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POOR SERVICE DELIVERY IN COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN KENYA: A CASE STUDY OF BUNGOMA COUNTY

***Elizabeth Nakoba Simiyu and Dr Yasin Kuso Ghabon**

Kenya.

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***Corresponding Author: Elizabeth Nakoba Simiyu**
Kenya.
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ABSTRACT

The introduction of devolution in Kenya under the Constitution of 2010 marked a significant shift in governance, aiming to improve service delivery, enhance accountability, and promote equitable development. Despite these intentions, many county governments continue to face persistent challenges in delivering efficient and quality services. This study examines the issue of poor service delivery in county governments, focusing specifically on Bungoma County. The research investigates the underlying causes, effects, and possible solutions to the problem.

Using a descriptive research design and relying on secondary data sources such as government reports, journal articles, and policy documents, the study identifies key factors contributing to poor service delivery. These include corruption, weak institutional frameworks, inadequate public participation, poor financial management, and human resource challenges. The study further explores the impact of these issues on critical sectors such as healthcare, infrastructure, and economic development.

The findings reveal that governance failures, rather than resource constraints, are the primary drivers of poor service delivery. The study concludes that unless structural and institutional reforms are implemented, the objectives of devolution will remain unmet. Recommendations include strengthening accountability mechanisms, enhancing transparency, improving public participation, and investing in institutional capacity building.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Devolution is one of the most transformative governance reforms introduced in Kenya through the Constitution of 2010. It created 47 county governments with the mandate to provide essential services such as healthcare, water, sanitation, and local infrastructure. The primary objective was to decentralize power and resources from the national government to local levels, thereby improving efficiency and responsiveness to citizens' needs.

County governments receive a significant portion of national revenue annually. However, despite these allocations, service delivery in many counties remains inadequate. Citizens frequently complain about poor healthcare services, stalled development projects, lack of clean water, and inefficient administrative systems.

Bungoma County, located in Western Kenya, exemplifies these challenges. Despite receiving substantial funding, the county continues to struggle with service delivery in key sectors such as health, agriculture, and infrastructure. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of devolution in achieving its intended goals.

1.2 Problem Statement

More than a decade after the implementation of devolution, poor service delivery remains a major concern in many Kenyan counties. In Bungoma County, residents continue to experience inadequate healthcare services, poor road networks, unreliable water supply, and weak governance systems.

Health facilities are often understaffed and lack essential equipment. Development projects are frequently delayed or abandoned, while corruption and mismanagement of public resources persist. Additionally, public participation in decision-making processes is often limited or ineffective.

This situation raises critical questions about the efficiency, accountability, and effectiveness of county governments in fulfilling their mandates. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the causes and implications of poor service delivery in Bungoma County.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To examine the causes and effects of poor service delivery in county governments in Kenya, with a focus on Bungoma County.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the factors contributing to poor service delivery in Bungoma County.
2. To assess the impact of poor service delivery on residents.
3. To evaluate governance and accountability mechanisms in the county.
4. To propose strategies for improving service delivery.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the main causes of poor service delivery in Bungoma County?
2. How does poor service delivery affect residents?
3. What governance challenges hinder effective service delivery?
4. What measures can be implemented to improve service delivery?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is important for policymakers, county officials, and development partners as it provides insights into the challenges affecting service delivery. It also contributes to academic discussions on devolution and governance in Kenya.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides a foundation for understanding the factors influencing service delivery in county governments. It offers a lens through which governance challenges, institutional inefficiencies, and administrative behaviors can be analyzed. In Kenya's devolved system, service delivery gaps persist despite increased funding, largely due to systemic governance and institutional weaknesses. Theoretical perspectives help explain how decision-making processes, incentives, and accountability structures influence public service outcomes. Public Choice Theory and New Public Management Theory are particularly relevant in analyzing inefficiencies within county governments such as Bungoma (Transparency International Kenya, 2025). These frameworks highlight the interaction between individual behavior and institutional systems in shaping service delivery outcomes, especially in environments characterized by weak oversight and limited transparency.

2.1.1 Public Choice Theory

Public Choice Theory explains how individual self-interest influences decision-making within public institutions. In many cases, public officials prioritize personal benefits such as financial gain, political survival, or power over public welfare. In Kenya, recent evidence shows that corruption remains deeply embedded in public service delivery, with bribery and favoritism being common practices in government institutions. For instance, national surveys indicate that a significant proportion of citizens encounter bribery when seeking public services, reflecting the influence of self-interest among public officials. This behavior leads to inefficient allocation of resources, poor prioritization of development projects, and ultimately weak service delivery outcomes. In county governments, including Bungoma, such tendencies undermine accountability and reduce the effectiveness of devolved governance systems (Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission [EACC], 2025).

