

MORAL DIMENSION OF LEADERSHIP ETHICS AND PERFORMANCE OF DEVOLVED GOVERNMENTS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The objective of the study was to establish how moral ethical leadership influence performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

Statement of the problem: Devolution is notably intended to improve service delivery to the people at the grassroots. The benefits of devolution include improving roads, improving medicine in healthcare facilities, improving lighting in the streets, among others. However, there has been a slow pace of implementing the budget, poor allocation of funds, and high refunds to the National Government. Similarly, the issue of pending bills continues to be a major economic policy challenge facing many county governments in Kenya.

Methodology: The target population was 329 county government officials. The study unit of observation focused on the governors, speakers of the county assemblies' representatives from the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) based at the counties, controller of budget, public forum, chair of the county board, and Auditor General based in the different selected counties in Kenya. The sample size was 180, determined by Slovin's sample size determination formula. The study adopted descriptive statistics by using means and percentages.

Findings: The study established that moral dimensions of leadership ethics is a key driver of the performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

Conclusion: The study concludes that there is a significant influence of the moral dimension of leadership ethics on the performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

Recommendations: The study recommends that county governments in Kenya should prioritize the recruitment, training, and development of leaders with strong moral principles and ethical conduct as central components of their governance frameworks. It is imperative for policy formulations and governance practices to embed ethical considerations deeply. Leadership development programs should focus on instilling values of integrity, accountability, and transparency, aiming to build a cadre of ethical leaders who can navigate the complexities of governance with moral clarity.

Keywords: *Moral dimension, ethical leadership, performance, devolved governments, Kenya.*

INTRODUCTION

The importance of leadership ethics in organizational performance cannot be overstated. As highlighted in the document, ethical leadership practices have a profound impact on the triple bottom line of profits, people, and the planet (Breene & Nunes, 2016; Nel & Beudeker, 2019). By prioritizing ethical conduct, leaders not only ensure financial sustainability for shareholders but also promote stakeholder satisfaction and environmental sustainability. Conversely, unethical practices can have severe consequences, such as the wastage of public funds, reduced quality of essential services, deprivation of citizens' basic needs and rights, economic repercussions, erosion of public trust, and lower investments (Anello, 2016; Nnablife, 2020; World Bank, 2000; Lawton, Rayner & Lasthuizen, 2013; Engdaw, 2022; Setiawan, 2022). These negative impacts underscore the critical role of ethical leadership in fostering organizational effectiveness and preserving societal well-being.

The devolved governments have increasingly recognized the importance of leadership ethics in enhancing public service delivery. These decentralized structures have implemented various policy instruments, including leadership ethics, to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of services (Texter, 2021; Chilenga-Butao, 2020; Gallagher, 2021). The rationale behind this approach is to empower local authorities with decision-making autonomy and align services with the specific needs and expectations of their constituents (Shattock, 2020; Manyala, Guyo, & Moronge, 2020; Shaw & Tewdwr-Jones, 2017). By devolving responsibilities and resources, devolved governments can potentially enhance their competitive advantage and responsiveness to citizens' demands.

However, the case of Kenya highlights the challenges associated with unethical practices in the public sector. Despite various reforms and promises from successive regimes, the level of ethics among public officials has consistently declined since independence (Amuhaya, Namusonge and Nthigah, 2018; Wainaina, 2017). This deterioration has been attributed to the prevalence of patron-client relations tendencies, which have contributed to the aggravation of unethical practices over time (Odhiambo-Mbai, 2018; Boex & Smoke, 2020; Oduol, 2019). Unethical conduct in the public service undermines the very essence of governance, as it erodes social capital and the machinery that enables effective service delivery. Addressing this issue has become a moral imperative, with scholars emphasizing the urgent need for organizations

to cultivate a culture of ethics in governance as a precondition for sustainable development (Ogola, Sikalieh, and Linge, 2019).

