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**Decentralized Governance Political Accountability in Water Service Delivery:
Insights from Selected Kenya's Coastal Counties**

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Insights from Selected Kenya's Coastal Counties**



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Abstract

Purpose: Water service delivery in Kenya's coastal counties has continued to face systemic challenges despite the devolved governance structure introduced by the 2010 Constitution. This study examines political accountability as a governance indicator within the devolved water sector, focusing on its core dimensions of transparency, oversight, and responsiveness.

Methodology: Using a descriptive research design and stratified random sampling, data were collected from key water sector stakeholders across Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale counties.

Findings: Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis revealed that although legal provisions promoting water provider autonomy are widely acknowledged, stakeholder perceptions of institutional independence and responsiveness to local needs remain variable. The findings underscore that political accountability is a crucial yet complex determinant of water service performance.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study recommends strengthening institutional autonomy, enhancing transparency mechanisms, and deepening citizen engagement to fully realize the intended benefits of devolution in the water sector.

Keywords: *Governance, Accountability, Devolution, Water, Transparency, Institutions, Responsiveness*

JEL Codes: *H75, H70, O55, Q25, D73*

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INTRODUCTION

Water is a critical service linked to health, economic development, and the overall quality of life. However, access to reliable and affordable water services remains highly unequal across Kenya's coastal counties, with significant disparities in both infrastructure and reliability of supply. Devolution, introduced under the 2010 Constitution, aimed to address these challenges by transferring power and resources to the county level. Despite this, issues of political accountability and governance persist in the water sector.

Despite the constitutional and legislative frameworks promoting decentralization, political accountability in water service delivery remains weak. Challenges such as political interference, limited fiscal autonomy, and weak oversight mechanisms continue to undermine efficient service delivery. Previous studies have emphasized legal reforms but have not sufficiently addressed how accountability mechanisms operate across different counties. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how political accountability influences service outcomes in the coastal counties of Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale. The findings are expected to benefit policymakers, scholars, and practitioners in strengthening governance frameworks for equitable water distribution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Principal-Agent Theory

This study is guided by the Principal-Agent Theory (Klitgaard, 1985; Schedler, 1999), which conceptualizes accountability as a relationship between those who delegate authority (principals) and those who exercise it (agents). In water governance, elected leaders act as principals while service providers are agents, expected to act in the public interest. Effective accountability mechanisms ensure alignment between public expectations and institutional performance. Complementary to this is the Governance Theory, which emphasizes transparency, participation, and responsiveness as drivers of effective service delivery (Andrews & Shah, 2019).

Decentralization, Devolution and Governance Outcomes

Decentralization and devolution are widely recognized as strategies for improving governance by shifting authority from central to local governments. Global research, including the World Bank's Decentralization and Service Delivery (2019), shows that local governments are often more responsive to community needs due to their closer proximity to citizens and better knowledge of local contexts. This closeness enhances transparency and accountability, as residents can more easily monitor local officials through public forums, county meetings, and direct engagement. Localized decision-making also fosters innovation and experimentation, allowing tailored solutions to unique local problems.

Smoke (2015) notes that in many developing countries, the motivation for decentralization is to strengthen accountability and enhance service outcomes. However, the success of decentralization depends on institutional capacity, political incentives, and clarity of roles across governance levels.

Decentralization and Water Service Delivery in Kenya

Existing studies (Ochieng et al., 2021; Njiru & Mutungi, 2019) reveal that while legal frameworks such as the Water Act No. 43 of 2016 support decentralization, implementation gaps persist due to political patronage and limited fiscal capacity. The identified gaps include:

- Fiscal dependence on national transfers, which limits true autonomy;
- Political contestation and patronage, which interfere with operational independence;
- Weak enforcement of regulatory standards;
- Unclear roles and overlapping mandates between county departments and water agencies;
- Budget constraints and delayed disbursements, which undermine long-term planning.
- These studies, however, rarely examine variations in accountability across counties, a gap this study seeks to bridge.

Political Accountability in Devolved Water Governance

Political accountability refers to mechanisms that make leaders and service providers answerable for decisions, ensuring adherence to legal norms and citizen expectations (Schedler, 1999). In this study, political accountability is assessed across five indicators drawn from Andrews and Shah (2019): Transparency, Electoral accountability, Oversight mechanisms, Responsiveness to community needs and the Role of civil society and media.

