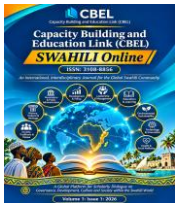
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Causes of Occupational Stress among Traffic Police Officers in Urban Tanzania: Evidence from Msimbazi, Dar es Salaam



Causes of Occupational Stress among Traffic Police Officers in Urban Tanzania: Evidence from Msimbazi, Dar es Salaam

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Abstract

Purpose: This study identified the causes of occupational stress among traffic police officers at Msimbazi Police Station in Ilala District, Dar es Salaam, one of the busiest traffic-policing environments in Tanzania.

Design/methodology/approach: A convergent parallel mixed-methods design guided by the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory and the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping was used. Questionnaires were completed by 200 of 218 sampled respondents (91.7%), and 14 key informants, including senior traffic officers and guidance and counselling officials, were interviewed. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data thematically.

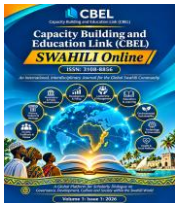
Findings: Occupational stress was high (overall mean = 3.95). Long working hours (M = 4.03; 81.0% agreement), poor working conditions (M = 4.01; 80.0%) and heavy workload (M = 4.00; 79.0%) were the strongest stressors, followed by exposure to public aggression (M = 3.89; 75.0%) and lack of support from superiors (M = 3.80; 71.0%). Interviews showed that extended shifts without adequate rest and confrontations with aggressive road users reduced officers' concentration, energy and composure.

Research limitations/implications: The study was confined to one urban station and relied on self-reported perceptions, which limits generalisation.

Practical implications: Because the main stressors are organisational rather than individual, police administrators should prioritise fair shift rotation, adequate rest, balanced workloads, better working facilities and stronger supervisory support.

INTRODUCTION

Police officers worldwide face significant occupational stress because of the demanding and unpredictable nature of their work. Stress arises when job demands exceed an individual's coping capacity and, if prolonged, it



impairs concentration, judgement, decision-making and overall job performance (McEwen & Akil, 2020; Gibbons, 2024). Traffic police officers are particularly exposed: they work long hours on the road, manage congestion under harsh weather conditions, attend crash scenes and deal continuously with motorists and the public. Evidence from many contexts shows that these conditions are associated with fatigue, burnout, irritability and reduced operational effectiveness (Anshel et al., 2019; Violanti & Steege, 2023; McLean et al., 2024).

Police institutions in several countries have responded with wellness and resilience programmes. In the United Kingdom, the National Police Wellbeing Service promotes structured psychological support, while police services in Rwanda, Kenya and Ethiopia have introduced resilience training, peer support and counselling. Nevertheless, mental health stigma, limited funding, staff shortages and rotating shifts continue to undermine stress management in policing (Wang & Zhang, 2021; Shane, 2020). In Kenya, Amidah et al. (2026) reported a high prevalence of occupational stress among police officers, and Mutua (2022) found that excessive workload, inadequate rest and public pressure were major stressors, particularly for officers stationed in urban areas.

In Tanzania, traffic officers in high-density urban areas such as Ilala in Dar es Salaam manage thousands of vehicles daily along major corridors, including the Nelson Mandela, Morogoro and Nyerere roads. Ilala has about 408 traffic police officers responsible for a vehicle-to-officer ratio that far exceeds recommended standards (Tanzania Police Force, 2025). Reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs indicate that occupational stress among urban officers is associated with burnout, fatigue and emotional exhaustion, which affect service delivery and public safety (Ministry of Home Affairs Tanzania, 2025). Although the Government has introduced welfare plans and a public service code of ethics that emphasise officer well-being and professional conduct (Uronu & Andrea, 2023), formal stress management practices tailored to the demands of traffic policing remain limited.