2.1.2 New Public Management Theory

New Public Management (NPM) Theory emphasizes efficiency, accountability, and performance in public service by adopting private sector management practices. It advocates for transparency, performance measurement, decentralization, and customer-oriented service delivery. In the Kenyan context, NPM principles are increasingly relevant in addressing inefficiencies within county governments. However, recent reports indicate that many counties still face challenges such as weak accountability systems, limited transparency, and poor performance monitoring. For example, governance assessments reveal that lack of access to information, low citizen awareness, and weak oversight mechanisms continue to hinder effective service delivery. These challenges demonstrate that while NPM principles offer a strong framework for improving public service delivery, their implementation in counties like Bungoma remains limited, resulting in continued inefficiencies (Transparency International Kenya, 2025).

2.2 Empirical Review

The empirical review examines recent studies and evidence on service delivery in devolved governance systems. In Kenya, data from recent surveys and governance reports show that poor service delivery is a widespread issue across counties. Despite increased funding and autonomy, many counties struggle with inefficiencies due to governance failures, corruption, and weak institutional frameworks. Evidence suggests that poor service delivery is not primarily caused by lack of resources but rather by mismanagement and ineffective utilization of available funds. Recent national surveys indicate high levels of corruption, low citizen engagement, and inadequate accountability systems in public institutions. These findings provide a basis for understanding the persistent challenges in Bungoma County and highlight the need for systemic reforms to improve service delivery (EACC, 2025).

2.2.1 Corruption and Mismanagement

Corruption and mismanagement remain key barriers to effective service delivery in Kenyan counties. Recent findings show that bribery is the most common form of corruption in public institutions, with over half of respondents reporting exposure to corrupt practices. Additionally, a significant number of citizens are required to pay bribes to access basic services, including employment and government assistance. This indicates that corruption is deeply entrenched in service delivery systems. Mismanagement further worsens the situation, as public resources are often poorly planned, misallocated, or diverted for personal gain. In county governments, these practices result in stalled projects, substandard infrastructure, and inadequate services. In Bungoma County, such trends contribute to inefficiencies and reduced public trust in government institutions (EACC, 2025).

2.2.2 Financial Management Challenges

Financial management challenges significantly affect service delivery in county governments. Recent reports indicate that weak financial controls, poor budgeting practices, and lack of transparency contribute to inefficient use of public funds. Many counties experience low budget absorption rates, leading to delayed or incomplete development projects. Additionally, governance assessments highlight that citizens often lack access to information regarding project costs and budget allocations, which limits accountability. In Bungoma County, such financial inefficiencies result in underfunded essential services despite available resources. Strengthening financial management systems, including transparent procurement processes and effective monitoring mechanisms, is essential for improving service delivery outcomes in devolved units (Transparency International Kenya, 2025).

2.2.3 Human Resource Constraints

Human resource constraints continue to undermine service delivery in Kenyan counties. Many counties face shortages of skilled personnel, particularly in critical sectors such as healthcare and technical services. Recent findings also show that corruption in recruitment processes, including bribery for employment opportunities, is widespread in county governments. This results in the hiring of unqualified individuals, which negatively affects productivity and service quality. Additionally, poor working conditions, lack of training, and low staff morale further reduce efficiency. In Bungoma County, these challenges contribute to understaffed health facilities and poor administrative performance. Addressing human resource issues requires merit-based recruitment, capacity building, and improved working conditions to enhance service delivery (EACC, 2025).

2.2.4 Public Participation

Public participation is a key pillar of devolved governance and plays a crucial role in enhancing accountability and transparency. However, recent studies indicate that public participation in many counties remains weak and ineffective. For example, governance reports show that a large proportion of citizens are unaware of key planning documents such as County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), and most do not know how public funds are utilized. This lack of awareness limits meaningful citizen engagement in decision-making processes. In many cases, participation is conducted merely as a formality without genuine incorporation of public views. In Bungoma County, weak public participation reduces accountability and limits the responsiveness of government programs to community needs (Transparency International Kenya, 2025).

