



Leadership styles adopted by county government officials in Taita Taveta County, Kenya, and their influence on socio-economic conflicts

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ABSTRACT

Leadership practices remain an influential component of governance in Kenya's devolved system, particularly in counties experiencing frequent social and economic conflicts. Even after the state's devolution policy of 2013, Taita Taveta County continues to experience conflicts over land, natural resources, development, and public participation, raising questions about the leadership style county government leaders practice among residents. This study aimed to determine the leadership style practiced by county government leaders in Taita Taveta County and establish the effect it had on social and economic conflicts following devolution. The study was guided by Conflict Transformation Theory and Dependency Theory and adopted a descriptive research design. The target population was 800, selected from government institutions, government agencies, political leaders, civil society, community groups, and residents in Taita Taveta County. The study used a sample size of 380 respondents selected from the target population using simple random and purposive sampling methods. Questionnaires, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), oral interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were the methods used to collect data. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. The researcher used triangulation methods by comparing and contrasting themes with documents and secondary literature related to the research topic. The study revealed that county government leaders mostly practiced consultative, participatory, transformational, and autocratic leadership styles. Consultative leadership style was the most practiced and preferred leadership style in conflict resolution, followed by participatory and transformational leadership styles. On the other hand, autocratic leadership style was associated with decision-making with no stakeholder involvement. The study also established that consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership styles enhanced dialogue forums, transparency and accountability forums, and public trust and confidence, thus reducing social and economic conflicts. However, autocratic leadership styles hindered public participation and civic engagement, caused political manipulation, and worsened developmental disparities, thereby promoting social and economic conflicts. The study concluded that leadership styles influence social and economic conflicts in devolved governance systems, with consultative leadership styles encouraging conflict resolution and transformational, participatory, and consultative leadership styles enhancing transparency, public trust, and confidence in leadership. The study recommended that county governments should practice consultative leadership with continual stakeholder engagement and enhance leadership capacity, especially on inclusive governance, to promote social cohesion and sustainable socio-economic development in the counties without experiencing social and economic conflicts.

Keywords: County Government, Consultative Leadership, Devolution, Leadership Styles, Kenya, Participatory Governance, Socio-Economic Conflicts, Taita Taveta County

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is an essential aspect of governance because it determines decision-making, stakeholder engagement, resource mobilization, accountability, and conflict resolution. The effectiveness of devolved government is undeniably determined by the extent to which political and administrative leaders perform their duties. Leadership styles are the patterns of behavior that leaders adopt when exercising their authority and influence. Autocratic, consultative, participatory, and transformational are the main leadership styles, each with different implications for leader-follower relationships, public-private partnerships, and decision-making. Autocratic leadership

is manifested when leaders make unilateral decisions without consulting their subjects in the decision-making process. Consultative and participatory leadership styles emphasize consensus-building and engaging all stakeholders in the decision-making process (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Transformational leadership is about developing a shared vision and mobilizing people towards achieving collective goals (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). The question leadership styles raise in the context of devolution is about their impact on governance systems and the ability of institutions to deliver on development agendas.

The literature review reveals that leadership style has become a critical indicator of institutional performance, inclusiveness, and ability to deal with social conflicts. Leadership that is consultative and participatory helps in promoting inclusive governance by enabling the stakeholders to influence decision-making before any of the leaders' actions takes effect. On the contrary, extremely autocratic leadership may lead to the feeling of exclusion among community members if they have no say in decisions, particularly those that affect the distribution of scarce economic resources. Transformational leadership can help address community conflicts by building collective action towards achieving the shared vision (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, most studies focus on leadership-performance and leadership-institutional relationships and give a limited insight into the relationships between leadership styles and socio-economic conflicts in decentralized governance systems. Such a research gap is surprising considering that leadership is not only a critical governance function but also a key conflict driver or resolution mechanism.

The questions about leadership are even more pertinent in Africa, where the devolution experiment has been associated with increased social tensions. Decentralization in Africa has failed to deliver on its promise of inclusive governance due to political rivalry, elite capture, top-down decision-making, and inequality of access to resources in local communities. African studies of devolution reveal a nuanced relationship between decentralization and democratic governance. The studies demonstrate that devolution is a process that depends on the institutional and leadership contexts in which it takes place. In other words, decentralizing political and administrative functions does not guarantee participatory governance if the local institutional and leadership structures do not promote inclusiveness. Consultative and participatory leadership styles can promote citizen engagement in governance processes, while autocratic leadership may exacerbate social conflicts due to the lack of stakeholder buy-in. The findings suggest that decentralization in Africa has created both new opportunities for and barriers to inclusive and equitable governance. The next step is to understand how specific leadership styles relate to conflict management in decentralized governance systems.

Decentralization in Kenya has created an interesting experimental field for studying the relationships between leadership styles, institutional performance, and social conflicts because devolution has been associated with both positive and negative governance outcomes. The 2010 Constitution and its 2013 implementation have significantly changed the political, administrative, and institutional landscape by devolving political power, economic responsibilities, and administrative duties to county governments. Counties became responsible for development, health, agriculture, planning, revenue collection and management, and citizen engagement. Devolution was supposed to promote democratic and accountable governance, self-reliance, and sharing of resources, as well as addressing marginalization. At the same time, decentralization created new conflicts over resources, employment opportunities, and political power at the county level. Cheeseman et al (2016) discovered that devolution created new county-level political hubs in Kenya. Muthomi and Thurmaier (2021) found that citizen participation in planning and budgeting at the county level was uneven. Overall, the studies demonstrate that new institutional arrangements do not automatically result in predictable governance outcomes. The same goes for leadership styles, which vary significantly in different institutional settings.

