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Abstract

Purpose: This study examined the influence of affirmative action practices on perceived service delivery in county governments in Kenya. It focused on administrative affirmative action in equal opportunity, non-discrimination, merit-based employment and decision-making, workforce diversity, and the inclusion of constitutionally recognized marginalized groups, rather than treating political representation and social-safety-net funds as equivalent constructs.

Methodology: A cross-sectional descriptive design was adopted, targeting County Executive Committee Members, Members of County Assemblies, and Chairpersons of County Public Service Boards. A sample of 310 respondents was drawn using stratified and simple random sampling, of whom 296 (95.5%) returned usable questionnaires. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression in SPSS 24, alongside content analysis of open-ended responses.

Findings: Affirmative action had a strong, positive, significant relationship with service delivery ($r = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 54.7 percent of the variance ($R^2 = 0.547$, $\beta = 0.804$, $p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis was rejected. Qualitative themes reinforced this, linking inclusivity to economic empowerment, education, accessible infrastructure, and institutional reform.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: County governments should institutionalize inclusive recruitment, promotion, decision-making, and procurement-compliance systems, and should monitor whether descriptive representation translates into decisions that improve timeliness, cost-effectiveness, accessibility, and citizen satisfaction. Future studies should test employment and AGPO compliance against objective service-delivery indicators.

Keywords: Affirmative Action, Service Delivery, Devolution, County Governments, Governance Practices

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INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) introduced devolution to decentralize political, administrative, and fiscal authority to 47 county governments, with the aim of making public services more responsive, equitable, and accessible (Alwanga & Wanjiku, 2020; Muwonge et al., 2022). Within this setting, affirmative action operates through distinct institutional domains that should not be conflated. Political affirmative action concerns representation in elective and appointive bodies, including the two-thirds gender principle. Administrative affirmative action concerns equal opportunity, non-discrimination, merit-based recruitment and promotion, workforce diversity, and the participation of marginalized groups in county decision-making. Procurement affirmative action is implemented through the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities programme, which reserves opportunities for enterprises owned by women, youth, and persons with disabilities under Article 227 and the Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Act, 2015 (Republic of Kenya, 2010, 2015; Public Procurement Regulatory Authority [PPRA], n.d.). Social and enterprise funds such as WEF, YEDF, Uwezo, and NGAAF are beneficiary programmes and are therefore conceptually different from county employment and procurement practices. The present study focuses primarily on administrative affirmative action and inclusive county decision-making; references to political representation or beneficiary funds are used only as contextual background.

Despite this constitutional and statutory framework, county service delivery remains uneven in dimensions such as timeliness, cost-effectiveness, accessibility, consistency, and citizen satisfaction (Adan & Nyangau, 2023; Muwonge et al., 2022; World Bank, 2024). The proposed connection is not that demographic diversity directly supplies staff, equipment, or medicines. Rather, inclusive recruitment and decision-making may broaden the information and perspectives used to identify underserved groups, prioritize budgets, design accessible services, monitor implementation, and hold departments accountable. Procurement preferences may also widen supplier participation, although their effect depends on compliance, supplier capability, contract management, and prompt payment. Accordingly, the relevant empirical question is whether administrative inclusion moves beyond numerical representation and shapes decisions and processes that citizens experience as more timely, equitable, cost-effective, and responsive.

Statement of the Problem

County governments continue to face uneven service-delivery outcomes despite increased expenditure and the existence of service charters specifying standards for timeliness, cost-effectiveness, efficiency, accessibility, and citizen satisfaction (Adan & Nyangau, 2023; Muwonge et al., 2022). Low staffing, inadequate supplies, and long waiting times are immediate operational constraints; however, they should not be attributed directly to demographic under-representation. The governance concern is whether exclusion from recruitment, procurement, planning, and decision-making narrows the evidence and perspectives used to allocate resources, design services, and monitor performance, thereby increasing the risk that the needs of women, youth, persons with disabilities, minorities, and marginalized communities remain under-prioritized.

