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**INFLUENCE OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP  
PRACTICES ON SERVICE DELIVERY WITHIN  
COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN KENYA: A  
LITERATURE REVIEW**

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# **INFLUENCE OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP PRACTICES ON SERVICE DELIVERY WITHIN COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN KENYA: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The research paper sought to examine the influence of strategic leadership practices on service delivery within county governments in Kenya: a literature review

**Methodology:** Based on previous research work the study specifically explored how core competencies and ethical practices can enhance service delivery

**Results:** The study found that strategic leadership practices can enhance service delivery. Electing and appointing county leaders who are professionally qualified and have essential leadership traits can fasten the attainment of devolution goals through better management of resources, involvement of the citizenry and reduction of bureaucracy

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** It is important that counties must invest in efficient communication systems so that staff are abreast with the dynamism that devolution presents. With so many impeding changes in the county environment, County leaders should be keen on ensuring that staff are involved in the planning and implementation stages. They should also increase their personal competencies to understand the organizational environment.

**Keywords:** *Devolution, Strategic leadership, Ethical practices, Core competencies, Service Delivery*

## **Introduction**

Historically governments have had the tendency to hold onto absolute power and centralize the decision making for the whole country. However, in the recent past countries, both unitary and federal have increasingly pushed for reduction of powers vested in central governments by devolving power to regional and local governments in what is known as devolution or decentralization (Hueglin & Fenna, 2015).

Leadership is one of the most discussed concepts in organizational and business studies and scene (Bush & Glover, 2014). Sharma and Jain (2013) define leadership as a process through which one is able to influence others to make certain feats and accomplish specific objectives. Leaders are entrusted with the role of communicating visions, organizational goals, and ideas to the people (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Antonakis (2012) contends that leaders have to be able to develop a compelling vision and devise strategies to assist others in attaining the vision. Leaders are also mandated with the task of implementing and maintaining key organizational systems and rules and even having an important say in the discipline of those within the organization.

Omar and Mahmoud (2014) argued that organizational capabilities relating to strategic leadership are key in the competitive landscape expected in the twenty first century. The researchers further argue that human and social capitals can be avenues through which organizations attain and sustain competitiveness and should therefore be carefully nurtured and developed. Hitt, Ireland and Hoskisson (2007) note that every individual that takes part in management of change has duties and responsibilities, and it is important for the organization to realize leadership role in implementation of strategies to enhance effectiveness of the delegating role.

Holman (2011) describes strategic leadership as the ability to influence others in decision making to enhance the prospects of the firm's long-term success while maintaining long-term financial stability. Different leadership approaches impact on the vision and potential success of the organization. To effectively manage change, strategic leaders must provide a sense of direction and build ownership and align workgroups to implement change. According to Bateman and Snell (2011), strategic leadership forms the purpose and gives meaning to an organization. It basically involves envisaging and anticipating a future for the organization or perhaps a government body as is our case and working with others to secure a viable future.

Strategic leaders play a critical role in aligning employees and organizational resources in the same direction (Akinyele & Olufunke, 2007). There are several strategic leadership practices adopted by organizations. A strategic leader must maximize use of the firm's internal resources and capabilities to realize set goals in a competitive environment. Hsieh and Yik (2011) contend that a strategic leader motivates employees to put efforts and commit themselves in giving their best. Strategic leaders must have functional skills which are essential in enabling the firm to deliver unique products having.

## **Decentralization and Service Delivery**

Decentralization has been seen as an important tool in revenue performance and therefore instrumental in providing services closer to people in large and densely populated economies such as China, the US and some European countries through federal arrangements (Clegg & Greg, 2010). According to Rosenbaum (2013) the worldwide governance trend is towards decentralization. Winsemius and Guntram (2013) noted that this has attracted a whole new way in which some National governments have reacted. Some have become tolerant to

divergent views and democracy while some have just stood their traditional grounds vehemently. Zungura (2014) with devolution, responsibilities have been shifted to locally manageable levels creating political stability and localized decision making to deal with unique needs.

