Regionalism and the political economy of development in Kenya, 1962-2022

Bildad Mutimba Wangia[1]
Pontian Godfrey Okoth [2]
Kizito Muchanga Lusambili[3]

[1]bidadwangia@gmail.com (+254720927959)
[2]pokoth@mmust.ac.ke. (+254700025095)
[3]kmuchanga@mmust.ac.ke (+254710363494)

https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1271-624X
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2813-6527
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5430-4558

[1,2,3] Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

Recommended Reference: Wangia, B. M., Okoth, P. G., & Lusambili, K. M. (2026). Regionalism and the political economy of development in Kenya, 1962–2022. *African Quarterly Social Science Review*, 3(4), 797–807.
https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.3.4.64

ABSTRACT

Regionalism has been a significant aspect of Kenya's political, economic, and social development, affecting resource distribution, political representation, access to public services, and regional economic opportunities. This study aimed to establish the effect of regionalism on the political economy of development in Kenya between 1962 and 2022. The research was conducted in Kenya, with evidence collected from regions that differed in their historical, political, and socio-economic development. The study applied Dependency Theory and Institutional Theory as a theoretical framework. The theories offered complementary perspectives that enhanced the understanding of historical issues of inequality, distribution of resources, and the role of political and governance institutions in regional development. A qualitative historical study design was selected for the research. The study targeted a population that consisted of individuals who had first-hand knowledge and experience of Kenya's regional political and economic development. The population included political leaders, public officials, members of the community, and business people. A sample of 22 participants was selected from the target population using purposive and snowball sampling approaches. Archival records, oral interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary sources of information such as books, journals, theses, and government publications were used to gather evidence. The research applied thematic and historical data analysis techniques to review the trends of resource allocation and apply the lessons in regional development. The study examined ethical issues arising from the collection of data from participants who did not offer their work publicly. The research requested permission from relevant entities and provided verifiable information for use by participants who submitted their information with verifiable names. No confidentiality was applied when using information from historical sources. The study concluded that regionalism affected the distribution of resources and opportunities such as infrastructure, education, health, and economic development. However, Kenya's new constitution and devolution will enable the country's regions to develop equitably. The study recommends addressing the needs of the different regions based on their specific requirements to achieve sustainable development.

Keywords: Development; Devolution, Political Economy; Regionalism; Regional Inequalities; Resource Allocation

I. INTRODUCTION

Regionalism has remained an important feature of Kenya's political, economic, and social development, influencing debates on political representation, territorial governance, public resource allocation, and regional inequality. Its historical roots can be traced to the final years of colonial rule, when competing political parties advanced different visions of how political power should be distributed in an independent Kenya. The Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) advocated *majimboism*, a regional system of government intended partly to protect minority communities against political and economic domination by larger groups. In contrast, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) favoured a stronger central government. These competing positions made regionalism a central issue in Kenya's constitutional negotiations and the transition to independence (Anderson, 2005; Vaughan, 2019).

This study examines the relationship between regionalism and the political economy of development in Kenya from 1962 to 2022, a period encompassing significant transformations in the country's political and institutional order. The year 1962 provides an appropriate historical starting point because the Regional Boundaries Commission and the constitutional negotiations preceding independence brought questions of territorial governance, political representation,

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

and regional autonomy into sharp focus. The *majimbo* debate reflected concerns among minority communities about potential political exclusion and the unequal distribution of economic opportunities in a centralised state (Anderson, 2005).

Following independence, the consolidation of centralised executive authority shaped the relationship between political power and regional development. Scholarship on Kenya's political economy has highlighted the significance of ethnic identities, patronage, and informal political relationships in shaping access to state resources and political influence (Lynch & von Soest, 2020). Such relationships provide an important analytical context for investigating how regional political considerations have influenced development priorities and the distribution of public resources across the country.

The adoption of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010, introduced a significant institutional shift by establishing a devolved system of government comprising national and county governments. Article 174 identifies objectives of devolution that include promoting democratic and accountable governance, recognising diversity, protecting marginalised communities, and ensuring equitable sharing of national and local resources (Republic of Kenya, 2010). Nevertheless, the introduction of devolution does not, in itself, establish that historical regional inequalities have been eliminated. Research on Kenya's devolved governance demonstrates that devolution has created new opportunities for regional development while also reshaping local political competition, patronage, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Cheeseman et al., 2016).

