supplemented by code-occurrence counts. Open-ended questionnaire, interview, and focus group data were collected from 44 purposively sampled stakeholders, comprising 23 finance officials, 1 executive mayor, 10 treasury and paymaster officials, and 10 contractors and suppliers who interact directly with municipal disbursement processes. To strengthen triangulation, the qualitative findings were brought into dialogue with objective administrative records: three voucher registers obtained from the accounting service of the Buea Regional Treasury, covering 560 individual disbursements totalling approximately 8.33 billion FCFA across fiscal years 2022–2024.

Findings: Three perceptual dimensions and one behavioural-response theme were obtained. Perceived efficiency emerged as the most heavily coded dimension, driven by payment and disbursement delay and by contractor withdrawal from public contracts. Perceived fairness was significantly compromised by the loss of councils' direct access to their own funds and by inconsistent procedural treatment, while perceived transparency was undermined by multi-stage approval architectures and documentation requirements that obscured disbursement status. Triangulation with the voucher records confirms that the mean processing time across 560 disbursements was 124.6 days, with 62% of payments settled beyond 90 days, providing convergent validation for the qualitative perceptions of chronic delay, disbursement irregularity and liquidity-timing mismatch. The three perceptual dimensions were found to be mutually reinforcing rather than independent, translating into behavioural dispositions ranging from cooperation to informal workarounds.

Research Limitations: The qualitative case-study design supports analytical rather than statistical generalisation. The sample composition, weighted towards finance officials and treasury staff, and the reliance on contemporaneous note-taking and self-completed questionnaires for most responses, are acknowledged as limitations. The voucher records capture only the reception-to-payment segment of the disbursement chain and are therefore a lower bound on the total wait experienced by claimants.

Practical Implications: The study contributes a theoretically grounded framework, anchored in procedural-justice and legitimacy theory, for understanding perceptual dynamics in centralised treasury reform, and it derives an integrated, institutionally calibrated reform agenda for MINFI spanning approval-architecture reform, liquidity management, contractor protection, transparency infrastructure and stakeholder governance, sequenced against Cameroon's PFM Reform Plan 2024–2027 and its IMF-supported programme commitments.

Originality/Value: The study offers one of the first qualitative analyses of stakeholder perceptions of TSA operations in Francophone Central Africa, extended by administrative triangulation with objective disbursement records, and extends procedural-justice and legitimacy-theory perspectives into the PFM context of a decentralised Central African setting.

Keywords: Treasury Single Account; decentralised financial management; payment delays; stakeholder perceptions; Cameroon; procedural justice; qualitative research; administrative triangulation; public financial management reform.

INTRODUCTION

Since its adoption in most sub-Saharan African countries, the Treasury Single Account (TSA) has become a flagship of public financial management reform. A TSA is a banking arrangement in which all government cash resources are consolidated within a single account structure, rather than being held in multiple accounts across ministries and agencies. Pimenta and Pessôa (2015) held that this reform is intended to reinforce fiscal discipline, enhance cash visibility, and reduce revenue leakage and fraud that arise during the disbursement of public funds. Through successive instruments from 2007, Cameroon's TSA framework was concretised by Law No. 2018/012 of 11 July 2018 on the Fiscal Regime of the State and Other Public Entities (Republic of Cameroon, 2018). Following these instruments, revenues and disbursements must pass through the Central Accounting Treasury Agency (ACCT) in Yaoundé, with operationalisation across Cameroon's ten regions.

Within Cameroon's current decentralised governance set-up, encounters with the TSA extend beyond what its centralising rationale adequately addresses. Although the platform's design places control at the centre, budget execution and service delivery remain anchored at the local level. Municipal councils, contractors and end users have experienced the TSA through immediate practical concerns, including whether payments are made on time, whether approval procedures are clear, and whether sufficient liquidity is available at the operational frontier (Odewole, 2016; Iloeje & Okwo, 2022). The legitimacy of centralised governance is scrutinised by stakeholders whenever its routine outcomes are deemed insufficient, even when the foundational policy logic enjoys broad consensus (Mboto et al., 2017; Mojeed et al., 2021). This article stresses that the perceived fairness, transparency and efficiency of the TSA in the South-West Region of Cameroon are mutually reinforcing rather than analytically independent dimensions of stakeholder experience. Stakeholders read a weakness in one dimension as a sign of weakness in the others. It is further suggested that bottlenecks in the multi-step approval framework, in which payments must obtain a series of approvals before being released, are the primary source of perceptual harm.

A distinctive feature of the present study is its integration of objective administrative records with the qualitative findings. Three voucher registers obtained from the accounting service of the Buea Regional Treasury, covering 2022 vouchers paid in 2023, 2023 vouchers paid in 2024, and 2024 vouchers paid in 2025, were analysed to provide convergent validation for the perceptual claims. The triangulation of these secondary data, together with a methodology for integrating payment-processing times, disbursement data and liquidity indicators, strengthens the study's credibility. A further distinctive contribution of this article is that it carries the evidence forward into a structured policy analysis for the Ministry of Finance, deriving an integrated and sequenced reform agenda from the same diagnostic base.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the research problem; Section 3 examines the pertinent literature and establishes the theoretical framework; Section 4 details the methodology; and Section 5 presents the thematic findings, including the administrative triangulation. Section 6 discusses the findings, while Section 7 develops the policy implications for the Ministry of Finance across five thematic areas. Section 8 addresses the decentralisation–centralisation tension and alignment with national and international reform frameworks, and Section 9 sets out implementation sequencing and political-economy considerations. Section 10 acknowledges the study's limitations and suggests avenues for future research, and Section 11 concludes.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the introduction of the TSA in Cameroon with legitimate goals of enhancing transparency and accountability in public financial management, findings from decentralised entities in the South-West Region reveal that its implementation has resulted in payment delays, bureaucratic hurdles and reduced financial autonomy at the municipal level (Takwa et al., 2020). Contractors report that prolonged waiting periods are recorded before disbursements are made, and chronic liquidity shortages are registered by municipal councils at the regional treasury interface.

Treasurers face system failures, as well as multi-stage approval chains that run from the council to the regional treasury and ultimately to the ACCT (Agence Comptable Centrale du Trésor) in Yaounde. These practical realities have raised pertinent questions about the legitimacy of centralised treasury reforms in decentralised governance settings. The perceptions of stakeholders most directly affected by the TSA regarding its fairness, transparency and efficiency, and whether these perceptions support or undermine the wider decentralisation agenda, remain empirical questions that have not been systematically explored through qualitative research in Cameroon. This study aims to fill that gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Empirical Literature on TSA Implementation

A considerable amount of empirical research on TSA implementation has emerged following the policy's spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa during the 2010s, with a primary focus on evidence from Nigeria. Findings at the consolidated-treasury level tend to report positive outcomes in fiscal discipline, revenue consolidation and the narrowing of corruption (Eme et al., 2015; Akinleye et al., 2018; Ivungu et al., 2020; Effiong et al., 2021; Amahalu et al., 2022). Findings at the municipal level tend to report a more cautious picture, identifying chronic and prolonged payment delays, contractor harm and capacity gaps as recurring features of TSA implementation (Mboto et al., 2017; Mojeed et al., 2021; Ojong et al., 2021; Iloeje & Okwo, 2022; Nwoba et al., 2023). The gap between consolidated-level findings and operational-level results has been characterised as a scale-of-analysis challenge associated with centralised public financial management reforms in developing economies (Pimenta & Pessôa, 2015; Cruz et al., 2023).

Within this body of research, three sub-streams stand out as particularly relevant to the present study. Research on bureaucratic and approval-chain bottlenecks has revealed that multi-stage processing is a major source of operational friction (Akinleye et al., 2018; Mojeed et al., 2021; Nwambuko & Nnaeto, 2023). Studies on contractor exposure within centralised disbursement systems have shown a systemic shift of cash-flow risk from public entities to private contracting partners (Odenigbo et al., 2020; Chadee et al., 2023). Investigations into the legitimacy implications of TSA reform have explored how stakeholder perceptions of fairness and accountability influence compliance and cooperation (Onyeizugbe et al., 2017; Ezekiel & Olanike, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilises an interpretive framework that incorporates two interrelated theoretical perspectives: procedural justice theory and legitimacy theory. The two frameworks are linked by their shared focus on the perceptual mechanisms through which institutional arrangements acquire or lose authority among the stakeholders most directly affected by them. Collectively, these frameworks provide the conceptual language needed to examine the relationship between TSA operations and stakeholder perceptions of fairness, transparency and efficiency.