Bovens (2007) and Boesen & Jensen (2007) argue that accountability in public service delivery requires transparent decision-making, clear reporting lines, public oversight, and a degree of operational independence.

Evidence from Kenyan studies (e.g., Njiru & Mutungi, 2019) shows that political interference, regulatory capture, and information asymmetry often weaken accountability in urban settings like Mombasa, compared to more rural counties where community participation is higher. Some studies suggest that strong civic pressure, community forums, and regulatory oversight such as WASREB's performance audits can improve accountability, though outcomes are varied and context dependent.

Inequalities in Water Access in Kenya's Coastal Counties

Recent Kenyan studies and sector reports reveal persistent and significant inequalities in water access across Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale counties, highlighting the need for closer scrutiny of political accountability in service delivery. National regulatory data and the Water Services Regulatory Board's latest impact assessment highlight that service coverage remains far from universal and that non-revenue water, leakages and supply shortfalls continue to constrain piped access (WASREB, 2024). In Kilifi County, empirical and thematic studies have documented limited piped coverage and continued reliance on boreholes, seasonal streams and informal point sources, with gendered implications for access and time burdens on women (Hillesland, 2023; Kilifi County, 2023). In Kwale, county planning documents and sanitation studies indicate improvements in piped coverage in recent years but persistent dependence by many households on unprotected wells and surface sources, reflecting spatial and socio-economic disparities (Kwale County, 2023; Legge et al., 2021). Mombasa's water utilities face acute supply-demand gaps compounded by high levels of non-revenue water and operational challenges; recent audits and utility reports show that actual supply meets only a fraction of licensed demand, creating large daily shortfalls and localized service failures (Auditor-General, 2024; Mombasa Water Supply & Sanitation Company, 2023). Together, these studies and official assessments point to uneven outcomes of devolution and the continuing importance of strengthening accountability, regulatory capacity, and targeted investments to address coastal water access inequities.

Both theoretical and empirical literature shows that while decentralization promises improved accountability and service delivery, actual outcomes depend on political incentives, institutional independence, regulatory strength, and citizen engagement. In Kenya's coastal water sector, political accountability remains a complex but essential governance factor influencing equity, efficiency, and responsiveness.