The relationships between leadership styles and socio-economic conflicts are of particular interest because, in many cases, social conflicts erupt due to unequal access to and distribution of resources and opportunities. Socio-economic conflicts are intimately linked to access to and distribution of land, labor, natural resources, public goods, and services. Leadership plays a critical role in conflict mitigation and management by determining who has access to whom and who has access to what. Consultative and participatory leadership styles have better conflict resolution potential because they promote more equal relationships between leaders and followers and stakeholders and the governed. Leadership influences grievance articulation and institutional response, with autocratic leadership suppressing open conflict and channeling dissatisfaction into institutional channels. Conflict Transformation Theory is useful in this context because it helps understand how relationships, structures, institutions, and systems change during conflict, which can be an important dynamic to study in the context of social change (Lederach, 1997). The theory's emphasis on building sustainable peacebuilding institutions resonates with the goals of transformational leadership style that promotes shared visions. Another interesting theoretical framework to study leadership and social conflicts is Dependency Theory, which examines the mechanisms through which dominant groups benefit from the subordination of others (Frank, 1967).

The themes of leadership and social conflicts, particularly their interdependence, resonate with the current research, which focuses on the relationship between county leadership and socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta

County. Taita Taveta County is characterized by social conflicts related to wildlife, mining, employment, and natural resource management, as well as the distribution of the associated benefits. The county is an excellent case study because it illustrates complex social interactions and highlights the importance of leadership in managing social conflicts. Although several studies have been conducted on various aspects of devolution in Kenya, little research has been done on the leadership styles of county government leaders and their impact on socio-economic conflicts in this region. Most of the literature focuses on devolution, inclusive governance, and citizen engagement from either institutional, political, fiscal, or participatory perspectives. There is limited understanding of the extent to which county government officials use autocratic, consultative, participatory, transformational, or mixed approaches to manage the complex social interactions in their constituencies.

The research aimed to fill this gap in the literature by investigating leadership styles and socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County after devolution. Specifically, the research was concerned with the extent to which the county leadership uses autocratic, consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership to manage social conflicts from 2013 to 2021, as well as the impact of these leadership styles on community grievances and collective action. The research used both quantitative and qualitative data to establish a complex relationship between leadership styles and community conflicts. Using quantitative data, the research focused on the prevalence of each leadership style in the context of devolution in Taita Taveta County. The qualitative component emphasized the lived experiences of community leaders, youth, women, business owners, and other stakeholders in social conflicts and their experiences with county leadership. Therefore, the research made an important contribution to the literature by producing county-specific findings on the relationship between leadership styles and social conflicts.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the devolution process which began in 2013, Taita Taveta County still experiences socio-economic conflicts brought about by land disputes, unfair distribution of benefits from natural resources, high unemployment rates among the youths, and complaints from communities about exclusion from decision-making processes regarding resource distribution. County governments were anticipated to respond to these issues by ensuring inclusive governance and enhanced citizen participation, which would mitigate the conflicts. Nonetheless, the issues persist due to challenges with centralized governance and lack of stakeholder engagement. Previous studies have focused on devolution, governance, and service delivery in Kenya but have overlooked the role played by leadership styles especially county government officials' – in either causing or addressing socio-economic conflicts. This omission has created a gap in understanding how governance can promote socio-economic peace and development within devolved systems, which this study aims to address. The research explored the leadership styles of county government officials in Taita Taveta County and their relationship with socio-economic conflicts in the region since 2013.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. Assess the leadership styles adopted by county government officials in Taita Taveta County, Kenya, since the introduction of devolution in 2013.
- ii. Examine the influence of leadership styles by county government officials on socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County, Kenya, since the introduction of devolution in 2013.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conflict Transformation Theory

The study adopted Conflict Transformation Theory as its theoretical framework for investigating the effect of different leadership styles on socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County. The theory emphasizes transformative processes in conflict resolution through engaging the disputing parties in addressing the underlying ecological, institutional, interpersonal, and governance factors contributing to the conflict. It, therefore, provided the rationale for revealing how autocratic, consultative, participatory, and transformational approaches influence society to promote harmonious co-existence and prevent the repetition of contentious issues in the devolved system of governance. The theory was, thus, critical in interpreting the quantitative and qualitative results discussed in this paper (Lederach, 1997).

Conflict Transformation Theory helped understand the results to reveal how leadership styles tend to trigger or de-escalate socio-economic conflicts. The quantitative results demonstrated that consultative, participatory, and transformational styles have a gap-filling, trust-building, and accountability-enhancing potential, thus reducing community tensions. On the other hand, autocratic leadership was associated with increased social disorganization, which exacerbates conflicts (Lederach, 1997). Similarly, qualitative results obtained from key informants' interviews, oral interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) demonstrated that consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership styles increase public trust and decrease social tensions, while autocratic leadership and political manipulation escalate grievances, causing socio-economic conflicts. Therefore, Conflict Transformation

Theory helped explain the results by demonstrating that leadership styles can contribute to conflict resolution and governance in Taita Taveta County by promoting sustainable and inclusive institutional mechanisms and relationships.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Leadership Style of County Government Officials.