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice theory holds that perceptions of institutional fairness are shaped less by substantive outcomes than by the procedures through which outcomes are produced, with voice, neutrality, respect and trustworthiness identified as the core procedural attributes that drive legitimacy assessments (Tyler, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2013). Although the theory has been developed predominantly in policing and criminal justice contexts, its core

constructs translate directly to public finance reform settings in which stakeholders experience institutional authority through procedures that determine payment timing, documentation requirements and approval sequences (Licht, 2014; Craen & Skogan, 2016).

In the TSA context, the four procedural attributes operate as follows. Voice signifies stakeholders' ability to be acknowledged and to articulate their concerns about how the system functions. Neutrality refers to the perception that decisions are made impartially and consistently across cases. Respect involves treating those affected by the procedures with dignity. Trustworthiness pertains to the belief that officials' actions are driven by good faith and honest intentions. If the multi-stage approval system is perceived as opaque, communication is restricted, and timelines are not clearly defined, all four procedural attributes are weakened simultaneously, leading to a decline in the reform's institutional legitimacy, regardless of whether its substantive objectives are achieved. The procedural-justice framework is complemented by the social-exchange logic developed by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), which holds that ongoing institutional relationships are sustained by expectations of reciprocity. Where reciprocity is honoured through timely and predictable exchanges, cooperation and compliance are reinforced; where reciprocity is violated, the legitimacy of the exchange relationship erodes. Applied to the TSA in a decentralised setting, the framework predicts that stakeholders will tolerate substantive delay or constraint where procedural fairness is maintained, but will withdraw cooperation and legitimacy where procedures are perceived as opaque, inconsistent or non-reciprocal.

Legitimacy Theory

According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy theory suggests that stakeholder trust, along with perceptions of institutional fairness, plays a crucial role in shaping compliance behaviour, encouraging participation in public programmes, and fostering support for institutional reform. In the context of public financial management, the legitimacy framework suggests that perceptions of fairness and transparency result in observable cooperative behaviours, such as the prompt submission of documentation, compliance with procedural requirements, and active participation in reform processes. Their absence leads to informal workarounds, complaint behaviour and resistance to reform. The framework, therefore, provides an analytic bridge from perception to behaviour, and hence to the operational sustainability of the reform itself. A fundamental insight from modern legitimacy research is that an institution, despite being formally legitimate with solid legal authorisation, can still lose perceived legitimacy if stakeholders find its day-to-day procedures opaque, slow, arbitrary or disrespectful. Conversely, an institution facing doubts about its mandate can establish legitimacy through fair, transparent and responsive operational practices. For the TSA in the South-West Region of Cameroon, this means that legitimacy cannot be guaranteed solely by the authority of Law No. 2018/012; rather, it will be gained or diminished based on the collective experiences of every contractor awaiting payment, every mayor seeking information, and every treasurer manoeuvring through the multi-stage approval process.

The institutional context in which the TSA operates also matters. The TSA is an institutional arrangement whose design (central oversight versus local discretion) and operational features (approval architecture, IT infrastructure, liquidity management) interact with the decentralisation framework within which it is deployed (Białek-Jaworska, 2021; Pandey et al., 2023). The acceptability of the centralisation–decentralisation trade-off depends on how stakeholders with different roles and levels of exposure perceive the resulting institutional arrangement.

Literature Gap

Despite the extensive empirical literature on TSA implementation in Nigeria and the growing body of comparative studies across CEMAC (the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa) and the broader sub-Saharan African region, the perceptual dimensions of fairness, transparency and efficiency remain underexplored in the Cameroonian context. Studies to date have either examined the consolidated-treasury level (Effiong et al., 2021; Amahalu et al., 2022) or emphasised objective performance indicators such as revenue consolidation and budget execution rates (Ojong et al., 2021; Iloeje & Okwo, 2022; Nwoba et al., 2023), without considering how stakeholders interpret the reform's operational characteristics. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a theoretically informed qualitative analysis of stakeholder perceptions in the South-West Region of Cameroon, focusing on the mechanisms by which these perceptions are created, communicated and

transformed into behavioural tendencies, and by triangulating those perceptions against objective administrative disbursement records.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used an embedded single-case qualitative design (Yin, 2018), focusing on the South West Region of Cameroon as the case, while three municipal councils within this region served as the embedded units of analysis. The design facilitates a thorough investigation of how stakeholders, situated in specific institutional roles within a distinct politico-administrative context, experience and construct the TSA. Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was chosen as the analytical approach because the study aimed to identify and interpret meaning structures within open-ended textual data and to develop thematic categories that reflect both explicit statements and underlying interpretive frameworks.

Sampling and Participants

To capture a diverse range of stakeholder perspectives on TSA operations and outcomes, purposive sampling was used. A total of forty-four (44) participants were recruited across three broad stakeholder categories: 23 central finance officials; 1 executive mayor, 10 treasury officials (including municipal, divisional and sub-divisional treasurers and regional paymaster staff, the primary disbursement officials in their respective stations); and 10 contractors and suppliers who engage with municipal disbursement processes through direct contract execution or supply. The sample reflects the institutional vantage points most directly exposed to TSA-mediated disbursement, combining the treasury- and finance-facing perspective of officials who operate the system with the contractor- and supplier-facing perspective of those who depend on its outputs.

The triangulation of these complementary vantage points provides institutional context for the perceptual claims rather than serving as an independent representative sample of any single role. Participants were recruited from municipal councils and treasury stations in the South-West Region, selected for their diverse demographic and economic characteristics. Each participant had at least three years of direct experience with TSA-mediated municipal disbursement processes. Recruitment was conducted via formal invitation (consent) letters to the council and treasury leadership. Participation was voluntary and contingent upon informed consent.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and small focus-group discussions from 28 August to 28 October 2025. The protocols for both interviews and focus groups were designed around four primary areas: experiences with TSA processing steps (verification layers, documentation requirements and regional-to-central transfer sequences); perceptions of fairness and consistency; perceptions of transparency and information accessibility; and perceptions of efficiency and operational outcomes. In addition, documentary evidence, such as policy documents, procedural guidelines, and publicly available audit notes, was referenced to provide context for the participants' narratives.

Two interviews were audio-recorded with explicit consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The remaining participants either declined to be audio-recorded, owing to the politically sensitive nature of treasury operations in the regional context, or responded via self-completed open-ended questionnaires. For interviewed participants who declined to be recorded, detailed handwritten notes were maintained throughout each interview, capturing direct quotations as they were spoken and summarising the surrounding discussion.

These notes were reviewed, expanded and typed up within twenty-four hours of the interviews to enhance recall accuracy. Direct quotations from non-recorded participants were noted verbatim in the contemporaneous records and were verified with the participants at the conclusion of the interviews. The reliance on contemporaneous note-taking instead of verbatim transcription for most interviews is acknowledged as a methodological limitation in Section 10.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was conducted using a thematic coding approach based on Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Saldaña (2021). Initial familiarity was established through a thorough review of all questionnaires, transcripts and typed-up notes. Descriptive codes were developed through an open-coding process based on participants' language (all participants wrote in English). Subsequently, these codes were organised into broader categories via axial coding, which were then grouped into four main themes corresponding to the three perceptual dimensions (fairness, transparency, efficiency) and an additional theme reflecting behavioural response. To enhance transparency in reporting, the frequency of each category across the corpus was documented, resulting in 171 unique code occurrences across the accounts of 44 participants. These frequencies are presented descriptively to indicate the relative importance of each category within the dataset; they are not intended to support inferential statistical claims, given the case study's qualitative nature and the limited sample size.

