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PUBLIC SECTOR REFORMS AND SERVICE DELIVERY IN KENYA: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the relationship between public sector reforms and service delivery. A critical literature review was employed to identify, synthesize and classify publications relating to public sector reforms across different contexts with emphasis on the public sector in Kenya. This was followed by a synthesis of the literature for purposes of identifying research gaps in respect to the efficacy of public sector reforms on service delivery. The findings reveal that while Kenya has made substantial progress in implementing various public sector reforms anchored on New Public Management framework, mixed performance results on service delivery still prevail. Key barriers to successful reforms were identified to include corruption, political interference, and institutional inefficiency. The findings contribute to the ongoing debate among scholars regarding the relevance and efficacy of public sector reforms based on the New Public Management orthodoxy. This article provides practical insights on the challenges of public sector reforms and the need for context specific policy interventions required to enhance service delivery. Key among the recommendations made in this paper to enhance service delivery in the public sector include; adoption of digitalization, decentralization, and strengthening institutional and corporate governance frameworks.

Keywords: Public Sector Reforms, Service Delivery, Digitalization, Decentralization, Kenya.

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Introduction

Public sector reforms are deliberate changes introduced by governments to improve the structures, processes, and management of public institutions in order to enhance efficiency, accountability, and performance (Ayee, 2023). These reforms are directly linked to service delivery because they aim to strengthen how public organizations plan, manage, and deliver essential services to citizens in a timely and effective manner (Lindquist, 2022). When well implemented, public sector reforms improve service quality, accessibility, and responsiveness, helping bridge the gap between government capacity and citizens' expectations (Raudla & Douglas, 2024; Beck, 2025).

Since the emergence of reform movements such as New Public Management in the 1980s and subsequent governance-oriented approaches, countries have invested substantial resources in restructuring public institutions, decentralizing authority, introducing performance management systems, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and embracing digital transformation with the expectation of improving service delivery outcomes (Amin et al.,2024). Despite these efforts, evidence from both developed and developing countries suggests that the impact of public sector reforms on service delivery remains mixed and often contested (Anshari et al., 2025). While some reforms have contributed to improvements in efficiency, responsiveness, transparency, and citizen access to services, others have produced limited results due to institutional weaknesses, implementation gaps, political interference, resource constraints, and contextual factors that undermine reform effectiveness (McCourt, 2018; Ayee, 2023).

Public sector reforms refer to the efforts and initiatives aimed at introducing improved management practices into the public sector to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability in service delivery to the public and other stakeholders (Bartolacci, Del Gobbo, & Soverchia, 2025). Public sector reforms aim at improving the efficiency, transparency, accountability, and overall effectiveness of government institutions in service delivery (Amin et al.,2024). Similarly, Ayee (2023) asserts that the reforms are designed to address systemic inefficiencies, reduce corruption, and improve the responsiveness of public institutions to citizens' needs. The primary objective of Public Sector Reforms is to introduce a business or private sector culture within public organizations (Hood, 1991; Moore, 1995). This shift towards a business-like mindset is a hallmark of New Public Management (NPM), which advocates for the adoption of practices such as performance-based management, customer orientation, and cost-effectiveness (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

The linkage between public sector reforms and service delivery is central to understanding the practical implications of the reform initiatives. Effective reforms are seen as crucial for enhancing the quality of public service (Bukenya & Yanguas, 2013; Fatile & Adejuwon, 2010). Key components of reforms include decentralization and performance contracting, while augmented with the introduction of digital governance tools, which all serve to increase accessibility, responsiveness, and transparency in

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public services (Karyeija, 2012; Koko & Moi, 2024). Furthermore, empirical evidence from different countries fully demonstrates that when public sector reforms are strategically aligned with governance frameworks, they can significantly boost public trust through the service delivery outcomes (Chege, 2020; Alex, Muriisa & Elias, 2023). In essence, public sector reforms are not only about institutional changes but also about fostering a culture of service delivery that can effectively meet the expectations of the public (Singh et al., 2010; Samaratunge et al., 2008).