Studies on leadership style have been conducted worldwide to determine the relationship between leadership and governance. Northouse (2022) revealed that transformational, participative, consultative, and autocratic leadership styles differ in terms of power, participation, and governance. On the other hand, Yukl (2020) showed that consultative leadership promotes accountability through participation, while autocratic leadership is concerned with maintaining the status quo in governance. The above research established the connection between leadership style and governance but failed to establish the leadership styles applicable in devolved county governments. As such, the review indicates that there is limited information on the relationship between leadership and governance of the county governments in Kenya.

Studies conducted in different regions reveal the connection between decentralized governance and leadership style. Golooba-Mutebi (2014) discovered the association between Uganda's decentralized governance system and leadership style. The study established that political elites in Uganda used to pursue centralized leadership even when democracy was realized. Muthomi and Thurmaier (2021) discovered the dominance of consultative leadership style in Tanzania's local governance system. Although the study revealed the prevalence of consultative leadership style, it was found to be inconsistent across Tanzanian regions. The above studies reveal the connection between leadership style and political decentralization but failed to reveal the leadership styles of county government officials in Kenya.

Leadership styles have been the subject of research in many countries across Africa. Makinda (2012) discovered that most of the continent's governance problems emanate from poor leadership styles in various sectors. The study hypothesized that leadership styles such as autocracy, collectivism, populism, and delinquency contribute to poor governance across different sectors. On the other hand, Ake (1996) argued that the centralized leadership style prevalent in many countries undermines democratic governance through inadequate accountability mechanisms. Although the above research reveals the influence of leadership style on governance in different countries, it fails to establish the connection between leadership style and devolved governance in Kenya.

Decentralized governance has been associated with improved public participation in county governance in Kenya. Kanyinga and Long (2018) argue that devolution promotes public participation in governance through citizens' voice. The study established that public participation in governance was influenced by the political elites who continued to exercise power in the counties. Bosire and Gikonyo (2015) discovered that consultative leadership style boosted public trust and accountability in the governance process. Thus, the above studies reveal the impact of consultative leadership style on accountability but failed to establish the leadership styles of county government officials in Taita Taveta County. This study, therefore, sought to determine the leadership styles of county government officials in Taita Taveta County after devolution.

2.2.2 Influence of Leadership Styles on Socio-Economic Conflicts

It is well established that leadership style has an impact on the existence of socio-economic conflicts across the world. For instance, Burns (1978) argued that transformational leadership encourages citizens to achieve collective goods and, therefore, enhances social responsibility. In a similar vein, Bass and Riggio (2006) asserted that transformational leaders promote harmony by creating trust and teamwork among their subjects, which minimizes tension and conflict. Indeed, many researchers have identified transformational leadership as a key strategy for enhancing harmony while reducing tension and conflict in communities. However, most of them have failed to establish the relationship between various leadership styles and socio-economic conflicts in devolved governance.

Studies conducted regionally indicate that leadership has a role in promoting harmony, especially in the context of devolution. For example, democratic leadership in South Africa improved accountability and citizen-state relationships, thus reducing conflicts in the process of decentralizing power to municipalities. In addition, Golooba-Mutebi (2014) found that decentralization was associated with tensions and disputes in local government in Uganda because of the dominance of elite groups in the process of decision-making. The two researchers agreed that leadership plays a key role in reducing tension and conflict but failed to elaborate further on the relationship between leadership style and socio-economic conflicts in the context of devolution.

Researchers from Africa have established that leadership plays a critical role in fueling or reducing socio-economic conflicts worldwide. For instance, Ake (1996) argued that leadership styles that do not emphasize citizen-centered governance fuel social tension and division in African countries. In addition, Makinda (2012) noted that poor leadership fosters governance problems in many African nations. The two researchers agreed that leadership is a key variable in socio-economic conflicts, but they failed to explore the connection between leadership style and socio-economic conflicts in the context of devolution.

Studies conducted in Kenya show that leadership style is a critical factor in determining the rate of socio-economic conflicts. Cheeseman et al. (2016) discovered that citizen approval of devolution was determined by whether their leadership was inclusive or exclusive. The three researchers found that the two types of leadership influenced the level of trust, transparency, and accountability in county governments which affected socio-economic conflicts. Muriaas et al. (2018) also found out that participatory leadership was the best leadership style for promoting positive governance in devolved government. However, they failed to elaborate how different leadership styles influence socio-economic conflicts in devolved counties such as Taita Taveta. This study, therefore, becomes important as it connects the influence of leadership styles on socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County after the process of devolution was finalized in 2013.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive research design in mixed-methods research in which the influence of leadership styles of county government leaders in Taita Taveta County on socio-economic conflicts has been assessed since devolution in 2013. A descriptive research design was appropriate for this study because the study aimed to describe the leadership style and establish a relationship between the leadership style and socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County without the researcher altering the variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study used a mixed methods approach because it provided more reliable and accurate results as opposed to using any one of the two methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Taita Taveta County, which is one of the 47 counties in Kenya as provided in the Kenyan constitution of 2010. The county was purposively selected because it has persistently faced socio-economic conflicts, including land, wildlife, mining, natural resource disputes, and unequal sharing of public resources since devolution. Therefore, this study was conducted to determine the relationship between leadership styles of county government leaders in Taita Taveta County and socio-economic conflicts.