Trustworthiness

The four standard trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were addressed through specific procedural steps. Credibility was supported through triangulation across stakeholder categories, member-checking of preliminary thematic interpretations with three participants, prolonged engagement with the corpus over two months of analysis, and, as detailed in Section 4.7, the integration of objective administrative records as a second independent data source.

Transferability was supported through thick description of the participant context, the institutional setting and the procedural arrangements, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail that documented analytic decisions, code definitions, and category development moves. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memoing during the analysis and by documenting the chain of evidence that links the raw account to the interpretive claim.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Institutional ethical approval was obtained from the Unicaf University of Malawi Research Ethics Committee and the Directorate General of the Treasury, Monetary and Financial Cooperation of the Ministry of Finance, Cameroon, prior to data collection.

All participants provided written informed consent after being briefed on the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their responses and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Participant identities were anonymised at the point of transcription and are reported in this article only through role-based codes (for example, Contractor R14; Treasurer R03). Audio recordings and transcripts are stored on encrypted devices accessible only to the researcher. No conflicts of interest are declared.

Administrative Records and Data Triangulation

To bring the study's qualitative findings into dialogue with objective administrative evidence, three voucher registers obtained from the accounting service of the Buea Regional Treasury were analysed. The registers cover 2022 vouchers paid in 2023, 2023 vouchers paid in 2024, and 2024 vouchers paid in 2025. Together, these records comprise 560 individual disbursements totalling approximately 8.33 billion FCFA. For each voucher, the processing time was calculated as the number of days between the reception date (when the payment file reached the treasury) and the payment date (when funds were released).

This administrative dataset provides an independent, non-perceptual measure of the settlement system's performance, enabling convergent validation of the qualitative themes in the sense intended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): two independent data sources, gathered by different means, can be assessed for convergence or divergence against the same substantive claims. The triangulation findings are reported in Section 5.6 and discussed in Sections 6 and 7.

FINDINGS

Overview of Thematic Categories

From the qualitative analysis, three perceptual themes and one behavioural-response theme were identified: perceived fairness in TSA processing; perceived transparency of TSA operations; perceived efficiency and its connection to governance outcomes; and behavioural responses to perceived institutional performance. Axial coding was used to identify sub-categories within each theme. Table 1 displays the distribution of code occurrences across the four themes and their respective sub-categories. The relative importance of each category within the corpus is reflected by the percentages, which are rounded to the nearest whole number to align with the qualitative design and the limited sample size.

Table 1. Distribution of thematic codes across the corpus (n = 171 code occurrences from 44 participants)

Theme	Sub-category	Code count	Share of corpus
Perceived fairness	Loss of direct access / financial autonomy	18	11%
	Contractor impact	11	6%
	Erosion of trust	9	5%
	Equitable payment ordering	3	2%
	Corruption / informal inducements	2	1%
	Subtotal – fairness	43	25%
Perceived transparency	Administrative and documentation issues	17	10%
	IT and connectivity/communication problems	10	6%
	Bureaucratic approval chain	8	5%
	Notification-transfer gap	7	4%
	Subtotal – transparency	42	25%
Perceived efficiency	Payment/disbursement delay	24	14%
	Planning and budgeting disruption	16	9%
	Contractor withdrawal/contract abandonment	11	6%
	TSA reliability/system malfunction	9	5%

	Project delays / service-delivery failure	6	4%
	Subtotal – efficiency	66	39%
Behavioural response	Coping and reform suggestions	17	10%
	Training and capacity-building proposals	3	2%
	Subtotal – behavioural response	20	12%
TOTAL		171	100%

Note. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Code counts indicate the relative salience of each category within the corpus and are not estimates of population frequencies.

Perceived Fairness in TSA Processing

Participants expressed frustration with their TSA processing experience, articulated as both fairness and unfairness. A minority of municipal treasurers and contractors valued the standardisation of decision rules and the consistent application of procedures, on the view that uniform rules narrowed the gaps for discretionary leakage. The dominant pattern, however, was the perception that approval procedures were applied inconsistently across cases, that delays stemmed from opaque decisions at the regional and central treasury levels, and that access to funds was uneven across categories of claimants.

“When rules are clear and always followed, I feel I am being treated fairly, even if the money is late. What matters is consistency.”

“Sometimes we see funds delayed because a certain unit wants more paperwork; that feels unfair when it happens again and again for no reason.”

Within the fairness theme (43 code occurrences in total), the loss of councils’ direct access to their own funds was the most frequently raised sub-category, accounting for 18 of those occurrences. Contractor impact (covering voicelessness, inequitable treatment, project abandonment, and refusal to accept new offers) accounted for 11 occurrences; erosion of trust between councils, contractors, and citizens for 9; demands for equitable payment for 3; and corruption or informal inducements for the remaining 2. The prominence of access- and treatment-related concerns within the fairness dimension is consistent with the broader empirical literature documenting cash-flow risk transfer and the erosion of local financial autonomy under centralised disbursement architectures (Odenigbo et al., 2020; Chadee et al., 2023).

Perceived Transparency of TSA Operations

Participants expressed differing views regarding transparency in TSA operations. Some affirmed that the consolidation and centralisation of funds had improved the visibility of aggregate cash positions and strengthened accountability at the macro level. The dominant pattern, however, was the perception that documentation requirements and multi-layered approvals created opacity and uncertainty about the precise locations of disbursement bottlenecks. A common concern was the absence of accessible, timely updates on the status of pending disbursements and of readily interpretable audit trails for non-specialist stakeholders. Some contractors aired the following:

“You can see the funds in the central account, but you do not easily understand where the bottleneck is in the chain of approvals.”

“Disbursement status is shared in official channels, but the information is not user-friendly for contractors.”

Within the transparency theme (42 code occurrences in total), administrative and documentation issues (covering missing documents, signature requirements, verification cycles and the opacity of the documentation chain) were the most salient sub-category, accounting for 17 of the 42 occurrences. Poor communication, connectivity and coordination between treasury stations and councils accounted for 10 occurrences; the unpredictability and irregularity of disbursement for 8; and the notification-transfer gap, whereby revenue is recorded or notified locally but withheld or unavailable centrally, for the remaining 7. The pattern is consistent with prior findings that multi-stage approval architectures generate information asymmetries that impede stakeholder understanding of disbursement timing and decision logic (Akinleye et al., 2018; Mojeed et al., 2021).

Perceived Efficiency and Its Link to Governance Outcomes

Participants' perceptions of efficiency were primarily based on processing times, the number of verification steps required for each claim, and the ease of complying with TSA documentation requirements. Some participants acknowledged that centralised control had improved overall liquidity management and reduced waste at a macro level. A larger number, however, described bureaucratic obstacles, slow inter-treasury transfers, and repeated documentation requests as indicators of operational inefficiency during service delivery. Many participants linked perceived inefficiency to project-delivery outcomes, noting that more efficient payment flows were associated with fewer contract delays, whereas centralised approvals led to delays that harmed contractor relationships and project-completion schedules. This pattern was effectively captured by the single mayoral participant:

"The system itself is supposed to make things faster, but each step adds another wait. By the time everything is approved, the project has already lost momentum."

The quotation is the only mayoral voice in the corpus, and the weight placed on it must be read accordingly; nonetheless, its alignment with the treasurers' and contractors' accounts strengthens the interpretation that the perception of momentum loss is widely shared across institutional positions. Within the efficiency theme (66 code occurrences in total, the most heavily coded dimension), payment and disbursement delay was the single most frequent sub-category, accounting for 24 of the 66 occurrences. Planning and budgeting disruption accounted for 16 occurrences; contractor withdrawal and contract abandonment for 11; system or technical malfunction and reliability concerns for 9; and project delays and service-delivery failure for the remaining 6. The concentration of coding on delay and its downstream consequences indicates that participants identified timeliness, rather than human-capital capacity, as the principal operational failing of the system.