Government performance is measured through service delivery to its people (Eigema, 2007). The best yardstick to measure government performance of good governance is through service delivery to the people. Public expectation in the public sector performance in delivering services consistent with citizen preferences has been considered weak in developing countries (Palladan, Kadzrina, & Chong, 2016). Abe and Monisola (2014) contends that government is expected to deliver better services to its people. They provided the indices of measuring service delivery to the people as low inflation, better education, and provision of improved health care at affordable rates, provision of clean water, provision of good road networks.

The United States of America is one of the key models of successful decentralization with 50 state governments and over 85,000 local governments. This has translated into robust development goals being driven by the autonomous states and the federal government which have resulted in better service provision (Rosenbaum, 2013). In Malaysia public sector organizations recognized that they had to improve and strengthen the values of good governance regularly in order to perform their excellent service delivery (Siddiquee, 2009); the researcher further noted that the main limiting factors to ineffectiveness and inefficiency of service delivery which is indicated by various complaints such as abuse of power, slow action and unethical behaviours among the employees made by the public

Regionally decentralization has been a success in countries such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda (Dickovick & Riedl, 2010); however the impact of decentralization has varied across nations in Africa. The link between decentralization and public services delivery in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa is scarcely explored. To date, only few studies have so far evaluated the impact of decentralization on service delivery in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa (Tshukudu, 2014). Additionally, there is imbalance in the attention that has gone into studies on governance decentralization and service delivery. Existing studies tend to measure service delivery with service accessibility and disregard other dimensions such as quality of service and citizen satisfaction (Opiyo, 2014; Sujarwoto, 2012).

Abe and Monisola (2014) contends that lack of transparency and accountability leads to corruption which may also be a reason for ineffective provision of social services for the people at the local level. Kjaer (2011) submitted that where a local authority is genuinely accountable to a local electorate, it displayed more incentive to improve the services for which it is responsible. The study revealed that accountability is essential to improved performance.

In a study in Kajiado County; the researcher noted that the main challenges to better service delivery were interference and political manipulation, corruption and lack of accountability and transparency, inadequate citizen participation, poor human resource policy, failure to manage change, lack of employee capacity, poor planning, and poor monitoring and evaluation (Makanyeza, 2013).

### **Devolution in Kenya**

The constitution of Kenya (2010) established 47 county governments to improve efficiency in service delivery. The transition from a central to devolved governments in Kenya has not

been smooth as several challenges such as inter-governmental relations, turf wars among leaders, corruption and strikes among others have threatened devolution. At present, research also indicates that over 51% of citizens are dissatisfied with service delivery of county governments in Kenya (Transparency International, 2015).

Sagala (2015) was of the view that strengthening public participation and governance is a core element in Kenya's strategy to accelerate growth and address long-standing inequalities in economic opportunities, investment, and service delivery in different parts of the country. This has been promoted through support of decentralization to devolved units of governance.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Africa, many countries have carried out reforms aimed at decentralizing the political, administrative and fiscal structures of the public sector. The need to transform the structure of governance is informed by the view that decentralization increases the overall efficiency and responsiveness of the public sector in providing services, an outcome that enhances economic development and contributes to a reduction in regional disparities decentralization has advanced considerably in the last two decades (Amusa & Mabugu, 2016). Moreover, many African central governments have initiated or deepened processes to transfer authority, power, responsibilities, and resources to sub-national levels.

The empirical evidence on the link between decentralization governance and service delivery is highly inconclusive. Theoretical and empirical literature is highly inconclusive on the benefits and drawbacks of devolution. There are a number of studies that have indicated that devolution improves service delivery (Balunywa, Nangoli, Mugerwa, Teko, & Mayoka, 2014; Abe & Monisola, 2014). On the other side a cross section of researchers has also found that devolution negatively influences service delivery (Freinkman & Plekhanov, 2009; Olatona & Olomola, 2015). In China, Wei-qing and Shi (2010) carried a study and revealed that fiscal decentralization on expenditure may make local governments tend to reduce provision of public services, such as education. Locally, the lack of coordination between the County executive and County assemblies as constantly contributed to wrangles on fund allocation and utilization which has resulted to poor service delivery and wastage of public resources (Karimi, Kimani, & Kinyua, 2017).

