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STRATEGIC DIRECTION AND PERFORMANCE OF DEVOLVED COUNTIES IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT
The introduction of County Governments in Kenya in 2013 brought high expectations for improved strategy implementation and enhanced performance. However, since their inception, many counties underperformed, raising concerns among citizens and stakeholders. This study examined the influence of strategic direction on performance of Kenya's devolved counties. The study was grounded on Strategic Leadership Theory and adopted a positivist philosophy and a correlation descriptive survey approach. Research was conducted in five counties, Kajiado, Nairobi, Machakos, Kiambu, and Murang'a, with a sample size of 399 participants. Data collection was through surveys and interviews. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 27, employing descriptive statistics and inferential analysis. The study established that strategic direction had strong and positive correlation with performance (r = .760), indicating that a clear, well-communicated vision and goals are critical for driving development outcomes. The regression analysis reveals a strong and statistically significant relationship between strategic direction and the performance of devolved counties in Kenya. The study concluded that strategic direction is the most influential factor in driving the performance of devolved counties in Kenya. The study recommended that county managers should prioritize clear strategic direction by setting well-defined visions, goals, and adaptive plans tailored to local contexts.
KEYWORDS: *Strategic Direction, Performance, Devolved counties, Devolution*

INTRODUCTION
In today's fast-paced global environment, governments and organizations face mounting pressure to adapt and remain competitive. Todorova (2024) emphasizes that survival hinges on the ability to respond to dynamic conditions, prompting many nations to adopt devolution and decentralization strategies as performance-enhancing mechanisms (Adinew, 2024). Paais and Pattiruhu (2020) argue that the success of these strategies depends on effective implementation, which is anchored in strategic direction. Countries like the United States have demonstrated how devolved governance can drive national strength and stability (Todorova, 2024). In the United Kingdom, collaborative relationships between central and regional governments have improved service delivery and bolstered economic resilience (Hanafi, 2021).

Across Africa, similar efforts have been made, though challenges persist. Nigeria's federalist model provides a framework for decentralized service delivery, yet performance remains inconsistent due to structural inefficiencies (Ikeanyibe, 2018; Waribu, Kabare & Sakwa, 2018). South Africa's constitutional devolution promotes shared governance, but slow service provision continues to hinder citizen access to basic amenities (Steytler, 2019; Masuku, 2019). Rwanda and Uganda have embraced inclusive local governance, with Rwanda's model proving more effective in promoting participation and representation (Nhede, 2019).

In Kenya, the 2010 Constitution marked a transformative shift toward devolution, aiming to decentralize power and enhance service delivery (Koros & Ragui, 2020). However, performance challenges persist, especially in metropolitan counties like Nairobi, Kiambu, Machakos, Murang'a, and Kajiado. These counties, despite their strategic importance in budgetary allocation and population density, struggle with misappropriation of funds, stalled projects, and poor

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service delivery (Munyi, 2023). Rapid urbanization has further strained infrastructure, requiring strategic leadership to manage growth effectively (Abdi, Mbithi & Kithiji, 2021). Investigations into Nairobi's Sh18 billion revenue discrepancy underscore systemic governance failures (Moturi, 2024).

Strategic direction, defined by Grant (2024) as the process guiding an organization toward its long-term goals, is essential for performance of these counties. Leaders must articulate vision, mission, and objectives to foster alignment and excellence (Mohamed, Ngugi & Deya, 2024). Weak strategic direction has been cited as key contributor to poor performance in devolved entities (Okerio & Muturi, 2019; Nini & Kihara, 2023). This study focuses on Kenya's metropolitan counties to examine how strategic direction influences performance, given their critical role in national development and governance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the optimism surrounding the establishment of county governments in 2013, devolved units in Kenya have consistently underperformed, with widespread issues such as corruption, delayed services, and unpaid bills (Ntoiti & Makau, 2022). The Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) reported Sh 18 billion in undisclosed funds between 2016 and 2019 (Moturi, 2024), while the Controller of Budget highlighted poor development expenditure utilization and Sh 107 billion in pending bills by January 2024 (Mburu, 2024). These challenges point to systemic inefficiencies, many of which stem from weak strategic direction, such as misaligned procurement plans, poor leadership, and lack of goal clarity (Nini & Kihara, 2023).