Behavioural Responses to Perceived Institutional Performance

Participant views indicated that perceptions of fairness, transparency and efficiency translated into observable behavioural dispositions toward TSA procedures. Greater willingness to engage with the process, timely submission of required documentation, and constructive dialogue with treasury staff were associated with positive perceptions of procedural consistency and information accessibility. Complaint behaviour, reluctance to comply with documentation requirements, and the development of informal workarounds were associated with negative perceptions, each of which could undermine the reform's legitimacy over time.

The behavioural-response theme (20 code occurrences in total) was also used to capture stakeholder coping mechanisms and concrete proposals for system improvement. 17 occurrences captured reform and coping suggestions, with decentralisation of disbursement authority through operational sub-accounts, restoration of direct council access, digital automation and integration of payment systems, internal audit and monitoring, cash-flow and liquidity management, and outright systemic reform recurring as the principal proposals. A further three occurrences concerned proposals for staff training and capacity building. \

The clustering of reform suggestions around decentralisation and authority reallocation is consistent with broader findings indicating that predictable preferences for the restoration of local discretion are generated among stakeholders subject to centralised disbursement architectures (Eme et al., 2015; Onyeizugbe et al., 2017). These participant-derived proposals are revisited in the policy implications section (Section 7).



TRIANGULATION WITH ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS

Payment-Processing Times

Across all 560 vouchers, the mean processing time was 124.6 days (median 107 days; range 14–259 days). Almost two-thirds of payments (62%) were settled more than ninety days after the file was received, and 31% took longer than six months. Table 2 reports the figures by fiscal year.

Table 2. Voucher processing times and disbursement totals, by fiscal year

Fiscal year (paid in)	Vouchers (n)	Mean days	Median days	Range (min–max)	% > 90 days	Total disbursed (FCFA)
2022 → 2023	60	40.2	40	14–78	0%	878,219,979
2023 → 2024	108	170.3	187	27–196	95%	738,678,603
2024 → 2025	392	124.9	101	31–259	63%	6,708,263,704
All years	560	124.6	107	14–259	62%	8,325,162,286

Note. Processing time is the number of days between the reception date recorded at the Buea Regional Treasury and the payment date. “Fiscal year (paid in)” denotes vouchers raised in the stated year and settled in the following year. Totals are nominal FCFA.

The trajectory is itself informative. Processing times rose sharply from a mean of roughly 40 days in 2022 to 170 days in 2023, before easing to 125 days in 2024 as volume expanded almost fourfold (from 60 to 392 vouchers). Even at the improved 2024 level, however, the typical voucher waited over three months, and none of the three years approached prompt settlement. Table 3 shows how the delay distribution shifted across the period.

Table 3. Distribution of vouchers by processing-time band

Processing-time band	2022 (n=60)	2023 (n=108)	2024 (n=392)	All (n=560)
≤ 30 days	24 (40%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	26 (5%)
31–90 days	36 (60%)	3 (3%)	146 (37%)	185 (33%)
91–180 days	0 (0%)	20 (19%)	154 (39%)	174 (31%)
> 180 days	0 (0%)	83 (77%)	92 (23%)	175 (31%)

Note. Cell entries are the number of vouchers in each band, with the within-year percentage in parentheses. In 2022, no voucher exceeded ninety days; by 2023, 95% did. The concentration of long waits in 2023 reflects an exceptionally constrained settlement period.

Disbursement Pattern and Liquidity Signals

Two features of the records speak directly to the themes of transparency and liquidity in the qualitative data. First, reception dates are heavily bunched at year-end: between 89% and 99% of vouchers in each register were

received at the Buea Regional Treasury in December, then settled in tranches over the following months of the next fiscal year. This pattern is the administrative signature of the year-end commitment cycle interacting with constrained liquidity: obligations crystallise in December but cannot be discharged until cash becomes available in the new year.

Second, payments are released in large same-day batches rather than as a steady flow. Single settlement dates clear very large numbers of vouchers at once; for example, 98 vouchers were paid on 24 March 2025 and 56 on 3 July 2024. This episodic, tranche-driven disbursement corroborates the qualitative perception of disbursement as unpredictable and irregular: from a claimant's vantage point, payment arrives not on a schedule but when a tranche is released.

A further test concerns whether delay is patterned or idiosyncratic. The correlation between voucher amount and processing time is effectively zero (Pearson $r = -0.09$), indicating that larger claims were not systematically prioritised or deprioritised; delay is a structural property of the settlement system rather than a function of transaction size. At the same time, repeat contractors experienced markedly different mean waiting times (ranging from around 66 days to nearly 190 days across firms that appeared four or more times), consistent with the perception that treatment was applied inconsistently across otherwise comparable claimants.

Triangulation Against the Qualitative Findings

Table 4 maps each principal qualitative perception to its corresponding objective indicator and records the degree to which the records corroborate that perception.

Table 4. Triangulation of qualitative perceptions against voucher-record indicators

Qualitative perception (code)	Objective indicator from voucher records	Triangulation verdict
Payment/disbursement delay (C1) — most-coded efficiency theme	Mean processing time of 125 days across 560 vouchers; 62% paid beyond 90 days; 31% beyond 180 days	Strongly corroborated: the perception of chronic delay is matched by an objective mean far exceeding any reasonable settlement window
Unpredictability/irregularity of disbursement (B3)	Payments are released in large same-day tranches (e.g. 98 vouchers cleared on 24/03/2025; 56 on 03/07/2024) rather than as a steady flow	Corroborated: disbursement is episodic and tranche-driven, not continuous, consistent with reported uncertainty over timing
Liquidity & revenue shortfalls/notification-transfer gap (B4)	89–99% of vouchers received at the treasury in December each year are then settled months later in the following fiscal year	Corroborated: year-end bunching and cross-year settlement indicate the timing mismatch between revenue inflows and disbursement obligations described by participants
Inequitable treatment/contractor exposure (A-theme, C5)	Repeat contractors wait widely different mean periods (e.g. 66 days vs 188 days); delay is unrelated to voucher size ($r = -0.09$)	Partly corroborated: variation in waiting times across otherwise comparable claimants is consistent with perceived

		inconsistency, though the records cannot establish intent
Loss of direct access / centralised approval (A1)	All payments are routed and settled through the Buea Regional Treasury accounting service; councils do not disburse directly	Contextually corroborated: the records confirm the centralised settlement architecture that participants experienced as a loss of direct access

Note. Code labels refer to the thematic coding scheme used in the study. “Corroborated” denotes convergence between the perceptual claim and the administrative evidence; it does not establish causation.

DISCUSSION

The Centrality of Payment Delay and Efficiency Concerns

The most salient finding of the analysis is the dominance of efficiency-related concerns in the corpus, accounting for approximately 39% of all code occurrences, with payment and disbursement delay as the largest single sub-category. Closely behind, fairness and transparency concerns each accounted for approximately 25% of all occurrences. The fact that delay and its knock-on effects dominated the accounts is exactly what the underlying theories would predict. Procedural-justice and social-exchange perspectives hold that people judge an institution mainly through the everyday dealings that affect them directly, rather than through the policy reasoning behind it. A contractor does not experience the TSA as a cash-consolidation reform; they experience it as “I submitted my invoice and waited four months to be paid.” The timing and reliability of those exchanges, therefore, shape perceptions far more than the system's official rationale, and the prominence of delay in the data reflects this (Tyler, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Stakeholders in the present study widely accepted the policy rationale for centralised cash management but expressed substantial dissatisfaction with the timeliness and procedural experience of its operationalisation. Within the fairness dimension, the loss of councils’ direct access to their own funds was the most prominent sub-category, signalling that stakeholders read the centralisation of disbursement not merely as a delay problem but as an erosion of local financial autonomy.

The prominence of contractor harm carries particular weight in assessing the reform’s legitimacy, a concern that surfaced across both the fairness dimension (through inequitable treatment and exclusion) and the efficiency dimension (through contractor withdrawal and contract abandonment). Contractors are positioned at the operational frontier of TSA-mediated disbursement; their cash-flow exposure is direct, their grievances are visible to municipal officials and end users, and their reduced willingness to accept new public contracts has knock-on effects on service delivery and local development. The pattern is consistent with findings reported in the Nigerian TSA literature, where contractor exposure has been documented as a recurring feature of centralised treasury implementation (Odenigbo et al., 2020; Mojeed et al., 2021; Chadee et al., 2023). The Cameroonian case adds confirmatory evidence to a pattern observed elsewhere in the region, although whether the pattern reflects a properly sub-regional regularity remains to be tested through systematic comparative work.

