

Transformational Leadership and Social Service Delivery in Kenya's Marginalized Counties: Evidence of Indirect Institutional Effects

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of transformational leadership on social service delivery in Kenya's devolved governance system, focusing on education, health, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services in Isiolo County. Grounded in Transformational Leadership Theory and Institutional Theory, the study adopted a pragmatist paradigm and an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 395 household respondents, while qualitative data were obtained from 19 key informant interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results show that transformational leadership has no significant direct effect on education and health service delivery ($\beta = 0.071$, $p = 0.247$) but a significant negative direct effect ($\beta = -0.175$, $p = 0.043$) on WASH service delivery. Transformational leadership significantly affects operational capacity ($\beta = 0.125$, $p = 0.036$) which positively affects education and health service delivery ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$). Operational capacity provides an indirect-only mediating pathway between transformational leadership and education and health service delivery but the indirect pathway remains non-significant in the WASH sector. The model explains 41.2% of the variance in education and health service delivery outcomes. Qualitative findings support these results where transformational leadership enhances planning, coordination, and accountability, while infrastructural and resource constraints continue to limit WASH performance. The study concludes that transformational leadership acts as a distal enabling factor where its effect on service delivery is realized through operational capacity. The findings demonstrate that leadership effects in devolved and resource-constrained contexts are primarily indirect and institutionally mediated as opposed to direct.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership; Social Service Delivery; Operational Capacity; Devolved Governance; Institutional Theory; Kenya

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1. Introduction

Kenya's 2010 Constitution introduced a devolved governance system aimed at improving equity, strengthening local governance, and enhancing the delivery of public services across counties. This reform devolved important functions on planning, budgeting and service delivery to county governments especially in health, educational support services and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) (Government of Kenya, 2010; Government of Kenya, 2013). However, inequalities in social service delivery are still glaring despite these reforms especially in the arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) counties such as Isiolo (World Bank, 2018; Muwonge et al., 2022).

County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) have aimed to enhance service accessibility, reliability, and responsiveness, but the outcomes from their implementation have been varied across sectors. There have been some modest improvements in staffing and the coordination of delivery of education and health services in Kenya's county governments, but the situation is different for WASH services, which continue to be dogged by persistent infrastructure and poor maintenance systems (Eregae et al., 2019; Kagwanja et al., 2024). This showed that planning is not enough without effective leadership and strong institutional and operational systems to

deliver results.

Transformational leadership is a leadership style that recognizes the importance of articulating a vision, inspiring, innovating and involving stakeholders (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006) and is now more than ever attracting interest in the field of public administration. Thus, transformational leadership has been associated with better performance, higher commitment of employees and better responsiveness in service delivery in the public sector (Atiku et al., 2023; Gichuki et al., 2024). However, evidence from resource constrained and decentralized settings is mixed. In such settings leadership effects are often constrained by weak infrastructure, financial constraints and institutional fragmentation. This study draws on Transformational Leadership Theory and Institutional Theory to examine leadership influence on social service delivery in devolved systems. Transformational Leadership Theory provides an understanding on how leaders influence vision and motivation (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) while institution theory emphasizes importance of systems, structures and procedures in influencing implementation outcomes (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995). The study conceptualizes transformational leadership as an indirect governance mechanism whose impact is mediated through operational capacity. Isiolo County offers an appropriate empirical setting given the pervasive governance and service delivery challenges typical of ASAL counties such as lack of infrastructure, resource constraints and climate change vulnerability. This study therefore explores whether transformational leadership has a direct effect on service delivery or that its effect is largely mediated through operational capacity.

1.1 Study Objective

- i. To determine the direct and indirect influence of transformational leadership on social service delivery in Isiolo County.

1.2 Research Hypothesis

- i. H₁: There is no statistically significant positive direct influence of transformational leadership on social service delivery in Isiolo County.
- ii. H₂: There is no statistically significant indirect effect of transformational leadership on social service delivery through operational capacity.

1.3 Transformational Leadership

This study views transformational leadership as a leadership style of four empirically validated principles of idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspiring motivation and personalized concern. The standardized principles are to motivate and develop the workers towards organizational goals (Gichuki et al., 2024). Numerous scholarships associate transformational leadership with improved organizational performance but its effectiveness in decentralized governance systems is often compromised by structural and contextual factors. This means that leadership alone cannot significantly improve service delivery in an environment characterized by poor infrastructure and weak administrative capacities, and low financial resources. It is clear that transformational leadership is dependent on enabling operational and institutional frameworks that enhance accountability, coordination and implementation capacities (Mussa & Dagada, 2026). Moreover transformational leadership is claimed to facilitate organizational change through enhancement of employee engagement, motivation and value-based influence that are vital for organizational commitment, responsibility and vision alignment in the implementation of public sector strategies (Gichuki et al., 2024).