Affirmative action can influence service delivery through two related administrative pathways. First, equitable and merit-based recruitment can create a more representative workforce and improve the legitimacy, accessibility, and responsiveness of county institutions. Second, when

representatives of marginalized groups possess discretion and participate meaningfully in planning and implementation, descriptive representation can become active representation through decisions that redirect attention and resources toward underserved clients (Mosher, 1968; Meier, 1993). Procurement affirmative action provides a separate pathway by widening access to public contracts through AGPO, but its contribution to service delivery depends on actual county compliance and effective contract performance rather than on reservation rules alone (Republic of Kenya, 2015; PPRA, n.d.).

Existing Kenyan research provides partial evidence but leaves the county-administration mechanism insufficiently tested. Kilonzo and Ikamari (2015) linked affirmative action in public-sector employment, promotion, training, and career progression to service quality, whereas Nzavi, Nthigah, and Iravo (2018) found that strong legal and policy provisions had not produced full workplace implementation. PPRA monitoring likewise indicates that not all procuring entities achieve the required preference and reservation threshold. These studies identify implementation weaknesses, but they do not jointly test how county employment inclusion, meaningful participation in administrative decisions, and procurement compliance relate to service-delivery outcomes. The present study therefore examines perceived affirmative action practices and perceived service delivery across the 47 counties, while recognizing that its composite, self-reported measure does not isolate AGPO compliance or replace objective performance data.

Objective and Hypothesis of the Study

Objective: To assess the influence of affirmative action practices on service delivery in the county governments in Kenya.

H01: There is no statistically significant influence of affirmative action practices on service delivery in the county governments in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

This study draws on two complementary theories to explain the expected relationship between affirmative action and service delivery: governance theory and representative bureaucracy theory.

Governance Theory

Governance theory, pioneered by Rhodes (1996), provides a broad analytical lens for examining the dispersed power dynamics and institutional interactions across state, market, and civil society spheres that shape public decision-making and collective outcomes. Within Kenya's devolved framework, this theory situates affirmative action as one of several governance practices whose interaction ultimately determines service outputs across counties, with service delivery outcomes shaped by the relative institutional balance between bureaucratic, commercial, and communal actors operating across national and county tiers.

Representative Bureaucracy Theory

Representative bureaucracy theory, originating with Kingsley (1944), distinguishes between descriptive or passive representation and active representation. Passive representation exists when the demographic composition of a public bureaucracy mirrors the population it serves; it can

enhance openness, legitimacy, and citizens' identification with government. It does not, by itself, guarantee changes in policy or service outcomes. Active representation occurs when officials use their roles and administrative discretion to advance the interests and needs of groups that have historically been under-represented (Mosher, 1968). Meier (1993) supplied empirical evidence that representation is more likely to affect client outcomes where officials have discretion and the policy issue is salient to the represented group. More recent meta-analytic evidence reports an overall positive association between bureaucratic representation and public organizational performance, while also showing that effects vary by institutional and frontline context (Ding et al., 2021). In county governments, affirmative action can improve service delivery only when numerical inclusion is accompanied by voice, discretion, supportive procedures, and influence over recruitment, budgeting, procurement, programme design, and implementation. Governance theory explains the wider institutional rules and accountability relationships, while representative bureaucracy theory specifies the mechanism through which inclusion may shape administrative choices and service outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presents the hypothesized relationship between affirmative action, the independent variable, and service delivery, the dependent variable, in county governments in Kenya. Affirmative action is operationalized through equal opportunity and non-discrimination, merit-based employment and decision-making, identification and resourcing of marginalized groups, workforce diversity, and responsiveness to diverse community needs. Service delivery is operationalized through timeliness, cost-effectiveness, and customer satisfaction. The model is deliberately limited to this direct relationship; national-culture dimensions are excluded because they were neither developed in the theoretical review nor measured in the study. The framework guided the hypothesis and the simple linear regression model.

Independent Variable

Affirmative Action

- Diversity
- Equality
- Inclusivity

Dependent Variable

Service Delivery

- Customer Satisfaction
- Timeliness
- Cost Effectiveness

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Empirical Review

Ding, Lu, and Riccucci (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of 80 quantitative studies and 648 effect sizes on representative bureaucracy and public organizational performance. They found an overall positive association, but showed that the magnitude of the relationship depended on the demographic characteristic examined, the organizational level, and whether the setting enabled active or symbolic representation. Their findings caution against assuming that numerical diversity

automatically produces performance gains and support testing the institutional conditions through which representation affects service outcomes.