Transparency Deficits and the Multi-Stage Approval Architecture

Transparency-related concerns accounted for approximately 25% of all code occurrences, with administrative and documentation issues and the bureaucratic, multi-stage approval architecture identified as the most salient sub-categories. The pattern indicates that stakeholder dissatisfaction with TSA transparency is not primarily a function of information unavailability in the abstract, but of information opacity at the specific operational stages where disbursements stall. Participants reported being able to confirm the existence of consolidated funds at the macro level, but they were unable to identify the precise approval node responsible for the delay in any given case.

This pattern carries an important implication for institutional design. A particular kind of transparency is generated by the TSA architecture in its current form: macro-level visibility into aggregate cash positions, combined with operational-level opacity in decision sequences. While the two are not contradictory, they are nonetheless misaligned with stakeholders' information needs. Operational-level transparency is required by end users and contractors to plan their activities, manage their cash flows and assess the credibility of payment commitments. However, only macro-level transparency is received, which does not meet their practical information needs. Consequently, real but misdirected transparency is produced by institutional design, which, according to the procedural-justice framework, is experienced as opacity rather than accountability (Licht, 2014).

Efficiency, Fairness and Transparency as Mutually Entangled Dimensions

Approximately 39% of code occurrences were attributed to efficiency concerns, making it the most heavily coded of the three perceptual dimensions, driven principally by payment delay and the budgeting distortion and contractor withdrawal that follow from it. The salience of efficiency coding should not, however, be read as evidence that participants experienced delay as an isolated operational fault. Rather, participants consistently attributed observable inefficiencies (payment delays, budgeting disruptions, contractor withdrawals, liquidity and project-delivery failures) to the upstream fairness and transparency problems documented in the preceding sub-sections, framing slow and unpredictable disbursement as the visible symptom of opaque approval architectures and the loss of direct local access to funds. Within the present corpus, efficiency was therefore the dimension in which the consequences of fairness and transparency deficits were most concretely registered.

This finding is consistent with the broader theoretical literature on procedural legitimacy, which holds that perceived efficiency in institutional arrangements is shaped not only by objective performance but also by the procedural and informational context within which performance is experienced (Suchman, 1995; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Where procedures are perceived as fair and information is accessible, identical operational outcomes yield more favourable efficiency assessments than where procedures are perceived as inconsistent and information is withheld.

The Interconnected Nature of the Three Perceptual Dimensions

A core finding of the analysis is that stakeholders do not experience the three perceptual dimensions (fairness, transparency and efficiency) as analytically separable. Fluid movement among the three dimensions was observed in participants' accounts, with transparency concerns connected to fairness concerns through unverifiable delay attribution, and fairness concerns linked to efficiency concerns through contractor withdrawal and project disruption.

The qualitative data do not support inferring causal direction among the three dimensions; the study's cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and is consistent with multiple plausible causal orderings. The data support the interpretation that the three dimensions are mutually reinforcing within stakeholder experience: weaknesses in any one dimension are amplified rather than absorbed by the others. The implication for reform design is that interventions addressing any single dimension in isolation are likely to be perceived as incomplete by stakeholders, whereas integrated reform programmes targeting all three dimensions simultaneously are more likely to be viewed as substantive improvements.

Evaluation of the Findings in a Comparative Context

The present findings can be productively situated within the broader TSA literature in two respects. The salience of contractor-related concerns, spanning inequitable treatment within the fairness dimension and outright contractor withdrawal within the efficiency dimension, closely aligns with findings reported in the Nigerian TSA literature, particularly Mojeed et al. (2021), Ojong et al. (2021) and Iloeje and Okwo (2022), each of whom identified contractor harm as a recurring feature of centralised treasury implementation. The divergence between the standardisation-acceptance pattern observed in some participant accounts and the operational-frustration pattern dominant in others mirrors the scale-of-analysis problem identified in the comparative TSA literature (Pimenta & Pessôa, 2015; Cruz et al., 2023), in which positive macro-level outcomes co-exist with negative operational-level outcomes within the same reform.

Convergent Validity: Administrative Records and Perceptual Findings

The administrative records provide convergent validation for the study's central perceptual finding. Where participants described payment delay as the dominant feature of their experience of the TSA, the voucher data show a settlement system in which the typical claim waited more than three months, and a substantial minority waited over half a year. The perception was not an artefact of disgruntled reporting; it tracks a measurable operational reality. This convergence strengthens the credibility and confirmability of the qualitative findings in the sense intended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): two independent data sources, gathered by different means, point to the same conclusion.

The records also sharpen the interpretation of the perception–outcome relationship. The near-zero amount–delay correlation (Pearson $r = -0.09$) and the year-end bunching locate the source of delay in the structure of the settlement cycle and in liquidity timing, rather than in the characteristics of individual transactions or claimants. This is consistent with the qualitative finding that participants attributed inefficiency to systemic features (centralised approval, the notification–transfer gap) rather than to isolated administrative error, and it supports the article's claim that perceived efficiency is entangled with, rather than independent of, the fairness and transparency dimensions.

Two cautions attach to the inference. The voucher registers capture only the reception-to-payment segment of the disbursement chain; they are silent on the upstream council-to-treasury and treasury-to-ACCT stages, where participants also experience friction, so the measured delay is a lower bound on the total wait a contractor experiences. And while the data establish that adverse perceptions co-occur with adverse outcomes, the cross-sectional records cannot by themselves establish the direction of causation between perception and outcome; they corroborate the existence of the relationship without resolving its ordering. Subject to these cautions, the integration of the voucher records delivers the triangulation the qualitative study invited: the objective settlement data independently confirm that the delay, irregularity and liquidity-timing problems reported by stakeholders are real, measurable and structural, and not merely perceptual.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE

The findings outlined above present the Ministry of Finance (MINFI) with a body of evidence that is both diagnostically precise and operationally actionable. The mean payment-processing time of 124.6 days, with 62% of disbursements settled beyond 90 days and 31% beyond 180 days, is not a perception artefact but an objective administrative reality confirmed by the Buea Regional Treasury's own records. The policy significance is threefold. First, the TSA's institutional legitimacy under Law No. 2018/012 of 11 July 2018 on the Fiscal Regime of the State and Other Public Entities cannot be sustained by legal authority alone; it must be earned through operational performance. Second, because the three perceptual dimensions are mutually reinforcing, piecemeal interventions targeting only one dimension will be perceived as incomplete and are unlikely to restore the cooperative compliance on which the reform depends. Third, the evidence provides MINFI with a set of empirically grounded, institutionally calibrated reform levers that are directly actionable within the existing legal and programmatic framework, including Cameroon's PFM Reform Plan 2024–2027 (World Bank, 2024) and its obligations under the IMF-supported Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility arrangements (IMF, 2025). The implications are organised below under five thematic areas.

The Institutional Stakes: Why Operational Performance Determines Reform Legitimacy

The study's theoretical framework, grounded in procedural-justice theory (Tyler, 2006) and legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995), carries a direct message for MINFI: formal legal authority is a necessary but not sufficient condition for institutional legitimacy. Law No. 2018/012 on the Fiscal Regime of the State and Other Public Entities provides the TSA with a robust statutory foundation, and stakeholders broadly accept the policy rationale for centralised cash management. What they do not accept, and what the administrative records confirm they are right not to accept, is the operational experience that the current architecture delivers.

The procedural-justice literature is unambiguous on this point: stakeholders assess institutional legitimacy primarily by the quality of the procedures they encounter, not by the quality of the policy objectives those

procedures are meant to serve (Tyler, 2006). Voice, neutrality, respect and trustworthiness are the four procedural attributes through which legitimacy is built or eroded, and the study documents deficits across all four. Contractors and councils have no effective voice in disbursement scheduling; processing times vary widely among otherwise comparable claimants (from 66 to 188 days for repeat contractors), undermining neutrality; the absence of accessible disbursement-status information is perceived as disrespectful; and the episodic, tranche-driven payment pattern erodes the trustworthiness of payment commitments.