However, it is important to acknowledge that its direct impact on social service delivery may be limited due to lack or unintegrated institutional processes (Jensen et al., 2019) and therefore transformational leadership is best understood to have an indirect impact on service delivery through enhancement of operational processes such as planning, coordination and resource allocation, rather than producing immediate results at the citizen level.

1.4 Operational Capacity

In this study, operational capacity was operationalized as the capacity of county governments to translate strategic intentions to successful social service delivery through adequate resources and strong infrastructure capabilities. Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Scott (1995), proponents of Institutional Theory, viewed this as the formal systems and procedures that convert leadership objectives into governance processes and execution structures. Accordingly, this operational capacity emphasizes both the availability of resources and infrastructure and the extent to which regulations, protocols and structures of coordination facilitate or hinder implementation plans. It is, however, clear that financial and human resources, necessary supplies, sector-specific infrastructure including planning, budgeting, maintenance and monitoring processes all have an influence on operational capability in devolved government situations. The availability of resources does not however make successful

plan implementation when there are prevalent challenges of poor coordination, insufficient controls, restricted autonomy, infrastructure deficits and inadequate funding (Shigali & Shitseswa, 2023). This research thus, evaluates operational capability through infrastructure adequacy, maintenance systems and the distribution of service facilities across the education, health, and WASH sectors to capture the institutional functioning and physical preparedness required for efficient service delivery in a decentralized setting.

1.5 Social Service Delivery

Social service delivery refers to the provision of basic public services in the education, health and WASH sectors and is measured by accessibility, reliability and responsiveness (Kagwanja et al., 2024). Reliability measurement represents the consistency and dependability of service delivery in terms of functional infrastructure, staffing levels and continuity of supply systems (Karama, 2021), accessibility is the ease with which citizens access services without barriers considering distance, cost or discrimination (Eregae et al., 2019) and responsiveness refers to the extent to which services promptly meet community needs and incorporate user feedback (Muwonge et al., 2022). The study is grounded on Public Value Theory which describes how public institutions provide outcomes that citizens value and are consistent with societal expectations (O’Flynn, 2021). In the state-citizen relationship, it therefore serves as both a performance indicator and a governance responsibility and further shaped by sectoral variations. Leadership and operational capacity have direct influence on delivery of education and health services, which are generally supported by continuing administrative systems, WASH services on the other hand rely more on infrastructure necessitating more maintenance systems, technical competence, and capital expenditure. These variations show how sector-specific analysis of service delivery results is imperative.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1 suggests that transformational leadership affects social service delivery through operational capacity. Transformational leadership is characterized by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration; it is expected to improve operational capacity through greater coordination, accountability, planning discipline and strategic alignment. Operational capacity in turn has an impact on the accessibility, reliability and responsiveness of services in the education, health and WASH sectors. The framework therefore conceptualizes transformational leadership as a distal enabling factor, with its contribution to service delivery mediated through improved implementation capacity rather than direct effects on citizen outcomes.