The year 2022 marks the endpoint of the study, covering the first decade of devolved government following the 2013 implementation of county governance and the conclusion of the Uhuru Kenyatta administration. It also captures the political transition associated with William Ruto's election in August 2022. This period provides an opportunity to examine continuities and changes in the relationship between regional political interests, institutional arrangements, and development outcomes.

Accordingly, the study investigates the relationship between regionalism and the political economy of development in Kenya between 1962 and 2022, focusing on resource allocation, infrastructure development, access to public services, economic opportunities, and regional inequalities. By adopting a historical perspective, the study seeks to contribute to understanding how successive political and institutional arrangements have shaped regional development and how these relationships have evolved from the pre-independence constitutional debates to the first decade of devolved governance.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Ideally, regional governance should support equitable political representation, balanced resource distribution, inclusive development, and fair access to public services and economic opportunities. In Kenya, however, the historical relationship between political power and regional development has raised persistent concerns about unequal access to public resources, infrastructure, and socioeconomic opportunities. The pre-independence *majimbo* debate reflected fears among minority communities that a centralised political system could expose them to domination by more populous groups (Anderson, 2005). Subsequent scholarship has also examined how ethnic political competition, patronage, and relationships between political elites and communities influence the distribution of public goods and access to state resources (Lynch & von Soest, 2020).

The Constitution of Kenya, 2010, sought to address some of these concerns by establishing devolved government and providing for the equitable sharing of national resources. However, the extent to which this institutional transformation has altered the historical relationship between regional political interests and development outcomes requires examination across a longer historical period. Although existing scholarship has investigated *majimboism*, ethnic politics, political patronage, and the effects of devolution, these strands of research do not necessarily provide a unified account of the relationship between regionalism and the political economy of development throughout the period from 1962 to 2022.

The research problem, therefore, concerns the need to establish how regionalism has influenced the political and economic processes through which development priorities, public resources, infrastructure, public services, and economic opportunities have been distributed across Kenya's regions over time. Addressing this problem requires a historical analysis of the interaction between regional political interests, state institutions, and development policies across different political regimes. Such an analysis can clarify the continuities and changes in regional development patterns and assess the significance of constitutional devolution in addressing historical inequalities.

1.2 Research Objective

To examine the relationship between regionalism and the political economy of development in Kenya from 1962 to 2022.

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Dependency Theory

This study was guided by Dependency Theory, which provided complementary perspectives for examining the relationship between regionalism and the political economy of development in Kenya between 1962 and 2022. Dependency Theory explains how historical and unequal economic relationships contribute to the concentration of resources, capital, and development opportunities in dominant centres at the expense of less advantaged regions (Frank, 1967; Dos Santos, 1970). Applied to Kenya, the theory informed the examination of historical patterns of regional resource allocation, infrastructure investment, access to public services, and economic opportunities. It provided a framework for understanding how political and economic relationships may have contributed to persistent regional inequalities and uneven development.

2.1.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory, on the other hand, explains how formal and informal rules, political structures, and governance arrangements shape resource distribution and development outcomes (North, 1990; Hall & Taylor, 1996). The theory guided the examination of how successive political regimes, constitutional arrangements, and governance systems influenced regional representation, public investment, and service delivery in Kenya. In particular, it informed the analysis of the transition from centralised governance to constitutional devolution under the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 (Akech, 2010; Gathii, 2020). The two theories complemented each other by explaining the economic structures and institutional mechanisms through which regional inequalities emerged, persisted, and potentially changed over the study period.

2.2 Empirical Review

Scholarship on regionalism provides important insights into the relationship between territorial identities, political institutions, competition for power, and the distribution of economic resources. Regionalism is not merely a geographical or cultural phenomenon; it also reflects struggles over political representation, state resources, public investment, and development opportunities. Keating (1998) argues that regionalism must be understood in relation to territorial identities, political institutions, and competition over political and economic resources. Similarly, Rokkan (1983) highlights the historical inequalities that emerge between political and economic centres and their peripheral regions. These perspectives provide a foundation for examining how regional political interests interact with institutional arrangements to influence development priorities and the distribution of resources. BITs, in essence, encourage cross-border economic relations by providing assurances against risks such as nationalization, unfavorable treatment by the host state, and changes in legislation

In African political scholarship, Kasfir (1976) demonstrates the importance of ethnicity, political participation, and elite mobilisation in shaping competition for political influence. His analysis of Ugandan politics offers a comparative perspective on how political actors mobilise group identities within restricted political arenas. Berman (2004) similarly examines the relationship between ethnicity, bureaucracy, democracy, and political trust, highlighting the importance of understanding ethnic identities in relation to institutional structures and political competition. Although these studies do not directly examine regional resource allocation in Kenya, they provide useful analytical perspectives for investigating how political mobilisation and institutional practices may influence the distribution of public resources and development opportunities.

