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Institutional Sustainability and Low-Emission Vehicle Adoption in Kenya: A Mixed-Methods Case Study of Kiambu County

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examined the association between institutional sustainability and adoption of low-emission vehicles (LEVs) in Kiambu County, Kenya.

Methodology: A descriptive mixed-methods study combined stratified random sampling for the questionnaire survey with purposive selection of key informants. Of 218 questionnaires distributed, 196 were completed (89.9%), and 18 interviews were conducted. Institutional sustainability was assessed using eight five-point items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .781$). Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation were combined with thematic analysis of interviews.

Findings: The eight institutional sustainability item means averaged 3.57. Institutional sustainability was positively correlated with the perception-based LEV adoption score ($r = .641$, $p < .001$). The lowest institutional rating concerned predictable long-term funding ($M = 3.39$), while interviews highlighted coordination gaps and discontinuous programme financing. The findings indicate association rather than causation; adjusted and interaction effects were not estimated.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study applies Institutional Theory to county-level low-emission transport and interprets financing constraints through fiscal decentralisation. It proposes institutional sustainability as a potential moderator of the affordability–adoption relationship for future testing. The findings support clearer implementation mandates, stronger national–county coordination, predictable programme financing and sustained stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: *Institutional Sustainability, Low-Emission Vehicles, Transport Policy, Institutional Coordination, Kiambu County*

JEL Classification: *H77; Q56; R48*

INTRODUCTION

Transport decarbonization requires cleaner vehicle technologies and institutions capable of supporting their adoption. Kenya released a draft national electric mobility policy in March 2024 and launched its National Electric Mobility Policy in February 2026 (Ministry of Roads and Transport, 2024, 2026a, 2026b). These developments provide the policy context for examining implementation at county level. Supportive policies do not, by themselves, establish effective implementation or widespread adoption. This study examines stakeholder perceptions of institutional sustainability and low-emission vehicle adoption in Kiambu County.

For this article, low-emission vehicles (LEVs) are road vehicles using electric propulsion wholly or partly, including battery electric vehicles, plug-in and non-plug-in hybrids, and electric two- and three-wheelers. This working definition situates the study within Kenya's electric mobility policy context; it is not a statutory emissions threshold. The National Electric Mobility Policy provides the national transition framework (Ministry of Roads and Transport, 2026b). Hybrids retain combustion engines, so their emissions depend on technology and use. The survey results are reported for the broad LEV category and do not establish technology-specific uptake or measured emissions reductions.

In this article, institutional sustainability refers to the capacity of institutions and institutional arrangements to maintain effective, responsible and coordinated operations over time while adapting to changing internal and external environments. In the transport context, the construct encompasses policy consistency, regulatory enforcement, intergovernmental coordination, integration of energy efficiency into planning, lifecycle assessment, predictable funding, clear mandates, accountability and stakeholder engagement. The concept is used here to describe governance capacity for sustaining low-emission transport programmes rather than environmental sustainability in general.

Kiambu County provides an important empirical setting because of its rapid urbanization, substantial transport activity and close relationship with Nairobi. The county captures both urban and peri-urban transport dynamics and provides a useful setting for examining how national policy intentions interact with local institutional implementation. The Kiambu County Integrated Development Plan 2023–2027 provides the county planning context (Kiambu County Government, 2023). Nevertheless, empirical evidence on the institutional determinants of LEV adoption in Kenya remains limited, particularly at county level.

The article examines whether institutional sustainability is associated with perceptions of LEV adoption in Kiambu County. It focuses on institutional conditions while recognising affordability and operational reliability as economic and technical determinants that should be controlled for in an adjusted model. It also develops an untested proposition that institutional sustainability may condition the relationship between affordability and adoption.