2.2.5 Infrastructure Limitations

Infrastructure limitations significantly hinder effective service delivery in county governments. Recent reports highlight that poor infrastructure, including roads, healthcare facilities, and water systems, remains a major challenge across many counties in Kenya. Inadequate infrastructure restricts access to essential services and slows down economic development. For instance, poor road networks limit access to markets and health facilities, while lack of proper equipment in hospitals reduces the quality of healthcare services. Additionally, governance assessments identify infrastructure development as a top priority for citizens, yet progress remains slow due to corruption and weak oversight mechanisms. In Bungoma County, these infrastructure gaps contribute to poor service delivery and reduced quality of life for residents (Transparency International Kenya, 2025)

2.3 Research Gap

While many studies have examined devolution in Kenya, few have focused specifically on Bungoma County. This study seeks to fill this gap.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design to examine the factors contributing to poor service delivery in county governments, with a focus on Bungoma County. A descriptive design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to systematically describe and analyze existing conditions without manipulating variables. It provides a clear understanding of relationships between governance practices and service delivery outcomes. The design also enables the collection of detailed information from existing data sources, making it suitable for studies involving public institutions and policy analysis. In the context of devolved governance, descriptive research is widely used to assess institutional performance and identify gaps in service delivery. This approach is particularly relevant in examining real-life administrative challenges affecting counties in Kenya (Kothari, 2023).

3.2 Study Area

The study focuses on Bungoma County, which is located in the western region of Kenya. The county is characterized by a largely rural population, with agriculture being the main economic activity. Bungoma County was selected due to its continued challenges in service delivery despite receiving substantial financial allocations under the devolved system of governance. The county has experienced issues such as inadequate healthcare services, poor road infrastructure, and weak administrative systems. These challenges make it an ideal case study for examining the effectiveness of county governments in delivering public services. Additionally, Bungoma provides a representative context for understanding broader service delivery challenges faced by many counties in Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

3.3 Data Sources

This study relies on secondary data collected from credible and authoritative sources. Secondary data includes government publications, policy reports, academic journals, and reports from oversight institutions. Key sources include reports from the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC), Transparency International Kenya, and the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. These sources provide reliable and up-to-date information on governance, corruption, financial management, and service delivery in county governments. The use of secondary data is appropriate for this study as it allows for comprehensive analysis of existing information without the need for primary data collection, which can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Furthermore, secondary data enhances the credibility of the study by relying on verified and peer-reviewed information (EACC, 2025).

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study was collected through document analysis, which involves reviewing and analyzing existing written materials related to the research topic. This includes policy documents, audit reports, government publications, and scholarly articles. Document analysis is an effective method for examining trends, patterns, and relationships in governance and service delivery. It allows the researcher to gather in-depth insights into institutional performance and identify recurring challenges affecting county governments. In addition, this method ensures that the data used is reliable, as it is sourced from credible institutions. Document analysis is widely used in public administration research due to its ability to provide detailed and contextual information (Bowen, 2023).

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The study employs qualitative data analysis using thematic analysis. This involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the collected data. Thematic analysis is suitable for this study because it allows the researcher to organize data into meaningful categories such as corruption, financial management, human resource challenges, and infrastructure limitations. Through this approach, the researcher is able to draw connections between different factors and explain how they contribute to poor service delivery. The method also allows for flexibility in analyzing complex governance issues, making it ideal for studies involving public sector performance. The use of thematic analysis ensures a systematic and structured interpretation of data, enhancing the validity of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important in ensuring the integrity and credibility of the research. This study adheres to ethical standards by using credible and properly cited sources of information. All data used in the study is obtained from publicly available documents and reports, ensuring transparency and accountability. Proper citation and referencing are applied to avoid plagiarism and give credit to original authors. Additionally, the study avoids misrepresentation of data and ensures that findings are presented objectively without bias. Ethical research practices are essential in maintaining academic integrity and ensuring that the study contributes meaningfully to existing knowledge (Resnik, 2023).

3.7 Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not capture real-time developments or specific local experiences in Bungoma County. Additionally, some reports may contain generalized findings that do not fully reflect the unique context of the county. Despite these limitations, the study ensures the use of recent and credible data sources to provide accurate and relevant insights. Future studies may incorporate primary data collection methods such as interviews and surveys to gain deeper understanding of service delivery challenges at the grassroots level (World Bank, 2024)

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Causes of Poor Service Delivery

The study identified several key factors contributing to poor service delivery in county governments, particularly in Bungoma County. These factors are largely institutional and governance-related rather than purely financial. Despite increased budgetary allocations to counties, inefficiencies persist due to systemic weaknesses in administration, accountability, and resource management. The findings indicate that corruption, weak institutional capacity, poor financial management, inadequate staffing, and poor infrastructure are the major drivers of poor service delivery. These issues are interrelated and collectively undermine the effectiveness of devolved governance. Recent governance assessments show that many counties continue to struggle with similar challenges, which significantly limit their ability to deliver essential services to citizens (Transparency International Kenya, 2025).