Public sector reforms is commonly operationalized through observable reform instruments such as performance contracting, strategic planning, performance appraisal, service charters, decentralization, digitalization, outsourcing, and results-based management (Raudla et al., 2024). Service delivery, in turn, is often measured through indicators such as accessibility, timeliness, responsiveness, reliability, transparency, citizen satisfaction, efficiency, equity, and perceived quality of services. This operational distinction is important because the relationship between the two concepts is not automatic: reforms represent administrative and institutional interventions, whereas service delivery reflects the extent to which those interventions translate into improved citizen outcomes.

Based on this, the aim of this paper is to critically examine empirical and theoretical literature on public sector reforms and service delivery in Kenya, with particular attention to how reform initiatives have influenced efficiency, accountability, responsiveness, equity, and quality in public service provision. The specific objectives are to analyze the theoretical foundations of public sector reforms and service delivery; to review empirical evidence on key reform instruments in Kenya, including strategic planning, performance management, performance contracting, performance appraisal, rapid results initiatives, service charters, devolution, and digitalization; to assess the extent to which these reforms have improved or constrained service delivery outcomes; and to identify conceptual, empirical, and methodological gaps for future scholarship. This focus is consistent with calls for context-sensitive reform analysis in developing countries (McCourt, 2018). It also aligns with the view that public sector reforms must be evaluated in relation to institutional capacity and governance conditions rather than assumed to produce automatic performance gains (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015). Furthermore, it responds to recent scholarship emphasizing the importance of critical and structured literature synthesis in public administration and management research (Page et al., 2022).

An emerging debate in public administration scholarship concerns whether public sector management reforms, particularly those inspired by New Public Management, have delivered the expected improvements in service delivery or merely reproduced new forms of administrative ritualism. Some scholars argue that reforms such as performance contracting, decentralisation, and digital government enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability when properly implemented (Raudla et al., 2024; Haug et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024). Other scholars caution that these reforms may produce uneven

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outcomes where they are adopted as universal templates without sufficient attention to local institutional capacity, political incentives, equity concerns, and administrative culture (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015; McCourt, 2018; Vakulenko & Mattei, 2023). This divergence is particularly important because the literature increasingly questions whether reform models designed in advanced economies are coherent when applied in developing-country contexts where corruption, patronage, resource constraints, and uneven state capacity shape implementation. The need for a critical literature review therefore arises from these unresolved tensions in the literature: whether reforms improve service delivery, under what conditions they do so, and why reform outcomes remain mixed despite decades of implementation. In an attempt to address some of the gaps alluded to above this paper posed the following questions,

i. What has been the focus of empirical studies based on public sector reforms-service delivery stream?
ii. What type of public sector reforms have been taking place across different contexts?
iii. What influence have these reforms had on service delivery?
iv. Are there internal and external contingent factors which have been observed to influence the relationship between public sector reforms and service delivery?
v. How do these two concepts manifest in the context of the public sector in Kenya?

Methodology

This paper was based on a critical literature review method. A critical literature review (CLR) is appropriate because the topic requires more than a descriptive summary of reform initiatives; it requires analytical engagement with empirical findings, theoretical assumptions, methodological choices, and contextual limitations across the literature. Comparative studies from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America were included where they offered theoretically relevant insights into reform transfer, institutional adaptation, and implementation constraints (Ayee, 2023; Samaratunge et al., 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Studies on developing countries were treated with particular care because reform outcomes are often shaped by political economy conditions, administrative capacity, bureaucratic incentives, and donor influence rather than by managerial reform design alone (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015). The review also considered the methodological limitations of the included literature, including over-reliance on policy analysis, limited longitudinal evidence, small or unspecified samples in some empirical studies, case-study bias, and the tendency of some reform literature to generalize from country-specific experiences without adequately accounting for institutional context (McCourt, 2018; Vakulenko & Mattei, 2023; Knox & Sharipova, 2023).