Previous Tanzanian studies have documented long working hours, irregular shifts, heavy workloads and limited resources as stressors among police and other frontline public servants (Mwakalinga, 2020; Macha et al., 2022; Sirili et al., 2018; Mirrudy, 2023). However, little empirical evidence focuses specifically on traffic police officers in demanding urban stations, and few studies have combined survey evidence with the accounts of senior officers and counselling officials to explain which stressors matter most. Understanding the causes of stress is a necessary first step in designing effective interventions, because stress management programmes are likely to succeed only if they target the actual sources of strain.

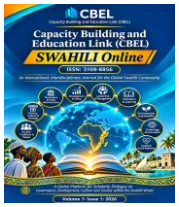
This article reports the first objective of a broader study on the effects of stress management on police efficiency: to identify the causes of occupational stress among traffic police officers in Msimbazi, Ilala District. It addresses the question: which job-related conditions are perceived as the main causes of stress among traffic police officers, and how do these conditions affect their work?

Theoretical Framework

Job Demands–Resources Theory

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory was developed by Demerouti et al. (2001). It explains employee well-being by distinguishing between job demands and job resources. This distinction is useful for the present study because traffic policing involves demanding operational conditions, while officers' ability to perform may also depend on the support and resources available to them.

Job demands are physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of work that require sustained effort and may therefore carry psychological or physiological costs. For traffic police officers, possible demands include heavy workloads, long working hours, exposure to road accidents, pressure from the public, and limited



operational resources. If these demands remain high without sufficient opportunities for recovery or support, they may contribute to stress, exhaustion, and impaired performance (Demerouti et al., 2001). These factors are relevant to the study's first objective, which examines the causes of stress among traffic police officers.

Job resources are aspects of work that help employees achieve work goals, reduce the impact of job demands, or support learning and development. In this study, relevant resources include counselling services, supportive supervision, stress-management training, adequate equipment, and fair shift scheduling. Bakker and Demerouti (2017) explain the importance of resources in helping employees manage job demands. However, the existence of a resource does not automatically mean that it is accessible, appropriate, or effective; its practical availability to traffic police officers therefore needs to be examined rather than assumed.

The JD-R theory describes two broad processes. In the health-impairment process, persistent job demands can deplete employees' energy and contribute to exhaustion and reduced performance. In the motivational process, job resources can support engagement, commitment, and productivity (Schaufeli & Taris, 2024). Applied to this study, the theory suggests that stress-management practices may support police efficiency by helping officers cope with demanding duties. The extent of this contribution remains an empirical question for the study to investigate.

Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), views stress as a dynamic interaction between an individual and the environment. Stress occurs when individuals appraise environmental demands as exceeding their available coping resources. In primary appraisal, the individual evaluates whether a situation is irrelevant, benign or stressful; in secondary appraisal, the individual assesses the resources available to cope with it.

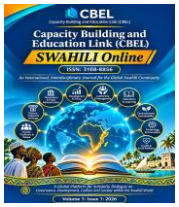
In policing contexts, Traffic Police Officers may encounter similar stressful situations such as traffic congestion, public pressure, or road accidents. However, their responses may differ depending on how they perceive these situations and the coping resources available to them. Officers who perceive themselves as capable of handling challenges are more likely to manage stress effectively, while those who perceive demands as overwhelming may experience distress, burnout, and reduced performance (Folkman & Lazarus, 2018).

The two theories are complementary. The JD-R Theory explains the organisational sources of stress, namely job demands such as workload and working hours and job resources such as supervisory support, while the Transactional Theory explains why officers exposed to the same demands may experience different levels of strain depending on how they appraise those demands and the coping resources available to them. Together they provide a basis for identifying both the structural and the interpersonal causes of stress examined in this study.

Empirical Literature

Empirical evidence consistently showed that police officers experience high levels of occupational stress due to the demanding nature of their work. Anshel et al. (2019), in a study conducted in the United States, found out that heavy workloads, exposure to danger, and continuous interaction with the public contribute significantly to occupational stress among police officers. The study revealed that prolonged exposure to stressful working environments results in fatigue, irritability, poor judgement, and reduced effectiveness during critical operations. These outcomes negatively affect operational efficiency and professional conduct.