Although previous studies have explored strategic direction implementation in various counties and sectors, they often focus on isolated factors like leadership styles or resource allocation. Few have directly examined how strategic direction, encompassing vision alignment, goal-setting, and communication, influences performance in metropolitan counties. This study addressed that gap by investigating how strategic direction influences the effectiveness of devolved counties, particularly in high-pressure urban contexts where performance expectations are elevated and governance challenges are more pronounced.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of the study was to determine the influence of strategic direction on performance of devolved counties in Kenya.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

H0: There is no statistically significant influence of strategic direction on performance of devolved counties in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the theoretical review, empirical review and conceptual framework that underpins the study.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of the study on the influence of strategic direction on performance of devolved counties was the Strategic Leadership Theory. The theory is highlighted in this section.

Strategic Leadership Theory

Strategic Leadership Theory, introduced by House and Baetz in 1979 (Hosmer, 1982), posits that strategically minded leaders shape an organization's survival and success by crafting compelling visions, setting strategic direction, and influencing performance outcomes. The theory emphasizes that leaders must define purpose, inspire commitment, and align organizational activities with long-term goals (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). Its strength lies in its holistic view of leadership as both visionary and operational, capable of navigating complexity and driving strategic direction. However, its weakness is its reliance on individual leader capacity, which may falter under environmental volatility or poor communication (Samimi et al., 2022).

In the context of devolved counties in Kenya, the theory anchors the relationship between leadership and performance by explaining how county leaders influence strategic direction through vision alignment, goal-setting, and employee engagement. Finkelstein (2009) underscores that strategic leadership directly impacts organizational success, making

it essential for counties to cultivate leaders who can adapt, inspire, and execute effectively. The theory aligns with the study's variables by linking strategic direction communication and leadership behavior to performance outcomes.

Jaleha and Machuki (2018) affirm that failure in leadership, especially in motivating and aligning teams, leads to poor organizational results. Thus, Strategic Leadership Theory is relevant to this study as it provides a foundational lens to evaluate how leadership practices shape strategic execution and institutional effectiveness in Kenya's devolved governance framework.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

The empirical review section highlights past related studies to influence of strategic direction on performance of devolved counties in Kenya. The focus is on findings from both global and local contexts.

Influence of Strategic Direction on Performance of Devolved Counties in Kenya

Strategic direction encompasses the deliberate actions a business undertakes to achieve its long-term objectives, guided by a clear vision, purpose, and goals (Johanson et al., 2019). It is often embedded within the organization's mission and vision statements, serving as a compass for future activities and justifying strategic choices (Madu, 2013). Madu (2013) further emphasizes the need for a "mental image" of the organization's ideal state, which may range from concrete goals to abstract aspirations. Achieving strategic direction demands a focused organizational attitude and behavior (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989), including resource alignment, effective communication, employee motivation, and problem-solving. Johanson et al. (2019) argue that strategic intent should create internal tension that energizes and commits employees to the envisioned future. Planning is essential before execution, requiring stakeholder involvement and thorough information gathering. Leadership plays a pivotal role in communicating the benefits of the strategic path to all parties. This preparatory phase is vital for successful implementation and is closely tied to the strategy generation stage of strategic management. Ultimately, strategic direction offers the organization a coherent identity, a unified focus, and a roadmap for realizing its aspirations in alignment with its stated purpose and vision.