Problem Statement

Kenya's electric mobility ambitions require implementation across constitutionally distinct levels of government. The Fourth Schedule assigns national responsibilities for road traffic and energy policy alongside county responsibilities for county roads, traffic and parking, and public road transport (Republic of Kenya, 2010). This division creates a practical coordination problem: national policy commitments must be linked to county planning, infrastructure decisions and

implementation resources. In Kiambu's urban and peri-urban transport setting, unclear responsibilities or discontinuous support could constrain the translation of policy into sustained uptake.

The empirical problem is that policy commitments alone do not show whether stakeholders experience durable institutional support or whether that support is associated with adoption. Research on Nairobi matatu SACCOs has examined vehicle cost, infrastructure and knowledge (Odhiambo, 2024), but this does not establish the association between a multidimensional institutional sustainability construct and perceived adoption in Kiambu County. Evidence is therefore needed on coordination, financing continuity and stakeholder engagement, while distinguishing perceived adoption from verified vehicle uptake. The present study addresses this bounded question using survey and interview evidence.

Research Objective

The objective was to examine the association between institutional sustainability and adoption of low-emission vehicles in Kiambu County, Kenya.

Research Hypothesis

H1: Institutional sustainability is positively associated with LEV adoption in Kiambu County.

Literature Review

Institutional Sustainability and Low Emission Transport

Institutional Theory links action to regulatory rules, normative expectations and shared understandings (Scott, 2014). For low-emission transport, these pillars connect formal policy authority with the practical capacity and legitimacy needed for implementation. Lockwood (2022) further shows that wider institutional context shapes energy-policy feedback and durability. Read together, these perspectives suggest that transport transitions depend on how coordination, resources and stakeholder relationships sustain policy over time. The review therefore organises institutional sustainability around three connected pillars: devolved intergovernmental coordination, predictable green financing and inclusive stakeholder engagement.

The eight survey indicators map onto these pillars. Policy support, national–county coordination, planning integration, enforcement authority and clear mandates concern coordination and implementation capacity. Predictable institutional funding and lifecycle assessment concern financial continuity and the evidence needed to sustain investment. Regular stakeholder engagement concerns participation and institutional responsiveness. Accountability links all three pillars. These are conceptual groupings of the existing indicators, rather than separately validated subscales.

Devolved Intergovernmental Coordination

Kester et al. (2018) identify policy mechanisms relevant to electric vehicle adoption in the Nordic region, providing a comparative basis for considering policy consistency and implementation across institutions. Transfer to Kenya requires attention to devolution: national policy direction and county transport responsibilities must work together (Republic of Kenya, 2010). Coordination can therefore be understood as the process through which mandates become compatible plans, infrastructure arrangements and enforcement practices. The unresolved county-level question is

whether stakeholders who perceive stronger institutional arrangements also report higher perceived LEV adoption.

Predictable Green Financing

Financing connects institutional coordination to practical adoption. Kester et al. (2018) discuss policy instruments for vehicle uptake, while Lockwood (2022) explains why institutional context matters for the persistence of energy policy. Fiscal federalism adds the requirement to align spending responsibilities and fiscal instruments across government levels (Oates, 1999). This makes continuity of public programme funding analytically distinct from consumer affordability: institutions need resources to sustain implementation, while users and operators need feasible purchase and operating costs. A programme may have policy support yet lack sustained implementation funding, even where consumers perceive long-term operating savings.

Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement

Institutional change also depends on actors who interpret, negotiate and implement formal rules (Battilana et al., 2009). In Kenya, the matatu transport cooperatives commonly called SACCOs provide a specific setting for examining this relationship. Odhiambo (2024) examines cost, infrastructure and knowledge in electric vehicle adoption among Nairobi matatu SACCOs. The SACCO Societies Regulatory Authority (n.d.) distinguishes these transport cooperatives from the financial SACCOs it regulates. Engagement must therefore recognise the different roles of vehicle owners, drivers, transport cooperatives and lenders. The theoretical friction is that formal policy operates through semi-formal transport arrangements in which investment decisions, operating needs and collective representation may not align. This motivates attention to inclusive engagement; it is not evidence that the present sample establishes SACCO-specific effects.