Despite this, the Kenyan evidence on the relationship between strategic leadership practices and service delivery within County governments is very limited. Moreover, much of the available evidence is anecdotal or focused on a specific set of issues, such as participation, empowerment or fiscal autonomy. This limited availability of research evidence has prompted the current research. The study examined how strategic leadership influences service delivery within devolved units of governance in Kenya.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of the study was to examine how strategic leadership practices influence service delivery within county governments in Kenya.

#### **Specific Objectives**

- i. To examine the influence of core competencies on the service delivery within county governments in Kenya.
- ii. To determine the effect of ethical practices on the service delivery within county governments in Kenya



## **Theoretical Review of the Study**

### **Contingency Theory**

This theory was postulated by House (1996), it is based on the understanding that there is no specific way to manage, plan, organise, lead and control an organization. A contingent leader adopts a style of leadership based on the situation at hand. Scholars such as Morgan (2007) opine that strategic leadership should be flexible to accommodate the changing needs of the customers. Further, Vroom and Jago (2009) explain that strategic leadership must exploit their leadership skills to ensure successful implementation of strategy. Strategic leadership should develop and provide a clear plan on how the process of strategy implementation will take place in terms of the roles, duties and the reporting relationships between strategic leadership in place and the employees. The operating assumption of this theory is that there is no direct way to lead an organization but this primarily depends on the situation on hand. This theory will highlight the importance of strategic leadership in fostering service delivery within devolved units of governance.

### **Resource Based View Theory**

Resource-based theory argues that human assets can be a source of sustainable advantage because tacit knowledge and social complexity are hard to imitate. However, these desirable attributes cause dilemmas that may prevent firms from generating an advantage (Collins & Clark, 2003). The resource-based view (RBV) of a firm, asserts that the competencies of firm employees are the intangible resources of an organization and that competency-based HRM practices, are responsible for leveraging and managing these competencies and ensuring that the organization can obtain competitive advantage, especially in terms of their productivity (Collins & Clark, 2003).

Different public organizations emphasize different competencies; hence, employees who are competent and at the same time possess the competencies needed by each organization are the valuable and rare resources. Thus, they cannot be imitated and substituted for, and this promises that sustainable competitive advantage is achievable (Barney, 1991). This theory underlines the importance of core competencies and ethical practices as unique capabilities that devolved units of governance can utilize to foster service delivery.

### **Literature Review**

Wangari (2014) acknowledges that decentralization is motivated by the government need to foster service delivery as well as eliminate systemic imbalances. Globally the clamour for decentralization has been at the centre of sudden economic development in countries such as Nepal, Chile and China which have revolutionized their economic centre as well as fostering public service delivery as a result of adopting devolution. Clegg and Greg (2010) also note that in countries such as the US and European economic powerhouse's decentralization has contributed to services being brought closer to the people as well as expanding revenue productivity in densely populated nations.

Gemmell, Kneller, and Sanz (2013) examined the contribution of financial decentralization in OECD countries and noted that decentralization tends to be associated with lower economic growth while revenue decentralization is associated with higher growth. The research failed to examine the significance of devolution on service delivery. Obicci (2014) was of the view that political decentralization can be used as a tool of promoting the provision of service delivery. Yusoff et al., (2016) supports the above ideology by concluding that decentralization of government functions enhances service delivery by placing the responsibility of service provision to local governments that are closer to the people.