3.3 Target Population

The target population of this study comprised 800 individuals selected from various institutions and stakeholders who played a role in governance, socio-economic development, and conflict resolution in Taita Taveta County. These respondents included county government leaders, national government administrative officers, elected leaders, land agencies, civil society, religious leaders, community leaders, business people, and residents of the county. The inclusion of these respondents ensured that the views of the population on leadership style and socio-economic conflicts were adequately covered in the study.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

The study used 380 respondents selected from the target population of 800 individuals. Cochran's sample size formula for estimating the population size was used in this study. The study used both simple random and purposive sampling techniques. In simple random sampling, each respondent had an equal chance of being selected, and this eliminated sampling bias (Oso & Onen, 2009). The study used a purposive sampling technique to select respondents with expertise in county leadership, governance, and socio-economic conflicts to obtain in-depth information on the issue under study (Patton, 2015).

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The study used quantitative and qualitative data collection procedures. The quantitative procedure involved questionnaires, while the interview guides, oral interviews, and focus group discussions were used in the qualitative procedure. Focus group discussions and oral interviews were held with community leaders, youth representatives, women representatives, business representatives, and civil society on leadership styles on county leadership and governance and how the various leadership styles influenced socio-economic conflicts in the county. The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted using questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered directly to the respondents.

3.6 Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics and included frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. On the other hand, the qualitative data obtained from key informants, oral interviews, and focus group discussions were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results obtained

from the analyses were thematically presented. The study combined qualitative and quantitative data to provide more reliable information to the study.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted considering the following ethical considerations. The participation of the respondents was voluntary, and they provided informed consent to participate in the study. The respondents' anonymity was maintained throughout the research process, and their identities were kept confidential. The researcher sought permission from the relevant government agencies conducting the research in Kenya. The study adhered to the ethical standards of research studies involving human subjects.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 The leadership styles adopted by county government officials in Taita Taveta County, Kenya, since the introduction of devolution in 2013.

The first objective sought to identify the leadership styles adopted by county government officials in Taita Taveta County since the introduction of devolution in 2013. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements assessing the prevalence of autocratic, consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership styles using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The findings were complemented by qualitative evidence obtained through key informant interviews, oral interviews, and Focus Group Discussions to establish how these leadership styles were practiced within county governance. A summary of the findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Findings on Leadership Styles Adopted by County Government Officials in Taita Taveta County since the Introduction of Devolution in 2013

Leadership Style	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Summary Interpretation
Consultative Leadership	Highest prevalence (Mean = 3.76); 71.3% of respondents agreed it was practiced.	Frequently associated with stakeholder consultations, public forums, dialogue, and improved public trust.	Most dominant leadership style , reflecting increased stakeholder engagement and adherence to the principles of devolution.
Participatory Leadership	Mean = 3.60; 67.4% agreed county leaders promoted community participation.	Respondents reported greater citizen involvement in planning, budgeting, and development programmes, although participation was sometimes inconsistent.	Widely practiced and strengthened transparency, accountability, and collaboration between government and communities.
Transformational Leadership	Mean = 3.53; 62.6% agreed county leaders demonstrated transformational leadership.	Linked with visionary leadership, motivation, institutional reforms, and promotion of peaceful coexistence.	Moderately practiced and contributed to long-term development and social cohesion.
Autocratic Leadership	Lowest mean (3.31); 49.5% agreed centralized decision-making still existed.	Interviews and FGDs revealed political interference, elite dominance, and limited consultation in some decisions.	Although less dominant, autocratic leadership persisted in selected governance processes, particularly resource allocation and politically sensitive decisions.
Overall Finding	Consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership recorded higher mean scores than autocratic leadership.	Qualitative evidence confirmed that county officials combined several leadership styles depending on governance needs.	County government leadership operated under a hybrid leadership model, with consultative leadership emerging as the preferred approach while elements of autocratic leadership remained evident.

The results revealed that county government leaders in Taita Taveta County practiced autocratic, consultative, participative, and transformational styles of leadership in performing their duties. However, the styles were not used equally, as some preferred one style over the others while others used a combination of the styles in their governance activities. The study further demonstrates that even though the devolved government was meant to foster public

accountability and involve citizens in decision-making processes, leadership styles in Taita Taveta County remained participative and autocratic.

The quantitative findings revealed that consultative leadership emerged as the most dominant leadership style adopted by county government officials, recording the highest mean score (Mean = 3.76). A majority of respondents (71.3%) agreed that county leaders frequently employed consultation in governance processes. This finding suggests that county officials increasingly relied on stakeholder engagement, public forums, and dialogue in addressing governance issues. Such practices are consistent with the constitutional principles of devolution, which emphasize citizen participation, transparency, and accountability in public administration.

Participatory leadership also emerged prominently among county government officials, with 67.4% of respondents agreeing that county leadership promoted transparency and community involvement in governance processes (Mean = 3.60). The findings indicate that county officials increasingly recognized the importance of involving communities in planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring of development programmes. Respondents associated participatory leadership with greater openness in governance and stronger collaboration between public institutions and local communities.