The legitimacy stakes are not merely reputational. The study documents a concrete behavioural consequence: contractor withdrawal from public contracts. When contractors who have experienced chronic payment delays decline to bid on new public contracts, the TSA's operational failures translate directly into reduced competition in public procurement, higher contract prices, project abandonment and service-delivery failure. This is a fiscal cost, not merely a perceptual one, and it falls disproportionately on the municipalities and communities that depend on locally contracted public works and services. The IMF's 2025 Article IV consultation for Cameroon independently identifies the prevention of arrears accumulation and the management of liquidity challenges as key PFM priorities (IMF, 2025), and the World Bank's 2024 PFM Reform Plan lists public expenditure management among its nine reform priorities (World Bank, 2024). The study's findings provide sub-national, operational-level evidence that grounds these macro-level diagnostics in the lived experience of the stakeholders who interact with the system daily.

Approval-Architecture Reform: Eliminating Structural Delay at Source

The most heavily coded finding in the study, payment and disbursement delay, accounting for 24 of the 66 efficiency-theme code occurrences, is not attributable to individual administrative failures or to the characteristics of specific transactions. The near-zero correlation between voucher amount and processing time (Pearson $r = -0.09$) establishes that delay is a structural property of the settlement system. The multi-stage approval chain, from the municipal council, through the regional treasury, to the ACCT in Yaoundé, is the primary structural source of this delay and the primary target for reform.

The first recommendation, directed to MINFI and the Directorate General of the Treasury and Financial Cooperation, is to conduct a systematic review of the approval architecture to identify redundant verification steps and to introduce value-based thresholds for centralised authorisation. This aligns with a well-established principle in public financial management that the level of authorisation should be proportionate to the transaction's fiscal risk. Routine, low-value disbursements, which constitute the majority of the 560 vouchers analysed, carry minimal fiduciary risk and do not require centralised approval. Reserving ACCT authorisation for high-value or non-routine transactions would reduce the volume of claims flowing through the central bottleneck without compromising the TSA's core fiscal-discipline function. The table below summarises the proposed tiered authorisation model implied by the findings.

Table 5. Proposed tiered authorisation model

Transaction tier	Proposed authorisation level	Rationale
Routine, low-value disbursements (below a defined threshold)	Municipal council level, with regional treasury notification	Minimal fiduciary risk; current centralised processing creates structural delay without commensurate control benefit
Mid-value or non-routine disbursements	Regional treasury level, with ACCT reporting	Proportionate oversight; preserves standardisation without requiring central approval for every claim
High-value, capital, or exceptional disbursements	ACCT level, with full multi-stage verification	Appropriate for transactions where the fiscal risk justifies the processing time

Implementing this tiered model would require amendments to the implementing decrees of Law No. 2018/012 on the Fiscal Regime of the State and Other Public Entities and the development of clear value thresholds, transaction-type classifications and audit protocols to ensure that the decentralisation of authorisation does not create new opportunities for discretionary leakage. The study explicitly notes that a minority of participants valued the standardisation function of the current architecture as a check on informal practices; the tiered model preserves this function for high-risk transactions while removing it from the low-risk majority, where it currently generates delay without benefit. The trajectory of the administrative data reinforces the urgency: processing times rose from a mean of 40 days in 2022 to 170 days in 2023, then eased to 125 days in 2024 as volume expanded nearly fourfold. As decentralisation deepens under Law No. 2019/024 of 24 December 2019 to Institute the General Code of Regional and Local of the Republic of Cameroon with the General Decentralisation Grant reaching CFA 292.5 billion in 2024 and more than CFA 2,300 billion transferred to local authorities since 2018 (Business in Cameroon, 2024), the disbursement infrastructure must be capable of processing these growing flows efficiently if the decentralisation agenda is to deliver on its service-delivery objectives.

Liquidity Management and the Year-End Commitment Cycle

The administrative triangulation reveals a structural liquidity-timing problem distinct from, and in some respects more tractable than, the approval-architecture problem. Between 89% and 99% of vouchers in each register were received at the Buea Regional Treasury in December, then settled in tranches over the following months. This year-end bunching is the administrative signature of the annual commitment cycle: obligations crystallise at year-end when ministries and councils exhaust their budget authorisations, but the cash to discharge those obligations is not available until the new fiscal year's revenue flows begin to accumulate.

The consequence is a predictable, recurring liquidity crunch at regional treasury stations in the first quarter of each new fiscal year. This is not a failure to hold sufficient aggregate resources; it is a timing mismatch between the pattern of obligation crystallisation and the pattern of revenue inflow. The qualitative data capture this mismatch through the notification–transfer gap sub-category (7 code occurrences within the transparency theme), describing the experience of revenue being recorded or notified locally but withheld or unavailable centrally.

The policy implication is the establishment of pre-positioned regional liquidity buffers, operational reserves held at regional treasury stations sufficient to absorb the first-quarter disbursement surge, while maintaining these buffers within the consolidated TSA balance and subject to consolidated reporting. This measure would not compromise the TSA's cash-visibility function; it would instead operationalise that function by ensuring that consolidated visibility translates into timely local disbursement. The measure is consistent with the IMF's recommendation that Cameroon enhance cash-flow management and align it with debt management (Lienert & Pattanayak, 2025).

A related implication concerns the incentive structure that drives year-end commitment bunching. The concentration of 89–99% of vouchers in December suggests that budget execution is heavily back-loaded, itself a symptom of procurement and commitment-management weaknesses upstream of the treasury. MINFI, in coordination with the Ministry of Public Contracts (MINMAP) and the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development (MINEPAT), should examine whether the annual procurement calendar can be restructured to spread commitment crystallisation more evenly across the fiscal year, reducing the December surge and the first-quarter liquidity pressure that follows from it.

Contractor Protection and the Integrity of Public Procurement

The findings on contractor harm carry implications that extend beyond the TSA's operational performance into the integrity of the public procurement system. Contractor-related concerns surfaced across both the fairness dimension (11 code occurrences for contractor impact, covering voicelessness, inequitable treatment and project abandonment) and the efficiency dimension (11 code occurrences for contractor withdrawal and contract abandonment). The administrative data add a further dimension: repeat contractors experienced mean waiting times ranging from approximately 66 days to nearly 190 days, a variation inconsistent with a system applying uniform procedures to comparable claims.

The policy significance of this variation is twofold. First, it suggests that the TSA's disbursement system is not operating as a neutral, rule-bound mechanism; discretionary or structural factors are producing systematically different outcomes for otherwise comparable claimants. Whether this reflects informal prioritisation, differences in documentation quality, or uneven application of verification procedures, it is experienced by contractors as unfair treatment and results in a reduced willingness to accept new public contracts. Second, contractor withdrawal from public procurement has direct fiscal consequences: reduced competition raises contract prices, increases the risk of contract abandonment, and ultimately reduces the value for money the procurement system delivers.

MINFI should therefore treat contractor protection not merely as a fairness concern but as a fiscal-efficiency concern. Three specific measures follow. First, the development of a standardised payment-commitment protocol that specifies maximum processing times by transaction tier, documentation requirements, and escalation procedures for overdue claims would address the neutrality deficit and provide contractors with enforceable expectations regarding payment timing. Second, in practice, the partial-payment mechanism should be reinforced for long-duration contracts, thereby reducing contractors' cash-flow exposure during extended processing periods and lowering the risk premium they implicitly build into their bids. Third, MINFI should work with MINMAP to establish a contractor feedback mechanism, a formal channel through which contractors can report payment delays and documentation disputes, feeding into the treasury's internal audit and monitoring function. Formalising this channel would reduce informal friction while generating systematic data on disbursement performance. These measures are consistent with the broader literature on contractor exposure in centralised disbursement systems (Odenigbo et al., 2020; Chadee et al., 2023), and Cameroon's experience adds the specific finding that the variation in contractor waiting times, rather than the average delay alone, is a particularly potent driver of the perception of inequitable treatment.