In response to these challenges, the study examined the influence of the moral dimension of ethical leadership on the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. Moral leadership encompasses a set of principles and behaviors that prioritize ethical conduct, fairness, and integrity in decision-making and interactions within organizations (Metwally et al., 2019). Moral leaders are guided by a strong sense of right and wrong, valuing traits such as honesty, empathy, and social responsibility. They foster environments characterized by trust, transparency, and accountability, serving as role models and inspiring others to uphold high standards of ethical behavior (Metwally et al., 2019).

The significance of moral leadership extends beyond mere compliance with rules and regulations; it has a direct impact on positive organizational outcomes, employee engagement, and commitment (Khuong & Dung, 2015; Agbim, 2018; Metwally et al., 2019). Employees are more likely to be engaged and satisfied when they perceive their leaders as exhibiting moral integrity and ethical conduct. Additionally, moral leadership contributes to the development of a strong organizational culture grounded in shared ethical values, ultimately enhancing organizational effectiveness and performance (Metwally et al., 2019; Ouma, 2017). Moral principles play a pivotal role in shaping the governance of devolved governments. By embodying these principles in their actions and decisions, leaders establish norms and expectations that guide employee behavior and interactions, fostering a sense of belonging and alignment with the organization's mission and values. Consequently, moral leadership emerges as a critical factor in driving positive change and improving governance outcomes within these decentralized structures.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

County governments in Kenya are crucial for national development by providing public services, yet they face significant challenges such as inefficiency, corruption, and lack of professionalism, leading to the wastage of substantial public resources (Boex & Smoke, 2020; Enngdaw, 2022). The devolved units of county governments in Kenya still find it hard to deliver services effectively and efficiently to citizen satisfaction (Abass, Munga & Were, 2017; Wagana, 2017; Opiyo, 2017, Kosgey, Ongera & Thuo, 2020). For instance, according to Auditor General Report (2019) over Kshs.16 billion cannot be accounted for by the county

governments and the same report mentions lack of effective administrative governance structures as a catalyst that has triggered the vice. This has slowly led to the deterioration of the counties' service delivery affecting even the country's GDP growth index from 7% in 2018 to 5.3% in 2019 (Kihara, 2020). Further, a report by Kenya Institute for Public Research and Analysis (KIPPRA) highlights key sectors like health, water and sanitation, education among others which have faced challenges in service delivery (Lubale, 2018) associated with issues of accountability and integrity in county governments of Kenya.

A Transparency International Survey in 2020 found that 41% of Kenyans were dissatisfied with their county governments' service delivery, citing ineffective leadership and governance structures. Budget and development absorption rates in counties have shown a fluctuating trend over the years, with notable declines in efficiency. Furthermore, the Auditor General reports a significant increase in pending bills among the counties, highlighting financial mismanagement. The pervasive nature of corruption is underscored by the 2022 National Ethics and Corruption Survey, which reported that 65% of respondents perceive high levels of corruption within county administrations. These challenges underscore the critical need for effective moral ethical leadership to enhance transparency, accountability, and organizational effectiveness in devolved governance in Kenya, although the impact of such leadership has yet to be thoroughly examined in empirical research. This formed the motive of the study.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To find out how moral dimension of leadership ethics influences performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The study was anchored on ethical leadership theory. The ethical leadership theory, developed by Linda Trevino, Laura Hartman and Michael Brown, and further developed by Toma Gonzalez and Manuel Guillen which suggests that ethical leadership can create a balance between the well-being of subordinates/community and organizational profitability (Banks, Fischer, Gooty & Stock, 2021). It identifies four key dimensions of ethical leadership - character (honesty, kindness, equality) (Madanchian, Hussein, Noordin & Taherdoost, 2018; Beekun, 2019; Zaim, Demir & Budur, 2021; Mbandlwa, Dorasamy & Fagbadebo, 2020), technical (goal clarity, transparency) (Ying & Mansori, 2017; Obicci, 2015; Shakeel, Kruey & Van Thiel, 2020), empowerment behavior (power-sharing, encouraging skill advancement) (Zaim, Demir & Budur, 2021; Hawass, 2016; Irfan & Lodhi, 2019; Ahearne, Mathieu & Rapp,