Similarly, transformational leadership constituted another important leadership style practiced within the county government, registering a mean score of 3.53, with 62.6% of respondents agreeing that county leaders demonstrated transformational leadership characteristics. Respondents associated this leadership style with visionary leadership, motivation of communities, promotion of peaceful coexistence, and commitment to long-term socio-economic development. The findings suggest that some county leaders attempted to inspire collective responsibility and encourage institutional reforms aimed at improving governance outcomes.

Despite the prominence of these inclusive leadership styles, the study also established that autocratic leadership remained evident within county governance structures. Nearly half of the respondents (49.5%) agreed that county leaders frequently adopted centralized decision-making approaches (Mean = 3.31). Although the mean score was lower than those of consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership, the findings indicate that elements of hierarchical leadership persisted, particularly in decisions concerning resource allocation, development priorities, employment opportunities, and implementation of county programmes. Respondents perceived that some important decisions continued to be made with limited stakeholder consultation, reflecting a coexistence of participatory governance and centralized political authority.

The qualitative results further supported the quantitative findings. Focus group discussions and oral interviews revealed that consultative and participatory leadership styles were practiced when the county government hosted interactive forums and stakeholder consultations. Consultative leadership was largely associated with improved public-private relations, stakeholder trust-building, and increased acceptability of proposed developments by the local communities. However, participants explained that consultation was not always practiced in decision-making, as some issues remained subject to the political and administrative agendas of the county's elite.

Consequently, the study found that leadership practice in Taita Taveta County cannot be categorized under either autocratic or participatory style. County leaders used consultative leadership, participatory leadership, transformational leadership, and autocratic leadership to varying degrees depending on the nature of the issues. Although the devolution policy promoted consultation during decision-making, administrative actions by county officials demonstrated the existence of centralized government functions. The study further found out that consultative leadership style was the preferred approach to leadership among the respondents. Participatory and transformational styles were also widely practiced but to a lesser extent, whereas autocratic leadership style was observed during the decision-making of selected government procedures that demanded more accountability. Overall, the coexistence of multiple leadership styles revealed that county governments continued to operate under a hybrid system of leadership, which favored a transition from the autocratic form of governance to a more participatory approach after the initiation of devolution in 2013.

4.1.2 Influence of Leadership Styles by County Government Officials on Socio-Economic Conflicts in Taita Taveta County, Kenya, since the introduction of devolution in 2013.

The second objective sought to examine the leadership styles adopted by county government officials and their influence on socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County since 2013. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements assessing the influence of autocratic, consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership styles, using a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The findings are presented in Table 2:

**Table 2***Influence of Leadership Styles on Socio-Economic Conflicts*

Statement	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Total	Mean
(i) Autocratic leadership styles by county leaders have increased socio-economic conflicts in the county.	31 (8.2%)	62 (16.3%)	99 (26.0%)	133 (35.0%)	55 (14.5%)	380	3.31
(ii) Consultative leadership approaches have positively influenced conflict resolution in Taita Taveta.	9 (2.4%)	41 (10.8%)	58 (15.3%)	196 (51.3%)	76 (20.0%)	380	3.76
(iii) Participatory leadership styles have promoted transparency and reduced community grievances.	13 (3.4%)	65 (17.1%)	46 (12.1%)	191 (50.3%)	65 (17.1%)	380	3.60
(iv) Transformational leadership by county officials has fostered peace and social cohesion.	16 (4.2%)	52 (13.7%)	74 (19.5%)	192 (50.5%)	46 (12.1%)	380	3.53

Key: SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neutral, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree

The findings demonstrate that respondents clearly differentiated between leadership styles that escalated socio-economic conflicts and those that contributed towards their mitigation. Overall, consultative leadership recorded the highest mean score (Mean = 3.76), followed by participatory leadership (Mean = 3.60) and transformational leadership (Mean = 3.53), while autocratic leadership recorded a moderate mean score (Mean = 3.31), indicating that respondents generally associated it with increasing socio-economic conflicts. These findings suggest that leadership style remains an important determinant of governance effectiveness and conflict management within devolved governments. Regarding the statement that autocratic leadership styles adopted by county leaders have increased socio-economic conflicts, nearly half of the respondents (49.5%) agreed or strongly agreed, while 24.5% disagreed and 26.0% remained neutral, yielding a mean score of 3.31. This finding suggests that many respondents perceived centralized decision-making, limited consultation, and exclusion of stakeholders as factors that have contributed to conflicts over land allocation, resource distribution, employment opportunities, and development priorities. The relatively high neutral responses further indicate that although some county officials occasionally adopted inclusive approaches, respondents perceived that major decisions affecting communities were often made without sufficient public engagement.

The finding implies that leadership characterized by unilateral decision-making weakens public confidence, reduces transparency, and limits community ownership of county development programmes. Consequently, communities become more likely to challenge government decisions through demonstrations, petitions, legal disputes, or other forms of socio-economic conflict. Similar observations were made by Northouse (2022), who argues that autocratic leadership often discourages collaboration, reduces organizational trust, and increases resistance whenever decisions directly affect people's livelihoods. In contrast, consultative leadership received the highest level of public approval, with 71.3% of respondents agreeing that consultation by county officials had positively influenced conflict resolution (Mean = 3.76). Only 13.2% disagreed, while 15.3% remained neutral. This overwhelming support demonstrates that respondents highly value leadership that engages citizens, community leaders, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders before major policy decisions are implemented. The high rating further suggests that consultation creates opportunities for dialogue, consensus-building, and early identification of community grievances before they escalate into open conflict. Through consultative leadership, county officials are able to understand competing interests, negotiate acceptable solutions, and improve public confidence in governance processes. According to Yukl (2020), consultation strengthens organizational legitimacy because stakeholders perceive decisions as fair, transparent, and collectively owned.