Numerous related empirical studies have been analyzed. Ng'iroo and Osoro (2024), for example, looked into the connection involving strategic direction and the leadership's performance in Kenya's West Pokot County. Their research was guided by theories related to top leadership and strategic decision-making. They targeted 77 senior county officials using a descriptive research strategy, and they employed a census technique to generate the complete sample. Data for the study were gathered through questionnaires. SPSS version 29 was used to examine the quantitative data. The findings of this study are expected to have a major influence on the corpus of expertise and next investigations in the subject of strategic management. The study came to the conclusion that the administration of West Pokot County is significantly shaped by its strategic orientation.

Mohamed, Ngugi, and Deya (2024) investigated the connection across Kenyan universities' performance and strategic direction. The theoretical foundation of the investigation was positivist methods, which measured the link between independent and dependent variables in an effort to evaluate the predictions scientifically. A descriptive research methodology was employed in the investigation. The study's target population comprised all 64 authorized universities in Kenya. To collect primary data, a traditional survey was employed. Based on the study's findings, Kenyan institutions must have strategic direction in order to set, encourage, and reward the accomplishment of both general and targeted goals. The results showed that key elements of strategic direction that influence the effectiveness of Kenyan institutions are the purpose, vision, and goal-setting statements.

Micheni and Awuor (2024) looked into how the Tharaka Nithi County Government's performance was affected by its strategic direction. Targeting 139 management-level personnel, the study used a descriptive research methodology and was founded on the Strategic Leadership theory. Stratified random selection was used to choose a sample of 124 responders. To gather information, structured questionnaires were employed. Regression analysis showed that strategy direction and county performance were positively correlated, and that modifications to strategic direction were associated with improvements in performance. The study concluded that the strategic direction has a positive and significant effect on the organizational performance of the county administration of Tharaka Nithi.

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Koros and Ragui (2020) investigated the performance of the Kenya National Highways Authority in regard to strategic direction in a study conducted in Kenya. The survey design used in the study was descriptive. Additionally, the researcher focused on eleven Kenya National Highways Authority offices. Primary data was gathered via structured questionnaires. The SPSS statistical tool was utilized to analyze the information employing both descriptive and inferential statistics. Regression modeling and the use of descriptive statistics were used to evaluate how strategic leadership approaches affected performance. The findings demonstrate that strategic direction significantly improves the Kenya National Highways Authority's organizational performance.

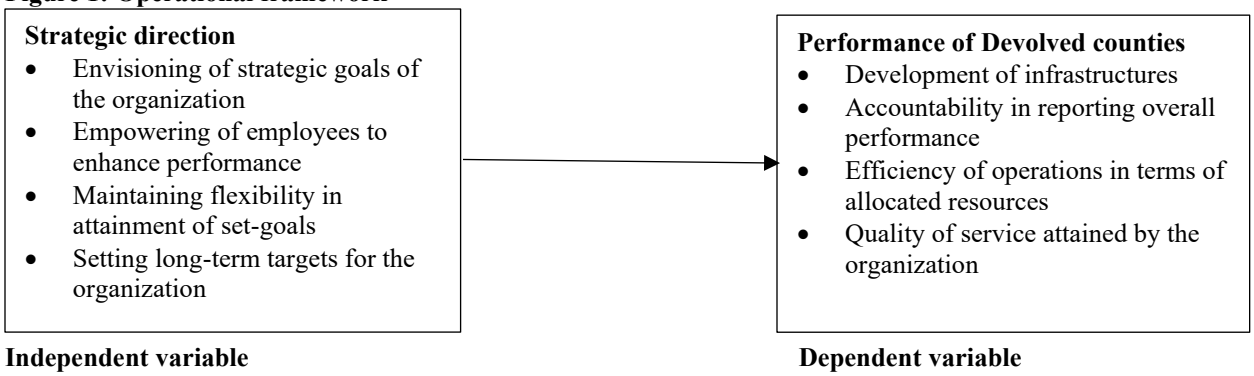
Phina (2020) examined how strategic management affected organizational performance in Nigeria, concentrating on a small number of manufacturing firms in South-East Nigeria. Combined classical theory and resource-based theory served as the foundation for the investigation. A sample size of 300 people from the manufacturing companies chosen using Taro Yamane's technique comprised the study's population, which included 1200 employees. The study used multiple regression analysis to look at the information that was gathered. It was discovered that the organizational performance of manufacturing companies in South East Nigeria was significantly impacted by all strategic tasks, comprising strategy direction, strategy goal, strategy design and implementation, and strategy evaluation.