Similar findings have been reported in African countries. Mutua (2022), in a study of the Kenyan National Police Service, found out that excessive workload, inadequate rest periods, and public pressure were major sources of stress among officers. The study further revealed that officers stationed in urban areas experienced



higher levels of stress than those in rural areas due to high population density and increased law enforcement demands. The findings suggested that unmanaged occupational stress reduces officers' efficiency and may contribute to aggressive behaviour and poor service delivery.

In Tanzania, Mwakalinga (2020) identified long working hours and irregular shift schedules as major occupational stressors affecting police officers. Officers who frequently worked extended shifts were more likely to experience fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and reduced concentration while on duty. Similarly, Macha et al. (2022) observed that police officers often work under challenging conditions characterised by limited resources, heavy workloads, and pressure to maintain public order. Such conditions increase the likelihood of absenteeism, negligence, and misconduct, all of which negatively affect police efficiency.

Sirili et al. (2018) further noted that staffing shortages within public institutions contribute significantly to work overload and occupational stress among frontline workers. The study revealed that many public-sector employees, including law enforcement personnel, operate under demanding schedules that limit opportunities for rest and recovery, resulting in declining service quality and reduced job satisfaction.

Further evidence links specific stressors to policing outcomes. Violanti and Steege (2023) found that shift work and disrupted sleep are strongly associated with police stress, while Kukić et al. (2023) and Gibbons (2024) identified hostile public encounters as an important contributor to emotional strain. John-Akinola et al. (2020) reported that Nigerian police officers experienced stress arising from poor working conditions and inadequate equipment, and that their coping mechanisms were often informal. In Tanzania, Kamala and Mushi (2019) observed that psychological support for police officers is limited, and Mnana (2022) linked occupational stress in public institutions to unethical behaviour such as petty corruption.

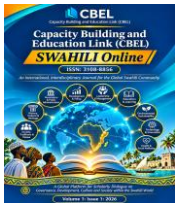
Although there is broad agreement that workload, long working hours, and poor working conditions are major causes of stress, scholars differ regarding the relative importance of organisational and individual factors. Some studies emphasised structural issues such as resource shortages and staffing constraints, while others highlighted personal coping abilities and resilience. This study considered both perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes of Stress Among Traffic Police Officers in Msimbazi, Ilala District.

METHOD

Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component was used to measure officers' reported experiences of occupational stress, the availability of stress-management practices, and perceived police efficiency. It also enabled statistical examination of the relationship between stress-management practices and police efficiency. The qualitative component explored the experiences and perspectives of selected senior officers, supervisors, and relevant officials concerning workplace stress, institutional support, and the implementation of stress-management programmes.

The mixed-methods approach was appropriate because the study objectives required both measurement and explanation. Quantitative data provided patterns that could be summarised statistically, while qualitative data offered context for understanding why particular patterns might occur. Using the two forms of evidence also allowed the researcher to compare findings and identify areas of convergence or divergence. The qualitative findings were not treated as a substitute for statistical results; rather, they were used to explain and contextualise them.



The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected during the same general phase of the research, analysed separately using procedures suitable for each dataset, and then brought together during interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design was selected because the study needed to assess measurable relationships while also documenting participants' experiences of stress-management practices in the operational context of traffic policing.

The quantitative and qualitative strands were conducted in parallel rather than making one strand dependent on the results of the other. Questionnaire data were analysed statistically, while interview data were analysed thematically. The findings were then compared in a joint interpretation. Agreement between the strands strengthened the credibility of the interpretation; differences were examined rather than automatically treated as errors, because they could reflect different roles, experiences, or perspectives among participants.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Ilala District, Dar es Salaam Region, with Msimbazi Police Station serving as the study site. Ilala was selected purposively because it is a busy urban district with major commercial activities, government offices and transport connections, including the Kariakoo market area and routes to Julius Nyerere International Airport, all of which generate complex traffic-management demands. Officers working in this setting manage congestion, enforce traffic regulations, respond to road incidents and interact frequently with motorists, which makes the site appropriate for examining occupational stress. The findings are interpreted in relation to this setting and are not assumed to represent every police station in Tanzania.

