

Invitation

You are cordially invited to the public defence to obtain the academic degree of

DOCTOR OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT

by Mansur Muhammad Bello

Mobilizing and Empowering for Collective Actions: A Comparative Study of Leadership in Co-production in Challenging Environments

Supervisors:

Prof. Dr. Joris Voets (Ghent University) - Prof. Dr. Bram Verschuere (Ghent University)

Wednesday, 18 March 2026 at 16h-18h

Faculty Council Room, Campus Tweekerken, Tweekerkenstraat 2, 9000 Ghent

Please confirm your attendance no later than March 5 through: mansur.muhammadbello@ugent.be

EXAMINATION BOARD

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Abstract

Historically, African communities embraced a collective responsibility for children's education, often expressed through the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. The contemporary education system has sought to revive this ethos through formal mechanisms that link schools and communities. This leads to renewed interest in co-production, a model in which citizens and the state jointly design, deliver, and assess public services, such as primary education. Although co-production has the potential to improve service quality, accountability, and citizen empowerment, research has paid limited attention to the micro-level leadership role of schoolteachers, also known as street-level bureaucrats, particularly how their discretion shapes participation and mobilization in challenging environments characterized by weak institutional support, resource deficit, sociocultural and geographical barriers.

Using a comparative analysis of primary schools in Kenya and Nigeria, interviews, and document analysis, the thesis investigates how the leadership styles of street-level bureaucrats influence their ability to mobilize and empower communities to participate in and contribute to co-production processes in challenging environments. Chapter 1 of the thesis provides the contextual background of the thesis, unpacks the research problem, presents the research questions, contributions, personal motivation for conducting the research, and organization of the thesis. Chapters 2 and 3 present the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological foundations of the thesis. Chapters 4, 5 & 6 cover the empirical analysis on the contextual factors that shape leadership styles and co-production, the specific leadership roles (functions and responsibilities) street-level bureaucrats adopt to implement co-production, and how these roles evolve across stages of co-production; and the mechanisms through which leadership of street-level bureaucrats maintains the integrity and sustainability of co-production. Chapter 7 synthesizes the central answer to the central question, discusses the findings, highlights theoretical and practical implications of the thesis, explains limitations and areas for future research, and draws conclusions.

Empirical findings demonstrate that institutional regulations and policies foster collaborative and ethical leadership, while sociocultural and geographical pressures encourage transformational leadership through discretionary action. Additionally, the findings establish that street-level bureaucrats adopt roles such as strategizers, resource mobilizers, and cultural navigators to implement co-production across stages, and combine professional roles that safeguard accountability with transformational roles that sustain participation. However, it cautions that excessive reliance on discretion can create risks of exclusion or misuse of resources. Overall, the thesis develops an integrated leadership framework that combines collaborative, transformational, and ethical leadership. This means that leadership in co-production is context-dependent, shaped by institutional imperfections, sociocultural expectations, and geographical constraints.

Theoretically, the thesis provides a new understanding of (1) how the integrated leadership framework functions in co-production. Rather than a fixed model, leadership in co-production emerges as a dynamic process sustained by street-level bureaucrats who combine different leadership styles to mobilize and empower communities (2). It refines the collaborative leadership roles framework (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2012) by proposing professional and transformational leadership roles in co-production (3). It contributes to the scholarship of street-level bureaucrats by unpacking the micro-level leadership dynamics and how discretion plays a crucial role in shaping leadership styles and roles of schoolteachers. Similarly, it cautions that discretion without collaboration could lead to exclusion and predatory behaviors. Practically, (1) it guides policymakers and practitioners that institutionalization of co-production is not a means to an end; instead, it depends on the discretionary leadership of street-level bureaucrats, and (2) community contributions should be formally treated as *additional* (value-added), not *substitutive of political responsibility*. The thesis concludes that institutionalized co-production is not a silver bullet, but a dynamic process that is sustained by the leadership of street-level bureaucrats who combine collaboration, discretion, and integrity to mobilize and empower communities for collective actions.

Curriculum vitae

Mansur Muhammad Bello (°born in Bungudu, Nigeria) obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Administration (Usmanu Danfodio University, Sokoto, Nigeria, 2010) and a Master of Science in Public Management (University of Birmingham, UK, 2018). Before joining Ghent University for a PhD in Public Administration and Management, Mansur taught in the Department of Public Administration, Federal University Gusau, Nigeria. His PhD project set out to study the leadership of street-level bureaucrats in mobilizing and empowering collective actions in weak institutional, culturally, and geographically constrained settings. Part of his PhD project, Mansur contributed a chapter to an edited book: *Making co-production sustainable: opportunities, challenges, and way forward (forthcoming)*, and has submitted papers for review to academic journals. Mansur presented his PhD research at several conferences, including the Annual International Research Society for Public Management conference in Budapest, Hungary (2023), the Co-production and Co-creation conference in Nijmegen, the Netherlands (2023), the International Association of Institutes and Schools of Administration (IASIA) conference at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa (2024), presented and co-chaired a panel at the International Institute of Administrative Sciences conference at the Kenyan School of Government, Mombasa (2024). Mansur was a Research Fellow at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya, and his PhD research won a valorization grant from the Global Minds Fund, Ghent University, Belgium.