Andrews, Boyne, Meier, O'Toole, and Walker (2005) examined workforce representativeness and public-service performance in English local government. Their results did not support a simple, unconditional performance benefit from representativeness; instead, organizational strategy conditioned the relationship. Although the institutional setting differs from Kenyan counties, the study is relevant at the same local-administration level and demonstrates that representative staffing must be connected to management systems and decision authority before it can influence service performance.

Kaimenyi, Kinya, and Chege (2013) analysed Kenya's two-thirds gender principle and found that legal recognition was not matched by an adequate implementation mechanism. Because their unit of analysis was political representation, the study provides constitutional context rather than direct evidence on county administrative practice. Its principal relevance is the broader implementation lesson that formal quotas do not necessarily produce substantive influence or improved services.

Kilonzo and Ikamari (2015) examined affirmative action within Kenya's public service and reported that measures relating to employment, promotion, training, and career progression were associated with improved service quality. This study is closely aligned with the administrative construct examined in the present research because it connects internal human-resource practices to service outcomes, although its national-ministry cases limit direct generalization to all 47 county governments.

Nzavi, Nthigah, and Iravo (2018) examined affirmative action and women's employment in Kenya's Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs. They found that Kenya had strong legal and policy frameworks prohibiting workplace discrimination, but that implementation remained incomplete and bias against women persisted. The findings underscore the distinction between formal compliance and the meaningful inclusion required for active representation.

The PPRA preference and reservation framework requires procuring entities at national and county levels to report periodically on opportunities awarded to enterprises owned by women, youth, and persons with disabilities (PPRA, n.d.). PPRA has also reported that not all procuring entities attain the required threshold. This evidence establishes procurement compliance as a distinct administrative issue, but it does not by itself demonstrate whether AGPO performance improves the timeliness, cost-efficiency, quality, or user satisfaction associated with county services.

Onsomu, Mose, and Munene (2022) reviewed Kenya's legal and policy environment for the inclusion of persons with disabilities and found continued exclusion across socio-economic domains despite formal policy milestones. Their analysis reinforces the need to measure implementation and accessibility, but, because it primarily treats persons with disabilities as beneficiaries, it offers limited evidence on their inclusion as county employees and administrative decision-makers.

Taken together, the evidence shows three unresolved issues: formal mandates may not be implemented fully; demographic presence may not become active influence over decisions; and county employment and procurement compliance are rarely connected to concrete service-delivery measures. Studies of political quotas and affirmative action funds illuminate the wider inclusion

environment but are not treated as direct tests of county administrative affirmative action in this study.

Research Gap

The principal gap is therefore not merely the failure to combine women, youth, marginalized groups, and persons with disabilities into one category. Existing literature has seldom tested whether compliance with affirmative action mandates in county employment and AGPO procurement changes how counties allocate resources and deliver services, particularly in terms of timeliness, cost-efficiency, accessibility, and user satisfaction. It has also rarely examined the mechanism through which descriptive representation becomes active representation in county administration. The present study addresses part of this gap by assessing the relationship between a composite measure of perceived administrative affirmative action and perceived service delivery across all 47 county governments. It does not directly audit employment quotas, AGPO awards, or objective service records; those remain priorities for subsequent research.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a pragmatist research philosophy and a cross-sectional descriptive research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The unit of analysis was the county government, while the unit of observation comprised County Executive Committee Members, elected and nominated Members of County Assemblies, and Chairpersons of County Public Service Boards across Kenya's 47 counties, drawn from a target population of 2,891 and a sampling frame of 1,394. Using the Yamane formula at a 95% confidence level, a sample size of 310 respondents was determined and allocated proportionately across the three strata using stratified random sampling, with simple random sampling used to identify respondents within each stratum: 104 County Executive Committee Members, 31 elected MCAs, 165 nominated MCAs, and 10 Chairpersons of County Public Service Boards.