Olatona and Olomola (2015) analysed the influence of fiscal decentralization on health and educational service delivery between 1999 and 2012. The study found that fiscal decentralization has positive link with educational service delivery, while high degree of fiscal decentralization is negatively related to health care delivery. Oriakhi (2006) examined fiscal decentralization and efficient service delivery in Nigeria. The researcher posited that service delivery by sub-national governments had been poor and attributed it to constraints such as, the mismatch between expenditure assignments and sources of revenue, lopsided vertical allocation formula which favoured the federal government, rent seeking and ineffective monitoring of public expenditures among others. Ibok (2014) carried a study on local governance and service delivery and avers that lack of funds occasioned by low budgetary allocation, restricted revenue sources available to local government and inability to effectively utilize its internal sources of revenue generation had impacted negatively on the provision of public goods at local level.

Masungu, Marangu, Obunga, and Lilungu, (2015) examine strategic leadership and the performance of devolved county governments in Kakamega County government and indicated that strategic leadership had a positive relationship with performance of devolved units. The findings also indicated that there was high agreement that the county government targetted service delivery as its core objective. Maina, Namusonge, and Kabare, (2016) examined Intrapersonal Traits in Service Delivery by devolved governments in central Kenya and indicated that ethical practices, leadership quality, skills and competencies enhanced service delivery within the devolved units.

Luballo and Simon, (2017) conducted a study on human resource management practices and service delivery in Siaya County and concluded that effective training, selection and recruitment and adoption of performance management systems enhanced service delivery within the county. The study recommended that county leadership should enhance create internal capacities that can foster employee performance for better performance. The study however did not take into account strategic leadership practices such as ethics/integrity. Mutuma, Iravo, Waiganjo, and Kihoro, (2017) examined government policies, shared responsibility and service delivery by county government workers in Kenya. The results of the study showed that styles adopted by leadership, leadership quality, coordination and workers empowerment enhanced service delivery within the devolved units. Interestingly the findings indicated that government policies such as monitoring and evaluation did not have any moderating effect on service delivery; this outlines the inadequacy of the national government in policing county governments towards effective service delivery.

Abass, Munga and Were, (2017) examined strategy implementation and performance of county government in Wajir County and noted that decision making by strategic leaders led to successful execution of strategies which has enhanced performance in the county. The study however did not address service delivery. Kakucha, Simba, and Ahmed, (2018) examine culture and strategic management change in Mombasa County and concluded that organization culture was driven by strategic leadership which fosters effectiveness within the county government. Karimi, Kimani and Kinyua, (2017) indicated that increased transparency and accountability within the county government personnel and leadership enhanced the service delivery within Embu County government. Kihoro, Nzulwa, Iravo and Wagana, (2017) examined relationship between administrative decentralization and service delivery and concluded there was a positive link between decentralization and service delivery in the country. The study also indicated there is an insignificant effect of e-government policies on the relationship between administrative decentralization and service delivery.

### **Core Competencies and Service Delivery**

Taylor (2010) concluded that recruitment-based core competencies were aimed at improving the quality of employees and cultivating a culture of creativity and problem-solving skills. Sharma (2011) emphasized that through identifying core competencies, firms were able to focus on their strengths and abilities in offering superior products or services as compared to their competitors. Ulrich and Smallwood (2010) indicated that good leadership investments don't just focus on how to better individual leaders but also on how to build leadership as an organizational capability throughout the organization by designing sustainable leadership systems. Leadership systems make leadership development as an event aligned to other management practices. When HR practices are integrated, leadership becomes a capability of a company other than developing individually talented leaders. Successful firms build strong leadership capabilities that last through different economic seasons.

Lufthans (2012) examined the perceived role of strategic leadership on competitiveness of banks in the United States. It was revealed that through strategic leadership core competencies were organisational individual strengths that enhanced performance. Palladan, Kadzrina and Chong (2016) tested the link between strategic leadership and competitiveness of tertiary firms in Nigeria and it was unearthed that strategic leadership practices such as strategic direction contributed towards enhancing competitive advantage.