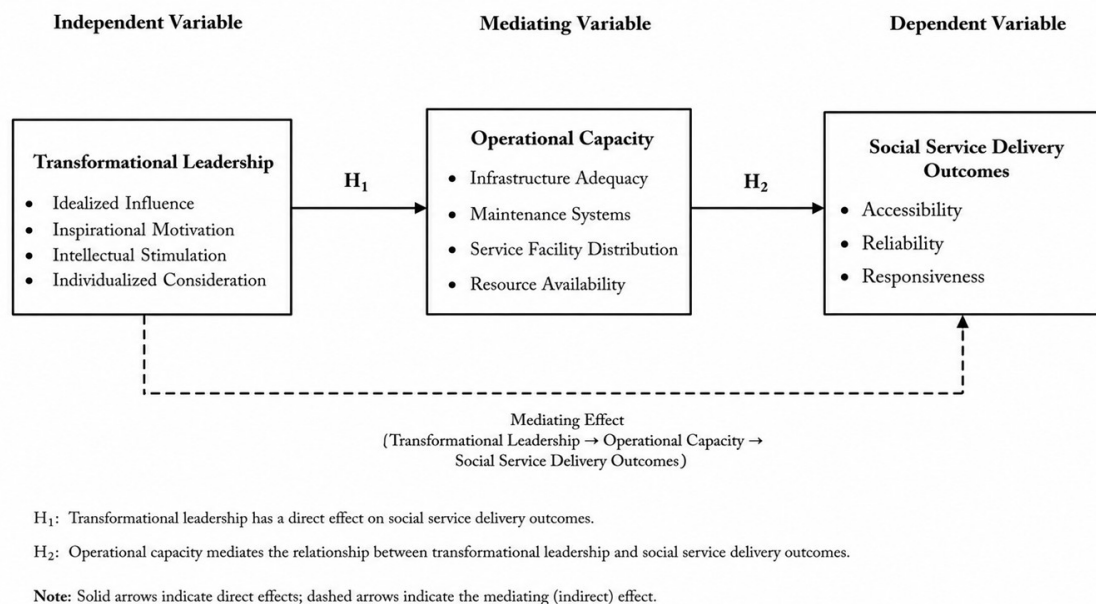


Figure 1. *Conceptual Diagram*

1.7 Theoretical Review

1.7.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory as described by Burns (1978) and later developed by Bass (1985) considers leadership as a process of inspiring followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of collective goals. The theory is based on four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Idealized influence is the leader's ability to act ethically and build trust. Inspirational motivation is the leader's ability to develop a compelling vision that aligns individual and organizational goals. Intellectual stimulation is the leader's ability to stimulate innovation and problem-solving. Individualized consideration is the leader's ability to show mentorship and attention to individual needs. The theory is useful in devolved governance systems to explain how leaders mobilize institutional actors and coordinate implementation processes. However, its explanatory power is limited in contexts with weak institutional capacity and resource constraints (Guo et al., 2024). In such settings, leadership effectiveness is heavily contingent on supportive operational capacity.

1.7.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory developed by Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Scott (1995) describes the influence of formal rules, procedures, norms and legitimacy systems on organizational outcomes. Institutions are the "rules, norms and beliefs that structure social behavior and shape social and organizational outcomes" (Scott, 1995, p. 33). Organizations are embedded in institutional environments that constrain behavior through regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive processes. Within the context of county governments, institutional arrangements such as budgeting systems, procurement procedures, coordination structures and accountability frameworks are instrumental in determining implementation effectiveness. Therefore, leadership effectiveness is mediated by the strength and functionality of these systems. This theory is relevant to the study as it explains why transformational leadership may not directly determine service delivery but through operational including the institutional systems and procedures that support implementation.

1.7.3 Public Value Theory

The theoretical underpinning of social service delivery is the Public Value Theory developed by Moore (1995). This theory views social service delivery as a product of citizen-centered governance as public institutions create value through the delivery of services that are responsive to societal expectations, politically legitimate and operationally effective (O'Flynn, 2021). Public value is generated when public institutions deliver services that citizens perceive as equitable, reliable, accessible and responsive to their needs (O'Flynn, 2021). In this study, social service delivery is operationalized through three dimensions, namely, accessibility, reliability and responsiveness within the education, health and WASH sectors. The Public Value Theory complements the Transformational Leadership Theory and Institutional Theory by linking leadership and institutional efficiency to tangible citizen-centred outcomes.

It is particularly relevant in decentralized governance systems where public expectations are increasingly directed at accountability, equitable development and quality service delivery. In poor ASAL regions, the theory also emphasizes the importance of institutional capacity and governance responsiveness in shaping citizens' perceptions of the effectiveness of the public sector. Accessibility refers to the extent to which services are provided to citizens without undue barriers such as distance, cost, discrimination or infrastructural limitations (Eregae et al., 2019). Reliability refers to the consistency and dependability of service delivery. This involves the effective functioning of infrastructure, people and supply chains (Karama, 2021). Responsiveness is the degree to which public services respond to citizen's needs by including local priorities and community voice (Muwonge et al., 2022). Public Value Theory complements Transformational Leadership Theory and Institutional Theory in linking leadership and institutional effectiveness to tangible citizen-centred outcomes. The theory is particularly relevant in devolved governance systems where public expectations are rising around accountability, equitable development and quality service delivery. The theory also highlights the role of institutional capacity and governance responsiveness in shaping citizen's perception of public sector performance in marginalized ASAL contexts.

1.8 Empirical Review

The influence of leadership on employee's performance, innovation, and engagement in an organization has been well documented in recent literature (Alhosana & Ahmad, 2024; Atiku et al., 2023; Budiman, 2022). Emerging that leadership is considered as a key ingredient in public sector organizations in improving coordination, communication, and organizational commitment (Daud et al., 2022; Gichuki et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the

findings have been inconsistent from decentralized and resource-limited environments. Typical challenges to effective leadership are lack of infrastructure, insufficient funding, political meddling and administrative inefficiencies (Rahman et al., 2023). As such, leadership does not necessarily translate into better outcomes for citizens. However, most of the previous studies are overwhelmed by the methodological weaknesses of direct effect models that are not able to explain the institutional pathways (Tan et al., 2024). Very few studies have employed mixed-methods or mediation models that explore how leadership translates into service delivery outcomes. Besides, most of the available evidence emanates from private sector actors or centralized public agencies thus limiting its applicability to decentralized governance systems in complex socio-cultural and resource-constrained environments. Research in county governments has primarily focused on leadership and service delivery as directly correlated constructs with little emphasis on organizational capabilities and implementation processes that could shed light on how leadership affects service outcomes. Consequently, the pathways through which transformational leadership leads to improvements in education, health and WASH services are poorly understood, especially in marginalized arid and semi-arid counties. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the direct and indirect effects of transformational leadership on social service delivery, mediated by operational capacity, in Isiolo County.