Population, Sample and Sampling

The target population comprised 479 people: 1 Regional Traffic Officer, 5 District Traffic Officers, 10 Assistant Inspectors, 408 junior traffic police officers, 15 guidance and counselling officials and 40 road users (drivers). A sample of 218 was determined using Slovin's formula at a 5% margin of error. Junior traffic police officers and road users were selected by simple random sampling, which gave each eligible respondent an equal chance of selection and minimised selection bias (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Senior officers and guidance and counselling officials were selected purposively because of their specialised knowledge of stress management policies and operational challenges. Table 1 presents the distribution of the sample.

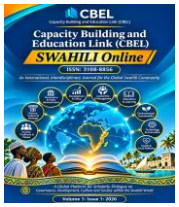
Table 1. Sample size distribution

Category	Target Population (N)	Sample Size (n)	Sampling Method
Regional Traffic Officer (RTO)	1	1	Purposive Sampling
District Traffic Officers	5	2	Purposive Sampling
Assistant Inspectors (AIs)	10	4	Purposive Sampling
Junior Traffic Police Officers	408	186	Simple Random Sampling
Guidance & Counselling Officials	15	7	Purposive Sampling
Road Users (Drivers)	40	18	Simple Random Sampling
Total	479	218	—

Source: Field data (2026).

Data Collection Instruments

A structured questionnaire was administered to sampled respondents. The section on causes of stress contained five statements on heavy workload, long working hours, exposure to public aggression, poor working conditions and lack of support from superiors, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior traffic officers, supervisors and



guidance and counselling officials to explore their experiences of workplace stress, institutional support and the implementation of stress management practices.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured by developing questionnaire items in line with the study objectives, the conceptual framework and the literature, and by having the instrument reviewed by research experts and supervisors. The questionnaire was piloted with 10 traffic police officers at Ubungo Police Station who did not take part in the main study. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha; as Table 2 shows, all constructs exceeded the conventional 0.70 threshold, and the causes-of-stress scale had an alpha of 0.824.

Table 2. Reliability statistics from the pilot study

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Causes of occupational stress	5	0.824*	Good internal consistency
Stress management programmes	5	0.861*	Good internal consistency
Stress management and police efficiency	5	0.879*	Good internal consistency
Overall instrument	15	0.892	High internal consistency

Source: Pilot study data (2026).

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and analysed using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Mean scores were interpreted using the following ranges: 1.00–1.80 (very low), 1.81–2.60 (low), 2.61–3.40 (medium), 3.41–4.20 (high) and 4.21–5.00 (very high) (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). Interview data were transcribed, organised and analysed thematically, and the two strands were compared during interpretation to identify points of convergence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Research clearance was obtained from Kampala International University in Tanzania, and permission to collect data was granted by the Ilala Police Region. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and gave informed consent; participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by not recording names and by reporting results in aggregate form. Data collection was scheduled during non-peak hours to avoid disrupting traffic operations.

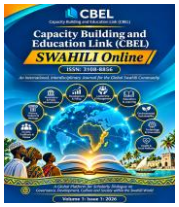
RESULTS

Response Rate and Respondents' Characteristics

Of the 218 questionnaires distributed, 200 were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 91.7%; in addition, 14 key informants were interviewed. Most respondents were male (75.5%). The largest age group was 26–35 years (37.0%), followed by 36–45 years (29.0%). In terms of education, 35.5% held a diploma, 23.0% had secondary education, 22.0% had a degree or higher and 19.5% held a certificate. Regarding experience, 34.5% had served for 6–10 years and 31.0% for less than five years, while 34.5% had more than ten years of service. Respondents therefore had sufficient exposure to traffic policing to report on its stressors.