The review therefore interrogates studies on public sector reforms, New Public Management, public value, governance, decentralization, digitalization, performance management, corruption, and service delivery, while assessing the extent to which these bodies of knowledge

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explain Kenya's reform experience. In line with the paper's focus on empirical and theoretical literature, the review draws from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and government documents already identified in the manuscript, including studies on reform implementation in Kenya, comparative public administration, and public service delivery outcomes. Through this process, the methodology enables the paper to move from a broad literature survey to a critical review that evaluates the strength, relevance, limitations, and contradictions of existing literature on public sector reforms and service delivery in Kenya. For instance, Kenya-focused studies on performance contracting, service charters, digitalization, devolution, and institutional reform were examined for their empirical basis and relevance to service delivery outcomes (Hope, 2012; Cheche & Muathe, 2014; Meru & Kinoti, 2022).

Methodologically, the review is informed by the logic of structured evidence synthesis, where clarity of scope, transparent selection of literature, and critical appraisal of evidence are central to credibility (Page et al., 2022). It also recognizes that review-based studies in management and public administration must move beyond citation accumulation by evaluating the quality, design, and limitations of the studies included (Mishra & Mishra, 2023). This approach is further supported by Agrawal et al. (2024), who emphasize that systematic and critical reviews require explicit procedures for identifying, organizing, and assessing literature rather than relying on unsystematic narrative selection. Accordingly, a critical review of public sector reforms and service delivery in Kenya must synthesize the evidence on reform design, implementation, outcomes, and limitations while interrogating the assumptions that underpin reform agendas.

To ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature, the review utilized several widely recognized academic databases and search platforms. These included the *Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)*, *JSTOR*, *Google Scholar*, *EBSCOhost*, and *Emerald Insight*, which provide extensive access to peer-reviewed publications in public administration, governance, development studies, and public policy. The databases were selected because of their credibility, broad disciplinary coverage, and accessibility to high-quality scholarly sources. Search terms were developed from the study themes and included combinations of keywords such as *public sector reforms*, *service delivery*, *governance*, *performance management*, *devolution*, *digitalization*, and *Kenya*. The use of multiple databases enhanced the breadth of literature coverage and reduced the risk of excluding relevant studies from the review. Furthermore, cross-database searches facilitated triangulation of evidence and strengthened the reliability and validity of the findings synthesized in this paper.

Literature Review

The literature review critically examines empirical and theoretical scholarship on public sector reforms and service delivery in Kenya. It is organized around two main components: empirical literature and theoretical literature. The empirical literature reviews evidence on key reform initiatives, including performance management, performance contracting, service charters, devolution, digitalization, and anti-

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corruption reforms. It also compares reform experiences across Kenya, Africa, and selected global contexts to identify patterns, contradictions, and contextual factors shaping service delivery outcomes.

Empirical Review

Public Sector Management Reforms and Service Delivery in Developed Countries

Public sector reforms have been a central focus for governments worldwide as they seek to improve the efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness of public services. In India, public sector reforms have been characterized by significant efforts to introduce e-governance, decentralize decision-making, and streamline public service delivery. According to Singh et al. (2010), India implemented several reforms aimed at modernizing its public sector, particularly through the introduction of digital platforms to enhance transparency and accessibility in service delivery. The country's efforts in decentralization and performance management, particularly at the local government level, were deemed pivotal in addressing service delivery gaps, although challenges such as corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency remained persistent (Singh, 2024). The Indian model of e-governance has been highlighted as a key driver for improving citizen engagement, even as institutional resistance slowed down full implementation in certain regions (Latupeirissa et al., 2024).