1.9 Research Methodology

The study employed the explanatory sequential mixed methods research design in exploring the relationship between transformational leadership and social service delivery in Isiolo County Kenya. The design had two interconnected phases, the first being the collection and analysis of quantitative data and the second, a qualitative study aimed at explaining and elaborating on the quantitative statistical results.

The design was suitable in capturing both the measurable relationships and the contextual intricacies of the devolved governance structures that are characterized by institutional and operational challenges that have a significant bearing on the results (Creswell et al., 2018; Hair et al., 2019). For the quantitative part, the cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Structured questionnaires were administered to the Isiolo County household respondents using Google Forms. The sample size was calculated using Yamane sampling formula at 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, this resulted to a sample size of 399 households. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure the respondents were proportionately represented in the three sub-counties of Isiolo North, Merti and Garbatulla, with one respondent per household to reduce intra-household response bias.

The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 21 purposefully selected key informants from county officials, civil society representatives and community stakeholders involved in the formulation and implementation of the County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP). However, only 19 interviews were successfully completed and included in the final analysis owing to scheduling conflicts and unavailability of two participants during the data collection period. This mixed method offered both statistical representativeness and a deep institutional insight into devolved service delivery processes.

Data collection instruments were pretested on 40 respondents from a population with similar socio-demographic characteristics to the target population in Isiolo North sub-county. Results from the pilot study showed high internal consistency across constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.847, confirming the reliability of the measurement instruments. Feedback from the pilot exercise, supervisors and practitioners was used to improve the questionnaire for clarity, coherence and contextual relevance. Data collection was conducted in conformity with ethical and procedural standards. The surveys were carried out by trained research assistants who obtained informed consent, explained questions and were culturally sensitive. Interview locations were chosen to be accessible and convenient to participants to facilitate openness and data quality. When necessary, local enumerators aided communication in indigenous languages to improve respondents' understanding and inclusivity. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant university authorities and county administration offices. Confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation were strictly adhered to in accordance with ethical research principles as well as Kenya's Data Protection Act (2019).

A multi-stage process was adopted for the quantitative data analysis. The preliminary screening stage involved tests for missing data, outliers, multicollinearity, linearity, normality and model adequacy. Normality was tested by Shapiro-Wilk tests, and skewness and kurtosis statistics. In cases of minor departures, bootstrap with 5000 resamples and bias-corrected confidence intervals were employed to improve the robustness of estimates. Bivariate relationships were analyzed using Spearman's rho correlation, based on the ordinal nature of Likert-scale data and distributional properties observed. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed using Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation to assess the dimensionality of constructs and the grouping of items. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values ranged between 0.837 to 0.978 and the Bartlett's Test of

Sphericity was statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ confirming the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was then performed to determine the measurement model. The measurement properties of the study constructs were first tested and then the structural relationships were tested as per the two-step modelling approach suggested by Hair et al. (2019). Convergent validity was tested using standardized factor loadings, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) while discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the shared variance among constructs. Model adequacy was tested using various goodness-of-fit indices such as the Chi-square statistic (χ^2/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). This in turn ensured that the latent constructs were both theoretically meaningful and empirically robust before hypothesis testing through Structural Equation Modelling.

The constructs had acceptable model fit, convergent validity, discriminant validity and reliability with composite reliability scores ranging from 0.773 to 0.923. Items with poor factor loadings were removed to enhance model parsimony and measurement accuracy. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships between transformational leadership, operational capacity and social service delivery. The model incorporated theoretically justified correlated residuals where appropriate to improve model fit and interpretation (Hair et al., 2019). Model estimation was supported using bootstrapping techniques to enhance robustness of indirect effect testing.

Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis approach, which included data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. The analysis was largely deductive, grounded in Transformational Leadership Theory and Institutional Theory, but also open to emergent themes on institutional constraints, implementation challenges and contextual governance factors. Finally, methodological triangulation was applied to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings. This integration improved interpretation by linking statistical relationships with lived institutional experiences, thereby strengthening the validity and depth of conclusions on the role of transformational leadership in shaping social service delivery in devolved governance contexts.

2. Findings

Response Rate and Demographic Profile

The household survey achieved a 99% response rate (395/399) indicating very high participation and strong representativeness of the quantitative data. The sample consisted of 51.4% male and 48.6% female respondents with 86.6% of participants aged below 50 years. The respondents were drawn from urban, peri-urban and rural settings across the County, indicative of diverse lived experiences of service delivery. Key socio-demographic characteristics included length of residence, socio-economic status and sub-county distribution. In addition, 19 key informant interviews were successfully completed out of the targeted 21, resulting in 90% completion rate. The participants were county officials, civil society actors and community stakeholders involved in the formulation and implementation of CIDP.