In Kenya, the relationship between ethnicity, constitutional arrangements, and political power has been an important theme in the literature. Okoth-Ogendo (1993) examines questions of ethnicity, justice, and constitutional order, providing a foundation for understanding political inclusion and the organisation of state power. These issues are particularly relevant to the historical debate over *majimboism*, which placed regional autonomy and the protection of territorially concentrated interests at the centre of constitutional negotiations preceding independence. The subsequent consolidation of centralised political authority created an important context for examining how regional interests were represented and how development priorities were established under successive administrations.

Throup and Hornsby (1998) provide a historical analysis of multiparty politics in Kenya, examining political developments under the Kenyatta and Moi administrations and the emergence of competitive party politics in the early 1990s. Their work provides important context for understanding how ethnic and territorial identities became instruments of political mobilisation. However, the relationship between electoral competition and regional development requires examination beyond the political organisation of parties and alliances. In particular, it is necessary to investigate how political competition related to decisions concerning public investment, infrastructure provision, access to services, and economic opportunities across different regions.

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

The political economy of regional development also requires attention to the relationship between political authority and the distribution of public investment. Research on Kenya's political history provides a basis for investigating the interaction between political elites, regional political interests, and the organisation of state power (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Nevertheless, establishing whether particular regions benefited disproportionately from public expenditure or infrastructure investment requires additional evidence from development plans, government expenditure records, sectoral statistics, and historical accounts of public investment. This distinction is important because political mobilisation and patronage may influence development decisions, but their actual consequences for regional development must be established through empirical investigation.

The introduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s created a new political context in which electoral competition, coalition-building, and regional political interests became increasingly significant. However, the relationship between political competition and development cannot be assumed to be uniform across regions or administrations. A historical examination must consider how political institutions, economic priorities, and regional interests interacted under different governments and how these interactions related to the distribution of infrastructure, public services, and economic opportunities. This approach enables regionalism to be examined not simply as a characteristic of electoral politics but also as a potential influence on the political and economic processes through which development resources are allocated.

The promulgation of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010, marked a significant institutional transformation by establishing a devolved system of government (Republic of Kenya, 2010). Devolution sought to promote democratic governance, protect marginalised communities, and facilitate the equitable sharing of national resources. Akech (2010) examines institutional reform under the new constitutional framework, providing a basis for understanding the legal and institutional changes intended to address weaknesses in governance and accountability. Gathii (2020) discusses the constitutional and institutional dimensions of the Equalisation Fund, which is intended to support the provision of basic services in marginalised areas. These contributions are important for assessing how devolution and related fiscal arrangements have sought to address historical regional disparities.

Nevertheless, the existence of constitutional provisions for equitable resource distribution does not, by itself, demonstrate that regional inequalities have been eliminated. An assessment of devolution must distinguish between institutional intentions, the allocation of financial resources, the implementation of development programmes, and the resulting outcomes for communities. It must also consider the relationship between national and county governments, differences in county development priorities, and the capacity of local institutions to translate public expenditure into improved services and economic opportunities. Consequently, the post-2010 period should be examined both as a departure from earlier arrangements and as part of the longer historical relationship between regional political interests and development in Kenya.

Taken together, the literature provides valuable insights into the political, constitutional, and institutional dimensions of regionalism. Keating (1998) and Rokkan (1983) offer perspectives on territorial identity and centre–periphery relationships; Kasfir (1976) and Berman (2004) illuminate the interaction between political mobilisation, ethnicity, and institutions; Okoth-Ogendo (1993) examines constitutional order and political inclusion; and Throup and Hornsby (1998) provide historical context for understanding political competition in Kenya. Akech (2010) and Gathii (2020) contribute to the analysis of institutional reform and the constitutional mechanisms intended to address regional disparities. However, these contributions address different aspects of the relationship between regionalism and development, and their arguments should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of a single causal relationship.