In China, public sector reforms have focused on administrative efficiency and centralization. Jing and Fan (2023) discussed China's ambitious reforms that sought to enhance the government's capacity to provide services while maintaining centralized control. Over the past four decades, China's public administration reforms have focused heavily on improving administrative efficiency through digital transformation, particularly in healthcare and urban management (Jakovljevic et al., 2023). The Chinese model emphasized top-down governance, but in recent years, the government has increasingly recognized the need for more localized decision-making by incorporating elements of participatory governance, especially in its push for smarter cities and improved public services in rural areas (Wang & Ma, 2022). Despite these advancements, the persistent issue of political centralization and lack of genuine public engagement has limited the full effectiveness of the reforms (Nana, 2024).

The United Kingdom (UK) has witnessed a series of reforms, particularly under the influence of New Public Management (NPM), which has emphasized market-driven approaches to public sector operations. Hood (1991) noted that the UK was one of the early adopters of NPM principles, implementing reforms that focused on competition, performance measurement, and outsourcing of public services. The reforms aimed at increasing efficiency and reducing government expenditures, led to the introduction of competitive contracting and the privatization of public utilities in the 1980s and 1990s (Wilson et al., 2024). However, critiques of the reforms pointed to the negative impact on service quality, particularly in healthcare and education, where market-driven approaches sometimes conflicted with public welfare goals (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). More recently, the UK has also turned to digitalization and e-governance to improve service delivery, with initiatives to enhance

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transparency and accountability in public administration (Kippin & Kippin, 2024).

Notably, the public service reforms in the United Kingdom have prominently featured the promotion of the 5 E's-Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Excellence, and Enterprise-as fundamental principles to institutionalize Public Management (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The establishment of the Efficiency and Reform Group (ERG) in 2010 underscored the government's commitment to driving efficiency and reform across public services. Additionally, initiatives like the Gershon Efficiency Review have been instrumental in identifying and implementing cost-saving measures within public sector operations (Wilson et al., 2024).

In the United States, public sector reforms have been shaped by a combination of NPM principles that focus on transparency, accountability, citizen engagement, and performance management. Key among the reform initiatives undertaken in the U.S. include performance-based budgeting and the implementation of government accountability office (GAO) frameworks to measure outcomes (Knox & Sharipova, 2023). The U.S. has made strides in improving service delivery through initiatives like open data platforms and e-governance, aimed at increasing transparency and responsiveness (Wilson et al., 2024). While these reforms have improved efficiency in certain sectors, such as public health and education, the overall effectiveness has been hindered by inconsistent implementation across different states and agencies (Knox & Sharipova, 2023).

Additionally, the U.S. has been working towards implementing SMART Cities solutions in cities like in San Francisco and Boston. This is an initiative that leverages technology, data analytics, and innovation to improve urban governance and service delivery (Knox & Sharipova, 2023). The concept of the SMART Cities focuses on integrating digital infrastructure and technology to optimize public services, improve efficiency, and enhance the quality of life for citizens. Analysis reveals that Singapore's public sector and service delivery have undergone continuous reforms, contributing significantly to the country's economic success and governance efficiency. Key reforms began with strategic planning for ministries and state-owned enterprises, which aligned public sector goals with national economic priorities. Over time, the reforms were expanded to include performance management systems, performance contracts, and performance appraisals, all of which were designed to improve accountability, efficiency, and public service outcomes. These initiatives ensured that civil servants met clear performance targets, fostering a culture of excellence and transparency within public institutions (Samaratunge et al., 2008). The country is using e-government and digital platforms to improve its service delivery augmented by stable governance systems while other countries like Malaysia and Indonesia struggle with their governance systems (Sukarno et al., 2024).

Public Sector Management Reforms and Service Delivery in Developing Countries in Africa

Public sector management reforms in developing countries in Africa have been widely adopted as strategic responses to persistent challenges of

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inefficiency, corruption, weak accountability, and poor service delivery. In Ghana, reforms have largely focused on decentralization, administrative restructuring, and capacity-building aimed at improving transparency and efficiency in public service delivery (Ayee, 2023; Ohemeng & Akonnor, 2023). Despite these efforts, implementation gaps remain due to political interference and bureaucratic resistance, which continue to limit the effectiveness of reforms in improving service outcomes. Similarly, in Nigeria, reform initiatives have emphasized innovation through performance management systems, digital governance, and public–private partnerships intended to enhance accountability and transparency in service delivery (Onuorah & Bosso, 2024; Amin, Bamidele & Abdullahi, 2024; Olabimitan, Ogunmodede, & John, 2025). However, these reforms have produced uneven results due to corruption, weak infrastructure, and inconsistent political commitment, which undermine sustained improvements in public sector performance.