Conceptual Framework

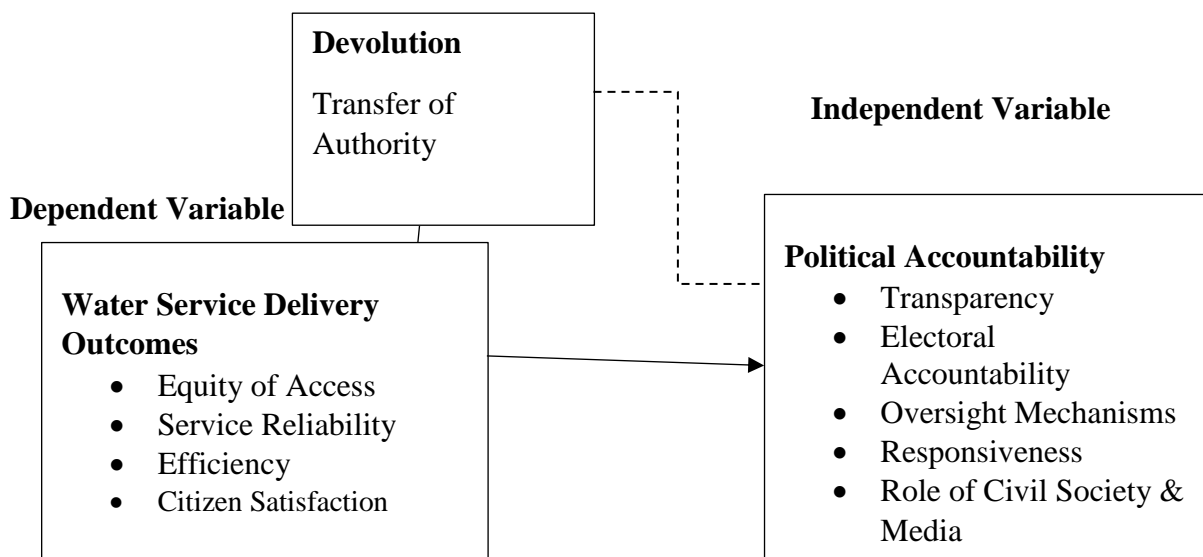


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Devolution plays a central role in shaping governance by transferring authority and decision-making powers from the national government to county governments. This transfer influences the establishment, design, and functioning of political accountability structures at the county level. Within this framework, political accountability acts as the intermediary variable connecting devolution to service delivery outcomes. The five accountability indicators; transparency, electoral accountability, oversight mechanisms, responsiveness, and the role of civil society and the media, constitute the core elements that determine how effectively governance systems perform. These indicators collectively shape the behavior of service providers and public officials by ensuring that their decisions and actions align with community needs, legal requirements, and established service standards. When these accountability mechanisms operate effectively, they enhance the performance of devolved water institutions, leading to improved service delivery outcomes such as equity of access, reliability, efficiency, and greater citizen satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive quantitative design to assess perceptions of political accountability across Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale counties. A stratified random sampling approach targeted county officials, water service providers, and citizens, yielding 119 valid responses. Data were collected through structured questionnaires containing Likert-scale items on accountability indicators such as transparency, responsiveness, oversight, and autonomy. Reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.7$). Descriptive statistics and ANOVA were used to analyze variations among counties.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Kenya's coastal counties of Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale, regions marked by rapid urbanization, diverse socio-economic populations, and varying access to water services (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). These counties represent a microcosm of the challenges facing decentralized service delivery systems.

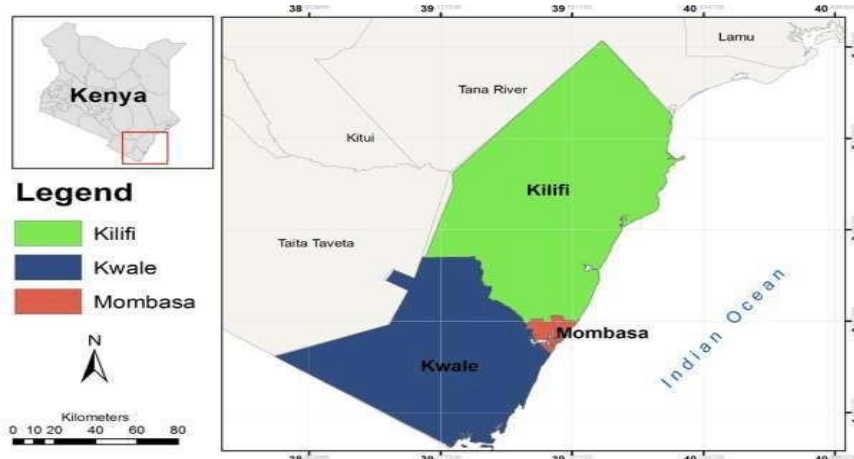


Figure 2: Location of Kwale, Mombasa and Kilifi Counties

Source: Ogega et al. (2016)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study engaged a sample size of 119 respondents drawn from key leadership positions across Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale Counties. These included County Executive Committee Members (CECM), directors, board members, Members of County Assembly (MCAs), and water sector managers. This mix reflects the political and institutional actors directly shaping water governance. Their perspectives were critical for assessing governance indicators such as political accountability, fiscal autonomy, stakeholder engagement, and administrative control. The demographic distribution ensures that both political leaders and institutional managers were represented, making the findings credible for evaluating governance in decentralized water service delivery.

While this study focused on governance indicators, water distribution levels across the three counties remain an important area for further exploration, as service inequalities often reveal underlying governance gaps. For the political class, the sample primarily comprised 60 MCAs (50.4%) and 6 CECMs (5.0%), offering substantial representation of decision-makers responsible for oversight and policy direction in water service delivery. Together, these groups make up 55.4% of the sample, which strengthens the validity of the ANOVA test on political accountability. Their central role in legislation, policy, and budget approvals ensures that the results genuinely reflect how accountability operates within county governance structures.

Table 1: Leadership Position

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	CECM	6	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Director	3	2.5	2.5	7.6
	Board Member	35	29.4	29.4	37.0
	MCA	60	50.4	50.4	87.4
	Management	15	12.6	12.6	100.0
	Total	119	100.0	100.0	

Source: Mbula, 2025

Governance Indicators and Political Accountability

The study set out to assess political accountability in the governance of water services across Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale. Respondents included a wide mix of stakeholders, with MCAs and CECMs forming 55.4% of the sample. This high political representation directly strengthens the validity of the governance indicators tested through ANOVA, since the very actors entrusted with oversight were part of the evaluation. Their views, combined with those of utility managers, board members, and citizens, give a balanced picture of the accountability landscape.