The principal gap addressed by this study is the need for a historically integrated examination of how regionalism has influenced the political economy of development in Kenya between 1962 and 2022. In particular, the study investigates how regional political interests, changing institutional arrangements, and competition for state resources related to the distribution of public investment, infrastructure development, access to education and health services, economic opportunities, and regional inequalities.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Objective

The study sought to examine the influence of regionalism on the political economy of development in Kenya between 1962 and 2022, focusing on resource allocation, infrastructure development, access to public services, economic opportunities, and regional inequalities.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Kenya, focusing on regions with different historical, political, and socioeconomic development experiences. The selection provided an opportunity to examine variations in regional resource allocation,

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

political representation, infrastructure development, and access to public services within the country's changing political and institutional context.

3.3 Target Population

The target population comprised individuals with relevant knowledge and experience of Kenya's regional political and economic development. These included political leaders, public officials, community representatives, and business people. Historical records, government publications, academic literature, and archival materials also constituted important documentary sources for the study.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

The study selected 22 participants using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling identified individuals with relevant knowledge of regional political and economic developments, while snowball sampling facilitated access to additional participants through referrals from initial respondents. Selection was guided by participants' knowledge and experience of Kenya's political history, governance, resource allocation, and regional development.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The study employed interviews, focus group discussions, and archival document reviews to collect primary and historical evidence. Interviews and focus group discussions generated insights from participants with first-hand knowledge of regional political and economic developments. Archival materials were examined to establish historical changes in political systems, development policies, resource allocation, and institutional reforms. Secondary data were obtained from books, peer-reviewed journals, theses, government publications, and other relevant scholarly materials. Using multiple sources facilitated the comparison and corroboration of historical evidence.

3.6 Data Analysis

The study employed thematic and historical analysis. Thematic analysis involved identifying and organising recurring patterns relating to regionalism, political representation, resource allocation, infrastructure development, public service provision, economic opportunities, and regional inequalities. Historical analysis examined changes and continuities in these patterns across the different political and institutional periods between 1962 and 2022. Findings from interviews, focus group discussions, archival records, and secondary literature were compared and triangulated to establish historical trends and generate conclusions in relation to the research objective.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study observed research ethics throughout data collection and analysis. Informed consent was obtained from participants before interviews and focus group discussions, and confidentiality was emphasised in handling information provided by research participants. Permission and research clearance were sought from the relevant authorities before conducting fieldwork. Historical documentary sources were appropriately acknowledged and referenced, while information obtained from participants was handled in accordance with the agreed confidentiality arrangements.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Regionalism and the Distribution of State Resources in Kenya

The study established that regionalism significantly influenced the distribution of state resources in Kenya between 1962 and 2022. Resource allocation was shaped not only by economic needs and population distribution but also by political interests, institutional arrangements, regional relationships, and access to political authority. Successive governments introduced different development and resource allocation strategies; however, political considerations continued to influence decisions concerning infrastructure, public investment, public services, and economic opportunities.

The findings revealed that the dismantling of the Majimbo system through constitutional amendments between 1964 and 1969 strengthened central government control over development planning and resource allocation. Evidence from focus group discussions with business people and traders in Mombasa indicated that planning, budgeting, and development decisions increasingly became concentrated within the Presidency and government ministries, while the Provincial Administration facilitated implementation at the regional level. Consequently, regions became increasingly dependent on central government decisions and political channels to access development resources.

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

This pattern became particularly pronounced during the Kenyatta and Moi administrations. Although the District Focus for Rural Development strategy introduced in 1983 sought to decentralise development planning, central government institutions continued to exercise substantial influence over regional development priorities. The introduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s further intensified competition for political influence and public resources. Roads, schools, electricity, water, and administrative appointments increasingly acquired political significance, with communities associating development delivery with political representation and government responsiveness.

These findings are consistent with Throup and Hornsby (1998) analysis of political competition and the organisation of political power under the Kenyatta and Moi administrations. They also reflect North (1990) argument that institutions shape incentives and influence the distribution of economic opportunities. From the perspective of Institutional Theory, centralised decision-making structures created mechanisms through which political relationships influenced access to public resources. Dependency Theory further explains how historical concentration of economic resources and investment in particular regions could reinforce centre–periphery inequalities (Frank, 1967).

The findings therefore demonstrate that regionalism operated not merely through ethnic or territorial competition but also through institutional relationships between political leaders, government structures, and communities. Access to development resources was consequently influenced by the political and institutional arrangements through which communities engaged with the state.