Primary data were collected using structured, self-administered questionnaires containing both open- and closed-ended items, administered over a three-week period either in person or by email. A pilot study involving 31 respondents (10% of the sampling frame) drawn from Machakos and Murang'a Counties was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the research instrument prior to the main survey, with pilot data excluded from the final analysis. Content validity was established by grounding the instrument in existing literature, while construct validity was assessed through exploratory factor analysis, with items exhibiting high factor loadings on their intended constructs and low cross-loadings retained. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with a coefficient of 0.7 or above considered acceptable and 0.8 or above indicating high reliability.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 24 and presented through descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) and inferential statistics, namely Pearson correlation and simple linear regression, to test the influence of affirmative action on service delivery, specified as:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

where Y is service delivery in county governments in Kenya, X₁ is affirmative action, β_0 is the constant, and ε is the error term. Prior to regression estimation, the data were subjected to

diagnostic tests for linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity (via the Variance Inflation Factor and Tolerance statistics), autocorrelation (via the Durbin-Watson statistic), and normality (via the Shapiro-Wilk test), to confirm that the assumptions of ordinary least squares regression were satisfied. Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire items were analysed manually using content analysis, whereby responses were read in full, grouped into preliminary codes, and consolidated into broader themes based on their frequency and conceptual similarity, then interpreted alongside the quantitative findings. The study observed research ethics relating to integrity, informed consent, voluntary participation, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of respondents throughout data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate

Of the 310 questionnaires distributed, 296 were returned and found usable, representing a response rate of 95.5%, considered high and sufficient for reliable analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions of affirmative action practices in county governments. Overall, results indicate a positive perception of government efforts to ensure equal opportunity and non-discrimination: 63.85% of respondents agreed that the county government ensures equal opportunities for all citizens regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social status (mean = 3.74, SD = 0.92), while 64.53% agreed that the county has implemented policies promoting equal treatment and non-discrimination (mean = 3.87, SD = 0.98). A majority (60.81%) agreed that county employment and decision-making are merit-based (mean = 3.75, SD = 1.02), and 65.88% agreed that the county government has identified all classes of marginalized citizens, including women, youth, and persons with disabilities (mean = 3.82, SD = 1.00).

Respondents also affirmed that counties have set aside programs and resources for identified marginalized groups (63.51% agreement; mean = 3.87, SD = 0.88), promote workforce diversity (62.83% agreement; mean = 3.78, SD = 1.02), factor diverse community needs into decision-making (62.50% agreement; mean = 3.79, SD = 0.94), and actively promote awareness of the county's diverse cultural heritage (64.19% agreement; mean = 3.82, SD = 1.01). When asked what more could be done to support inclusivity, respondents proposed increased funding for youth entrepreneurship, scholarships for women in non-traditional fields such as engineering, accessible infrastructure for persons with disabilities, mentorship programs for young leaders, expanded rural healthcare for marginalized communities, and financial literacy programs tailored to women and marginalized groups.

Table 1: Affirmative Action (n = 296)

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
Ensures equal opportunities regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social status	3.74	0.92
Implements policies promoting equal treatment and non-discrimination	3.87	0.98
Employment and decision-making based on merit, without discrimination	3.75	1.02
Identifies all marginalized classes (women, youth, PWDs, disadvantaged citizens)	3.82	1.00
Sets aside programs and resources for identified marginalized groups	3.87	0.88
Values and promotes diversity in its workforce	3.78	1.02
Decision-making accounts for diverse needs and perspectives	3.79	0.94
Promotes awareness of diverse cultural heritage and traditions	3.82	1.01

These findings align with Kilonzo and Ikamari (2015), who linked affirmative action in public-sector employment and career systems to service quality. They are also consistent with the broader meta-analysis by Ding et al. (2021), which found a positive average association between bureaucratic representation and organizational performance, while cautioning that institutional context conditions the effect. Because the present measures are perceptual and cross-sectional, the findings indicate association rather than proof that inclusion alone caused the reported service outcomes.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong, positive relationship between affirmative action and service delivery ($r = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that respondents who rated county affirmative action practices more favourably also tended to rate service delivery more favourably. The result is compatible with representative bureaucracy theory, particularly where descriptive inclusion is accompanied by meaningful administrative influence (Mosher, 1968; Meier, 1993), but the cross-sectional design does not establish temporal or causal direction.

Table 2: Correlation between Affirmative Action and Service Delivery

		Affirmative Action	Service Delivery
Affirmative Action	Pearson Correlation	1	.740**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	296	296
Service Delivery	Pearson Correlation	.740**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	296	296

Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

A simple linear regression was estimated to determine the extent to which affirmative action predicts service delivery in county governments in Kenya.