Causes of Occupational Stress

The first objective of the study was to identify the causes of stress among Traffic Police Officers in Msimbazi, Ilala District. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements relating to heavy workload, long working hours, public aggression, poor working conditions and lack of support from superiors.



Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Table 3. Respondents' views on the causes of stress among traffic police officers (n = 200)

Statement	SD n (%)	D n (%)	U n (%)	A n (%)	SA n (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Heavy workload causes stress in performing duties	8 (4.0)	15 (7.5)	19 (9.5)	86 (43.0)	72 (36.0)	4.00	1.059
Long working hours negatively affect my efficiency	7 (3.5)	13 (6.5)	18 (9.0)	91 (45.5)	71 (35.5)	4.03	1.012
Exposure to public aggression leads to emotional strain	9 (4.5)	17 (8.5)	24 (12.0)	88 (44.0)	62 (31.0)	3.89	1.081
Poor working conditions increase job-related stress	6 (3.0)	14 (7.0)	20 (10.0)	92 (46.0)	68 (34.0)	4.01	0.997
Lack of support from superiors contributes to stress	11 (5.5)	20 (10.0)	27 (13.5)	83 (41.5)	59 (29.5)	3.80	1.136
Total/Overall	41 (4.1)	79 (7.9)	108 (10.8)	440 (44.0)	332 (33.2)	3.95	—

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; U = Undecided; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree. Source: Field data (2026).

The findings in Table 3 indicate that occupational stress among traffic police officers in Msimbazi was high, with an overall mean of 3.95. Agreement exceeded 70% for every indicator, which shows that stress did not stem from a single factor but from a combination of workload, prolonged working hours, difficult working environments, public aggression and inadequate supervisory support.

Long Working Hours and Heavy Workload

Long working hours recorded the highest mean (M = 4.03), with 81.0% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they negatively affected their efficiency. Heavy workload recorded a mean of 4.00, with 79.0% agreeing that it caused stress. These two indicators reflect the volume and duration of traffic duties in a busy commercial district, where officers manage large volumes of traffic and road incidents with limited relief. Prolonged hours are particularly problematic in traffic policing, which requires continuous attention and sound judgement.

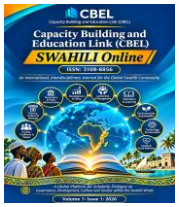
Key informants confirmed this pattern. One senior officer explained: "The traffic officers are exposed to heavy workload and long hours, especially when there is congestion or a major incident. Sometimes an officer remains on duty for many hours without enough time to rest, and this affects concentration and energy" (Key Informant 1).

Poor Working Conditions

Poor working conditions recorded a mean of 4.01, with 80.0% agreeing that they increased job-related stress. This indicates that the physical and operational environment in which officers work, including exposure to weather, noise and pollution and shortages of equipment such as first-aid kits and protective gear, is itself a significant source of strain. Inadequate conditions make already demanding duties more stressful.

Exposure to Public Aggression

Exposure to public aggression recorded a mean of 3.89, with 75.0% agreeing that it led to emotional strain. Frequent confrontations with aggressive road users create emotional pressure that may affect officers' morale and professional conduct. A key informant described how this stressor interacts with fatigue: "Dealing with aggressive road users is another challenge. When an officer is already tired and has to deal with arguments from



drivers, the pressure becomes higher and sometimes it affects the way the officer responds to the public" (Key Informant 2).

Lack of Support from Superiors

Lack of support from superiors recorded the lowest mean (M = 3.80), although 71.0% still agreed that it contributed to stress. Supervisory support influences officers' morale, coping capacity and willingness to seek help, so its relative weakness indicates that officers do not consistently find the support they need to manage the other demands of their work.

DISCUSSION

Stress as an Organisational Problem

The results show that the main causes of stress among traffic officers in Msimbazi are job demands that are structured by the organisation of work: long hours, heavy workload and poor working conditions. In terms of the JD-R Theory, these are persistent demands that, without sufficient recovery or resources, trigger the health-impairment process leading to exhaustion and reduced performance (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The comparatively lower but still substantial concern about supervisory support indicates that an important job resource is not consistently available to buffer these demands (Schaufeli & Taris, 2024).