Kihara (2016) examined how strategy implementation impacted the performance of manufacturing SMEs and the correlation regarding age and the size of the organization. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the performance of industrial SMEs in Kenya is influenced by leadership styles, organizational structure, personnel, technology, and strategic direction. The Dynamic Capabilities View of the organization, which maintains that prosperous companies develop unique talents that enable them to attain greater performance stages, serves as the basis for this study. Data was gathered through a mixed approach that combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and 115 businesses were selected from 593 registered small and medium-sized enterprises based on the logical positivist paradigm. Using SPSS, the collected information was evaluated and the outcomes were displayed using inferential statistics like regression and correlation as well as overall statistics like mean rankings, variances, and standard deviations. The findings offered statistical proof that the performance of manufacturing SMEs is positively and significantly impacted by the plan's implementation.

Muthaa and Muathe (2018) investigated how strategic direction affected a number of performance indicators, such as resource management, admission, effectiveness, and efficiency. Data for the study was gathered using questionnaires using a cross-sectional descriptive survey approach. The findings demonstrated that the performance of technical training institutions was significantly influenced by their strategic direction. Furthermore, the organizational orientation paradigm was improved by adding a moderating variable pertaining to government policy. The study suggested that these institutions' philosophies, targets, innovations, and collaborations should all be in line with their strategic goals in order to improve performance.

OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Operational framework



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a positivist philosophy and correlation descriptive survey design. Research was conducted in five counties, Kajiado, Nairobi, Machakos, Kiambu, and Murang'a, with a sample size of 399 participants. They were

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selected using stratified and simple random sampling techniques. The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula, ensuring statistical representativeness and precision.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size, N = population size, and e = acceptable sampling error

using the formula, $n = \frac{483}{1+483(0.05)^2}$ -a total of 399 respondents were selected

Data collection employed surveys and interviews, targeting County Executive Officers and other key officials. A pre-test was conducted in Nairobi County with eight participants, who were excluded from the main study. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, employing descriptive statistics and inferential analysis. Qualitative data from interviews were examined using content analysis to inform conclusions and recommendations.

To validate the multiple regression model, several assumptions were tested: normality, multicollinearity, autocorrelation, heteroscedasticity, panel unit root, and Hausman were performed as diagnostic procedures. The study findings were presented using tables and figures for enhanced clarity and interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The section presents the descriptive and inferential results of strategic direction and performance of devolved counties in Kenya.

Descriptive Results

The results on the influence of strategic direction on performance of devolved counties is provided. This was measured using the Likert scale of 1=Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3= Neutral 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree, and the results, expressed as percentages and mode.

Table 1 Descriptive results of strategic direction

Strategic Direction	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	SD
The organization has a clear vision for employees.	0	3	19	61	17	3.93	0.682
The vision is aligned with our goals and future projections.	0	3	13	53	30	4.09	0.769
The mission statement accurately reflects the future aims of the organization	1	12	27	41	19	3.65	0.961
The mission is well aligned with the activities within the organization.	1	7	13	54	25	3.96	0.852
We regularly revise our goals to stay in line with market changes	3	17	24	37	20	3.53	1.073
Our employees work hard to attain the goals set by the organization.	2	14	27	39	18	3.56	1.007
Performance targets are frequently monitored to ensure the achievement of organizational objectives.	8	22	17	41	12	3.27	1.172
Employees are frequently reminded of the objectives of the organization	3	10	14	50	24	3.83	0.994

The results from the assessment of strategic direction in devolved counties can be arranged from best to least based on agreement levels, mean scores, and standard deviations. At the top is "Vision Alignment with Goals," with 83% agreement, a high mean of 4.09, and a standard deviation of 0.769. This reflects strong support and moderate consistency, suggesting that strategic vision is effectively integrated with long-term planning. This finding is supported by Mohamed, Ngugi, and Deya (2024), who found that vision-goal alignment significantly enhances institutional performance in Kenyan universities, reinforcing the importance of coherent strategic direction in public sector planning and execution.