Table 3: Model Summary

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
0.740	0.547	0.545	0.56152

The R Square value of 0.547 indicates that affirmative action explains approximately 54.7% of the variance in service delivery, with the remaining 45.3% attributable to factors outside the model.

Table 4: ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	111.951	1	111.951	355.06	.000
Residual	92.699	294	0.315		
Total	204.65	295			

The F-statistic of 355.06 ($p < 0.001$) indicates that the fitted regression model predicts service-delivery scores better than an intercept-only model. This supports a statistical association between affirmative action and service delivery; it does not, by itself, establish causation.

Table 5: Regression Coefficients

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.749	0.166		4.521	.000
Affirmative Action	0.804	0.043	0.740	18.843	.000

The unstandardized coefficient ($B = 0.804$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that a one-unit increase in the affirmative-action score was associated with a 0.804-unit increase in the service-delivery score. This is a substantial predictive association within the estimated model, but it should not be interpreted as an experimental causal effect. The finding is consistent with Kilonzo and Ikamari (2015) and with Ding et al. (2021), while the contingent results reported by Andrews et al. (2005) suggest that organizational strategy and implementation conditions may shape the strength of the relationship.

Hypothesis Test (H_{01}): The regression model was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.547$, $F = 355.06$, $p < 0.001$), and affirmative action explained a substantial proportion of the variation in service-delivery scores. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. The results support a positive statistical association between affirmative action practices and service delivery in county governments in Kenya, subject to the limitations of the cross-sectional design.

Qualitative Findings

Analysis of open-ended responses revealed that respondents understood inclusion more broadly than the administrative construct measured in the closed-ended items. They mentioned economic empowerment, education, accessible infrastructure, institutional reform, and targeted outreach. These suggestions are reported as contextual qualitative themes and should not be treated as

evidence that political reservations or social-safety-net funds are equivalent to affirmative action in county employment or procurement.

Within the study's administrative scope, the most relevant qualitative mechanisms were calls for equal access to county employment, mentorship and leadership pathways, disability-friendly public offices, and wider participation in decisions about services for underserved communities. These mechanisms help explain how descriptive inclusion could become active representation: officials and participants with relevant lived experience may identify barriers, influence priorities, and improve the accessibility and responsiveness of implementation. Calls for scholarships, grants, transport support, and entrepreneurship funding represent proposed service interventions rather than measures of workforce or procurement compliance.

Respondents also emphasized enforcement, recommending quotas for marginalized groups in local-government positions and equal opportunity in public-sector employment. This supports Kaimenyi et al.'s (2013) broader observation that formal rules require workable implementation mechanisms, while the distinction developed by Mosher (1968) and Meier (1993) suggests that representation matters most when included officials can influence decisions. The qualitative evidence therefore complements the quantitative association by identifying plausible administrative pathways, but it does not demonstrate that each proposed programme caused better service delivery.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study assessed the relationship between affirmative action practices and service delivery in county governments in Kenya. Affirmative action was positively associated with service delivery ($r = 0.740$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 54.7% of the variance in the fitted model ($R^2 = 0.547$; $B = 0.804$, $p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis was rejected. The findings suggest that counties perceived as stronger in equal opportunity, non-discrimination, merit, workforce diversity, and attention to marginalized groups were also perceived as stronger in service delivery. Representative bureaucracy theory indicates that this relationship is plausible when descriptive inclusion becomes active influence over administrative decisions; however, the cross-sectional, self-reported design does not establish causality or isolate employment and AGPO compliance effects.

County governments should institutionalize affirmative action through transparent recruitment and promotion, meaningful participation of marginalized employees and communities in planning, accessible service design, and verifiable compliance with procurement preference and reservation requirements. Monitoring should go beyond headcounts and policy statements to assess whether included groups influence budgets, programme design, procurement, and frontline implementation. Future research should combine county employment records, AGPO award and payment data, administrative service records, and citizen-satisfaction measures in longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs to test effects on timeliness, cost-efficiency, accessibility, and quality. Political representation and beneficiary funds should be analysed separately unless a study specifies and tests the mechanism linking them to county administrative performance.

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