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According to the results, the respondents generally perceived a positive role for stakeholder engagement in accountability, but transparency and accessibility of information scored lower, indicating critical gaps needing attention as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Governance and Political Accountability Indicators (Likert Scale Mean Scores)

Indicator	Mean Score
Transparency	3.2
Responsiveness to Public Needs	3.8
Oversight and Checks & Balances	3.8
Electoral Accountability	3.6

Source: Researcher, 2025

Transparency

Transparency refers to open rules and policies that support governance, especially in financial management. Findings show a generally positive perception of existing legal frameworks. These include the Water Act No. 43 of 2016 (Republic of Kenya, 2016), the Kilifi County Water and Sanitation Services Act, 2015 (County Government of Kilifi, 2015), the Kwale County Water and Sanitation Services Act, 2020 (County Government of Kwale, 2020), and the Mombasa County Water and Sewerage Services Act, 2016 (County Government of Mombasa, 2016).

Beyond laws, flagship regional projects by the Coast Water Works Development Agency (CWWDA) demonstrate accountability in practice. The Mwache Dam in Kwale has involved broad consultations and disclosure of environmental impacts (CWWDA, 2025). The Mzima II Pipeline, linking Taita-Taveta to Mombasa, shows fairness through equitable distribution of water and open reporting under public-private partnerships (CWWDA, 2019). The Baricho Water Supply upgrade in Kilifi openly shared investment plans to tackle shortages, while the Kenya Towns Sustainable Water Supply and Sanitation Program (KTSWSSP) highlights donor oversight and citizen engagement to ensure resources reach intended beneficiaries.

These perceptions suggest that citizens and stakeholders view both laws and projects as reinforcing accountability. The Water Act and county frameworks strengthen autonomy of utilities, legitimizing independent decisions and reducing political interference (Republic of Kenya, 2016).

On financial management, respondents noted adequate controls for planning and execution. Yet fiscal limits and political influence in budgeting remain risks that may erode trust.

Overall, accountability was found to strengthen public trust, legitimacy, and cohesion. Where mechanisms work well, citizens see government as fair, transparent, and responsive, which in turn deepens civic engagement and cooperation

Responsiveness to Public Needs

Responsiveness relates to how services are adapted to local needs. The study recorded a mean score of 3.8, reflecting moderate confidence that service providers are able to tailor water services but also facing clear constraints.

Flexibility was identified as important. Providers must adapt to different community needs, yet resource limitations and political interference often reduce this ability. This echoes findings by Ochieng et al. (2021), who show that legal mandates alone are not enough to guarantee responsive services.

Tailoring services is a vital accountability feature because it links governance to citizens' daily lives (Brinkerhoff, 2004). Respondents recognized that devolution has created some room for flexibility, but its impact is uneven. A majority (68.1%) affirmed that autonomy improves efficiency, yet 31% expressed doubt, pointing to gaps between legal promises and practical realities.

In sum, political accountability can align institutional goals with community needs (Ng'ang'a & Mbataru, 2022). But the study reveals that operational and political constraints still limit responsiveness in many areas.

Oversight and Checks and Balances

This indicator encompasses institutional arrangements and proper checks on autonomy, reflecting the delegated authority exercised under accountable oversight. By investigating the adequacy of independence in management, the results showed a moderate positive level of autonomy allowed to water service providers, with a mean score of 3.8. The relatively low standard deviation of 0.76 indicates a strong agreement among respondents regarding the restricted management independence. These findings align with theories suggesting that autonomy from political interference enhances service efficiency (Andrews & Shah, 2019).

In addition, respondents indicated an average score of 3.8 regarding the ability of water service providers to independently prioritize and customize services based on local requirements. This rating highlights perceived limitations in providers' ability to effectively modify service

delivery to meet the unique needs of the community, pointing to possible shortcomings in decentralized decision-making that may impede responsiveness and efficiency (Schedler, 1999).

Oversight exists and helps prevent abuse, but it also narrows operational space. Providers are accountable, yet sometimes at the expense of flexibility. This balance continues to shape the effectiveness of water service delivery in devolved counties.