Next is "Clear Vision for Employees," with 78% agreement, a mean of 3.93, and a low standard deviation of 0.682, indicating strong consensus and clarity in strategic direction. Only 3% disagreed, showing that most employees recognize and understand the organizational vision. The results agree with Micheni and Awuor (2024), who found strategic clarity boosts county performance. This implies that clear vision enhances alignment, motivation, and execution, but context-specific factors may moderate its impact.

Third is "Mission Alignment with Activities," with 79% agreement, a mean of 3.96, and a standard deviation of 0.852. This shows strong support and reasonable consistency, indicating that most employees perceive coherence between strategic intent and operational execution. Micheni and Awuor (2024) also highlighted that strategic direction, including mission clarity, improves performance when operationalized effectively. The implication is that counties that align their mission with daily activities can ensure that strategic goals are translated into tangible outcomes.

"Reminders of Organizational Objectives" follows, with 74% agreement, a mean of 3.83, and a standard deviation of 0.994. This reflects strong support and moderate consistency, suggesting that communication of strategic goals is generally effective. Koros and Ragui (2020) also emphasized the importance of continuous communication in maintaining strategic alignment. The implication is that frequent reminders help sustain momentum and keep employees focused on long-term goals, though the variability suggests that communication practices may differ across counties.

"Mission Reflects Future Aims" ranks fifth, with 60% agreement, a mean of 3.65, and a standard deviation of 0.961. This indicates moderate support with noticeable variability, suggesting that while many see alignment, others may find the mission statement lacking clarity or relevance. The literature partially agrees with Phina (2020) who found that strategic direction must reflect future aims to drive performance, but noted that this requires input from all organizational levels. However, Kihara (2016) found strategic direction statistically insignificant for SMEs. Overall, counties must refine mission statements to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with future goals.

"Employee Effort Toward Goals" comes next, with 57% agreement, a mean of 3.56, and a standard deviation of 1.007. This reflects moderate support with some dispersion, indicating that goal commitment may vary among staff or departments. The literature supports Micheni and Awuor (2024) findings that strategic direction improves employee effort when clearly communicated and supported by leadership. The implication is that counties must foster a culture of accountability and provide incentives to ensure consistent effort toward strategic objectives.

"Goal Revision with Market Changes" ranks seventh, with only 57% agreement, a mean of 3.53, and a high standard deviation of 1.073. This suggests moderate support but high variability, pointing to inconsistent practices in strategic adaptability. The literature strongly agrees. Koros and Ragui (2020) emphasized the need for enhanced strategic direction through regular goal evaluation and revision to respond to changing demands and ensure timely achievement. At the bottom is "Monitoring of Performance Targets," with only 53% agreement, a mean of 3.27, and a high standard deviation of 1.172. This reflects mixed perceptions and significant inconsistency in performance tracking, which may hinder strategic execution. The literature supports this concern. Mohamed et al. (2024) found that performance monitoring is critical for evaluating strategic progress and making necessary adjustments. The implication is that counties must strengthen their performance management systems to ensure accountability and continuous improvement.

The findings show that strategic direction in devolved counties shows strong vision-goal alignment and mission clarity, but inconsistent adaptability and weak performance monitoring hinder effective execution and long-term strategic responsiveness.

Inferential Results

This section presents the correlation and regression results derived from hypothesis testing of influence of strategic direction on performance of devolved counties.