4.2 Regional Disparities in Infrastructure Development

The study established that regional disparities in infrastructure development were among the most significant manifestations of regionalism in Kenya. Roads, electricity, railway networks, communication infrastructure, water systems, educational facilities, and healthcare infrastructure influenced the extent to which different regions participated in economic activities and accessed public services. The findings traced these disparities to colonial development patterns, which prioritised selected areas for administrative and economic purposes, creating uneven infrastructure foundations that persisted after independence.

Archival evidence indicated that between 1965 and 1975, significant government investment in roads, agricultural feeder roads, rural electrification, irrigation, education, and health services was directed towards Central, Eastern, and parts of the Rift Valley regions. These areas had relatively established agricultural production and trading systems, particularly in coffee, tea, dairy, and horticultural production. Development planning consequently favoured areas considered economically productive and capable of generating higher returns on public investment. Although this approach was justified by national economic growth objectives, it reinforced the advantages of regions that already possessed relatively favourable economic conditions.

The findings further revealed that the Kenyatta and Moi administrations maintained substantial central government influence over infrastructure investment. During the Moi administration, infrastructure projects and public facilities increasingly acquired political significance, with the Provincial Administration playing an important role in identifying regional development priorities. Respondents from less-developed areas, including Marakwet Plateau, described inadequate roads and limited infrastructure as persistent obstacles to economic activity and investment. Edgar Shisungu and Peter Odongo particularly highlighted the consequences of poor road connectivity for local development.

A shift towards technocratic development planning became more evident during the Kibaki administration through initiatives such as the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation and Kenya Vision 2030. These programmes prioritised roads, energy, airports, universities, and communication networks. Nevertheless, the findings indicated that established economic centres, including Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, and Eldoret, continued to enjoy infrastructure advantages, while remote areas, particularly in northern Kenya, experienced significant deficits in roads, electricity, and clean water.

These findings support Frank (1967) argument that historical economic relationships can reproduce uneven development between dominant and peripheral areas. They also demonstrate the relevance of Rokkan (1983) centre–periphery perspective in explaining territorial inequalities. From an institutional perspective, North (1990) argument that institutional arrangements shape economic incentives helps explain how development policies and investment decisions influenced the geographical distribution of infrastructure. The findings suggest that infrastructure investment generated cumulative advantages: areas with established infrastructure attracted additional investment, expanded economic activity, and subsequently became more attractive destinations for further public and private investment.

4.3 Regionalism and Access to Education, Healthcare and Public Services

The study established that regionalism influenced access to education, healthcare, and other public services across Kenya. Historical differences in missionary activities, colonial investment, infrastructure development, and the distribution of human resources contributed to uneven access to education and healthcare. Regions that benefited from

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

earlier missionary and administrative investments entered the independence period with relatively stronger educational and healthcare foundations than areas that had received limited investment.

Archival evidence indicated that disparities persisted after independence despite increased government investment in education and healthcare. Differences in the distribution of trained teachers, qualified medical personnel, and public facilities affected the capacity of different regions to provide essential services. Respondents also highlighted the geographical barriers associated with accessing healthcare. Yusuf Hassan, for example, observed that residents in his area frequently travelled long distances to obtain medical services. Such experiences illustrated how regional inequalities translated into differences in the quality of life and access to basic public goods.

The findings further revealed that access to education and healthcare became increasingly politicised during the 1980s and 1990s. Budgetary allocations, recruitment decisions, and the distribution of public facilities were perceived by some respondents to reflect political affiliation and regional influence. Nevertheless, respondents offered different explanations for these disparities, including institutional capacity, limited financial resources, informal political networks, and government development priorities.

The findings are consistent with North (1990) institutional perspective, which emphasises the influence of institutional rules and arrangements on resource distribution and economic outcomes. They also support Frank (1967) argument that historical inequalities can persist through economic and institutional structures. The findings demonstrate that regional disparities in public services cannot be explained exclusively by political discrimination; they also reflect differences in historical investment, geographical accessibility, institutional capacity, and the availability of qualified personnel.

The introduction of devolution under the Constitution of Kenya, 2010, created new institutional arrangements for the provision of healthcare and other county-level services (Republic of Kenya, 2010). However, the study established that disparities in healthcare access persisted among counties, reflecting differences in financial resources, administrative capacity, infrastructure, and implementation. Thus, although devolution brought decision-making closer to local communities, it did not automatically eliminate historical inequalities in public service provision.