Transparency Infrastructure: From Macro-Visibility to Operational Accountability

The transparency findings present MINFI with a counterintuitive but important diagnostic. Stakeholder dissatisfaction with TSA transparency is not primarily a function of information unavailability at the aggregate level; participants confirmed that consolidated fund balances are visible at the macro level. The problem is information opacity at the operational level: stakeholders cannot identify which approval node is responsible for a given delay, cannot track the status of a pending disbursement, and cannot access audit trails in a form interpretable by non-specialist users. The study characterises this as real but misdirected transparency — macro-level visibility that does not meet the operational information needs of contractors, councils and end users.

The policy implication is precise: the transparency investment required is not a further expansion of aggregate fiscal reporting but the development of operational-level disbursement-status interfaces accessible to the stakeholders who depend on them. The second principal recommendation calls for contractor-facing information interfaces that provide real-time disbursement status, stage-level processing data, and documented grievance channels. This is technically feasible within the existing integrated financial management information system infrastructure and is consistent with the Treasury's stated digitisation agenda (The Guardian Post, 2026). The table below maps the transparency gap to the specific informational content an operational interface should provide.

Table 6. Mapping the transparency gap to the required operational information

Stakeholder information need	Current provision	Required provision
Status of a specific pending disbursement	Not accessible to contractors or councils	Real-time stage-level tracking: received → verified → approved → scheduled → paid
Reason for processing delay	Not communicated; requires informal escalation	Automated notification when a claim exceeds a defined processing threshold, with reason code

Expected payment date	Not provided	Indicative payment schedule updated when tranche releases are planned
Grievance and escalation channel	Informal; no documented procedure	Formal, documented channel with defined response timelines
Audit trail for completed disbursements	Available in official channels but not user-friendly	Simplified disbursement confirmation accessible to payees

Implementing these interfaces would require investment in the user-facing layer of the financial-management information system, staff training in contractor-facing communication, and standard operating procedures for disbursement-status updates. The cost should be assessed against the fiscal cost of the informal escalation traffic it would replace and the compliance benefit of reducing contractor reluctance to engage with public procurement. A further implication concerns the disbursement calendar: because payments are released in large same-day tranches (98 vouchers on 24 March 2025, 56 on 3 July 2024) rather than as a steady flow, payment timing is fundamentally unpredictable from a contractor's perspective. Publishing a provisional disbursement calendar, indicating the approximate dates on which tranches are expected to be released, would not commit MINFI to specific payment dates but would substantially reduce the uncertainty contractors currently experience, improving their cash-flow planning and reducing the risk premium embedded in their bids.

Stakeholder Governance and the Voice Deficit

The procedural-justice framework identifies voice, the ability of affected stakeholders to articulate concerns and be acknowledged, as one of the four core procedural attributes through which institutional legitimacy is built. The study documents a significant voice deficit: contractors and councils have no formal mechanism through which to surface operational concerns, propose remediation measures, or receive feedback on systemic issues. The informal workarounds and complaint behaviour documented in the behavioural-response theme (20 code occurrences) are the predictable consequence of this deficit.

The third principal recommendation calls for the institutionalisation of structured consultation mechanisms at the regional level, under the co-chairmanship of the Directorate General of the Treasury and Financial and Monetary Cooperation and the National Decentralisation Council, involving mayors, treasurers, contractors, and end users.

This has a direct precedent in Cameroon's decentralisation framework: Law No. 2019/024 establishes the National Decentralisation Council as the consultative body for decentralisation policy (Republic of Cameroon, 2019), and the Regional Councils provide a sub-national platform for structured dialogue. MINFI should work with the Ministry of Decentralisation and Local Development (MINDDEVEL) to establish a standing TSA operational review committee at the regional level, meeting at least semi-annually, with a mandate to review disbursement performance data, surface systemic issues, and recommend operational improvements to the Directorate General of the Treasury.

The code-occurrence distribution provides a basis for prioritising the committee's agenda: the efficiency dimension (39% of occurrences) should be the primary focus, with payment delay and contractor withdrawal as leading agenda items, while fairness and transparency concerns (each approximately 25%) should be addressed as integrated components of the same agenda.

Beyond the regional consultation mechanism, MINFI should consider establishing a TSA performance dashboard, a publicly accessible, regularly updated summary of key disbursement performance indicators, as a transparency and accountability instrument. The administrative data demonstrate that such a dashboard is technically feasible: processing times, disbursement volumes and settlement rates can be computed from the voucher registers the treasury already maintains.

Publishing these indicators would create an accountability signal reinforcing the operational reforms and would demonstrate to international partners, whose programmes include PFM-reform conditionality (World Bank, 2024; IMF, 2025), that MINFI is taking the TSA's operational performance seriously.

THE DECENTRALISATION–CENTRALISATION TENSION AND REFORM ALIGNMENT

A Structural Policy Challenge

The findings sit within a structural tension fundamental to Cameroon's governance architecture: the TSA's centralising logic is in direct conflict with the decentralising logic of Law No. 2019/024 and the broader decentralisation agenda. The study documents this tension through the loss-of-direct-access/financial-autonomy sub-category, the single most frequently coded fairness concern (18 of 43 fairness-theme occurrences), and through the behavioural-response theme's dominant proposals for sub-account decentralisation and the restoration of direct council access.

This tension is not unique to the Republic of Cameroon. The IMF's December 2025 assessment of TSA reform in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa notes that AFRITAC Central countries (including Cameroon) have achieved TSA coverage of less than 25% of sub-national governments, compared with 75% in AFRITAC West countries (Lienert & Pattanayak, 2025). The gap reflects the difficulty of extending TSA architecture to sub-national levels while preserving consolidated cash visibility without eliminating local operational flexibility. The findings suggest that the current Cameroonian model has tilted too far toward centralisation at the operational level, generating legitimacy costs not offset by commensurate efficiency gains at the sub-national level.

The policy implication is not to abandon the TSA's centralising rationale, which enjoys broad stakeholder acceptance, but to redesign the architecture so that centralised oversight and local operational flexibility are complementary rather than contradictory. The tiered authorisation model (Section 7.2), combined with the regional liquidity buffers (Section 7.3), would move the architecture in this direction without requiring legislative amendment.

The operational sub-accounts proposed by participants (though they exist pending their deployment), accounts that would allow councils to manage routine disbursements within a defined envelope while remaining part of the consolidated TSA balance, represent a more ambitious structural reform that would require regulatory amendment and would most directly address the financial autonomy deficit that dominates the fairness dimension. MINFI should accelerate the existing implementation of operational sub-accounts within the TSA framework, drawing on the experience of AFRITAC West countries that have achieved higher sub-national coverage (Lienert & Pattanayak, 2025).

Alignment with the PFM Reform Plan 2024–2027 and IMF Programme Commitments

The findings and policy implications are directly relevant to Cameroon's existing reform commitments. The PFM Reform Plan 2024–2027, approved by the government in May 2024 and supported by the World Bank (World Bank, 2024), identifies public expenditure management as one of its nine priority areas. The findings provide operational-level evidence to inform the design and sequencing of reforms within this priority area, particularly regarding approval-chain rationalisation, disbursement-performance monitoring, and contractor-facing transparency.

The IMF's Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility arrangements, under which Cameroon has received SDR 593.4 million in total access (IMF, 2025), include structural benchmarks related to PFM reform, and the 2025 Article IV consultation explicitly identifies the prevention of arrears accumulation and the management of liquidity challenges as key priorities.

The administrative data, showing that 31% of vouchers were settled more than 180 days after reception, and that 89–99% were received in December before being settled in tranches over the following year, provide direct evidence of the arrears and liquidity-timing problems identified at the macro level. MINFI can use this evidence

to demonstrate the operational specificity of its reform commitments and to build the case for targeted technical assistance. The table below maps the principal findings to the relevant reform frameworks.