Research Gap

The literature leaves three connected gaps. First, comparative electric vehicle policy research does not establish how Kenya's devolved implementation setting relates to perceived uptake in Kiambu. Second, research on Nairobi matatu SACCOs addresses important economic and infrastructure factors but does not answer the present question about a multidimensional institutional sustainability construct in Kiambu (Odhiambo, 2024). Third, it remains unclear whether durable institutions strengthen the relationship between affordability and adoption. The present study addresses the first two gaps through a bivariate institutional association and qualitative interpretation. The third gap informs a proposed moderation model for future testing; it is not resolved by the reported correlation. These gaps lead to the stated research objective and H1.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory provides the principal theoretical lens. Its regulatory pillar concerns formal rules and enforcement; its normative pillar concerns expectations about appropriate institutional conduct; and its cultural-cognitive pillar concerns shared understandings that make practices intelligible and accepted (Scott, 2014). In low-emission transport, policy authority and mandates relate to regulation, accountability and engagement relate to normative expectations, and confidence in new mobility practices relates to shared understandings. The survey indicators capture practical institutional conditions rather than separately validated measures of all three theoretical pillars.

The institutional perspective implies that coherent policies, clear mandates, credible enforcement, stable financing and effective coordination create an enabling environment for low-emission transport. Conversely, institutional fragmentation, unclear responsibilities and discontinuous funding can weaken implementation and reduce confidence among transport actors. Institutional sustainability is therefore treated as a governance capability that can support the institutionalization of LEV adoption. The theory generates the expectation that stronger institutional arrangements will be associated with higher levels of reported adoption.

Fiscal Decentralisation

Fiscal federalism complements Institutional Theory by asking how governmental functions and financing arrangements should be aligned (Oates, 1999). In Kenya, Article 209 reserves major tax instruments to the national government, while Article 212 conditions county borrowing on a national guarantee and county assembly approval (Republic of Kenya, 2010). The implication for this study is interpretive: county support for cleaner transport may coexist with limited fiscal discretion. The study does not measure fiscal transfers, budget execution or the extent of any funding shortfall, so fiscal decentralisation provides a lens for interpreting reported constraints rather than a tested explanation.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework treats institutional sustainability (IS) as the focal explanatory variable and the perception-based adoption score (Y) as the outcome. Affordability (A) and operational reliability (R) are substantive determinants and proposed controls, rather than incidental background conditions. A second, explicitly untested proposition treats IS as a moderator of the affordability–adoption relationship: financial accessibility may translate more readily into adoption where institutions sustain coordination, infrastructure support and implementation. This proposition concerns variation in the association between A and Y; the present bivariate evidence cannot establish it or demonstrate actual vehicle uptake.

For future multivariable testing, the adjusted model is:

Model 1: $Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 IS_i + \beta_2 A_i + \beta_3 R_i + \varepsilon_i$.

The proposed moderation model adds the affordability–institutional sustainability interaction:

Model 2: $Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 IS^c_i + \beta_2 A^c_i + \beta_3 R_i + \beta_4 (IS^c_i \times A^c_i) + \varepsilon_i$.

Here, i denotes a respondent, β denotes model coefficients, ε is the error term, and superscript c denotes mean-centred scores. β_1 in Model 1 represents the adjusted institutional association; β_4 in Model 2 represents moderation. Interpretation of the sign of β_2 or β_4 requires an affordability score coded consistently so that higher values indicate greater affordability. Item wording and reverse coding must be checked before estimation. Both equations are specifications for future analysis; no regression or interaction estimates are reported in this article.