Similarly, participatory leadership was positively perceived by respondents, with 67.4% agreeing that it had promoted transparency and reduced community grievances (Mean = 3.60). Only 20.5% expressed disagreement while 12.1% remained neutral. This finding indicates that respondents viewed public participation as one of the most effective governance approaches for minimizing socio-economic conflicts within the county. The finding reflects the central objective of Kenya's devolved governance system, which emphasizes citizen participation in planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring of county development programmes. When citizens actively participate in governance, they are more likely to trust public institutions, understand government priorities, and support development initiatives. Conversely, exclusion from decision-making often creates perceptions of marginalization and inequality, thereby increasing community dissatisfaction. These findings support the observations of the World Bank (2020), which argues that meaningful citizen participation improves accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in local governance.

The study further established that transformational leadership positively influenced peace and social cohesion, with 62.6% of respondents agreeing that county officials adopting transformational leadership had fostered peaceful coexistence among communities (Mean = 3.53). Only 17.9% disagreed, while 19.5% remained neutral. This observation implies that leadership practice is effective when it is visionary, innovative, motivational, and concerned with community needs. Transformational leadership encourages community members to achieve organizational goals through collective responsibility, motivation, and institution building. Such leadership, therefore, leads to cohesion because citizens view their leaders as people who work for the public good and not for selfish gains. Transformational leadership practice boosts organizational commitment, trust, innovation, and performance by encouraging collective responsibility (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In general, the survey results indicate a high prevalence of consultative, participative, and transformational leadership styles as compared to the autocratic style of leadership. The survey results also suggest that socio-economic conflicts are less likely to arise when county leadership is consultative or participative and not autocratic.

The survey results are consistent with Conflict Transformation theory by Lederach (1997). The theory explores conflict resolution strategies that can be employed to change societal structures that contribute to tensions, hurt feelings, and distrust in communities, promoting sustainable peace. Consultative leadership, participative leadership, and transformational leadership styles are more likely to be associated with high public approval because they promote conflict transformation in structures, relationships, processes, and institutions. On the other hand, the survey results are also consistent with Dependency Theory by Frank (1967). According to Frank, an autocratic leadership style promotes economic conflicts because it promotes dependence between citizens and their leaders. The leaders benefit from suppressing the citizens economically through dominating decision-making processes in the community. The autocratic style of leadership, therefore, leads to social inequality, which causes socio-economic conflicts because citizens become economically dependent on their leaders. Citizens are unable to meet their basic needs because the leadership does not allow them to be active participants in decision-making processes that determine the distribution of resources.

In general, it is safe to assume that the style of leadership in the county government plays a critical role in determining the level of county cohesion and public tranquility or tensions. Leadership in the county government is more likely to be effective in promoting equity and sustainable development when it is transformational and involves openness, collectivism, accountability, consultation, and participation. On the other hand, leadership that is autocratic, non-participative and non-consultative is more likely to cause social divisions and tensions. The survey results, therefore, confirm the need for responsible and transformative leadership in promoting sustainable development and peace in Taita Taveta county.

4.2 Qualitative Findings on Leadership Styles Adopted by County Government Officials and Their Influence on Socio-Economic Conflicts

This section discusses the qualitative results of the study concerning the leadership style of county government officials and its effect on socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County from 2013. The results were generated from Key Informant Interviews, oral interviews, and Focus Group Discussion with youth representatives, women representatives, business representatives, and community leadership representatives. The study also reviewed secondary sources of information to supplement the information collected from the primary sources. The section provides themes that explain how leadership styles of the county government officials have caused or alleviated socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County and have contributed to the control of the crises within the devolved government system.

Theme 1: Autocratic Leadership and Political Interference Increase Community Tensions

The researcher aimed to determine whether autocratic leadership, political manipulation, and lack of consultative governance were some of the factors that triggered socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County. Secondary data revealed that despite devolution's intent to enhance democracy and citizen participation in governance, leadership in various counties continues to exhibit autocratic tendencies, elite capture, political patronage, and lack of public accountability. According to Commission on Revenue Allocation (2021), limited engagement and consultation of stakeholders in the devolution process have resulted in diminished public accountability and exacerbated social tensions in several counties. In addition, National Cohesion and Integration Commission (2022) concurs that political manipulation of the system has resulted in inter-group tensions, mistrust, and resource-seeking behaviours among communities in the counties. Bosire and Gikonyo (2015) also agree that autocratic leadership styles in the county have resulted in diminished public trust in the county government and triggered socio-economic conflicts.

