

Challenges and Emerging Strategies of Federalism on Socio-Economic Development in Eastern Kenya (1960–2022)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical trajectory of federalism in Kenya and its socio-economic implications in Eastern Region between 1960 and 2022, emphasizing both challenges and the emergent strategies used to overcome them. Using qualitative methods including archival research, interviews, focus group discussions, and observations the research analyzed governance and development across Eastern Region counties. Findings show that while devolution improved local participation, access to resources and targeted service delivery, it faces persistent obstacles such as elite capture, fiscal dependency, central interference and ethnic favoritism. Counties have responded through strengthened local revenue collection, participatory forums, community monitoring groups and inter-county collaborations. Applying Marxist theory reveals structural power imbalances shaping governance outcomes, while the Great Man theory illustrates the role of visionary or exclusionary leaders in shaping success or failure. Strengthening fiscal autonomy, capacity building and inclusive governance are vital for enhancing devolution's socio-economic benefits.

Keywords: Federalism, Devolution, Eastern Kenya, Socio-economic Development, Governance, Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Federalism distributes power between central and subnational units to manage diversity and promote political participation. Kenya's experience from the short-lived Majimbo constitution (1963) to the 2010 Constitution's devolved framework illustrates tensions between centralization and local autonomy. Eastern Kenya's regional perspective is underexplored and this paper addresses that gap by analyzing both challenges and strategies in the region's governance and socio-economic development.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Prior scholarship underscores that effective federalism balances central authority with local autonomy. Marxist theory highlights structural inequalities, while the Great Man theory points to leadership's impact. African federalism studies reveal mixed outcomes, with elite capture and fiscal dependence as recurring problems. This study situates Eastern Kenya within these broader debates, drawing on references such as Wanyande & Mboya (2015), Boone (2012), and Kimenyi & Meagher (2004) from the thesis.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive design was adopted. Eastern Region counties, Embu, Isiolo, Kitui, Machakos, Makueni, Marsabit, Meru, and Tharaka Nithi were purposively selected. Data were collected from 60 respondents via interviews (40) and FGDs (20), supported by archival and secondary sources. Respondents included 15 administrators, 15 political leaders, 20 community elders, and 10 civil society representatives. Thematic analysis triangulated interviews, FGDs, archives, and secondary materials for credibility and validity. Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained.

FINDINGS

Counties operate within a legacy of centralization, with national directives often overriding local plans. Inadequate financing delays project execution, while infrastructure deficits hinder socio-economic growth. Ethnic favoritism and elite capture persist and weak institutional capacity limits service delivery. However, devolution has improved citizen participation and localized service delivery, especially where counties mobilize local revenue effectively and practice inclusive decision-making.

Emergent Strategies and Responses

Analysis of thesis data reveals several strategies already being applied:

- Strengthening local revenue mobilization in Machakos and Meru to reduce fiscal dependency.
- Establishing participatory forums such as LASDAP to enhance community engagement.
- Creating community monitoring groups to oversee development projects and curb elite capture.
- Promoting inter-county collaborations for shared infrastructure investments.
- Leveraging charismatic leaders who champion inclusive governance, demonstrating Great Man theory in practice.

These strategies show that while challenges persist, counties are not passive they are experimenting with local solutions.

DISCUSSION

Marxist analysis underscores how structural imbalances like fiscal dependency constrain counties. Great Man theory reveals leadership's dual potential: inclusive leaders can foster civic participation, while self-serving elites can entrench inequality. Integrating both perspectives explains variation in outcomes across Eastern Kenya.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Devolution has advanced socio-economic development and political participation in Eastern Kenya, but its potential is hampered by elite capture, fiscal dependency, and institutional weaknesses. Recommendations include: 1) Strengthen fiscal autonomy and ensure timely disbursements, 2) Institutionalize participatory budgeting and civic education, 3) Build administrative capacity, 4) Clarify power-sharing between national and county levels, and 5) Integrate planning for rural-urban linkages to sustain socio-economic growth.

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