4.4 Regionalism and Economic Opportunities

The study further established that regionalism influenced the distribution of economic opportunities across Kenya. Employment, investment, industrial activity, access to markets, and productive resources were unevenly distributed, reflecting historical investment patterns and political and institutional arrangements. Regions with established infrastructure, stronger agricultural production, and better integration into national markets were better positioned to attract investment and expand economic activities. Conversely, areas with limited infrastructure and weaker market connections remained more dependent on pastoralism, agriculture, and informal economic activities.

Government development policies between the 1960s and 1980s contributed to these differences by prioritising areas considered to have higher economic potential. Investment in agriculture, infrastructure, and industry strengthened the productive advantages of regions such as Central Kenya and parts of the Rift Valley. The findings demonstrated that policies intended to maximise national economic growth could generate uneven regional outcomes because areas with established productive capacity were better positioned to benefit from subsequent investment.

The study also established that political competition during the multiparty period influenced perceptions of access to economic opportunities. Development projects, markets, roads, and other public investments became associated with political support and electoral considerations. Political leaders increasingly acted as intermediaries between communities and the state, while regional political support became an important basis for negotiating access to public investment and development opportunities.

These findings are consistent with Throup and Hornsby (1998) examination of political competition and the organisation of political power in Kenya. They also reinforce Keating's (1998) argument that regionalism is connected to territorial interests and competition over political and economic resources. From the perspective of Dependency Theory, the findings suggest that regions with established economic advantages accumulated further investment and opportunities, while less-developed areas experienced difficulties overcoming their structural disadvantages (Frank, 1967).

4.5 Regionalism, Migration and the Uneven Distribution of Opportunities

The findings established that regional disparities influenced migration patterns, particularly movement from less-developed regions towards urban centres and economically productive areas. From the 1970s onwards, Nairobi and other major urban centres, including Eldoret, attracted individuals seeking employment, education, investment opportunities, and improved living conditions. Migration therefore emerged as an economic and social response to uneven regional development.

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

The study identified contradictory consequences of this mobility. On the one hand, migration enabled individuals from less-developed regions to access employment, education, and other opportunities that were limited in their places of origin. On the other hand, it contributed to the concentration of labour and skills in already established economic centres. Consequently, some rural regions experienced the loss of productive populations, while expanding urban areas faced increasing pressure on housing, infrastructure, and public services.

The findings further indicated that migration was influenced by perceptions of particular locations as centres of opportunity and upward mobility. Nairobi, for example, was perceived not only as the national capital but also as a centre of employment, education, investment, and economic advancement.

These findings demonstrate that regional inequality extends beyond the geographical distribution of public resources to influence population movements and the spatial concentration of economic activity. They also illustrate the cumulative nature of uneven development, whereby economically advantaged regions attract additional labour and investment, strengthening their position relative to less-developed areas.

4.6 Regionalism and the Marginalisation of Certain Regions

The study established that regionalism was associated with the persistent marginalisation of several regions, particularly northern and arid and semi-arid areas of Kenya. These regions experienced considerable disadvantages in infrastructure, education, healthcare, employment, and access to markets. Counties such as Marsabit, Mandera, and Turkana continued to experience development deficits arising from historical patterns of limited public investment, geographical challenges, and political and institutional priorities.

The consequences of marginalisation extended beyond material deprivation. Limited access to roads, water, markets, employment, and public services constrained livelihood opportunities and reinforced dependence on pastoralism and informal economic activities. Respondents also associated prolonged development exclusion with perceptions of unequal citizenship and limited participation in national decision-making. In this respect, inadequate public investment was interpreted not simply as an economic disadvantage but also as an indication of political and institutional exclusion.

The findings suggest that regional marginalisation has both material and political dimensions. They are consistent with Rokkan (1983) centre–periphery perspective, which explains how territorial inequalities can become embedded in political and economic relationships. They also relate to Okoth-Ogendo (1993) examination of ethnicity, justice, and constitutional order in Kenya, particularly the significance of political inclusion and equitable participation in state institutions. The findings therefore demonstrate how prolonged regional inequalities can reinforce territorial identities and influence communities' perceptions of their relationship with the state.

Although constitutional devolution introduced mechanisms intended to address historical marginalisation, the study established that these interventions had not completely eliminated regional disparities by 2022. Increased investment in infrastructure, healthcare, and water services in counties such as Turkana, Wajir, and Mandera represented important developments. However, differences in institutional capacity, geographical conditions, and governance practices continued to influence the ability of counties to translate financial resources into sustainable development outcomes.