2021), and moral (role modeling, unselfishness, social justice) (Kumar & Saha, 2017; Tekin & Ertürk, 2019; Obicci, 2015; Silva & Dias, 2016; Khuntia & Suar, 2018). The moral dimension focuses on the leader acting as an ethical role model, exhibiting virtues like trustworthiness, fairness, honesty and integrity. It emphasizes principles of distributive justice, respecting diversity, and accountability.

This theory was relevant to studying the moral dimension of leadership ethics and its influence on the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. The moral dimension constructs like social justice, respect for diversity, fairness and accountability directly align with ethical governance and service delivery in the devolved county structures. By applying this theory, the study can examine how county leaders who embody moral principles and act as ethical role models can foster an organizational culture of integrity, motivate employees, and drive improved performance outcomes. The theory provides a robust framework to explore the link between the moral dimension of county leadership ethics and the effectiveness of devolved governance.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual framework can be defined as a set of broad ideas and principles taken from relevant fields of inquiry and used to structure a subsequent presentation (Myers, 2013). Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework which will be used in this study and depicts the interrelationship between the study variables. The independent variable is moral dimension of ethical leadership and dependent variable is performance.

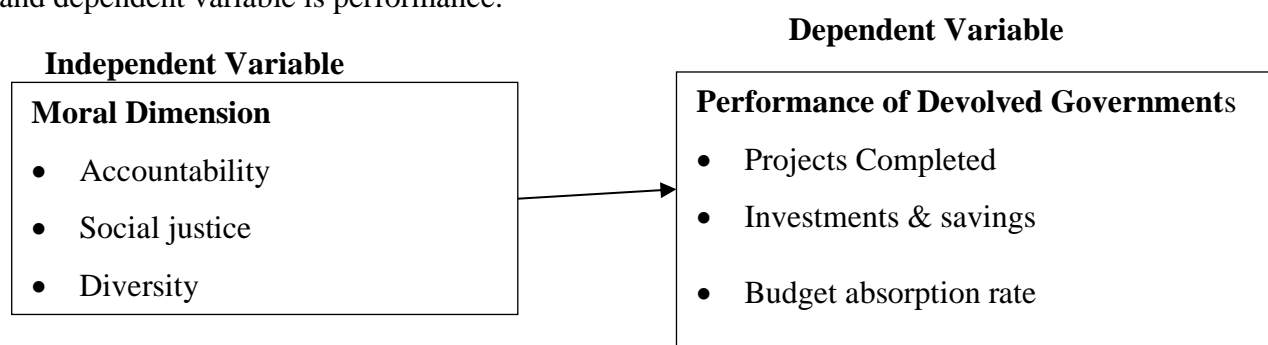


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Metwally et al. (2019) study sought to examine how moral ethical leadership shapes employees' readiness to change: The mediating role of an organizational culture of

effectiveness. The study investigated either the ethical leadership of middle–lower echelons influences on employees’ readiness to change positively (H1) and if this relationship is mediated through shaping an organizational culture of effectiveness (H2). Using data from 270 direct reports of middle–lower managers in public foreign trade Egyptian companies, the findings reveal that ethical leadership enhances employees’ readiness to change and that this impact is partially mediated by an organizational culture of effectiveness. Thus, with these findings, new light is shed on the positive role of ethical leadership and the mechanisms it uses to enhance employees’ readiness to change.