The researcher's oral interview results also revealed similar results. According to respondents, citizen participation and consultation in decision-making processes on matters affecting the county's economy, social issues,

and access to employment had tremendously declined. Wundanyi sub-county oral respondent noted that *“leaders in the county had taken key decisions on matters affecting the community for self-interest and public good; therefore, creating tensions between the people and the county government”* (Oral Interview, Wundanyi town, 3rd April 2026). Taveta sub-county oral respondent also noted that *“political elites used competitions among themselves to advance their agendas and undermined key developmental initiatives in the county”* (Oral Interview, Taveta town, 7th March 2026).

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) of community leadership representatives also revealed that county leadership practises autocratic governance, thus limiting citizen participation in the decision-making process. They argued that the county government made policies without consulting the average citizen. According to a respondent, *“the situation created feelings of alienation and deprivation, particularly in matters related to land, employment, and access to resources”* (FGD, Community Leadership Representatives, April 2026). Business representatives’ FGD revealed that *“the county’s inconsistent policies and preferential treatment of selected businesses had caused mistrust between the county government and investors. The respondents argued that the tensions hindered sustainable business growth and investment in the county”* (FGD, Business Representatives, 6th April 2026).

FGD of youth representatives also revealed that citizens view the county’s leadership as unresponsive to their demands and aspirations. According to the respondents, youth involvement in decision-making was limited, and the county leadership only engaged them during election time, thus making the majority feel disconnected and disenfranchised (FGD, Youth Representatives, 8th April 2026). The researcher conducted a total of thirteen (13) Focus Group Discussions, each comprising five (5) respondents.

The themes identified in the documentary data, oral interviews, and Focus Group Discussions indicate that autocratic leadership and political manipulation in Taita Taveta County have caused tensions between the county government and the citizens, resulting in reduced employment opportunities and social conflicts. The research findings align with various conflict theories, including Conflict Transformation Theory and Dependency Theory. According to Lederach’s Conflict Transformation Theory, conflict transformation occurs when leaders utilise non-zero-sum strategies, such as consultation, participation, and dialogue, to address community grievances (Lederach, 1997). Leaders who fail to utilise the restorative justice framework tend to experience prolonged and intensified conflicts, as illustrated by the socio-economic tensions in Taita Taveta County.

On the other hand, the study findings also align with Dependency Theory, which states that societies with concentrated political and economic power tend to exhibit exploitative behaviours toward the less economically powerful (Frank, 1967). The documentary evidence and oral interviews revealed that political manipulation and autocratic leadership discouraged investments in the county, hindered access to employment, and limited citizen participation in governance. Therefore, the study findings indicate that political manipulation and autocratic leadership exacerbate socio-economic conflicts and trigger social divisions.

Theme 2: Consultative Leadership Promotes Conflict Resolution

The researcher aimed to determine whether consultative leadership practiced by county government leaders had promoted conflict management in Taita Taveta County since 2013. Secondary literature revealed that consultative leadership increases public participation, trust, and accountability as well as speeds up decision-making and policy implementation processes (Northouse, 2022; OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Consultative leadership is also a constitutional requirement in Kenya, as public participation, responsiveness, and accountability are emphasized in the 2010 Constitution, specifically in Articles 10, 174(c), 196, and 232. The qualitative findings validated the above literature and policies by demonstrating that consultative leadership eased tensions by providing a forum for airing grievances and making decisions jointly. The Youth Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants noted that the communities were willing to embrace the county’s programs after engaging them, mainly if youths had been involved in decision-making. The discussion revealed that consultation seldom took place, though interactions held increased public trust and reduced hostilities. The youth participants emphasized that people felt empowered when they interacted directly with the county officials responsible for developing and implementing policies and programs that affected their lives.

The Women Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants noted that women used consultative meetings to air their grievances and views on matters affecting land, water, livelihood, and social services. They added that consulting the communities, and particularly women, promoted the communities’ willingness to engage with the county government as it considered their views and needs in decision-making. However, the women participants noted that consultation sometimes took place formally to comply with the law, and thus community members’ needs and aspirations were not prioritized. The above findings were supported by the oral interview respondents. For example, one village elder noted that consultations held in their community before rolling out development projects kept the residents calm and united throughout the process. Another respondent, a civil society member, noted that interacting with stakeholders reduced tension-building among the community members by addressing their concerns before they

escalated. The interviewer also learned that communities were willing to work with the county government if they had a say in decision-making.

According to table 2, consultative leadership had the highest mean score (Mean = 3.76), with 71.3% of the respondents agreeing that consultation had promoted conflict management in the county. Therefore, the researcher concluded that consultation had played a significant role in conflict management in Taita Taveta County. The findings were consistent with research conducted by Bosire and Gikonyo (2015). These researchers also found that consultation increased transparency and reduced community grievances, which, in turn, improved the legitimacy and accountability of county leaders. However, unlike Kanyinga and Long (2018), who asserted that consultation reduced conflicts by promoting inclusiveness, the current study found that consultation did not eliminate conflict but helped manage it effectively by creating permanent peace and reducing social tensions. Additionally, consistent with the findings of the World Bank (2021), consultation also improved collaboration between the county government and the community.