4.7 Regional Integration and Economic Development

The study established that regional integration, particularly through the East African Community (EAC), expanded opportunities for trade, investment, labour mobility, and market access. The establishment of the EAC Customs Union in 2005 and the Common Market in 2010 strengthened the framework for regional economic cooperation. Cross-border commercial activities around Busia, Malaba, and Namanga provided opportunities for formal and informal traders, while Kenyan manufacturing and service enterprises gained access to wider regional markets.

However, the benefits of regional integration were not distributed uniformly across Kenya. The study found that industrially developed areas, particularly Nairobi, Kiambu, and parts of Nakuru, were better positioned to exploit regional market opportunities because of their established infrastructure, capital availability, and productive capacity. In contrast, less-developed regions faced constraints associated with inadequate transport infrastructure, limited access to finance, and weaker institutional support.

Informal cross-border trade provided additional economic opportunities for small-scale traders, although their participation remained vulnerable to regulatory changes and capital constraints. The findings therefore revealed a contradiction: regional integration expanded the geographical scope of economic opportunities but did not necessarily produce balanced development within Kenya. Regions already integrated into national and regional economic networks benefited more rapidly than marginalised areas.

The findings demonstrate that external market integration interacts with existing domestic economic inequalities. From the perspective of Dependency Theory, unequal productive capacities influence the ability of different

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

regions to benefit from expanding economic relationships (Frank, 1967). Keating's (1998) analysis of regionalism also provides a useful conceptual perspective for understanding the interaction between territorial interests and economic opportunities. The study consequently establishes that regional integration should be accompanied by complementary domestic investment and institutional support if its benefits are to contribute to more balanced regional development.

4.8 Devolution and the Reconfiguration of Regional Development

The study established that devolution represented the most significant institutional intervention during the study period to address the historical consequences of centralised development. The Constitution of Kenya, 2010, established county governments and sought to bring political authority, public resources, and development decision-making closer to local communities (Republic of Kenya, 2010). The findings indicated that devolution changed the relationship between regionalism and development by creating constitutionally recognised institutional structures through which communities could influence local development priorities.

The effects were particularly visible in counties that had historically experienced limited government investment. County governments assumed responsibility for important functions, including county health services, local infrastructure, and water services. Increased county-level investment facilitated the implementation of development projects in areas that had previously experienced significant service and infrastructure deficits.

Nevertheless, the study established that devolution did not automatically eliminate regional inequalities. Counties differed in administrative capacity, technical expertise, governance practices, economic foundations, and implementation capacity. These differences influenced their ability to translate devolved resources into sustainable development outcomes. The Equalisation Fund and other targeted interventions represented additional constitutional mechanisms for addressing historical marginalisation, although their effects remained insufficient to overcome deeply entrenched structural disparities.

These findings are consistent with Akech (2010) analysis of institutional reforms under the 2010 Constitution and Gathii's (2020) examination of the Equalisation Fund as a constitutional mechanism for addressing historical inequalities. They also support North's (1990) argument that institutional arrangements influence economic and development outcomes. The study therefore interprets devolution as a reconfiguration rather than a complete resolution of regional inequality. Although political authority and development resources were redistributed, historical differences in infrastructure, institutional capacity, economic structure, and geographical conditions continued to influence development outcomes.

4.9 Synthesis of Findings and Discussion

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that regionalism significantly influenced Kenya's political economy of development between 1962 and 2022. Its influence was evident in the distribution of state resources, infrastructure, education, healthcare, employment, investment, trade, and other economic opportunities. Regional inequalities were not attributable to a single administration or development policy but emerged through the interaction of historical legacies, centralised institutions, political competition, economic planning, and regional bargaining.

The findings further demonstrate that the relationship between regionalism and development changed across different historical periods. The dismantling of the Majimbo system following independence strengthened centralised control over development planning and resource allocation. During the Kenyatta and Moi administrations, political authority and regional development became closely interconnected. Multiparty competition from 1992 intensified regional bargaining over public resources, while the Kibaki administration placed greater emphasis on technocratic planning and infrastructure development. The Constitution of 2010 subsequently introduced devolution as a new institutional mechanism for redistributing political authority and development resources.