Likewise, Khuong and Dung (2015) showed that moral dimension of ethical leadership had a direct effect on employee engagement. In addition, these factors and organizational justice indirectly affected employee engagement through an employee trust. Consequently, the fair, ethic and reward are important roles for the organization. These factors can enhance the level of trust and keep the employees engaging in their jobs. Another study was conducted by Tekin and Ertürk (2019) to examine the effect of moral dimension of ethical leadership on employee commitment of manual laborers in manufacturing companies in Turkey. In total, 150 questionnaires were distributed to randomly selected employees of those 3 companies, and 107 questionnaires representing a 71% return rate were analyzed using SPSS 19.0. Samples were drawn from different private manufacturing organizations in Istanbul and Kocaeli in Turkey. Results of hierarchical regression analysis indicated that moral dimension of ethical leadership to positive impact on employee commitment.

Karim and Nadeem (2019) study focused on understanding the unique impact of moral dimensions of ethical leadership on employee attitudes. This study extends earlier findings on ethical leadership by testing the relationship of the seven dimensions of ethical leadership with job satisfaction, organization commitment, job embeddedness, and cynicism. It uses time-lagged data from 585 employees in Pakistan. Using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling, the study supports the concept of multidimensional ethical leadership in the Eastern setting and indicates that the dimensions of people orientation, fairness, power sharing, ethical guidance, and role clarification are associated with the majority of outcomes, as suggested by social exchange theory. However, the concern for sustainability and integrity dimensions had a limited effect.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a positivist, quantitative approach using descriptive and correlational research design to examine the influence of ethical leadership dimensions on the performance of devolved county governments in Kenya. The target population consisted of 329 county officials across 47 counties. A sample of 180 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling from 25 counties ranked lowest on performance and ethical issues based on the 2022 National Ethics and Corruption Survey report and the 2021/22 audit report revealing financial irregularities. Primary data was collected through self-administered questionnaires to governors, speakers, EACC representatives and other officials, while secondary data came from government reports. The study employed correlation and regression analyses to establish the relationships between the independent variables of character, technical skills, empowerment behavior, and moral dimensions of ethical leadership, and the dependent variable of county government performance.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Response Rate

The study distributed 180 questionnaires to 25 county governments in Kenya. Out of the 180 questionnaires, 160 were returned. However, of the 160 returned, a total of 113 were reasonably and adequately completed representing approximately 70.65% response rate (Table 1). This response rate falls within the confines of a large sample ($n \geq 30$). Additionally, the response rate was deemed satisfactory as suggested by Portney (2020) who recommends 60% as a rule of the thumb for minimum responses. Further, regarding the works of Jaworski and Kohli, (1993) and Prasad *et al.* (2021), this response rate is considered satisfactory and is comparable to research on similar topics in devolution. Table 1 shows the study response rate.

Table 1: Response Rate

Responses	No.	Percentages
Administered questionnaires	180	100%
Returned	160	88.89%
Unusable questionnaires	47	29.35%
Usable questionnaires	113	70.65%

Descriptive Statistics

Respondents were requested to indicate their level of agreement with various statements on aspects of moral dimension. It was posited as a one-dimensional construct measured by the six

items. There is high social justice that everyone deserves equality in the county (MD1); The county leadership portrays respect for the diversity of the employees (MD2); The county leadership observes the codes of conduct based on chapter six of the constitution (MD3); The county leadership adheres to principles of distributive justice by treating all employees equally irrespective of ethnicity (MD4); The county leadership consistently endeavors to make the wisest decision whether the activity is perceptible (MD5); The county leadership is accountable for the performance of the county (MD6). This objective was measured using opinion statements on the Likert scale of 1 to 5. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with code of conduct opinion statements that empowerment behaviour dimension is executed in the county governments. This was on a Likert scale of (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree). The result of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