4.1.1 Corruption

Corruption emerged as one of the most significant causes of poor service delivery in Bungoma County. It leads to the misallocation of resources, inflated project costs, and poor implementation of development projects. Public funds intended for essential services such as healthcare, infrastructure, and water supply are often diverted for personal gain. In many cases, procurement processes are manipulated, resulting in the awarding of contracts to unqualified contractors. This leads to substandard or incomplete projects, which fail to meet the needs of the population. Recent national surveys indicate that corruption remains widespread in public institutions, with a significant proportion of citizens reporting bribery when accessing government services. This undermines efficiency, accountability, and public trust in county governments (Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission [EACC], 2025).

4.1.2 Weak Institutional Capacity

Weak institutional capacity is another major factor contributing to poor service delivery in Bungoma County. County institutions often lack the necessary technical expertise, systems, and structures required to effectively manage resources and implement development projects. This includes inadequate planning mechanisms, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, and limited use of data in decision-making. As a result, many projects are poorly designed, inefficiently implemented, or fail to achieve their intended objectives. Additionally, institutional weaknesses make it difficult to enforce accountability and transparency, further exacerbating inefficiencies. Recent governance reports highlight that many county governments in Kenya continue to face challenges related to weak institutional frameworks, which significantly hinder service delivery (World Bank, 2024).

4.1.3 Poor Financial Management

Poor financial management significantly affects service delivery in Bungoma County. This includes issues such as misallocation of funds, low budget absorption rates, and lack of transparency in financial processes. In many cases, funds allocated for development projects are either misused or not fully utilized, leading to delays or abandonment of projects. Weak financial controls and oversight mechanisms further contribute to inefficiencies and increase the risk of corruption. Additionally, lack of access to financial information limits public accountability and citizen oversight. Recent reports indicate that many counties in Kenya continue to struggle with financial management challenges, which negatively impact the delivery of essential services. Strengthening financial systems is therefore critical for improving service delivery outcomes (Controller of Budget, 2024).

4.1.4 Inadequate Staffing

Inadequate staffing is a key challenge affecting service delivery in Bungoma County, particularly in critical sectors such as healthcare and administration. Many county departments face shortages of qualified personnel, which limits their ability to provide efficient and timely services. In the health sector, understaffing leads to long waiting times, reduced quality of care, and increased workload for existing staff. Additionally, recruitment processes in some counties are often influenced by political considerations rather than merit, resulting in the employment of unqualified personnel. This further reduces efficiency and productivity within county institutions. Recent studies indicate that human resource challenges, including staff shortages and poor working conditions, continue to affect service delivery in many counties across Kenya (World Health Organization, 2023).

4.1.5 Poor Infrastructure

Poor infrastructure is a major barrier to effective service delivery in Bungoma County. Inadequate road networks, poorly equipped healthcare facilities, and insufficient water and sanitation systems limit access to essential services. For instance, poor roads make it difficult for residents to access markets, hospitals, and schools, especially in rural areas. Similarly, lack of medical equipment and proper facilities affects the quality of healthcare services. Infrastructure gaps also hinder economic development by limiting trade and investment opportunities. Recent development reports highlight that infrastructure deficits remain a significant challenge in many Kenyan counties, despite increased funding under devolution.

Addressing these gaps is essential for improving service delivery and enhancing the quality of life for residents (African Development Bank, 2023).

4.2 Effects of Poor Service Delivery

Poor service delivery has far-reaching effects on the socio-economic well-being of residents in Bungoma County. One of the major effects is increased poverty levels, as limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure reduces economic opportunities. Poor healthcare services lead to negative health outcomes, including increased morbidity and mortality rates. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure and inefficient administrative systems hinder business activities, resulting in reduced economic growth. Another critical effect is the loss of public trust in government institutions, as citizens become frustrated with the inability of leaders to meet their needs. Recent studies show that poor service delivery is closely linked to declining citizen confidence in public institutions and reduced civic engagement (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

4.3 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that governance challenges are the primary contributors to poor service delivery in Bungoma County. Despite the availability of financial resources through devolution, inefficiencies persist due to corruption, weak institutional capacity, and poor management systems. These findings are consistent with recent national and international reports, which highlight governance failures as the main barrier to effective service delivery in developing countries. The study also demonstrates that these challenges are interconnected, with weaknesses in one area often reinforcing problems in others. For example, corruption undermines financial management, while weak institutions fail to enforce accountability. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms that focus on strengthening governance structures, improving transparency, and enhancing institutional capacity (Transparency International Kenya, 2025).