The findings provide complementary support for Dependency Theory and Institutional Theory. Dependency Theory explains how historical inequalities in productive capacity, infrastructure, and investment contributed to the persistence of regional economic disparities (Frank, 1967). Institutional Theory explains how political structures, governance arrangements, and resource allocation mechanisms influenced the reproduction or transformation of these inequalities (North, 1990). The two perspectives demonstrate that regional development outcomes were shaped by both structural economic relationships and the institutions through which political and economic decisions were made.

Overall, the study established that regionalism was neither uniformly detrimental nor entirely beneficial to Kenya's development. It provided a mechanism through which communities negotiated access to state resources and development opportunities, but it also contributed to the reproduction of historical inequalities. By 2022, Kenya had transitioned from a highly centralised development system towards a devolved governance framework. However, this institutional transformation had not produced complete regional equality. The political economy of development remained influenced by historical investment patterns, political power, institutional capacity, economic opportunities, and regional interests.

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concluded that regionalism was a persistent and evolving feature of Kenya's political economy between 1962 and 2022. Regional identities and interests influenced the distribution of state resources, infrastructure, education, health services, and economic opportunities, contributing to differences in development across regions. These patterns were partly rooted in colonial inequalities and were subsequently reinforced, modified, or addressed by successive governments through political competition, development policies, constitutional reforms, and devolution. The introduction of devolution under the 2010 Constitution represented an important institutional response to historical regional inequalities by bringing resources and decision-making closer to local communities. However, regional disparities persisted, demonstrating that institutional reforms alone did not eliminate historically embedded inequalities. The study therefore concluded that regionalism had both constraining and enabling effects on development: it contributed to competition and uneven distribution of resources, while also creating opportunities for political representation, local participation, and more geographically responsive development.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that the national and county governments should strengthen equitable and needs-based allocation of development resources, particularly by improving the implementation of the Equalization Fund and strengthening mechanisms for directing public investment towards historically marginalized regions. Resource allocation should be guided by objective indicators of deprivation and development need rather than political influence or regional patronage. This would enable regionalism to contribute more effectively to inclusive and balanced national development.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

Akech, M. (2010). *Institutional reform in the new Constitution of Kenya*. International Center for Transitional Justice.

Anderson, D. M. (2005). 'Yours in struggle for majimbo': Nationalism and the party politics of decolonization in Kenya, 1955–64. *Journal of Contemporary History, 40*(3), 547–564. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009405054571

Berman, B. (2004). Ethnicity, bureaucracy, and democracy: The politics of trust. In B. Berman, D. Eyoh, & W. Kymlicka (Eds.), *Ethnicity and democracy in Africa* (pp. 38–53). James Currey.

Cheeseman, N., Lynch, G., & Willis, J. (2016). Decentralisation in Kenya: The governance of governors. *The Journal of Modern African Studies, 54*(1), 1–35.

Dos Santos, T. (1970). The structure of dependence. *The American Economic Review, 60*(2), 231–236.

Frank, A. G. (1967). *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical studies of Chile and Brazil*. Monthly Review Press.

Gathii, J. T. (2020). The Kenyan Constitution and devolution: An assessment of the Equalisation Fund. In Y. Ghai & J. Cottrell Ghai (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the Kenyan Constitution* (pp. 601–620). Oxford University Press.

Hall, P. A., & Taylor, R. C. R. (1996). Political science and the three new institutionalisms. *Political Studies, 44*(5), 936–957. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00343.x

Kasfir, N. (1976). *The shrinking political arena: Participation and ethnicity in African politics, with a case study of Uganda*. University of California Press.

Keating, M. (1998). *The new regionalism in Western Europe*. Edward Elgar.

Lynch, G., & von Soest, C. (2020). The political economy of Kenya: Community, clientelism, and class. In G. Lynch (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Kenyan politics*. Oxford University Press.

North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press.

Okoth-Ogendo, H. W. O. (1993). *Ethnicity, justice and the law: The quest for constitutional order in Kenya*. Zed Books.

Republic of Kenya. (2010). *The Constitution of Kenya, 2010*.

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)

Rokkan, S. (1983). *Economy, territory, identity: Politics of West European peripheries*. Sage Publications.

Throup, D., & Hornsby, C. (1998). *Multi-party politics in Kenya: The Kenyatta and Moi states and the triumph of the system in the 1992 election*. James Currey.

Vaughan, C. M. (2019). The politics of regionalism and federation in East Africa, 1958–1964. *The Historical Journal, 62*(2), 519–540.

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC)