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COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN KENYA**

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CORRUPTION IN PUBLIC AWARENESS AND PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY-EVIDENCE AND LESSONS FROM COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to fill the existing knowledge gap on models for delivering public awareness services in devolved systems of government by examining the effects of corruption in public awareness within Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties, which are two devolved systems of government in Kenya and its impact on public service delivery within the two counties. The paper is based on empirical research that looked at the effects of corruption in conducting civic education forums on public service delivery and is anchored on institutional theory, commons theory, policy networks theory and multiple streams framework. The research took a qualitative interpretative approach, with in depth interviews involving 126 respondents and two focus group discussions with 9 key stakeholders being carried out. The data was subjected to thematic analysis and findings showed that corruption in public awareness led to inaccessible and poor, quality public services. The study made recommendations on how the two counties might overcome corruption in public awareness and recommended a conceptual model to guide further studies in this area.

Key words: *Corruption in public awareness, civic education forums, embezzlement, bribery, public service delivery.*

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INTRODUCTION

Public policy scholars often advocate for public awareness as a critical component of accountability in an effort to improve public services in devolved systems of government (Novi, Piacenza, Robone, & Turati, 2019). It is therefore not surprising that

many countries have developed civic education forums as a way of engaging the public in the governance of devolved governments. It is expected that when such forums are conducted, more people become empowered to demand better services from their government (Magessa, Wynne-Jones, &

Hockley, 2020). As such, corruption would be reduced as the public would be more vigilant in checking the excesses of devolved governments (Opalo, 2020).

However, research has shown that there is always an information asymmetry between the governed and those governing, as the citizens rarely have the full picture of what is happening in government and may not understand what is happening in government especially if the literacy levels are low, leaving fertile ground for corruption in public awareness to take root (Mulyaman, Ismail, & Raya, 2019). This paper concentrates on corruption in conducting civic education forums as studies have shown that they form a critical component of public awareness initiatives that are geared towards better service delivery (Chege & Wang, 2020). The paper specifically looks at embezzlement and bribery as these have been identified as the major forms of corruption which are rampant in the Kenyan counties (Auditor General, 2018). The paper focuses on public service delivery as it is one of the critical functions of devolved governments. Within public service delivery, the paper looks at the accessibility of public services in terms of their geographical reach and affordability and their quality aspects as defined by the SERVQUAL model of reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness as many studies have not focused fully on these aspects of public service delivery (Raza, Umer, Qureshi, & Dahri, 2020). This model looks at reliability of services in terms of their accuracy and dependability and assurance as the knowledge and courtesy of the public officials providing public services. Tangibles refer to infrastructure, equipment and human resources available for service delivery while empathy looks at the individual attention and the caring attitude of the staff providing public services. Responsiveness refers to the public officials' willingness to help and provide prompt services.

The study is framed within the following theories:

Firstly, *the institutional theory*, which perceives institutions as authoritative determinants of social

behavior through their descriptive and injunctive norms (Berthod, 2018). Through their actions, institutions maintain social order and give society stability and resilience over time (Lammers & Garcia, 2017). It is the authors' contention that such actions entrench corruption practices which become deeply entrenched, influencing the behavior of public officers charged with conducting public awareness.

Secondly, *the commons theory*, which seeks to explain how public resources such as budgets which are finite resources are held in common on behalf of the public and face depletion due to man's selfish nature, leading to the tragedy of the commons (Ghorbani & Bravo, 2016). Thus, in the context of public awareness, the selfishness of public officials leads to corruption, which leads to misuse of public resources and their inevitable depletion, leading to policy failure and societal breakdown.

Thirdly, *the policy networks theory*, which argues that policy changes are a result of resource exchanges between policy actors, whose preferences and strategies determine policy outcomes (Gowa, 2019). It is the authors' view that policy networks are critical players in conducting civic education forums and play an important role in agenda setting if corruption within public awareness is to be eradicated.

Fourthly, *the multiple streams framework*, which presupposes that policy change is a result of a policy window that occurs when the problem, the policy and the politics stream converge (Mackey, 2019). Scholars argue that a problem stream crystallizes when the public recognizes the existence of a problem requiring government intervention (Hutchinson, Balabanova, & McKee, 2019). It is the authors' view that adequate public awareness is a prerequisite for empowering the public to recognize issues requiring government intervention, and civic education forums are critical channels through which such issues can be elevated to the problem stream in devolved systems of government.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers carried out 126 in depth interviews and two focus group discussions with 9 key stakeholders from each county. Public officials in strategic functions in the counties were interviewed as outlined in Table 1. The focus group discussions included women, minorities, religious leaders, professionals, persons living with disability, political leaders, officials in non-government organizations, business leaders and representatives from the youth. 12 members of the public were interviewed

from various service delivery points such as hospitals and markets in each county. This was important as the researchers needed to capture their views on corruption in public awareness and how it was affecting the accessibility and quality of public services that they were receiving. The researchers also interviewed 24 suppliers from each county as they were vulnerable to corruption within public awareness when delivering services and goods, and when looking for information on tenders and seeking payments for their goods and services.

Table 1: Units of analysis and observation

Units of Analysis	Units of Observation	Total
2 counties	10 public officers (executive)	20
2 counties	8 public officers (legislature)	16
2 counties	9 key stakeholder groups	18
2 counties	12 suppliers (executive)	24
2 counties	12 suppliers (legislature)	24
2 counties	12 members of the public	24
Total:	63 Units of Observation	126

Source: (authors).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Studies show that public awareness is an important component of accountability in empowering citizens to oversight governments and in ensuring corruption is kept in check (Novi, Piacenza, Robone, & Turati, 2019). Results from this study showed a lack of public awareness in both counties, as corruption was reported in civic education forums, with the public unaware that money was being embezzled by county officials. Many respondents reported that civic education forums were not held regularly and many times they had to obtain information from third parties, such as non-governmental organizations, pastors and politicians. This situation was captured by respondent N59 who said:

...as a church we educate our congregation on what is happening... Sometimes we partner with the MCAs to come to church and make announcements about the bursaries (Mwangi, 2022).

Thus, the pastor organizes with the politicians to make bursary announcements in church and this shows that the citizens get information third hand, after it has been brokered by religious and political interests. It also means those who do not attend the specific church do not get the information.

Respondent K56 confirmed this information in the following words:

... Sadly, it's only the suppliers and the officials who have the right information on how much they are stealing from us. The information that reaches the public is always twisted to fit specific narratives that do not compromise their corrupt ways. Thus, civic education forums are not a priority for the county government since they don't want the public to "chanuka" (to be informed about corruption) (Mwangi, 2022).

This shows that corruption information is hidden from the public so that they may not take any action against the corrupt officials. It also shows civic education forums are not held as a way of

ensuring the public do not get to know about the corruption that takes place. In the light of the multiple streams-framework, the empowerment of the public would trigger the problem stream and mobilize public attention on the corruption issue, thus the public officials limit public awareness to cover their actions. It also means that any existing policy networks in the form of anticorruption organizations would not have the requisite information and forum to interrogate government actions. The situation also reflects a tragedy of the commons in that the public do not get information that could protect the public resources (budgets) that would be prone to depletion through corruption.

Respondent N14 reported that the few public awareness forums that were conducted had become political rallies as they were dominated by hired political goons who were violent and shouted down policies that the politicians were opposed to. This made civic education forums lose their meaning and original goal of empowering citizens to hold their government to account.

Other respondents such as N36 claimed that public officials would conduct non-existent civic education forums, with the budgets for such activities being stolen. He explained:

... *pesa zinakunywa maji* (money is stolen) so the common *mwananchi* (public) suffers for not having quality services, as the corruption goes on (Mwangi, 2022).

The data shows that when public funds are stolen, public services suffer. The data supports studies that have reported that public awareness is a critical anticorruption strategy (Magesa, Wynne-Jones, & Hockley, 2020). Scholars posit that public awareness acts as an anticorruption tool by narrowing the information asymmetry between public officials and the public.