Table 1: Conceptual Relationships and Analytical Status

Variable or term	Conceptual role	Analytical status
Institutional sustainability	Focal explanatory variable	Bivariate association reported
Affordability	Economic determinant and proposed control	Adjusted effect not estimated
Operational reliability	Technical determinant and proposed control	Adjusted effect not estimated
Institutional sustainability × affordability	Proposed moderation term	Interaction not estimated
Perception-based LEV adoption score	Outcome in all specifications	Perceived uptake and attitudes; not verified uptake

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study used a descriptive mixed-methods design combining a structured questionnaire with semi-structured key-informant interviews. Quantitative and qualitative findings were analysed separately and compared during interpretation. The design was cross-sectional and non-experimental, so the associations cannot establish causal effects. Field data were collected in 2026.

Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in Kiambu County, Kenya. The county is characterized by rapid urbanization, substantial transport activity and close functional connections with Nairobi. The target population comprised stakeholders involved in the formulation, implementation or monitoring of low-emission vehicle policies, including government representatives, transport-sector actors, environmental agencies, private-sector participants and energy and sustainability experts. The source study estimated a target population of 500 stakeholders.

Sample and Data Collection

The estimated target population comprised 500 stakeholders. The questionnaire sample was determined using the Krejcie–Morgan finite-population formula: $n = \chi^2 NP(1 - P) / [d^2(N - 1) + \chi^2 P(1 - P)]$. With $\chi^2 = 3.841$, $N = 500$, $P = .5$ and $d = .05$, the calculated sample was approximately 217.5, rounded up to 218 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Stratified random sampling was used across stakeholder sectors, while key informants were purposively selected for specialized knowledge of policy development, regulation or implementation. Questionnaires were administered through drop-and-pick and researcher-administered approaches. Of 218 distributed questionnaires, 196 were completed (89.9%); 18 key-informant interviews were conducted.

Measures and Operationalization

Institutional sustainability was assessed through eight statements scored from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Items addressed policy support, national–county coordination, planning integration, lifecycle assessment, enforcement authority, funding continuity, mandates and accountability, and stakeholder engagement. Affordability and operational reliability each comprised eight five-point items. Affordability covered purchase and battery costs, fiscal

measures, financing access, operating costs and perceived long-term benefits. Reliability covered everyday dependability, range, charging, servicing, electricity supply and performance across road and weather conditions.

The outcome comprised eight five-point perception items covering reported growth in LEV numbers and uptake, public awareness, institutional fleet integration, incentives, progress towards climate goals, willingness to switch and the perceived significance of adoption for national energy commitments. It therefore captures perceptions and attitudes surrounding adoption, rather than independently verified vehicle uptake. A separate yes/no ownership question was collected and should not be equated with the composite outcome.

Reliability and Validity

Reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .781 for institutional sustainability, .804 for affordability, .789 for operational reliability and .797 for the adoption score; each scale contained eight items. The study reports a pilot involving approximately 22 stakeholders in Murang'a County, excluded from the main study, and expert review of instrument content. Factor loadings and model results are unavailable, so construct validity cannot be established from the reported evidence.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis used frequencies and percentages to describe respondents, item means and standard deviations to summarise institutional perceptions, and Pearson correlation to examine the bivariate association between institutional sustainability and the perception-based LEV adoption score. This analysis did not adjust for affordability, operational reliability or other potential confounders. The adjusted and moderation equations in the conceptual framework specify analyses for future testing; neither model was estimated for this article. The reported item summaries and single bivariate correlation do not contain the joint respondent-level information needed to estimate these models. In particular, the institutional sustainability–adoption correlation cannot establish whether institutional sustainability changes the affordability–adoption relationship. The results are therefore restricted to an unadjusted association and do not establish an independent institutional effect or moderation.

Qualitative Analysis and Integration

The interviews were conducted face-to-face or electronically, recorded with consent and transcribed. Thematic analysis identified recurring institutional, affordability, reliability and adoption themes, and these findings were compared with the survey results (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Ethics

The researcher received university clearance and obtained a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) before engaging participants. Participants received information about the study and gave consent before data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained.