In the case of Ghana, King et al. (2013) assessed the level of transparency and accountability in the local government in 14 Metropolitan and Municipal Assemblies analyses revealed that the legal provisions made room for social accountability but the weak capacity of assembly members in terms of resources, the understanding of legislative provisions, poor professional capabilities and the acceptability of the concept challenged its implementation; hence limiting service delivery.

### **Ethical Practices and Service Delivery**

Mihelič, Lipičnik, and Tekavčič, (2010) notes that ethical practices concern strategic leaders' ability to be humble, to have concern for the common good, strive for fairness, taking responsibility and showing respect for each individual. According to Hale (2013), ethical practices in organizations have been associated with greater reputation, trust, confidence and above all organizational performance.

Toor and Ofori (2009) explored the effectiveness of ethical practices on competitiveness and it was revealed that firms that maintained ethical principles and standards were able to save huge costs from fines and penalties and this contributed towards improved performance. Gu, Weng and Xie (2012) found that firms that complied with ethical codes of conduct were able to create ample time and resources towards achieving their set goals and targets. Holloway (2012) observed that many employees who maintained integrity in their work were employees of firms that were compliant with ethical principles.

In his study Boris (2015) sought to critically analyze the challenges confronting local government administration in effective and efficient social service delivery in Nigeria. Using secondary data, the study concluded lack of funds, corruption, and undue political interference amongst others as major constraints to local government service delivery. Alornyeku (2011) carried a case study in Kumasi metropolis on administrative structure and service delivery. The researcher was of the view that assembly low productivity, due to excessive bureaucracy negatively impacted performance of the central government. The study however failed to take into account devolved units of governance.



Ndabahaliye (2013) assessed the impact of employees' ethical conducts on organizational performance of public institutions. A survey design was implemented in a sample of 120 respondents. Collection of data was done with the help of questionnaires and survey monkey software. The study depicted a significant link between employees' ethical conducts and organizational performance. The link was significant in unethical behaviors that resulted into poor organizational performance.

### **Conclusions**

The review of literature has indicated that strategic leadership practices are factor to achieving organization performance. There are numerous practices that are adopted by strategic leaders that vary from the private sector to the public sector. In the context of the devolved units the main challenges in Kenya have been the lack of basic leadership competencies and the daunting challenge of integrity and ethical conduct; hence this paper examine literature on how core competencies and ethical practices are imperative in service delivery. This study concludes that emphasizing ethical practices as well as core competencies among elected and appointed county leaders is essential for improved service delivery.

The adoption of devolution has been cited as an avenue of bringing services closer to the people whilst improving efficiency, accountability and equitability of resources. Strategic leadership plays a vital role in the realization of this vision. The study outlines the importance of leadership accountability as a core determinant of service delivery. Furthermore the personal traits and professional competencies have been highlighted as critical factors to strengthening the service provision within the devolved units.

From the study findings it is evident that poor leadership competencies and traits have been a major limiting factor to service delivery within devolved units. The lack of basic communication and leadership skills has derailed many development projects within county governments as noted by Transparency international. Furthermore lack of awareness on financial management and public policy has deterred some county leaders from adopting an inclusive environment that can enhance service delivery.

### **Recommendations**

It is important that counties must invest in efficient communication systems so that staff are abreast with the dynamism that devolution presents. With so many impeding changes in the county environment, County leaders should be keen on ensuring that staff are involved in the planning and implementation stages. They should also increase their personal competencies to understand the organizational environment.

The study further indicated that political interference is a major concern in decision making within County setting. Therefore there is a need to have professionals run the affairs of Counties not politicians. Policies should be put in place to determine the kind of professionals that are needed to work in leadership positions in the county level. These leaders should not just meet the professional competencies but ethical guidelines that will promote accountability, integrity and transparency in the county affairs.

From the research findings it is evident that strategic leadership plays a key role in supporting service delivery within county governments. From a policy point of view the study recommends that the national government should institute a change management process that will see into it that leaders within county governments are well trained on the dynamism that comes with devolution as well as on human resource development systems that will ensure in the future there is knowledge retention within devolved units for better service delivery.

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