The researchers used conflict transformation theory to interpret the results. The theory is appropriate for this study because it explains how conflict is transformed, emphasizing collaborative approaches that reduce tension-building processes and promote inclusive decision-making, relationships, structures, and processes that help transform conflict for the long term. The theory also applies to the findings because the study found that consultation promoted peaceful coexistence by helping leaders understand community members' grievances and addressing them amicably. The findings also support dependency theory, which states that leaders' failure to consult community members results in feelings of being exploited, resulting in hostility and persistent conflicts, especially over land, water, and other key resources. Consultative leadership reduced such grievances by involving community members in decision-making, thus shortening the chain of command. The researcher concluded that consultative leadership was the most effective leadership style for managing socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County. Where consultation had taken place, the communities had willingly adopted the county's programs and policies, resulting in reduced hostilities and improved collaboration. The researcher recommended that the county government should invest more in institutionalizing consultation and encouraging public participation in decision-making to maximize the benefits demonstrated by this study.

The researcher argued that leadership was a critical order parameter for managing or fueling conflicts that erupted in Taita Taveta County because it defined the approach taken in addressing disputes. The research findings demonstrated that Taita Taveta County's socio-economic conflicts arose not only from structural factors such as historical injustices and resource inadequacy but also the poor leadership styles that fueled them. For example, the study found that conflict erupted when the leadership failed to respond to the communities' expectations, which reflected poor leadership theories, such as political patronage, the Great Man theory, and the Trait theory. According to these theories, the power and influence of a leader are the determining factors in how successfully an organization, community, or region will be governed. Therefore, poor leadership manifested in the form of limited public participation and consultation resulted in persistent social-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County.

The researcher recommended that county leaders should recognize consultative and participatory leadership as a necessity for achieving sustainable peace through empowerment and accountability. This study demonstrated that these leadership styles promoted public participation, which, in turn, increased public trust, accountability, and inclusiveness. Consultative leadership also reduced social tensions by providing a platform for addressing grievances and validating the legitimacy of county leaders' actions. By contrast, leadership styles based on political patronage and the Great Man theory failed to promote public participation and consultation, resulting in the communities feeling as if they were being ruled by a foreign entity.

The researcher argued that citizens assessed leadership based on whether the leadership promoted equity, minimized inequalities, and maximized public participation. According to the researcher, leadership did not contribute to or promote sustainable peace for the majority of citizens if it failed to address systemic issues, such as historical injustices, unemployment, and inequality in the distribution of resources. Additionally, if leadership failed to foster an inclusive and equitable environment, which, according to the Conflict Transformation Theory, shortens the chain of command, reduces tension, and promotes peaceful coexistence, it was ineffective. Therefore, the researcher recommended that the county's leadership invest time in maximizing transformational leadership by promoting equity and reducing the distance between county officials and the community members.

Based on the arguments of conflict transformation theory and dependency theory, the researcher recommended that Taita Taveta County invest more effort in promoting consultative and participatory leadership than in other forms of leadership. Conflict transformation theory helps explain how consultation promoted sustainable peace by encouraging public participation, accountability, and inclusiveness, and accelerating decision-making and implementation of policies to reduce the length of time disputes persisted. Consultative leadership also reduced tension-building by providing a platform for airing and addressing grievances. Consistent with dependency theory,



consultation reduced feelings of exploitation and minimized grievances, particularly in areas such as land, water, and natural resources.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concluded that the leadership styles of county leaders had an impact on the nature of socio-economic conflicts in Taita Taveta County after the commencement of devolution in 2013. The study established that leadership influenced trust and acceptance of the devolved government, stakeholder participation, resource management, legitimacy of the county government system, and control of conflicts over socio-economic issues. Thus, it was concluded that leadership in the county is a critical function that influences the effectiveness of the devolution policy. The study further concluded that consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership styles have a positive effect on conflict prevention and management in Taita Taveta County. The leadership styles promote consultation, participation, responsiveness, accountability, and effective decision-making, thus enhancing stakeholders' trust and acceptance of the county government and its institutions. The study further established that autocratic leadership styles had a negative impact on conflict prevention and management in the county. It was found that the leadership style reduced public participation in governance, leading to dissatisfaction with the county government's performance on public issues, such as land, resources, employment, and services, causing conflicts.

The study further concluded that effective conflict management in Taita Taveta County requires stakeholders to identify and address the root causes of conflicts, including historical injustices, exclusion, inequality in the distribution of benefits from natural resources, unemployment, and politicization of public appointments. The research established that the root causes of conflicts were brought about by the failure of county leadership to take action in addressing the injustices, making the situation worse. Therefore, the study concluded that the propositions of Conflict Transformation Theory and Dependency Theory apply in the context of Taita Taveta County due to the effect of leadership styles on conflict prevention and management. Finally, the study concluded that the devolution philosophy envisioned by democratically elected county governments cannot be achieved in Taita Taveta County without institutionalized consultation, participation, responsiveness, accountability, and transparency in decision-making and the implementation of policies. The study established that leadership plays a critical role in ensuring effective governance, which will prevent and mitigate conflicts in the county.

5.2 Recommendations

The County Government of Taita Taveta should develop and institutionalize capacity-building programs for consultative, participatory, and transformational leadership amongst elected and appointed leaders. The programs should emphasize values such as inclusion, ethics, accountability, openness, and citizen engagement to enhance governance in accordance with devolution principles. The County Government should develop and sustain institutionalized structures for public participation and stakeholder consultation in decision-making, resource allocation, and development matters to promote inclusiveness. This will promote public trust and confidence in county governance, hence reducing conflicts and disappointments, especially in marginalised communities.

Declaration of Interest

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