Correlation Results

The correlation results of the independent and dependent variables are illustrated in this section.

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Table 2 Correlation analysis

	Performance	Strategic direction
Performance	1	.760**
Strategic direction	.760**	1

Strategic direction had strong and positive correlation with performance (r = .760), indicating that a clear, well-communicated vision and goals are critical for driving development outcomes. The results agree with Mohamed, Ngugi, and Deya (2024), who found that strategic direction, through vision, purpose, and goal-setting, significantly enhances institutional performance. However, Kihara (2016) reported that strategic direction had a statistically insignificant impact on manufacturing SMEs, suggesting its influence may vary by sector and organizational maturity. This implies that strategic direction is a powerful driver of performance when clearly communicated and aligned with organizational goals.

Regression Analysis

This section used regression to analyze the influence of strategic direction on performance of devolved counties. Key outputs included model summary, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and regression coefficients.

Table 3 Influence of strategic direction on performance

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.760[a]	0.578	0.576	0.64866

a. Predictors: (Constant), strategic direction

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	164.700	1	164.700	391.433	.000[b]
	Residual	120.338	286	0.421		
	Total	285.038	287			

a. Dependent Variable: performance of devolved counties

b. Predictors: (Constant), strategic direction

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	0.706	0.120		5.874	0.000
	strategic direction	0.785	0.040	0.760	19.785	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: performance of devolved counties

The regression analysis reveals a strong and statistically significant relationship between strategic direction and the performance of devolved counties in Kenya. The model shows a high correlation coefficient (R = .760), indicating a strong positive association. The R Square value of 0.578 suggests that strategic direction explains 57.8% of the variance in county performance, while the adjusted R Square (0.576) confirms the model's reliability. The standard error of the estimate (0.64866) indicates a reasonably good fit.

The ANOVA results (F = 391.433, p < .001) confirm that the model is statistically significant, meaning strategic direction is a meaningful predictor of county performance. The coefficient table shows that strategic direction has a standardized beta of 0.760, with a highly significant t-value (19.785, p < .001), demonstrating its strong influence. The unstandardized coefficient (B = 0.785) implies that for every unit increase in strategic direction—such as clear vision, goal-setting, and long-term planning—county performance improves by 0.785 units. The constant value

(0.706) represents the baseline performance when strategic direction is absent. The model equation for the relationship between strategic direction and performance of devolved counties in Kenya is therefore;
$Y=0.706+0.785X_4$
In this regard, $\mathbf{H_{01}}$ was rejected. Therefore, the alternate hypothesis is;

H_{a1}: There is statistically significant influence of strategic direction on performance of devolved counties in Kenya.
The results agree with the regression analysis showing a strong relationship between strategic direction and county performance. Micheni and Awuor (2024) found that strategic clarity significantly improved Tharaka Nithi County's outcomes. Similarly, Mohamed, Ngugi, and Deya (2024) emphasized that vision and goal-setting are critical to institutional success in Kenyan universities. These studies affirm that strategic direction, anchored in purpose, planning, and leadership, drives performance. This means that devolved counties must prioritize strategic direction to enhance service delivery. Clear goals, aligned leadership, and adaptive planning are essential for translating public mandates into measurable development outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that strategic direction is the most influential factor in driving the performance of devolved counties in Kenya, underscoring the importance of clear vision, goals, and adaptive planning. Its effectiveness, however, depends on contextual relevance and integration with leadership, resources, and sector-specific dynamics.

Recommendations

The study recommended that county managers should prioritize clear strategic direction by setting well-defined visions, goals, and adaptive plans tailored to local contexts. With strategic direction accounting for nearly 60% of performance variation, aligning plans with community needs and resources is vital. Leadership must be synchronized with strategy to achieve measurable outcomes.

Area For Further Research

Future studies should explore the influenec of strategic direction on performance of rural and urban counties in Kenya. This should lead to comparative analsysis on the application of strategic direction as a driver to performance.

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