Electoral Accountability

Electoral accountability is measured by how citizens judge the performance of institutions. The study recorded a mean score of 3.6, pointing to mixed satisfaction levels.

Some respondents expressed confidence in institutional independence. Others were less convinced, citing political contestations, capacity limitations, and coordination issues—especially in urban areas such as Mombasa (Njiru & Mutungi, 2019; Mbula, 2025).

A mean of 3.6 shows that accountability is valued, but there is still doubt about how well it works in practice. As Schedler (1999) explains, satisfaction is a sign of whether accountability is being experienced, not just promised.

Overall, the findings portray accountability as a pillar of governance in devolved Kenya. Legal frameworks are strong, but their effectiveness depends on greater financial and administrative autonomy. The mixed responses reveal that while citizens see progress, they also remain cautious about whether accountability consistently translates into better services.

Water Governance: Differences in Political Accountability across Counties

Political accountability in water governance may differ across counties because of variations in policies, institutions, and leadership practices. Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale each operate under unique county water acts and priorities. These create slightly different environments for oversight, transparency, and service delivery. To test whether these differences were significant, a one-way ANOVA was conducted.

The results showed no statistically significant difference in political accountability across the three counties ($p = 0.38 > 0.05$). This means political accountability appears relatively consistent in Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale. In ANOVA, "between groups" refers to the variation in accountability across the counties. "Within groups" refers to the variation among individual respondents inside each county. Since the variation within groups was larger than between counties, no significant difference was found.

Table 3: ANOVA for Political Accountability

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	37.64	2	18.82	0.985	0.38
Within Groups	2253.75	118	19.10		
Total	2291.39	120			

Correlation of Political Accountability and other Governance Variables on Water Service Delivery

Political accountability was not examined in isolation. Other governance indicators which include stakeholder engagement, fiscal autonomy, and administrative control were also studied. This was necessary because accountability does not operate alone. Effective service delivery depends on how these indicators interact.

The results show that political accountability correlates positively and significantly with stakeholder engagement, fiscal autonomy, and administrative control. In simple terms, when autonomy and management are strengthened, accountability also improves. This suggests that accountability is part of a broader system of governance practices that reinforce one another.

Table 4: Selected Correlation Coefficients

Variable	Political Accountability
Stakeholder Engagement	0.56**
Fiscal Autonomy	0.58**
Administrative Control	0.49**

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Influence of Governance Indicators on Water Service Delivery

Regression analysis was used to see which indicators matter most for service delivery. The results show that government policies, stakeholder engagement, and administrative control have strong and significant effects. Fiscal autonomy has a weaker effect. Political accountability shows a positive but not significant direct impact.

This means accountability contributes indirectly, mainly by working together with other governance factors. The strongest drivers of better services are clear policies and active citizen participation.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Summary

Variable	B	p-value
Government Policy	1.02	0.00*
Stakeholder Engagement	0.35	0.03*
Administrative Control	0.29	0.01*
Fiscal Autonomy	0.21	0.09
Political Accountability	0.07	0.64

Significant at $p < 0.05$; Source: Researcher, 2025

This implies that improving water service delivery requires stronger policies, deeper citizen participation, and empowered institutions. Political accountability still matters, but its effect is realized more through its link with these other factors.

Challenges in Political Accountability

The research identified several challenges that limit accountability in decentralized water services. First, lack of transparency reduces public oversight and weakens citizen voice. Second, poor communication blocks stakeholders from participating meaningfully. Third, institutional barriers and financial constraints, especially weak fiscal autonomy, hinder effective resource allocation. Finally, political conflicts and limited commitment among leaders undermine reform efforts.

Together, these challenges create instability and weaken accountability systems. This reduces the quality and sustainability of water service delivery.

Implications of the Study

The study offers theoretical, policy, and practical implications. Theoretically, it reinforces Principal-Agent Theory by demonstrating how accountability mechanisms affect service outcomes. For policy, it stresses the need for clearer frameworks that enhance fiscal and

operational autonomy for county water utilities. Practically, the study calls for improved citizen engagement, stronger oversight institutions, and transparent budgeting to ensure sustainable and equitable water service delivery.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Political accountability remains a crucial but under-realized component of decentralized water governance. Strengthening it requires a holistic approach that combines institutional reforms, citizen participation, and fiscal transparency. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to track how evolving governance structures affect service delivery outcomes.

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