Table 7. Mapping of findings and policy implications to reform frameworks

Finding	Policy implication	Relevant reform framework
Mean processing time 124.6 days; 62% of vouchers > 90 days	Tiered authorisation model; approval-chain rationalisation	PFM Reform Plan 2024–2027 (public expenditure management); IMF ECF/EFF (arrears prevention)
89–99% of vouchers received in December; cross-year settlement	Regional liquidity buffers; commitment-cycle smoothing	IMF ECF/EFF (liquidity management); PFM Reform Plan (cash management)
Repeat contractor waiting times 66–188 days; $r = -0.09$	Standardised payment-commitment protocol; partial-payment mechanism; contractor feedback channel	Public procurement integrity; NDS30 (private-sector development)
Operational-level transparency deficit; macro-visibility without stage-level tracking	Contractor-facing disbursement-status interfaces; provisional disbursement calendar	PFM Reform Plan (transparency); digitisation agenda
Voice deficit; no formal stakeholder consultation mechanism	Regional TSA operational-review committee; TSA performance dashboard	Law No. 2019/024 (National Decentralisation Council); IMF programme accountability
Loss of direct access / financial autonomy (most-coded fairness concern)	Accelerate the deployment of existing operational sub-accounts within the TSA framework	Law No. 2019/024 (decentralisation); AFRITAC Central TSA coverage expansion

IMPLEMENTATION SEQUENCING AND POLITICAL-ECONOMY CONSIDERATIONS

The reform agenda implied by the findings is substantial, and its implementation must be sequenced to account for the political-economy constraints of the current reform environment. The IMF’s 2025 Article IV consultation notes that the electoral cycle has limited the government’s appetite for deep reforms (IMF, 2025), and the security situation in the South-West and North-West regions adds operational complexity to any reform requiring sub-national implementation. A pragmatic sequencing would distinguish three tiers of reform by implementation horizon.

Short term (within 12 months). Measures implementable through administrative instruction or ministerial circular without legislative amendment: publication of a provisional disbursement calendar; establishment of a contractor grievance channel within the existing treasury administration; introduction of processing-time monitoring and reporting within the ACCT’s internal management information; and the convening of an initial regional TSA operational-review meeting co-chaired by the Directorate General of the Treasury, Financial and Monetary Cooperation and National Decentralisation Council framework. These measures are low-cost, high-visibility, and directly address the voice and trustworthiness deficits identified in the study.

Medium term (12–36 months). Measures requiring regulatory amendment or significant IT investment: development of contractor-facing disbursement-status interfaces; introduction of value-based authorisation thresholds through amendment of the implementing decrees of Law No. 2018/012; capitalisation of regional

liquidity buffers; and the fast implementation of operational sub-accounts. These measures address the structural sources of delay and the transparency deficit, and they align with the PFM Reform Plan 2024–2027 timeline.

Long term (36+ months). Structural reforms requiring legislative amendment or fundamental IT-infrastructure investment: implementation of operational sub-accounts within the TSA framework; extension of TSA coverage to a higher proportion of sub-national government operations (consistent with the AFRITAC- **African Regional Technical Assistance Centre for Central Africa**, Central target); and integration of disbursement-performance data into a publicly accessible TSA performance dashboard. These measures address the fundamental tension between centralisation and decentralisation and would position Cameroon's TSA architecture as a model for the CEMAC sub-region.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Several limitations of the present study are acknowledged. The qualitative case-study design supports analytical generalisation to comparable institutional settings rather than statistical generalisation to the broader population of Cameroonian municipalities or to other CEMAC member states. The findings should be interpreted as theoretically grounded interpretive claims about the mechanisms through which stakeholder perceptions of the TSA are constructed in the South-West Region of Cameroon, rather than as estimates of population parameters. The sample composition is deliberately weighted toward finance officials and treasury staff, as well as contractors and suppliers, and is not designed to support strong claims about the perceptions of mayors or other elected officials; the accounts in the corpus serve a complementary, triangulating function across institutional vantage points. Reliance on contemporaneous note-taking and self-completed open-ended questionnaires, rather than verbatim transcription, for the majority of responses is a further limitation; although direct quotations were captured at the moment of utterance and verified with participants. A portion of the open-ended responses was transcribed from handwritten, in part French-language, returns, introducing a transcription-and-translation step between the raw account and the coded data. Finally, the code-occurrence counts presented in Table 1 indicate relative salience within the analysed corpus and should not be interpreted as estimates of population frequencies.

On the administrative triangulation, the voucher records only track the stretch from when a payment file reaches the treasury to when it is finally paid. They therefore understate the true wait, since a contractor's wait actually begins earlier. The records say nothing about the two earlier stages, getting the file from the council to the treasury, and from the treasury to the ACCT in Yaoundé, yet participants reported delays at those stages too. In addition, although the records show that negative perceptions and poor payment outcomes are associated, both the interview and voucher data were collected at a single point in time. This means the study can show the two are linked, but it cannot prove which one causes the other.

Future Research

Two useful directions for future research stand out. First, the same study could be repeated elsewhere, using the same interview and coding methods in other regions of Cameroon, and in other French-speaking Central and West African countries that run similar treasury systems. This would show whether the patterns found here are unique to one region, common across Cameroon, or shared across the wider sub-region. Second, a study that follows the same people over several years of reform would reveal how their perceptions change over time, and would allow stronger conclusions about cause and effect than a one-off snapshot can offer.

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated stakeholders' perceptions of the fairness, transparency, and efficiency of the Treasury Single Account within the context of decentralised public financial management in Cameroon's South-West Region and translated those perceptions into an actionable reform agenda for the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Cameroon. A qualitative content analysis of forty-four (44) participant accounts, yielding 171 distinct code occurrences, revealed three perceptual themes and one behavioural-response theme: efficiency concerns dominated by payment and disbursement delay and its downstream consequences; fairness concerns centered on the loss of councils' direct access to their own funds and on contractor exposure; transparency deficits rooted in the multi-stage approval architecture and documentation chain; and behavioural tendencies that

translate perceptions into cooperation, compliance, resistance or concrete remedial proposals for decentralisation and direct access.

These qualitative findings were triangulated against objective administrative records from the Buea Regional Treasury, comprising 560 vouchers totalling approximately 8.33 billion FCFA across three fiscal years. The administrative data confirm that the mean processing time was 124.6 days, with 62% of payments settled beyond 90 days and 31% beyond 180 days. The year-end bunching of reception dates (89–99% of vouchers received in December) and the episodic, tranche-driven disbursement pattern corroborate the qualitative perceptions of liquidity-timing mismatch and disbursement irregularity. The near-zero correlation between voucher amount and processing time ($r = -0.09$) locates the source of delay in the structure of the settlement system rather than in individual transaction characteristics, consistent with participants' attribution of inefficiency to systemic rather than transaction-specific factors.

This study is among the first systematic qualitative analyses of stakeholder perceptions of TSA implementation in Francophone Central Africa, extended by administrative triangulation with objective disbursement records. It extends procedural-justice and legitimacy-theory perspectives into the PFM context of a decentralised Central African environment, showing that the three perceptual dimensions are mutually reinforcing rather than independent, and that integrated reform programmes addressing all three dimensions simultaneously are likely to be more effective than interventions focused on a single dimension in isolation.

In terms of policy, the study yields an integrated and sequenced reform agenda aligned with the institutional framework established by Law No. 2018/012 of 11 July 2018 on the Fiscal Regime of the State and Other Public Entities and with Cameroon's PFM Reform Plan 2024–2027 and IMF programme commitments: redesigning the approval chain through a tiered authorisation model; establishing regional liquidity buffers to absorb the year-end timing mismatch; protecting contractors through commitment protocols, partial payment and formal grievance channels; building operational-level transparency interfaces; and institutionalising structured stakeholder consultation. Ultimately, the legitimacy of centralised treasury reform in decentralised governance settings will be determined not by the authority of Law No. 2018/012 of 11 July 2018 on the Fiscal Regime of the State and Other Public Entities but by the experience of every contractor awaiting payment, every mayor seeking information, and every municipal treasurer navigating the multi-stage approval chain. The evidence is now available, the reform agenda is clear, and the convergence of perceptual and administrative evidence strengthens the foundation for both comparative replication and reform implementation.

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