Diagnostic Tests

The diagnostic analysis found slight deviation from normality as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test which is expected in large samples ($N = 395$). However, the skewness and kurtosis statistics showed no serious violations of normality assumptions. To address potential non-normality, Spearman's rho was used for bivariate analysis, while the SEM estimation used bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and bias-corrected confidence intervals to enhance robustness. Multicollinearity diagnostics showed no significant problems ($VIF = 1.305$, tolerance = 0.766). Standardized residuals ranged from -2.971 to 2.520 ($M = 0.000$, $SD = 0.995$) indicating an acceptable model stability.

Descriptive Statistics: Transformational Leadership

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Transformational Leadership

Sub-Construct	Items	Mean	SD
Idealized Influence	3	1.75	0.79
Inspirational Motivation	3	1.89	0.87
Intellectual Stimulation	2	1.74	0.73
Individualized Consideration	1	2.46	1.07
Overall Transformational Leadership	9	1.96	0.87

The results in Table 1 imply that transformational leadership practices in the structures of Isiolo County government are generally low. The mean scores of idealized influence, inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation were particularly low, indicating weak strategic leadership behaviors such as vision articulation, stimulation of innovation and motivational engagement. Individualized consideration had relatively high scores; however, it was still below the neutral midpoint. These results are consistent with the previous studies that reported weak transformational leadership practices, which are associated with limited institutional effectiveness and poor delivery of social services (Budiman, 2022; Musyoki et al., 2021).

Measurement Model Assessment

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

EFA results indicated excellent sampling adequacy ($KMO = 0.978$) and statistical appropriateness (Bartlett's $\chi^2 = 24,476$, $df = 36$, $p < 0.001$). Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation produced a single dominant factor (eigenvalue = 9.00) with strong loadings (0.751–0.787) for all items. Reliability was very high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.997$; McDonald's $\omega = 1.000$), indicating very good internal consistency but also possibly indicating item redundancy and similar perceptions of the sample respondents.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

The CFA refined the model by removing poorly performing items (TL3, TL4, TL7, TL8, TL9). The retained transformational leadership items (TL1, TL2, TL5, TL6) loaded between 0.677 and 0.724. Social service delivery was modeled as a two-dimensional construct (Education & Health, and WASH). Loadings ranged from 0.663 to 0.802 for Education & Health and from 0.794 to 0.911 for WASH. Composite reliability ranged from 0.772 to 0.897, and AVE ranged from 0.469 to 0.745, indicating acceptable convergent validity. The model fit indices (CMIN/DF = 3.702, CFI = 0.907, TLI = 0.891, RMSEA = 0.083) were acceptable as per the criteria for social sciences supported by Hair et al., (2019). The retained indicators were considered to adequately represent the constructs, although the reduction of items led to a more parsimonious model. However, very high values of reliability should be interpreted with caution, as there might be conceptual overlap and homogeneity of respondents.

Structural Equation Modelling Results

Table 2. Structural Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold	Interpretation
χ^2/df	3.899	2–5	Acceptable
CFI	0.906	≥ 0.90	Adequate
TLI	0.890	≥ 0.90	Marginal
IFI	0.906	≥ 0.90	Adequate
NFI	0.878	≥ 0.90	Slightly Below Threshold
RMSEA	0.086	≤ 0.08	Marginally Acceptable

The model in Table 2 demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data applied public-sector research thereby supporting the adequacy of the hypothesized structural relationships. Structural Equation Modelling was used to establish the direct and indirect effect of transformational leadership on social service delivery in Isiolo County. Operational capacity was modelled as the mediating construct through which transformational leadership may influence service delivery outcomes.

Direct Effects of Transformational Leadership on Social Service Delivery

Table 3. Direct Effects of Transformational Leadership on Social Service Delivery

Path	B	S.E.	C.R.	p-value
Education & Health SSD ← Transformational Leadership	0.071	0.061	1.159	0.247
WASH SSD ← Transformational Leadership	-0.175	0.086	-2.021	0.043

Table 3 displays the testing of H_{01} , that is the direct effects of transformational leadership on sector-specific social service delivery outcomes. From the results, the direct effect of transformational leadership was not statistically significant for education and health service delivery ($B = 0.071$, $p = 0.247$) but was statistically significant for WASH service delivery ($B = -0.175$, $p = 0.043$). We, therefore, retained H_{01} for education and health service delivery and rejected H_{01} for WASH service delivery. These results imply that the direct effect of transformational leadership on service delivery varies by sector and that the effect alone cannot explain improvements in service delivery outcomes. Indirect Effects of Transformational Leadership on Social Service Delivery through Operational Capacity To test H_{02} , operational capacity was modeled as a mediator between transformational leadership and service delivery outcomes.