According to the findings, the respondents agreed that there was high social justice that everyone deserves equality in the county ($M=4.254$, $SD=0.376$). The respondents also agreed that county leadership portrayed respect for the diversity of the employees ($M=3.876$, $SD=0.419$). The respondents agreed that the county leadership observed the codes of conduct based on chapter six of the constitution ($M=4.216$, $SD=0.018$). The respondents also agreed that the leadership consistently endeavored to enhance accountability in the county ($M=3.989$, $SD=0.218$). Also, the respondents agreed that the civil servants on behalf of their agencies provided effective mechanisms ($M=3.991$, $SD=0.183$). The respondents agreed that the county leadership ensured that there was diversity of employees from different backgrounds ($M=4.216$, $SD=0.018$). The finding revealed that the respondents took a positive position (above 3.5). All items had a mean of above 3.0. This shows that the general position was that the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the items. The scores of responses for this section agreed at 55% indicating that most respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that moral dimension of ethical leadership was factor of performance of devolved governments in Kenya. Overall, the findings on green disposal had an aggregate mean of 4.075, standard deviation of 0.274, skewness of 0.75 and kurtosis of 0.95. The implication is that the targeted devolved governments are yet to capitalize on moral dimension of ethical leadership since not much has been done with respect to performance in terms of projects completed, budget absorption rate, investments and savings.

The study results are in tandem with the study findings by Davidson and Hughes (2020) that moral leadership reinforces the concept that moral reasoning may be developed through specific coursework or guided experiences, and that if graduates of employees are to be prepared to address the moral and ethical dilemmas that leadership will bring, then efforts to develop moral reasoning should be integrated into such organizations to improve their performance. The study findings also are in agreement with the study findings by Metwally et al.(2019) that moral dimension of ethical leadership exemplifies strong moral values, selflessness and integrity. Decision-making in moral leadership is guided by an inherent ethical system and moral purpose. Self-disciplined, compassionate and responsible, moral leaders prefer to lead and inspire others by setting an example and establishing moral goals.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for the Construct Moral Dimension

	Statement n = 113	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev
MD1	There is high social justice that everyone deserves equality in the county.	3.0	2.1	8.7	15.9	70.3	4.254	.376
MD2	The county leadership portrays respect for the diversity of the employees.	8.0	5.1	18.3	12.3	56.3	3.876	.419
MD3	The county leadership observes the codes of conduct based on chapter six of the constitution.	2.4	1.8	23.4	11.8	62.8	4.216	.428
MD4	The county leadership adheres to principles of distributive justice by treating all employees equally irrespective of tribe.	4.0	6.0	14.2	15.4	60.4	3.989	.218
MD5	The leadership consistently endeavours to enhance accountability in the county	5.9	12.0	5.7	23.9	58.9	3.991	.183
MD6	The county leadership ensures that there is diversity of employees from different backgrounds	0.0	2.0	23.4	11.8	62.8	4.216	.018
Average							4.213	.243

The respondents were requested to give their opinions on the influence of moral dimension of ethical leadership on performance of devolved governments in Kenya. The moral dimension of ethical leadership significantly influences the performance of devolved governments in

Kenya. Leaders who embody a strong moral dimension contribute to a positive ethical climate, which, in turn, affects various aspects of governance and organizational effectiveness. The moral dimension of ethical leadership is a critical factor in shaping the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. Leaders who prioritize moral integrity contribute to a positive ethical climate, fostering trust, accountability, and transparency.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis is used to show the association between the independent and dependent variables. The association can be positive, negative, or no association. The Correlation results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 33: Correlation Analysis

		Performance	Moral Dimension of Leadership ethics
Performance	Pearson Correlation	1.000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
Moral Dimension of Leadership ethics	Pearson Correlation	.617**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	

The correlation results depicted in Table 3 establish there is a positive and significant association between moral dimension of Leadership ethics and performance ($r=.617$, $p=000$). The study concurs with. The study results concur with the results of Metwally et al. (2019) who reveal that ethical leadership enhances employees' readiness to change and that this impact is partially mediated by an organizational culture of effectiveness. Likewise, Khuong and Dung (2015) showed that moral dimension of ethical leadership had a direct effect on employee engagement. Another study was conducted by Tekin and Ertürk (2019) indicated that moral dimension of ethical leadership to positive impact on employee commitment. Karim and Nadeem (2019) indicate that the dimensions of people orientation, fairness, power sharing, ethical guidance, and role clarification are associated with the majority of outcomes, as suggested by social exchange theory.

