

# **ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEVOLVED GOVERNANCE, POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION, AND SERVICE DELIVERY: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to critically review the existing literature on the relationship between the devolved governance aspect of political decentralization, and its influence on service delivery. The study will be based on the context of devolved governments in Kenya. This review specifically evaluates the theoretical and empirical literatures related to political decentralization and service delivery with an aim of establishing areas of gaps for further research. In particular, the paper identifies some of the important theoretical, conceptual, measurements, contextual, and methodological drawbacks in previous researches. However, it also identifies other literatures that restrict generalization of results to a particular contexts, sectors, and larger populations. Additionally, several research avenues have been proposed for in-depth understanding of the relationship between political decentralization and service delivery.

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**Keywords:** Governance, Devolution, Decentralization, Citizens, Service Delivery

## **Introduction**

Decentralization has been recognized as an important theme of governance in both developed and developing societies of the world (Dasgupta and Victoria, 2007). In the past two decades, there has been a renewed interest in decentralization, particularly in the context of developing countries that are seeking ways to promote accountability of government in public service delivery (Mookherjee, 2014). Consequently, the centralized

government systems have been blamed for a long time for hindering efficient delivery of public services (Wangari, 2014). Decentralization of the provision of social services such as education, health, water, and sanitation leads to improved service delivery (Ekpo, 2008). It is now widely regarded as an instrument for improving service delivery to the public. Conceptually, decentralization is depicted in various forms and dimensions. Olatona & Olomola (2015) asserted that there are three fundamental forms of decentralization. The first form is outlined as de concentration which refers to the shifting of responsibilities to local administrators who are closely supervised by the federal government. It is the weakest form of decentralization. The second form is delegation which involves the transfer of decision-making and administration to semi-autonomous organizations (public corporations). The last form is devolution which is the strongest form. Thus, it entails transferring some authority for decision-making, finance, and management. In devolution, states government can elect their own leaders, raise their own revenue, and make their own investment decisions (Olatona and Olomola, 2015).

Importantly, there are three fundamental dimensions of decentralization which include administrative decentralization, political decentralization, and fiscal decentralization. Administrative decentralization implies the transfer of civil servants and public functions to the lower level; fiscal decentralization involves the devolution of fiscal resources and revenue generating powers; while political decentralization refers to devolution of decision-making powers to local governments (Muriu, 2012; Triesman, 2007). According to Akorsu (2015), political decentralization is a set of constitutional amendments and electoral reforms designed to open new, or activate existing but dormant or ineffective spaces for the representation of sub-national politics . It aims to give more authority to citizens and their elected representatives in decision making and public administration. Furthermore, political decentralization also tends to support democratization by providing more opportunity for citizens and their elected representatives to affect the creation and implementation of policies (Ozmen, 2014).

The proponents of political decentralization argues that bringing citizens closer to government and allowing them to hold elected officials accountable, are an important foundation of achieving a better local government and public services (Grindle, 2007). Notably, when local or county government is brought closer to those receiving services, beneficiaries of these services would become active in demanding quality. However, since those responsible for quality of services are local governments, citizens will be more motivated to demand improvements if services decrease in quality (Sujarwoto, 2012). All in all, the main reason for

political decentralization is to ensure efficient and effective services delivery to the citizens.

Across the world, over seventy five countries have attempted to decentralize responsibilities to lower tiers of government in the last quarter century (Ahmad, Junaid, Devarajan, Khemani, and Shah, 2005). The rationale that supports this reform is that devolved governments, being closer to their constituencies, can be more responsive to local needs. Consequently, they make public services to be more efficient. To achieve efficient services delivery, countries and national states must institute an effective division of labor among multi-levels of government and assign appropriate financing instruments (fiscal revenues) to match fiscal responsibilities (Shen and Zou, 2015). Wangari (2014) citing a study by World Bank (2003) argued that decentralization has both an explicit and implicit motivation of improving service delivery for two major reasons. Firstly, the basic services which the state is responsible for are systematically failing. Secondly, improving service delivery through decentralization is important because these services are consumed locally. In Africa, decentralization has advanced considerably in the last two decades. Many African central governments have initiated or deepened processes to transfer authority, power, responsibilities, and resources to sub-national levels. Thus, the African countries which have been decentralized include Kenya, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda (Dickovick and Riedl, 2010). However, there are few studies that have so far reviewed decentralization experiences across the region in a comprehensive and comparative way. Much of the available evidence is anecdotal or focused on a specific set of issues, such as participation, empowerment, or fiscal autonomy (Batchelor, Smith, and Fleming, 2014).

### **Devolved Governments in Kenya**

Kenya chose devolution by the promulgation of a new constitution in 2010. This was followed by the march 2013 election that established 47 county governments to work alongside the central government (Wangari, 2014). The Kenya's devolution system of governance is one of the most ambitious form of decentralization involving large-scale political, fiscal, and administrative decentralization (Kenya School of Government, 2015). This is unlike other countries where the devolution process of the three powers has been sequentially attained. In Kenya, the experience has been a 'big bang' where the three types of decentralization (political, fiscal, and administrative) were achieved at once with the ratification of the constitution (Kobia and Bagaka, 2014). Devolution in Kenya is based on the supremacy of the constitution, sovereignty of the people, and the principle of public participation (ICJ Kenya, 2013). Significantly, the fourth schedule of the

constitution sets out the functions and powers of the national and county governments. Kenya Constitution (2010) articulates the rationale behind devolution to be among other reasons such as: self-governance, economic development, and equitable sharing of national and local resources. The constitution also provides the objects and principles of devolution, functions, and powers of the national and county governments and the relationships between the levels of governments. To achieve these objectives, the constitution established 47 county governments in addition to the national government (Constitution of Kenya, 2010; Ngundo, 2014). Thus, the constitution further provides that each county will have a government consisting of county assembly and county executive.

Moreover, the constitution of Kenya (2010) devolved many services to county governments. The devolved services includes county health services, solid waste disposal, county transport, including county roads, street lighting, traffic and parking, water conservation, and social welfare (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). County governments are better placed than the national government to deliver social services because of their local knowledge to the local problems facing the people. Ultimately, devolution in Kenya has raised citizen's expectations for quality service from the county governments. Through devolution of fiscal power, political power, and administrative power, citizen expects county governments to deliver quality services and improve efficiencies and responsiveness. However, the available local studies on devolution are mainly qualitative which have only helped to understand the pros and cons of decentralization (Abdumlingo and Mwirigi, 2014; Kobia and Bagaka, 2014). Furthermore, there is paucity of empirical evidence on the impact of political decentralization on service delivery in county governments in Kenya.

### **Theoretical Review**

The concept of political decentralization has been explained by Souffle Theory and Principal-Agent theory. This paper will examine political decentralization variable of decentralization based on these two theories.

### **The Souffle Theory**

The Soufflé theory was proposed by Parker (1995) who argued there are three major elements of decentralization, namely: administrative, fiscal, and political decentralization. Parker (1995) emphasized that decentralization is a multi-dimensional process that proceeds with successes and setbacks. The theory argues like a souffle that needs just the right combination of milk, eggs, and heat to rise. Thus, a successful program of decentralization must include just the right combination of political, fiscal, and institutional elements in improving rural development outcomes (Farooq, Shamail, and

Awais, 2008; Laryea-Adjei, 2006). Decentralization initiatives will therefore be subject to a continuous process of modification which reflects changes in the social, political, and economic conditions (Laryea-Adjei, 2006). There is therefore the need to include all dimensions of political, fiscal, and administrative decentralization.

Parker (1995) suggested a conceptual model, *the soufflé theory*, which incorporates the essential elements of the political, fiscal, and administrative decentralization. This is because they are combined to realize desired outcomes. Political decentralization transfers policy and legislative powers from the central government to the elected local authorities (Azfar, 1999). However, the allocation of the power of decision making to local authorities is not enough to create successful decentralization if local officials are not accountable to the local population (Elsageer and Mbwambo, 2004). Local accountability might be promoted through various mechanisms such as third party monitoring by media and NGOs, extensive participation, and central government oversight of local governments (Godda, 2014). All in all, soufflé theory is relevant as it provides an in-depth understanding of political decentralization variable that is examined in this study. Thus, Parker (1995) model is illustrated in figure 3.1 below:

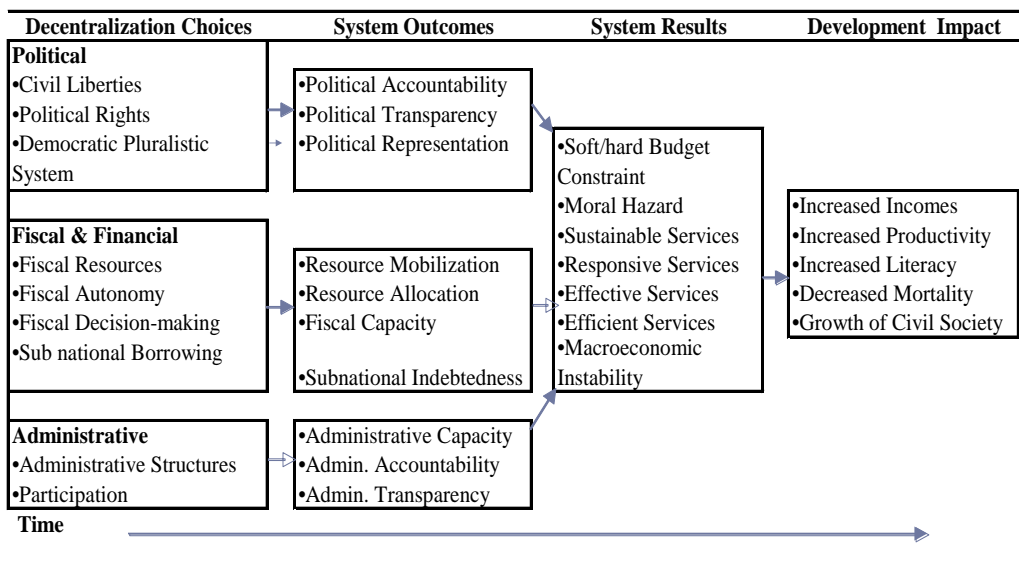


Figure 3.1. The Soufflé Theory of Decentralization (Parker, 1995)

Despite the propositions of the Soufflé theorist that are in favor of decentralization, devolved governance has been criticized due to several limitations. Saito (2001) posits that decentralization may foster more local



royalty to regional identities than the national identity. Therefore, this may encourage more autonomy from the central government and even a territorial secession in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, particularly in Africa. This puts the national integrity itself at risk. Secondly, decentralization may increase corruption at local level and thus this would not improve accountability. Lastly, the increased efficiency and effectiveness of public resources may not be realized, since resources (capital, human, and even social) available at the local level in low-income countries are very limited. These scarce resources are more effectively utilized when they are concentrated at the national level. Therefore, decentralization may also jeopardize equity among different localities. In Kenya, the Soufflé theory is at the centre of devolution. The devolution process of the three powers (political, fiscal, and administrative) proposed by the Scouffle theory were achieved at once with the ratification of the constitution. Specifically, the theory provides an in-depth understanding of financial decentralization, political decentralization, and administrative decentralization exercised by county governments in Kenya.

### **Principal-Agent Theory**

The Principal-Agent theory (also referred to as Agency Theory) is one of the dominant theoretical perspectives for analyzing and describing public governance reforms. Thus, this theory was proposed by Jensen and Meckling (1976). The theory proposes a ‘principal’ with specific objectives and ‘agents’ who are required to implement activities in achieving those objectives. The core of the principal-agent theory is the agency relationship, which depends on power positions and information flows between principals and agents. The question, then, is how principals can manage the interests of agents so that they are in line with the goals they (principals) wish to achieve (Masanyiwa, Niehof, and Termeer, 2012).

Mewes (2011) links the agency theory to top down and bottom-up models. In the top down model, local governments are agents, exercising responsibilities on behalf of the central government (principal). In the bottom-up model, the ultimate principals are the citizens or service users, while politicians as representatives in decision-making organs are agents. In turn, local government administrators responsible for executing service delivery functions are agents of local political leaders and service users. Consequently, Kayode et al. (2013) further posits that in a democratic polity, the ultimate principals are the citizens who are consumers of specific services provided by the government. In the Principal –Agent theory, they are principal in the sense that politicians as agents seek their mandate from and act as the representatives of the public.

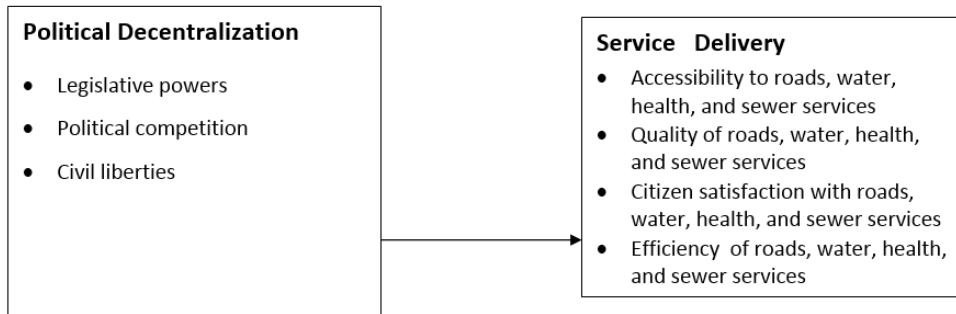
Critics however argue that the Agency-Theory model is one-sided because it negatively characterizes an agent's behavior as self-seeking. Also, it ignores agent loyalty, pride, and professionalism in aligning with the principal's goals (Davis, Donaldson, and Schoorman, 1997; Kayode et al., 2013). Another criticism of the agency theory is that it omits opportunistic behavior by principals. This is especially so in public services where politicians and bureaucrats personally stand to gain from colluding with private agents (Kamara, Ofori-Owusu, and Sesay, 2012). Furthermore, Masanyiwa (2012) citing Batley (2004) criticized the agency-theory model for focusing on the vertical relationship between the centre and periphery in a 'one-dimensional' way. Therefore, this makes it difficult to analyze multiple principals and agents, especially if they are of different administrative levels.

In Kenya, Agency-Theory is relevant to devolved system of government because it provides a good basis for understanding the relationship in which one party (the principal) delegates work to another (the agent), who performs the task. Politicians act as the agents of citizens and must act in good faith to fulfill the principles of the Principal. Without addressing the principal agent problems, poor governance practices such as lack of social accountability have risen. The Principal-Agent theory has become a widely used paradigm for analyzing public accountability. This is because it provides a flexible framework for modeling innumerable variations in institutional arrangements, and in comparing their potential for inducing desirable behavior by agents (Gailmard, 2012). Researchers also adopt Principal-Agent theory to understand the social accountability practices between citizens and politicians. The principals are the citizens or service users, while politicians as representatives in decision-making organs are agents.

### **Conceptual Model**

A conceptual framework can be seen in the diagrammatic presentation of variables, showing the relationship between the independent variable, moderating variables, and the dependent variables (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). Consequently, the conceptual framework illustrates the perceived link between the independent variable (political decentralization) and the dependent variable (service delivery). The conceptual framework was founded on the literature review, which depicts a linkage between political decentralization and service delivery. Political decentralization constitutes the legislative powers, political competition, and civil liberties. Service delivery is conceptualized as accessibility, quality of services, and citizen satisfaction of services such as garbage collection and disposal, health, rural roads, water supply, and street lighting. However, the conceptual model in figure 4.1 shows the relationship between political

decentralization and service delivery.



**Independent Variable**

**Dependent Variable**

### Empirical Review

Review of previous research work reveals that there is an evidence to support the existence of the relationship between political decentralization and service delivery. Evidently, in Indonesia, Sujarwoto (2012) surveyed 8,320 households living in 120 local governments to investigate the association between political decentralization and local public service performance. The study revealed that effective local political institutions, better informed citizen and transparency, citizen political participation via community programs, and the presence of social group in community are significant for improving local public service performance. Empirically, Enikolopov and Zhuravskaya (2007) use both cross-section and panel data from developing and transition countries. Furthermore, they discovered that strong national parties (a form of political centralization) combined with fiscal decentralization significantly improves government quality measured both in terms of government efficiency, regulatory quality, control of corruption, rule of law, and public goods provision (health and education outcomes). For Spain, Kyriacou & Roca-Sagale's (2011) using the sample of 101 countries found a negative impact of political decentralization on the relationship between fiscal decentralization and government quality (control of corruption, rule of law, regulatory quality, and government effectiveness). Therefore, the researchers concluded that political decentralization, in the form of sub-national elections, bicameralism, and especially federalism and autonomy, tends to mitigate the positive impact of fiscal decentralization on the quality of government. They observed the findings could be as result of the existence of a regionally elected upper house with the power to block the



lower house's financial legislation which may be preventing improvements in government performance.

In the context of South Africa, Bogopane (2014) carried a study on political decentralization and service delivery based on north west provincial government that consists of twelve provincial departments and the legislature. The study revealed the lack of a well-established public bureaucracy that bluntly implements government policies. Thus, they are also involved in putting politicians in check against any form of abuse of political power. The study also found lack of political structures which led to errors of judgment which in turn resulted to poor governance and service delivery. In addition, Lambright (2014) found that partisan politics undermines service delivery in Kampala in several ways. These include through financing, tax policy, and even direct interference in the policies and decisions made by the city council. More importantly, Nir and Kafle (2013) evaluated the implications of political stability on educational quality using a sample comprising of 47 countries, 26 politically stable, and 21 politically unstable during a ten-year period of time (1998-2008). The study revealed that political stability plays a major role in explaining the survival rate in education when used as a single predictor, or when introduced in the analysis with the GDP per capita. In the case of Pakistan, Hasnain (2008) examined the impact of the political party structure on the incentives for politicians to focus on patronage versus service delivery improvements in Pakistan. The researchers argued that fragmentation and factionalism both exacerbate the information problems that voters have in assigning credit (blame) for service delivery improvements (deterioration), thereby creating the incentives for politicians to focus on targeted benefits. Polarization, particularly ethnic polarization, reduces the ability of groups to agree on the provision of public goods, which again causes politicians to favor the delivery of targeted benefits.

In a related study, Ndudula (2013) discovered too much politicization of the public sector, interference between politicians and administrators into each other's affairs and vice versa, and adverse effects of cadre deployment which are damaging service delivery. In the same context, Obicci (2014) revealed that political decentralization can be used as an instrument to promote the provision of service delivery. Furthermore, decentralization is shown to have had significant effect on service delivery in the ten local governments examined in the study. Most critically, a study in Europe by Diaz-Serrano & Rodriguez-Pose (2014) based on analysis of views of 160,000 individuals in 31 European countries found that political decentralization affects citizen's satisfaction with education and health delivery in different ways. However, the influence of political decentralization is highly contingent on the capacity of the local or regional

government to exercise authority over its citizens (self-rule) or to influence policy at the national level (shared-rule). Similarly, Kumar and Prakash (2012) carried a study in India to investigate the impact of political decentralization and gender quota in local governance on different measures of health outcomes and behaviors. The study found that political decentralization is positively associated with higher probabilities of institutional births, safe delivery, and births in public health facilities.

### **Critical Review of Existing Literature**

Majority of previous empirical studies on political decentralization and service delivery have been conducted in developed or developing countries of Asia and Latin America (Diaz-Serrano and Rodriguez-Pose, 2014; Kyriacou and Roca-Sagale's, 2011; Sujarwoto, 2012). There is relatively small body of work and attempts to systematically examine the evidence on the impact of decentralization on service delivery in Sub-Saharan Africa. As a consequence, the link between political decentralization and public service delivery in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa is scarcely explored. The near absence of research in Africa in this area raise a question as to whether political decentralization influences service delivery in Africa. Empirical findings in developed countries may not be generalized in developing countries due to different cultural and political context. Furthermore, there is need to test if political decentralization frameworks, models or theories developed in western countries are applicable to poor African countries which are suffering high unemployment rates. Thus, further research need to be carried to examine how political decentralization influences service delivery in developing countries like Kenya.

Additionally, literature reviewed indicates that there is imbalance on the attention that has gone into studies on decentralization and service delivery. In measuring service delivery, most studies tend to concentrate on service accessibility and disregard other dimensions of service delivery such as quality of service and citizens satisfaction (Kosec and Mogue, 2015; Saavedra, 2010; Sujarwoto, 2012). Empirical evidence on the links between political decentralization and service delivery measured from quality of service and citizen satisfaction perspective is evidently lacking. It would therefore be prudent for other researchers to make a remarkable contribution in this field by establishing the impact of political decentralization on service delivery (measured by accessibility of service, citizen satisfaction, and quality of services).

There is need to question the veracity of the link between political decentralization and service delivery. The theoretical literature on the impact of political decentralization on service delivery is ambiguous, providing arguments both for and against decentralization. Furthermore, there is less

empirical work on the influence of political decentralization on service delivery and it is less unanimous. Prior studies provide mixed and inconclusive evidence on the impact of political decentralization on service delivery. A cross section of existing research reveals that political decentralization leads to improved service delivery (Kumar and Prakash, 2012; Saavedra, 2010; Sujarwoto, 2012). In contrast, other studies found that political decentralization negatively influences government quality (Kyriacou and Roca-Sagale's, 2011). Additionally, another related study by Hasnain (2008) found that more fragmented, factionalised, and polarised party systems leads to a weak service delivery. The inconclusive nature of evidence suggests a need for more empirical work on the relationship between decentralization and service delivery.

Significantly, majority of political decentralization studies has mainly examined a direct link between political decentralization and service delivery outcome (Hasnain, 2008; Kumar and Prakash, 2012; Kyriacou and Roca-Sagale's, 2011; Mookherjee, 2014; Nir and Kafle, 2013; Obicci, 2014; Sujarwoto, 2012). Political decentralization studies tend to ignore moderating variables which could affect the strength of the relationship between political decentralization and service delivery. Furthermore, examination of prior literature reveals that the few political decentralization and service delivery studies done in developing country are case studies. Due to small sample size, the local case studies suffer from methodological limitations which restrict the generalization of research findings across the whole nation. Notably, studies that use case studies fall short of providing comparisons and cross-county evidence on the relationship between decentralization and service delivery. This suggests that more research is required with large sample size to shed more light on how political decentralization influences service delivery in developing countries.

Locally, although the Constitution of Kenya (2010) shifted government from centralized to decentralized governance, empirical research on the impact of decentralization on public service delivery in Kenya is scant. The available local studies are mainly qualitative which have only helped in understanding the merits and demerits of political decentralization. The magnitude of the impact of political decentralization on services delivery in Kenya remains largely non-quantified. The limited character of research findings in this area suggests that there is need to further investigate the nature of the relationship between decentralized governance, in particular political decentralization and service delivery.

Lastly, previous empirical literature has analyzed the impact of decentralization on service delivery from a single dimension (fiscal, administrative, or political) rather than from all three simultaneously. Allowing for interaction of all three dimensions of decentralization in the

same analysis can bring more robust evidence on the relationship between decentralization and access to service delivery. Hence, this serves as a stronger basis for providing policy advice in the future

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The present paper reviews the literature on political decentralization and its influence on service delivery. The article also highlights some avenues for future research which are discussed below. First, most studies which linked political decentralization and service delivery are drawn from developed countries. Also, there is limited research on political decentralization and service delivery in developing countries. Future studies may thus focus on the link between political decentralization and service delivery in developing countries particularly in the African context. Secondly, there is scanty of research that has so far examined whether political decentralization has any influence on service delivery measured by the quality of service and citizen satisfaction. However, future studies should examine the link between political decentralization and service delivery from quality of service and citizen satisfaction perspective.

In addition, most of the previous studies suffer from methodological drawbacks such as the use of cross sectional surveys which limits the identification of causality between political decentralization and service delivery. Future researchers may therefore undertake longitudinal studies to address this issue more conclusively. Furthermore, the few studies done in the developing world on the link between political decentralization and service delivery did not engage a sampling technique. However, they were largely case studies or desktop studies. This limits the ability of local studies to speak and be generalized to larger populations.

Finally, based on previous studies, there is a paucity of existing literature that examined the association between political decentralization and service delivery particularly with moderating or mediating effect of other variables. Future studies may therefore introduce moderating and mediating variables on the relationship between political decentralization and service delivery. The researchers further recommend that future studies in the area need to be domiciled in a developing world context. Thus, this is with the aim of addressing identified knowledge gaps on the relationship between political decentralization and service delivery.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing critical review of existing literature, it has been observed that knowledge gaps exist in research evaluating the effect of political decentralization on service delivery. However, previous studies have several theoretical, conceptual, contextual, and methodological

knowledge gaps. The gaps restrict the generalization of existing research findings to a particular contexts, sectors, and larger populations. This paper contributes to existing research on political decentralization and service delivery by identifying knowledge gaps and proposing potential area for future research on this relationship. Additionally, the researchers are currently carrying a study to evaluate the influence of devolution on service delivery in county governments in Kenya. The results obtained from the research will be presented in a later article.

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