In South Africa, post-apartheid public sector reforms have prioritized inclusivity, equity, and institutional transformation to address historical inequalities in service delivery. Key reforms have included procurement system improvements, institutional capacity strengthening, and governance transparency initiatives across sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure (Mabotja et al., 2024). While these reforms have contributed to improved policy frameworks and service access in some areas, challenges such as inefficiency, corruption, and political dynamics continue to constrain their overall effectiveness. In Uganda, decentralization has been the central reform strategy aimed at bringing services closer to citizens and improving local governance structures (Alex, Muriisa, & Elias, 2024). However, as in many African contexts, outcomes remain mixed due to weak local institutional capacity, corruption, and unequal resource distribution across regions (Nambassa & Mutiarin, 2024).

Across African countries, empirical literature highlights a recurring theoretical tension between New Public Management (NPM) reforms and actual service delivery outcomes. NPM emphasizes efficiency, performance contracting, competition, and results-based management as mechanisms for improving public sector performance (Hood, 1991; Bukenya & Yanguas, 2013). However, evidence suggests that while these tools may improve measurable outputs, they often fail to address deeper structural issues such as inequality, weak accountability systems, and uneven state capacity (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; McCourt, 2018). In Kenya and similar contexts, the adoption of NPM-inspired reforms such as service charters, performance contracts, and digital governance has improved administrative visibility but has not fully resolved persistent service delivery challenges linked to corruption and institutional fragmentation (KIPPRA, 2021). This creates a conceptual gap between reform design and real-world outcomes, highlighting the need for context-sensitive approaches rather than universal reform prescriptions.

A second key issue in the literature is the assumption that decentralization automatically improves service delivery. While decentralization reforms in Ghana, Nigeria,

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South Africa, and Uganda are intended to enhance responsiveness and citizen participation, empirical findings show that outcomes are highly uneven across countries and regions. In many cases, decentralization has been weakened by elite capture, weak fiscal discipline, corruption, and limited administrative capacity at local levels (Ayee, 2023; Onuorah & Bosso, 2024). In Kenya, devolution has expanded access to services but has also exposed significant disparities in governance capacity and resource management across counties (KIPPRA, 2021). These findings suggest that decentralization should not be treated as an inherently successful reform model but rather as a contingent process whose outcomes depend on institutional strength, governance quality, and political incentives. Therefore, the literature increasingly calls for more critical, evidence-based evaluations of public sector reforms that go beyond policy intentions to assess actual service delivery performance and citizen experiences in diverse African contexts.

Public Sector Management Reforms and Service Delivery in Kenya

Since independence in 1963, the Government of Kenya has implemented successive public sector management reforms aimed at improving governance, accountability, and service delivery. Early reforms focused on centralizing state authority and building a functional public administration system, as reflected in foundational policy documents such as Sessional Paper No. 1 of 1965 and the Ndegwa Report of 1971 (Republic of Kenya, 1965; Hope, 2012). These early frameworks emphasized efficiency, merit-based recruitment, and professionalization of the civil service. However, challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, and weak service delivery capacity persisted, prompting continuous reform efforts over time (Chege, 2020).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Kenya introduced reform initiatives aimed at improving efficiency and decentralizing service delivery, including the District Focus for Rural Development (DFRD) and performance contracting systems (Hope, 2012; Cheche & Muathe, 2014). These reforms were intended to bring services closer to citizens and strengthen accountability, but their impact was limited by weak institutional capacity, political interference, and entrenched bureaucratic resistance. The Policy Framework Paper (1996) further reinforced public sector restructuring by linking public financial management reforms with broader economic adjustment programs supported by the IMF and World Bank, emphasizing efficiency, fiscal discipline, and improved resource allocation (Republic of Kenya, 1996).