Indirect Effects through Operational Capacity

Table 4. Direct and Indirect Structural Effects

Path	Standardized β	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Operational Capacity ← Transformational Leadership	0.125	0.036	[0.009, 0.253]
Education & Health SSD ← Operational Capacity	0.412	<0.001	[0.322, 0.566]
WASH SSD ← Operational Capacity	-0.007	0.900	[-0.154, 0.136]
TL → OC → Education & Health SSD	0.051	—	[0.012, 0.101]
TL → OC → WASH SSD	-0.001	—	[-0.029, 0.026]

To test H_{02} , operational capacity was modelled as a mediator linking transformational leadership to service delivery outcomes as shows in Table 4. Transformational leadership had a significant positive effect on operational capacity ($\beta = 0.125$, $p = 0.036$) and operational capacity had a strong positive effect on education and health service delivery ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$). Operational capacity had no significant effect on WASH service delivery ($\beta = -0.007$, $p = 0.900$). The indirect effect of transformational leadership on education and health service delivery through operational capacity was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.051$, 95% CI [0.012, 0.101]). Since the indirect effect was significant while the direct effect was still non-significant, the results indicated indirect-only mediation. The indirect pathway to WASH service delivery was however not significant ($\beta = -0.001$, 95% CI [-0.029, 0.026]) as the confidence interval included zero. Accordingly, H_{02} was rejected for education and health service delivery but retained for WASH service delivery. These findings indicate that transformational leadership results in improved service delivery primarily by improving operational capacity rather than through direct effects on service outcomes.

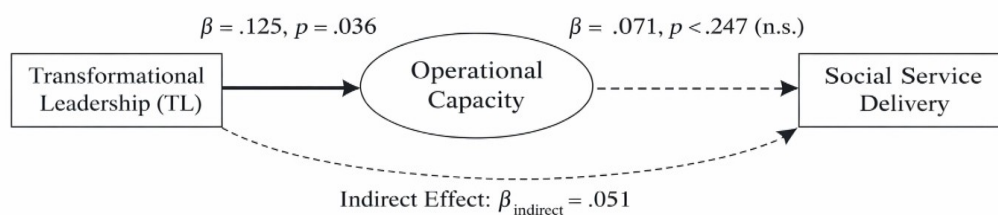


Figure 2. *Structural Model of the Direct and Indirect Effects of Transformational Leadership on Social Service Delivery Through Operational Capacity*

In conclusion, the SEM results imply that transformational leadership influences social service delivery via operational capacity, not directly on service outcomes. Transformational leadership has a significant positive impact on the operational capacity that in turn has a strong positive impact on the delivery of education and health services. The indirect effect of transformational leadership on the delivery of education and health services through operational capacity was statistically significant, indicating an indirect-only mediation path. Conversely, transformational leadership did not have a significant direct effect on the delivery of education and health services, but a statistically significant negative direct effect was found on the delivery of WASH services. Furthermore, operational capacity did not significantly affect WASH outcomes, resulting in an insignificant indirect path. The findings suggest that the mechanisms of leadership service delivery are context specific. The findings collectively support the argument that transformational leadership is a distal enabling factor whose efficacy is contingent on the operational capacity of public institutions. The absence of a significant mediation effect in the WASH sector also suggests that infrastructure deficits, environmental challenges and other structural constraints might prevent the translation of leadership initiatives into improved service delivery outcomes in marginalized county contexts.

Table 5. Thematic Insights on Transformational Leadership and Social Service Delivery

Theme	Challenges	Suggested Interventions	Prevalence	Significance
Transformational Leadership	Mismanagement, weak planning, misalignment with CIDP goals	Public accountability, strong leadership, CIDP alignment, inclusive planning	Most informants	Leadership determines planning quality, transparency, and alignment with development goals
Social Service Delivery	Resource constraints, poor infrastructure, sociocultural barriers	Community feedback, M&E, equitable resources, human capital, infrastructure investment	Nearly all informants	Delivery outcomes reflect the effectiveness of leadership and other strategic practices

Table 5 indicates qualitative results which show that transformational leadership is a key enabler of social service delivery, particularly in education and health. Earlier quantitative results indicated that the influence of leadership on service delivery is mediated by operational capacity rather than through direct effects on service outcomes. The thematic analysis above confirms that transformational leadership improves planning, coordination and implementation capabilities which in turn contribute to improving service delivery performance. The results provide evidence for the mediating role of operational systems and processes that enable implementation in leadership effectiveness in resource-constrained governance environments (Hair et al., 2019). The qualitative findings also emphasize the role of planning discipline, accountability, coordination and alignment with County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) priorities. The limited influence of leadership on WASH outcomes may mean that structural, infrastructural and environmental factors in the sector are a barrier to translating leadership efforts into concrete service outcomes. This finding supports the argument that the effectiveness of service delivery is not only a function of leadership capacity but also enabling institutional arrangements, infrastructural investments and community level factors (O'Flynn, 2021).