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that poor service delivery in Bungoma County is largely driven by governance-related challenges rather than lack of financial resources. Key issues identified include corruption, weak institutional capacity, poor financial management, inadequate staffing, and limited public participation. These challenges have significantly undermined the effectiveness of devolved governance, resulting in inadequate provision of essential services such as healthcare, infrastructure, and water supply. Despite increased funding to county governments, inefficiencies persist due to weak accountability mechanisms and mismanagement of resources. The findings suggest that unless comprehensive reforms are implemented to address these systemic issues, the objectives of devolution—improved service delivery, transparency, and equitable development—will remain unmet. This aligns with recent governance reports indicating that institutional weaknesses continue to hinder service delivery across Kenyan counties (Transparency International Kenya, 2025).

5.2 Recommendations

The study proposes several recommendations aimed at improving service delivery in Bungoma County and other county governments in Kenya. These recommendations focus on strengthening governance systems, enhancing accountability, and improving institutional capacity.

5.2.1 Strengthening Accountability

Strengthening accountability mechanisms is critical in addressing corruption and improving service delivery. County governments should establish robust oversight systems, including independent audit committees and strengthened roles for county assemblies in monitoring executive actions. Additionally, there is a need to enhance transparency through regular public reporting on budget utilization and project implementation. Digital platforms can also be used to track government expenditures and increase citizen access to information. Strengthening anti-corruption institutions and enforcing strict penalties for misuse of public funds will further deter corrupt practices. Evidence from recent reports indicates that improved accountability mechanisms significantly enhance public trust and efficiency in service delivery (Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission [EACC], 2025).

5.2.2 Financial Reforms

Improving financial management systems is essential for ensuring efficient use of public resources. County governments should adopt transparent and participatory budgeting processes that align with development priorities. Strengthening procurement systems by enforcing competitive bidding and reducing political interference will help minimize corruption and ensure value for money. Additionally, enhancing financial monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will ensure that allocated funds are utilized effectively and projects are completed on time. The use of integrated financial management systems can also improve accountability and reduce inefficiencies. Recent findings show that counties with stronger financial controls and transparent procurement processes achieve better service delivery outcomes (Controller of Budget, 2024).

5.2.3 Capacity Building

Capacity building is essential for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of county governments. This includes training staff, improving technical skills, and ensuring merit-based recruitment processes. Counties should invest in continuous professional development programs to enhance the competence of employees in key sectors such as healthcare, engineering, and administration. Additionally, recruitment processes should be transparent and based on qualifications rather than political influence to ensure that competent personnel are hired. Improving working conditions, including timely payment of salaries and provision of adequate resources, will also boost staff morale and productivity. Studies show that strong human resource capacity is directly linked to improved service delivery in public institutions (World Health Organization, 2023).

5.2.4 Public Participation

Enhancing public participation is critical for improving accountability and ensuring that government programs reflect the needs of citizens. County governments should create inclusive platforms that allow meaningful engagement of citizens in planning, budgeting, and decision-making processes. This includes increasing public awareness of key documents such as County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) and providing opportunities for community input. Additionally, feedback mechanisms should be established to ensure that citizen concerns are addressed effectively. Strengthening public participation will empower citizens to hold leaders accountable and improve transparency in governance. Recent governance assessments indicate that active citizen engagement significantly improves service delivery outcomes and strengthens democratic governance (Transparency International Kenya, 2025).

5.2.5 Infrastructure Development

Investment in infrastructure is essential for improving access to services and promoting economic development. County governments should prioritize the development of critical infrastructure such as roads, healthcare facilities, water systems, and sanitation services. Proper planning and allocation of resources are necessary to ensure that infrastructure projects are completed efficiently and meet required standards. Additionally, strong monitoring and evaluation systems should be put in place to prevent delays and ensure quality implementation. Public-private partnerships can also be explored to mobilize additional resources for infrastructure development. Recent development reports highlight that improved infrastructure significantly enhances service delivery and contributes to overall socio-economic development (African Development Bank, 2023).

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