From the 2000s, reforms became more structured through the Public Service Reform Strategy and the introduction of service charters aimed at improving transparency, accountability, and citizen-focused service delivery (UNDP, 2008; Meru & Kinoti, 2022). The 2010 Constitution further strengthened reforms through devolution, transferring service delivery functions to county governments to enhance responsiveness and local participation (KIPPRA, 2021). Despite these improvements, challenges such as uneven capacity across counties and governance constraints continued to affect implementation outcomes (Chege, 2020).

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From 2013 to the present, Kenya has increasingly embraced digital transformation and e-governance as key drivers of public sector reform and service delivery improvement. Platforms such as e-Citizen have enhanced efficiency, transparency, and accessibility of government services, while initiatives like Konza Technopolis reflect long-term ambitions for technology-driven governance (Meru & Kinoti, 2022; Amin et al., 2024). Recent reforms have also focused on parastatal restructuring, privatization, and data-driven decision-making to improve performance and accountability in public institutions (Abdikadir, 2013; Koko & Moi, 2024). However, while these reforms have improved service visibility and efficiency, issues of equity, affordability, and institutional coordination remain critical challenges in Kenya's public sector reform trajectory (Chege, 2020).

Public Sector Reform Models

Public sector reform models in the empirical literature are commonly grounded in the New Public Management (NPM) framework, which explains how governments use managerial tools to improve service delivery performance. NPM assumes that public sector efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness can be enhanced by adopting private-sector practices such as performance contracting, decentralization, performance appraisal, outsourcing, strategic planning, and results-based management (Hood, 1991; Bukenya & Yanguas, 2013). In this view, reforms are expected to improve service delivery through measurable outputs such as faster service turnaround time, achievement of performance targets, and increased managerial autonomy. Recent studies continue to apply NPM logic in evaluating reform outcomes, especially in contexts where governments aim to reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies and strengthen accountability systems (Anshari et al., 2025; Mabotja et al., 2024). However, empirical evidence shows that the translation of NPM reforms into improved service delivery is not automatic, as outcomes are often constrained by institutional capacity, political interference, and administrative culture. As a result, scholars such as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) and Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2015) caution that NPM may overemphasize efficiency and competition while underrepresenting equity, inclusiveness, and broader public value outcomes in service delivery systems.

In contrast, the SERVQUAL model provides a complementary empirical approach for assessing service delivery from the perspective of citizens' experiences. It conceptualizes service quality as the gap between expected and perceived service performance across five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Empirical studies apply SERVQUAL to evaluate public services in sectors such as health, education, licensing, and local government administration by focusing on user satisfaction and perceived quality improvements following reforms (Bukenya & Yanguas, 2013; Anshari et al., 2025). Its strength lies in shifting attention from internal administrative efficiency to external service experience, thereby capturing whether reforms are actually felt by citizens in practice. However, scholars such as Babakus and Boller

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(1992) and Mabotja et al. (2024) argue that SERVQUAL is limited because it does not fully capture broader public sector values such as equity, transparency, accountability, and rights-based access. Therefore, while SERVQUAL is useful in measuring perceived service quality improvements, it should be integrated with governance and public value perspectives to provide a more comprehensive assessment of public sector reform outcomes.

Synthesis of Empirical Literature

The empirical literature shows that public sector reforms have improved accountability, administrative efficiency, and service delivery in many countries, although their outcomes vary across political and institutional contexts. Developed countries in Western Europe and North America have successfully applied New Public Management and Results-Based Management approaches, including performance contracting, service charters, and performance measurement systems (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Kippin & Kippin, 2024). Digital transformation has also strengthened access, transparency, and responsiveness in countries such as Singapore (Sukarno et al., 2024). However, similar reforms have produced mixed outcomes in developing countries because of corruption, political interference, inadequate resources, weak institutions, and differences in administrative culture (Bukenya & Yanguas, 2013; Fatile & Adejuwon, 2010). African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda have emphasized decentralization, institutional restructuring, and digital governance, but weak local capacity, corruption, and political instability have often limited their effectiveness (Ayee, 2023; Onuorah & Bosso, 2024; Mabotja et al., 2024). These findings demonstrate that international reform models cannot simply be transferred across countries without adapting them to local governance realities.