Results

Respondent Characteristics

Among the 196 respondents, 112 (57.1%) were male and 84 (42.9%) female. Occupations comprised private-sector employment (64; 32.7%), entrepreneurship (52; 26.5%), government employment (38; 19.4%), students (24; 12.2%), retired respondents (12; 6.1%) and other occupations (6; 3.1%). Respondents were drawn from Thika, Ruiru, Kiambu, Kikuyu, Limuru, Githunguri, Juja and Gatundu. LEV awareness was reported by 158 respondents (80.6%), while 46 (23.5%) reported ownership. These describe the sample and do not estimate county-wide prevalence.

Descriptive Results

The mean of the eight institutional item means was 3.57. The value of 0.800 in Table 2 is the rounded average of the eight item standard deviations, rather than the standard deviation of a respondent-level composite score. The highest-rated item concerned government support for renewable-energy policies favouring low emissions (M = 3.72, SD = 0.781); the lowest concerned predictable long-term funding (M = 3.39, SD = 0.845).

Table 2: Respondents' Perceptions of Institutional Sustainability

Institutional-sustainability indicator	M	SD
Government agencies encourage renewable-energy policies favouring low emissions	3.72	0.781
National and county institutions have good coordination	3.54	0.812
Energy efficiency is incorporated into institutional planning	3.61	0.795
Institutions conduct lifecycle assessments	3.42	0.834
Institutions have authority to enforce supportive policies	3.58	0.798
LEV programmes have predictable long-term institutional funding	3.39	0.845
Established mandates and accountability mechanisms exist	3.63	0.776
Regular stakeholder engagement facilitates sustainable transition	3.66	0.762
Average of item means and item SDs	3.57	0.800

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Scores were based on a five-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Correlation between Institutional Sustainability and LEV Adoption

Pearson correlation analysis showed a positive association between institutional sustainability and the perception-based LEV adoption score, $r = .641$, $p < .001$, consistent with H1. Respondents reporting stronger institutional sustainability also tended to report higher perceived adoption. This result does not establish causation, an association independent of affordability and reliability, or an interaction between institutional sustainability and affordability.

Qualitative Findings

The study reports 18 interviews involving government and county transport or energy officials, industry experts, environmental and NGO representatives, consumers, vehicle owners and transport stakeholders. Institutional themes concerned coordination, funding, engagement and regulatory mandates. One government official stated that "policy direction from the national level does not always translate into county-level action plans." Another observed that "funding for pilot LEV programs tends to stop once the initial project cycle ends." An industry expert stated that "institutions are willing in principle but lack the sustained budget to follow through." These excerpts support the reported concerns about implementation continuity; they do not independently demonstrate causal effects.

Mixed-Methods Integration

The quantitative and qualitative strands converged around institutional continuity. The survey indicated a positive association between institutional sustainability and perceived LEV adoption, while interviews described coordination and financing problems that may help interpret this pattern. These accounts suggest possible implementation pathways but do not test causal mechanisms. Together, the strands support examining policy continuity, coordination, funding, accountability and participation as connected institutional conditions.

Discussion

The reported positive bivariate correlation supports an association between institutional perceptions and the perception-based adoption score. Kester et al. (2018) emphasise stable national targets with local implementation flexibility, while Lockwood (2022) shows how institutional context can shape energy-policy trajectories. The Kiambu interview excerpts are consistent with these concerns. The bivariate analysis does not establish an independent institutional association after controlling for other predictors.

The descriptive results indicate a difference between perceived policy support ($M = 3.72$) and funding continuity ($M = 3.39$). Fiscal decentralisation offers one explanation to investigate: local implementation responsibilities may not be matched by sufficiently flexible or predictable resources (Oates, 1999; Republic of Kenya, 2010). However, these ratings do not measure an actual county budget deficit, delayed transfers or expenditure rigidities. The finding is best understood as a perceived implementation constraint requiring verification against budget and programme records.