Data from respondent N13 supported this view in the following words:

... There is usually a lot of money given out for projects which the public is not aware of and if some of the public get wind and know the right figure, they are either bribed or the issue is played down by the county officials... Corruption has altered the information the public receives. The government controls the information to release to the public...The government plays mind games on the public. This has resulted to the public receiving poor infrastructure such as roads, hospitals and schools, hence causing difficulties in their lives (Mwangi, 2022).

Thus, public officials determine the kind of information to be released to the public and when there is an information leak, they bribe to ensure the issue is not publicized, as the public ends up with poor services, after the monies earmarked for public services are diverted to individual use.

Respondent N43 reported that projects with kickbacks were favored and those that were important to the common man ignored. The data confirms studies that have showed that public officials redesign programs and propose projects with few public benefits and more opportunities for their own profit, through corruption (Akhigbe, 2015; Andersen, Johannesen, & Rijkers, 2020). This further confirms studies that have demonstrated the significance of public awareness as an anticorruption tool, where more people are informed about corruption and mobilize attention to the problem (Yulianita, Nurrahmawati, & Maryani, 2020).

Respondent K35 additionally reported:

Kuna ile general information that everyone knows. *Hiyo* we don't interfere. *Mtu anaenda kwa county ama* subcounty offices. But *kama hii* where we have clamped a vehicle *na mtu hajui* what to do, we don't inform. *Wacha hiyo* ignorance *tuitumie vizuri*...

(There is general information that everyone knows. That, we do not interfere. Someone

goes to the county or subcounty offices. But if it is like this one here, where we have clamped a vehicle and someone does not know what to do, we do not inform him. Let us exploit his ignorance and milk the maximum bribes from him) (Mwangi, 2022).

Thus, the public officials take advantage of the public's ignorance of their internal processes due to lack of public awareness by extorting bribes from them. Respondent N8 further confirmed this during the interview, as he could not distinguish between the services offered by the county or national government. This also pointed to lapses in intergovernmental coordination where the two levels of government did not jointly carry out public awareness to inform the public of their roles. This left loopholes for corruption to take root.

Respondent K23 put this in these words:

Ati (surprised) public awareness? – Let's not even go there... do you think a budget about awareness on financial matters would be easily passed? Especially exposure of this corruption to the public? It is unheard of...can you trust the same people to let the public be aware about matters finance and corruption? The public will only hear there were audit queries from the media, and that is if the story manages to get there... (Mwangi, 2022)

The data shows that some of the members of the public are aware of the corruption behavior of public officials who hoard financial information. This captures a dilemma for public policy scholars who recommend public awareness as a governance model which is supposed to be implemented by the same corrupt officials, who are not interested in exposing their corrupt activities in the first place (Rajasekhar, Babu, & Manjula, 2018). Thus, one can argue that the lack of public awareness in the counties is very deliberate, in that an ignorant public will not ask too many uncomfortable questions. Respondent N51 explained further:

...county officials do not want to educate the masses about their corruption in the delivery

of services and goods. They do this purposely to keep the masses in the dark about what goes on in their departments. This way, if the masses are not knowledgeable of the activities that happen in the departments, they will not be able to notice the corrupt dealings of these officials. Thus, we continue to receive poor or no services... (Mwangi, 2022)

The data raises important questions on how public policy practitioners can ensure civic education is conducted in a meaningful way in the counties. On one hand you have unwilling officials and on the other a public that needs the critical information in the hands of the officials. The problem is compounded by data from respondent K8 who reported that county officials were asking for bribes before admitting members of the public into civic education forums. Respondent N15 explained that many were left out as they could not afford such unofficial charges. He also confirmed that some of those forums were carried out in secret, to avoid too many people getting to know about it. According to institutional theory, such negative institutional practices, if allowed to thrive, tend to spread to other government institutions as governments had a habit of copying each other through mimetic isomorphism (Berthod, 2018)

Further, the public officers equally controlled the list of those who could attend as reported by respondent K8, who also added that there were 'professional attendees' who were paid to attend and ensure the policies favored by their paymasters carried the day. He explained that attendance lists of fictitious persons would sometimes be signed and the list utilized to siphon public monies. This data confirms studies that demonstrate how bribery reinforces embezzlement and vice versa, leaving no trace for the auditor to follow (Jeppesen, 2019; Arce & Hendricks, 2019; Baccouche, 2016; Englebert & Mungongo, 2016; Gustafsson & Scurrah, 2019; Montero, 2018).