4.4 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is a set of statistical methods used to estimate relationships between variables. The regression analysis includes the presentation of model fitness, variance analysis (ANOVA) and regression coefficients. The summary the model fitness results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Model Fitness of Moral Dimension of Leadership ethics and Performance

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.617	0.381	0.375	0.243974

a Predictor: Moral dimension of leadership ethics

The results presented in Table 4 establish that moral dimension of Leadership ethics is satisfactory in influencing performance of devolved governments in Kenya. The coefficient of determination, also known as the R square, was 0.381 (38.1%). This implied that moral dimension of Leadership ethics can explain 38.1% of the variations in performance of devolved governments in Kenya. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was determined, and the study results are presented in Table 5

Table 54: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of Moral Dimension of Leadership ethics and Performance

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.065	1	4.065	68.297	.000b
	Residual	6.607	111	0.06		
	Total	10.672	112			

a Dependent Variable: Performance

b Predictors: (Constant), Moral Dimension of Leadership ethics

Based on the study results presented in Table 5, the p-value was found to be 0 .000, which is less than 0.05; hence, moral dimension of Leadership ethics are significant in explaining the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. Further, the result of regressions of the coefficients are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Regression coefficients of Moral Dimension of Leadership ethics and Performance

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.897	0.276		6.865	0.000
	Moral Dimension of Leadership ethics	0.594	0.072	0.617	8.264	0.000

a Dependent Variable: Performance

The model is; $Y = 1.897 + 0.594X$; Where: - Y= Performance; X= Moral Dimension of Leadership ethics

The study found that Table 6 demonstrates a positive and significant relationship between the moral dimension of Leadership ethics and the performance of devolved governments in Kenya, with a substantial beta coefficient (β) of 0.594 and a highly significant p-value of 0.000. The rejection of the null hypothesis, given the p-value is less than 0.05, underscores that the moral dimension of Leadership ethics wields a substantial and influential impact on the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. This finding emphasizes the critical role of ethical principles and moral conduct in leadership, indicating that leaders who exhibit strong moral dimensions are more likely to contribute positively to the effectiveness and efficiency of governmental operations in the devolved context. The study rejected the null hypothesis based on the regression results. Thus, moral dimension of Leadership ethics has a significant influence on performance of devolved governments in Kenya.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant influence of the moral dimension of leadership ethics on the performance of devolved governments in Kenya. The study have demonstrated that leaders' adherence to moral principles and ethical conduct significantly impacts organizational outcomes, fostering trust, accountability, and overall governance effectiveness. These findings underscore the importance of prioritizing ethical leadership practices and integrating moral considerations into decision-making processes within devolved governance structures. By emphasizing the moral dimension of leadership ethics, policymakers and organizational leaders can cultivate a culture of integrity and transparency, ultimately enhancing public trust and organizational performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that county governments in Kenya should prioritize the recruitment, training, and development of leaders with strong moral principles and ethical conduct as central components of their governance frameworks. Given the significant impact of the moral dimension of leadership ethics on the performance of devolved governments, as evidenced by the positive and substantial relationship between moral leadership and organizational outcomes, it is imperative for policy formulations and governance practices to embed ethical considerations deeply. Leadership development programs should focus on instilling values of integrity, accountability, and transparency, aiming to build a cadre of ethical leaders who can navigate the complexities of governance with moral clarity. Furthermore, the study suggests the establishment of robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating leaders' ethical

behaviors, ensuring that ethical leadership is not just encouraged but systematically integrated into the operational fabric of county governments, thereby enhancing service delivery, infrastructural development, and overall public trust in devolved units.

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