The interviews reinforce concerns about translating national direction into county action and maintaining finance beyond pilot cycles. Through Institutional Theory, these concerns connect regulatory commitments with the resources and routines needed for implementation. In semi-formal transport settings, engagement with matatu cooperatives and vehicle operators may help align institutional plans with investment and service needs, a question also motivated by

Odhiambo's (2024) Nairobi study. The present interviews are not analysed as a distinct SACCO subgroup and cannot establish how effects vary across transport organisations.

Implications of the Study

Policy and Practical Implications

- National and county institutions should agree on implementation responsibilities and maintain regular joint review of LEV programmes, within their respective mandates.
- Programme financing should be linked to costed implementation plans and medium-term budgets, subject to lawful appropriations. Coordination on available national and county financing instruments could help reduce reliance on short pilot cycles.
- Clarify mandates and accountability mechanisms so that institutions responsible for policy implementation have identifiable responsibilities and performance expectations.
- Integrate low-emission transport and energy-efficiency considerations into routine transport and energy planning at both national and county levels.
- Strengthen lifecycle-assessment practices to support evidence-based decisions about procurement, infrastructure and the environmental and institutional sustainability of LEV programmes.
- Stakeholder engagement should include transport cooperatives commonly called matatu SACCOs, individual owners, drivers and users alongside energy providers, lenders and public agencies. Engagement should address purchase finance, charging access and service continuity, while distinguishing transport cooperatives from regulated financial SACCOs.

Theoretical Implications

The study applies Institutional Theory to the continuity of county-level transport implementation and uses fiscal decentralisation to interpret the gap between perceived policy support and funding. A theoretical proposition arising from this interpretation is that institutional sustainability may moderate the affordability–adoption relationship. Predictable implementation, credible rules and sustained operational support could make financial accessibility more consequential for adoption. This proposition is not tested or established by the present findings. Testing it would require respondent-level affordability, institutional sustainability, reliability and adoption scores, verified scale coding, and estimation of the interaction in Model 2 with appropriate diagnostic checks. Establishing a relationship with actual adoption would additionally require verified ownership, registration or fleet measures.

Limitations and Future Research

- The single-county, cross-sectional design limits generalisability and causal inference. Perception-based measures collected from the same respondents may introduce common-method bias; perceived adoption should not be equated with independently verified vehicle uptake. The outcome combines perceptions and attitudes, and the broad LEV category does not distinguish technology-specific uptake. Bivariate analysis leaves affordability, operational reliability and other possible confounders uncontrolled. The reported summary statistics are insufficient to estimate the proposed adjusted and interaction models, so the study cannot establish whether the institutional association persists after adjustment or whether institutional sustainability moderates the affordability–adoption relationship.

Fiscal mechanisms were also not tested. Interview themes offer contextual interpretation rather than proof of causal mechanisms.

- Future studies should use multi-county or longitudinal designs and combine perception measures with registration records, fleet-conversion data, charging-infrastructure data and programme budgets. Respondent-level data would permit estimation of the proposed adjusted and moderation models, subject to scale validation and diagnostic checks. Comparative analysis of matatu cooperatives, individual operators and other users could examine whether institutional and affordability relationships differ across transport arrangements.

Conclusion

The available survey and interview evidence suggests that institutional sustainability is associated with perceptions of LEV adoption in Kiambu County. Respondents rated funding continuity less favourably than policy support, and interviewees described coordination and financing constraints. The cross-sectional design does not establish causation. The bivariate association may reflect unmeasured confounding.

The practical implication is to align cleaner-transport policy with sustained implementation capacity, including coordinated responsibilities, predictable programme finance and stakeholder participation. The proposed role of institutional sustainability in conditioning the affordability–adoption relationship requires multivariable testing. Findings should be applied cautiously beyond Kiambu County and should not be interpreted as estimates of actual vehicle uptake or emissions reductions.

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