Respondent N45 explained that often times the distance to the venues of the civic education forums

was a hindrance as they had to pay transport to get to venues and many times the monies to refund their transport was not forthcoming from the county officials. Respondent K25 also decried the practices in both counties in the following words:

... meetings and workshops are held on paper, in that there is documentation that a certain forum in a certain village took place but in real sense no such thing happened. The money set aside for the activity was divided among officials responsible for the activity (Mwangi, 2022).

Thus, ghost meetings are held and money shared among public officials. This was further confirmed by respondent K34 who said that counties often budgeted for public awareness forums that did not take place, each financial year. In his own words:

...where the monies end up, is a mystery. Only the top chain of command can answer.

The assembly which should act as a watchdog and ensure these forums happen, do not take any action, leading one to question if they are in cahoots with the executive or ignorant of their constitutional mandate (Mwangi, 2022).

The data shows a major failure by the oversight body of the county assembly in ensuring accountability for monies budgeted for public awareness. This position contradicts studies that show devolution increases oversight through local assemblies and greater grassroots participation, thus reducing corruption (Diaz-Serrano & Rodriguez-Pose, 2015; Adamtey, Obeng, & Sarpong, 2020). It is assumed that such oversight would reduce corruption but the role of public awareness has been captured in literature from Indonesia which shows that corruption (and unethical behavior) was greatly influenced by lack of public sensitizations (Ashari, Nanere, & Trebilcock, 2018). Other studies have reported that countries with high corruption levels benefit from public awareness when government audit reports are disseminated in civic education forums, thus galvanizing public support (Ashari, Nanere, & Trebilcock, 2018).

Respondent N67 gave examples of how public officials invited their friends for a photoshoot at their offices and touted that as civic education, ignoring the public and especially those living in the slums such as Mathare and Kibra. He further explained:

...corruption has infiltrated the way the county conducts civic education forums...this is one of the major challenges we're facing in this county because public participation is not conducted as required. You know civic education must be conducted in word and spirit and not just as a formality. You find that someone invites a few friends and takes them to city hall for a photo session and says that is civic education. Civic education must involve the whole county from places such as Kibra, Mathare to Embakasi and all the wards and villages. When the finance bill is still in the assembly, the public must be taken through the vote heads and shown that in infrastructure, we have allocated this amount, in education, roads, health, we have allocated this amount. Information should be disseminated on how much has been budgeted for each vote head as that's the only way the public will be able to ensure accountability. But when people do not have this information, the officials take advantage to steal public funds (Mwangi, 2022).

The data confirms some of the members of the public are aware of their right to information and what civic education entails. They are also aware of the corruption taking place. In light of the multiple streams-framework, the problem stream is likely to crystallize when a critical mass of people reaches this level of awareness.

Respondent N5 reported incidents of public awareness being departmentalized, with departments setting out their own civic education forums without involving other departments, further entrenching corruption. Respondent N54 captured this situation in these words:

... corruption is deeply embedded in public service delivery and that is why the education of the masses is ignored. Simply put, there is no education where corruption is involved. Corrupt officials will squander the money meant for civic education to the detriment of the public... (Mwangi, 2022).