3. Discussion

The study establishes that the effect of transformational leadership on social service delivery in Isiolo County is principally through operational capacity rather than direct effects on service outcomes. The findings from the SEM reveal that the model explains about 41% of the variance in education and health service delivery. While the effect of transformational leadership on operational capacity was significant and positive, its direct effect on education and health service delivery was not statistically significant. A significant negative direct effect was established for WASH service delivery underscoring the sector-specific variations in the effect of leadership on service outcomes. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of leadership depends on operational and structural factors under which social service delivery is provided. Descriptive results show low levels of transformational leadership practices among county government systems. The mean scores for idealized influence ($M=1.75$), inspirational motivation ($M=1.89$) and intellectual stimulation ($M=1.74$) were all low, while individualized consideration had a relatively higher but still low score ($M=2.46$). The results show that strategic vision communication, innovation support, staff development and participatory leadership practices are weak, yet they are important for effective coordination and delivery of services in devolution governance structures. The measurement model showed acceptable reliability and construct validity. The standardized factor loadings of transformational leadership indicators ranged from 0.677 to 0.724 with the composite reliability values above the recommended level confirming satisfactory internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019).

In the same vein, the SEM results show that transformational leadership has a statistically significant positive effect on operational capacity ($\beta=0.125$, $p=0.036$) which in turn has a strong positive effect on education and health social service delivery ($\beta=0.412$, $p<0.001$). The indirect pathway indicates that transformational leadership affects service delivery largely through operational capacity rather than through direct influence on the immediate service experiences of citizens. The leadership effect on operational capacity, while statistically significant, is modest suggesting that leadership alone cannot effect a significant transformation in service systems in resource-constrained devolved settings.

The findings thus underscore the importance of broader institutional conditions beyond leadership agency itself. Despite moderate to high explanatory power of the indicators, operational capacity had a low variance accounted for at the latent construct level ($R^2 = 0.016$). The findings imply that operational capacity in devolved county systems is determined by a range of additional structural externalities beyond transformational leadership. These could include delays in disbursement from the national government, political interference in the county implementation processes, infrastructure deficits, climate-related shocks prevalent in ASAL regions, procurement inefficiencies and general institutional constraints affecting county administration.

Hence, while transformational leadership positively contributes to operational coordination and implementation discipline, the institutional environment is still a major determinant of operational effectiveness in marginalized counties. Additional sector-specific analysis revealed differences in results. While operational capacity was strongly associated with education and health service provision, it was not statistically significantly associated with WASH outcomes ($\beta = -0.007$, $p = 0.900$). This means that WASH services are heavily dependent on infrastructure-intensive systems, technical investments, maintenance governance mechanisms, and environmental sustainability that are beyond the reach of leadership and administrative coordination within the system. This is further supported by qualitative data where respondents invariably link effective service delivery with stronger planning discipline, better accountability systems, improved coordination, and equitable resource allocation. However, the entrenched infrastructure deficits, weak implementation mechanisms, and socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder leadership-led reforms, especially in the WASH sector. Weak WASH pathways may also indicate inequities in capital investment that have historically prioritized education and health sectors over the development of water infrastructure.

WASH outcomes, unlike education and health services, are highly dependent on long-term infrastructural investments, specialized technical expertise, maintenance governance mechanisms, and environmental sustainability. In many marginalized counties, these requirements are compounded by fragmented implementation arrangements, donor-supported project cycles, and inadequate maintenance funding. Hence, improvements in leadership and administrative coordination may not necessarily translate into tangible WASH outcomes unless such improvements are accompanied by significant infrastructural and institutional investment.

The findings are consistent with the Institutional Theory propounded by Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Scott (1995) that organizational effectiveness is largely a function of operational and institutional systems, processes, and implementation structures and not necessarily leadership behavior alone. Similarly, the findings augment the Transformational Leadership Theory advanced by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) that leadership effectiveness in devolved governance systems is contingent on operational readiness and institutional support mechanisms. Transformational leadership is a distal institutional enabler of implementation discipline, coordination and strategic alignment, not a direct determinant of citizen outcomes. The findings further support the Public Value Theory proposed by Moore (1995) which argues that public institutions create value when governance systems can respond effectively to citizen needs with accessible, reliable and responsive services. The observed differences across sectors indicate that public value creation in marginalized counties is uneven and largely dependent on the institutional and infrastructural realities of each sector.

Education and health systems seem more amenable to leadership-driven operational improvements because of their well-established administrative systems, while WASH outcomes remain heavily constrained by infrastructure deficits and broader environmental vulnerabilities. The observed variation across sectors may also be understood along an institutional maturity gradient. Education and health sectors tend to have relatively well-established administrative systems, routinized funding mechanisms, and mature implementation structures developed over several decades. These features render them more susceptible to leadership-driven improvements in operations. By contrast, WASH services are highly infrastructure-dependent, requiring sustained capital investment, technical maintenance and environmental resilience. Therefore, in sectors where implementation outcomes are less dependent upon administrative coordination and more dependent upon physical infrastructure, the effects of leadership are diluted. This suggests the need to consider the institutional context of the sector when evaluating the effectiveness of leadership in devolved governance systems. These findings contribute to the wider literature on public administration and devolved governance in questioning the dominant assumption that transformational leadership in isolation can have a significant impact on public sector outcomes. Rather the study shows that the effectiveness of leadership in marginalized, resource-constrained settings is institutionally mediated and highly context dependent. The evidence thus suggests a governance framing of leadership effectiveness, where the operational capacity, institutional coordination, adequacy of infrastructure and implementation capacity together determine whether the leadership efforts result in meaningful improvements in social service delivery.