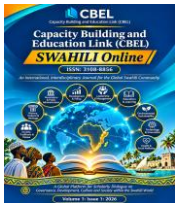
These findings are consistent with earlier evidence. Anshel et al. (2019) found that heavy workloads, danger and continuous public contact were major sources of police stress in the United States, and Mutua (2022) reported that urban Kenyan officers experienced higher stress because of excessive workload, inadequate rest and public pressure. In Tanzania, the findings echo Mwakalinga (2020) on long hours and irregular shifts, Macha et al. (2022) on limited resources and workload pressure, and Sirili et al. (2018) on staffing shortages and overload among frontline public servants. The prominence of working hours also corresponds with the international evidence on shift work and police stress (Violanti & Steege, 2023).

The Role of Appraisal and Coping

The interview accounts show how stressors combine. Fatigue from long shifts lowers officers' tolerance, so that an encounter with an aggressive driver is appraised as more threatening and may provoke a less professional response. This is consistent with the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, which holds that stress depends on the balance between perceived demands and available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 2018). Where rest, supervisory support and psychological services are lacking, officers' secondary appraisal of their ability to cope is likely to be negative. The findings on public aggression align with Gibbons (2024) and Kukić et al. (2023), who identified hostile public encounters as an important contributor to occupational stress.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

Because the leading stressors are organisational, the response must also be organisational. Encouraging individual coping is useful but insufficient if officers continue to work excessive hours in poor conditions. Theoretically, the study supports the combined use of the JD-R and Transactional theories: the first identifies the demands and missing resources, and the second explains why the same demands may produce different responses among officers. Practically, the findings provide a clear basis for prioritising interventions in workload management, shift design, working conditions and supervisory practice, and for linking these to the counselling and wellness services that police welfare plans seek to strengthen (Ministry of Home Affairs Tanzania, 2025).



Limitations

The study was conducted at a single urban police station and relied on self-reported perceptions, which may be affected by social desirability or by officers' current workload. The questionnaire captured five stressors and may not cover others such as remuneration, family pressures or exposure to trauma. Future research could compare urban and rural stations, use validated clinical measures of stress and burnout, and examine how stressors change after specific interventions such as revised shift systems.

CONCLUSION

This study identified the causes of occupational stress among traffic police officers in Msimbazi, Ilala District. It concludes that stress is high and arises mainly from organisational conditions: long working hours, poor working conditions and heavy workload are the dominant stressors, reinforced by exposure to aggressive members of the public and inconsistent support from superiors. Interviews confirmed that extended shifts without adequate rest reduce concentration and energy and make officers more vulnerable to the emotional strain of public confrontations. Stress among traffic officers is therefore best understood as a consequence of how traffic policing is organised and resourced rather than as an individual weakness.

Recommendations

i. The Tanzania Police Force should introduce fair shift rotation and enforce maximum duty hours and minimum rest periods for traffic officers, particularly during periods of heavy congestion.
ii. Command at Msimbazi Police Station and Ilala Police Region should assess workloads regularly and allocate duties and staff in proportion to traffic volumes and incident demands.
iii. Police authorities should improve basic working facilities and provide adequate operational and protective equipment, including first-aid kits, for officers on the road.
iv. Training in communication, conflict de-escalation and psychological coping should be provided to help officers manage confrontations with aggressive road users, supported by accessible and confidential counselling services.
v. Supervisors should maintain regular communication with officers, recognise work-related pressures and create an environment in which officers can raise concerns without fear.

Acknowledgements

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Conflict of Interest

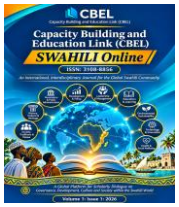
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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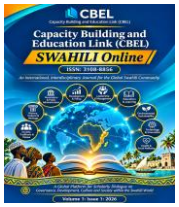
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