The data shows that the lack of public awareness kept the public ignorant and this enabled corruption to infiltrate public service delivery processes. This data contradicts studies that have showed that devolution decreases corruption through improved oversight from the public (Diaz-Serrano & Rodriguez-Pose, 2015; Adamtey, Obeng, & Sarpong, 2020). However, other studies have showed the relevance of public awareness in decreasing corruption, with studies from Indonesia showing that when anticorruption laws were disseminated to the public, there was improved compliance and reduced corruption (Dewantara, et al., 2021). A similar situation was reported in Papua New Guinea where public awareness reduced corruption and improved public services (Ezebilo, Odhuno, & Kavan, 2019). In Cameroon, the lack of public awareness led to underperforming anticorruption institutions, making the country one of the most corrupt in the world (Bechem, 2018).

Respondent K11 narrated that the public awareness budget was repurposed for public relations activities, showing the lack of priority for civic education in the counties. Further respondent K7 decried the practice where counties held private forums masquerading them as civic education forums. He gave examples of health camps funded by private sector where public awareness was utilized to exploit them as they had to pay for the services. Such situations confirm the critical role that public awareness plays in holding devolved governments to account (Novi, Piacenza, Robone, & Turati, 2019). Thus, respondents K6, N20 and K47 were of the view that corruption becomes less when public awareness increases. Respondent N17 was also of a similar view, as he put it this way:

... public awareness in terms of forums where the public is notified of projects and use of public funds, has slightly helped to reduce corruption. Where the public is aware of projects, those who are corrupt know the public is watching and so will think twice before they steal...But the county officials ensure the awareness forums are held in hotels where the common *mwananchi* (public) cannot access. The corruption in public awareness happens in those hotels. First, there is no assurance to the public that they are getting the right information. Second, the teams deployed to teach there are often unqualified and give scant information or hedgy answers and skirt issues. Third, the people giving information are a bit biased because they are the same people who commit corruption thus, they leave out sensitive information that can be utilized to nab them... (Mwangi, 2022)

The data shows how public officials ensure that no meaningful civic education takes place during the public awareness forums by ensuring the venues are not convenient for members of the public and through disinformation or skirting issues. Such forums clearly need to be well structured but corruption has crept into the processes to ensure this does not happen.

As respondent K16 explained, in her own words:

...take various issues like, cars getting clamped without their knowledge because county level procedures have not been explained to the public, the officials use it to extort cash from the public through unprocedural clamping. When there's an increase in parking fees and there is lack of civic education to know if these have been increased, you end up paying more, *kumbe* (so) it's the corruption culture you are feeding. There is delay in services when you refuse to bribe and you're taken round in circles on the same issue due to corruption within the bureaucracy and this is due to lack

of public awareness of what is happening (Mwangi, 2022).

The data confirms the public officials exploit the ignorance of the public and hide information from them, so they can take advantage of the situation to extort bribes. The situation confirms studies that show that information asymmetry between public officials and the public widens when there is no public awareness (Mulyaman, Ismail, & Raya, 2019).

The data shows that with little civic education, the residents of Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties have little information from their governments and hence have no meaningful way of engaging with their governments on the democratic governance of their own counties. Thus, the citizenry is uninformed and have no knowledge of the affairs of their devolved governments. The lack of meaningful public awareness means corruption has taken root and raises important questions on how the citizens of these counties can stay informed of their rights and obligations as citizens with civic duties. The data further confirms the role played by public awareness in safeguarding public budgets, as failure to carry out public awareness is likely to lead to the tragedy of the commons in both counties, as massive corruption will end up depleting the common resources.