4. Theoretical Contribution

First, the article extends the Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006) and demonstrates that transformational leadership does not directly influence social service delivery in resource constrained and decentralized government systems. Instead, it exerts a positive influence through operational capacity, the mechanism through which leadership manifests into effective implementation and service outcomes. This finding contests the common leadership literature assumption that transformational leadership directly influences organizational or service performance. Second, the article develops from Institutional Theory (Selznick, 1953; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995) and presents empirical evidence that institutional arrangements and operational systems are important mediating structures through which leadership effects are realized.

For county governments, the effectiveness of leadership is a function of the effectiveness of planning systems, coordination mechanisms, resource allocation processes, and implementation structures. This shifts the explanatory focus away from leadership behavior per se to the institutional conditions that enable or constrain the effectiveness of leadership. Thirdly, the study contributes to Public Value Theory (Moore, 1995), by operationalizing public value creation through accessibility, reliability and responsiveness of services in education, health and WASH sectors. The findings show that public value outcomes in devolved governance systems are uneven across sectors, and are largely influenced by infrastructural and institutional readiness. This supports the argument that public value is a product of leadership intentions but also a product of the interaction between leadership, institutional capacity and sector-specific constraints.

Fourthly, the use of Structural Equation Modeling is a methodological contribution to empirically disentangle direct and indirect effects of transformational leadership. Most prior research has concentrated on direct links between leadership and performance outcomes. This study shows that mediated paths provide a more precise and theoretically consistent account of leadership effectiveness in complex governance systems. Finally, the study provides a contextual theoretical contribution by embedding leadership theory in an ASAL (Arid and Semi-Arid Lands) governance context. The observed sectoral variation particularly the strong effects in education and health compared to the weak effects in WASH highlights the importance of context sensitivity in leadership theory. This suggests that transformational leadership theory must be interpreted through institutional and environmental contingencies when applied in marginalized and resource-constrained settings.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that transformational leadership does not exert a direct influence on social service delivery in Isiolo County. Instead, its effect is indirect and operates through operational capacity. This finding suggests that leadership alone is not sufficient to achieve measurable improvements in service delivery in resource constrained and structurally constrained devolved governance systems. The results also show that operational capacity plays a mediating role at the center of the translation of leadership into improved social service delivery especially in the education and health sectors. This pathway is absent in the WASH sector where infrastructural deficits, environmental constraints and systemic weaknesses greatly constrain performance outcomes. Overall the findings suggest that improvements in social service delivery are contingent upon the interaction of leadership practices, operational capacity, institutional systems and sector specific structural conditions. Transformational leadership is therefore best understood as an enabling governance mechanism rather than a direct driver of public service delivery in marginalized counties.

The paper makes empirical contributions to the relatively scant literature on strategy implementation and devolved governance by demonstrating that the effectiveness of leadership is conditioned by the institutional and operational environment in which it is exercised. The findings reinforce the need to strengthen operational systems, administrative processes and implementation capacity besides leadership development initiatives. From a policy perspective, county governments seeking better service delivery outcomes should focus on leadership reforms as well as building the organizational capabilities required to turn strategic intentions into tangible public value. The paper also provides evidence from a marginalized arid and semi-arid county that adds to the understanding of how leadership and operational factors interact to influence service delivery outcomes in devolved governance settings.

6. Policy and Practice Implications

The findings have important implications for policy and practice in devolved systems of governance. First,

county level leadership development efforts should not be limited to enhancing leadership competencies in isolation but should be complemented with reforms to enhance operational capacity including planning systems, coordination mechanisms and resource management structures. Second, county governments should focus on the institutionalization of robust implementation frameworks linking strategic leadership decisions to operational implementation. This entails strengthening CIDP implementation systems, improving inter-departmental coordination and reinforcing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure alignment between policy intentions and social service delivery. Third, there is a need for sector-specific policy responses. Investments in leadership development in health and education are likely to generate tangible improvements when supported by effective systems for implementation and operational capacity. In the WASH sector, the challenge is to increase investments in infrastructure, maintenance systems, and technical capacity, since leadership interventions alone are unlikely to be enough to overcome the structural constraints. Fourth, the national and the county governments must address systemic challenges that affect operational efficiency, including delays in fiscal transfers, procurement bottlenecks and infrastructural deficits. These constraints hinder county administrations' ability to translate strategic priorities into effective service delivery. Finally, sustainable improvements in social service delivery will require an integrated governance approach, including transformational leadership, institutional strengthening and infrastructure investment. Such alignment is key to translating strategic vision into accessible, reliable and responsive public services in marginalized and resource-constrained settings.

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