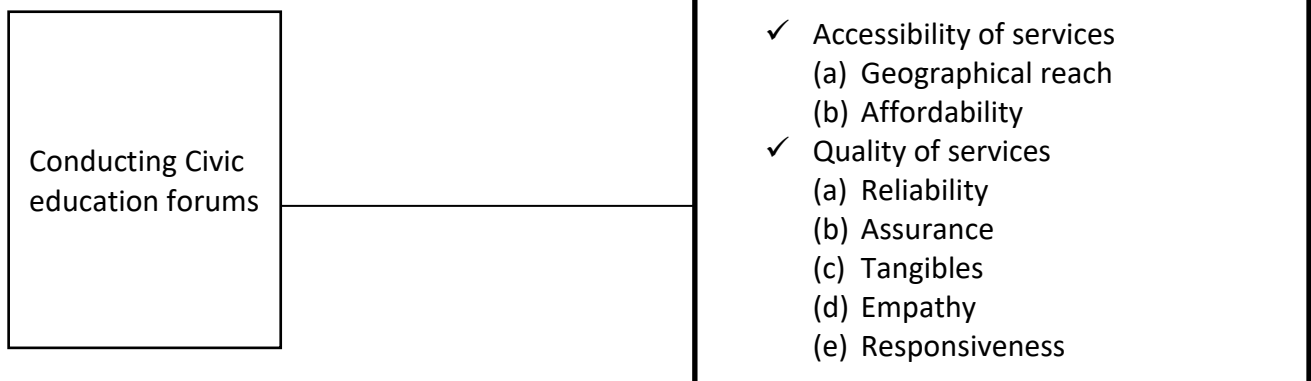
The data agrees with studies that call for more public awareness to reduce corruption and improve public service delivery in devolved systems of government (Novi, Piacenza, Robone, & Turati, 2019; Abasili & Akinboye, 2019). It also agrees with studies done in the health sector where studies showed that public awareness was an effective tool for fighting corruption (Mackey, 2019). Studies done in Taiwan also confirmed this view, with findings showing that public awareness assisted their citizens to recognize the negative effects of corruption and therefore make decisions to work together to eradicate it (Huang, Hsiao, & Shin-Lin, 2021). Other studies have equally demonstrated that when policy makers tackle the supply side of corruption, which is mainly fueled by the private sector, through public awareness, the grand corruption of high level officials and politicians is laid bare for the public to see and this creates public pressure to stop the corruption, thus acting as an anticorruption strategy (Mahmud, Mohamed, & Arshad, 2022).

PROPOSED MODEL

The authors proposed a conceptual framework that links corruption in public awareness, which is the independent variable and public service delivery, which is the dependent variable and demonstrates the relationship between these variables in the study, as shown in Fig 1 below:

Corruption in Public Awareness

Public Service Delivery



Independent Variable

Dependent Variable

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

CONCLUSION

The study found that corruption in public awareness is affecting the quality and accessibility of public services in Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties. Members of the public were experiencing inaccessible services as they had to travel long distances to reach public awareness venues. They were also finding the public awareness forums inaccessible due to affordability issues that were caused by the rampant corruption within public awareness. Thus, corruption made accessing public awareness forums expensive and out of their reach. This also affected the quality of public services they received as they did not meet the SERVQUAL model of reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors recommended that both counties conduct meaningful civic education forums in order to root out corruption by ensuring adequate resources are allocated for civic education and ensuring that venues for civic education forums are accessible to members of the public. Agendas for such forums should be widely publicized and information shared during the forums should address the needs of the citizenry. This will empower the citizens to participate fully in governance.

Further, the authors recommended that both counties design strategies for making regular policy pronouncements on eradicating corruption in public awareness so as to avoid lapses. Thus, public awareness forums should be avenues of

championing anticorruption messages so as to ensure the public is well informed on this important topic.

Significance

This study is significant, for providing empirical data that contributes to existing scholarship on corruption in public awareness and public service delivery in devolved systems of government. A review of the available literature reveals scanty data on corruption in public awareness and hardly any study in Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties. The study's contribution is significant because there is currently no theory of corruption and studies on devolved systems of government are still at a nascent stage. The data provided makes a substantive contribution to the existing literature on corruption in public awareness and forms the basis for policy recommendations which the authors argue have the potential to eradicate corruption in public awareness within both counties.

Further Research

The authors recommended that more studies be undertaken in this area so as to better understand the impact of corruption in public awareness on public service delivery in devolved systems of government especially in Africa and developing countries where public awareness is low. Further, the authors call on scholars to consider utilizing the proposed conceptual model presented in this paper, so as to validate the model and move scholarship forward in this area.

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