In Kenya, public sector reforms have focused on performance management, devolution, service charters, institutional restructuring, and digitalization. Performance contracting was introduced to strengthen accountability and efficiency, while Huduma Kenya and e-Citizen have improved the accessibility and speed of public services (Hope, 2012; Cheche & Muathe, 2014; Meru & Kinoti, 2022). Nevertheless, reform outcomes remain uneven across sectors and counties because of corruption, political patronage, bureaucratic resistance, weak enforcement, inadequate infrastructure, and the digital divide (KIPPRA, 2021; Koko & Moi, 2024). Although devolution has brought government services closer to citizens, its effectiveness has been constrained by resource misallocation, limited county capacity, and weak oversight mechanisms (Onyango, 2024). The literature therefore indicates that sustainable improvement requires reforms that reflect Kenya's political, cultural, and institutional conditions. Stronger accountability systems, local capacity-building, transparent resource management, effective anti-corruption enforcement, and inclusive digital infrastructure are essential for translating reform policies into reliable and equitable service delivery (Agili, 2018; Meru & Kinoti, 2022). All this is summarized in the Table 1 in the Appendix.

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Theoretical Anchorage

This article considered how the predictions of various theories namely institutional theory, public value theory, and governance theory, have been used across empirical studies to elucidate the relationship between public sector management reforms and public sector service delivery across different contexts.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory was founded by Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell in 1983 (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The theory postulates that organizations are shaped by formal rules, legal frameworks, professional norms, political expectations, administrative traditions, and cultural practices that influence how reforms are interpreted and implemented (Singh et al., 2024). In public sector reform, this implies that instruments such as strategic planning, performance contracting, service charters, digitalization, and devolution do not automatically improve service delivery simply because they are introduced. Instead, their effectiveness depends on whether they are embedded within supportive institutional arrangements, enforcement mechanisms, leadership practices, and accountability systems (Alex et al., 2024).

This theory predicts that the relationship between public sector management reform and service delivery is mediated by institutional capacity, administrative culture, political incentives, and implementation discipline. However, scholars have critiqued the theory for overemphasizing conformity, stability, and institutional pressures while paying insufficient attention to managerial agency, innovation, strategic leadership, and citizen demand (Hood, 1991). This creates a theoretical gap because Institutional Theory explains why reforms may be constrained by entrenched systems, but it does not adequately explain how reform actors can actively mobilize change, generate public value, or overcome institutional inertia.

Public Value Theory

The public value theory was founded by Mark H. Moore in 1995 (Moore, 1995) and it provides the normative and evaluative lens for assessing whether public sector reforms generate outcomes that matter to citizens. The theory postulates that public managers should create value by aligning public resources, institutional capabilities, political legitimacy, and citizen expectations with the broader public interest (Moore, 1995). In relation to public sector reform, the theory predicts that reforms will improve service delivery when they enhance public value through better accessibility, fairness, responsiveness, trust, accountability, and service quality. This perspective is important because reforms such as performance management, digitalization, devolution, and service charters should not be evaluated only by internal administrative indicators such as cost reduction, speed, or compliance. Rather, they should be judged by whether citizens experience meaningful improvements in welfare, inclusion, reliability, and confidence in public institutions (Alex et al., 2024).

The strength of Public Value Theory lies in its ability to correct the limitations of efficiency-driven reform models. It recognizes that public sector reforms must serve collective welfare and

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not merely reproduce private-sector performance logic. This is especially relevant in Kenya, where service delivery challenges include regional inequality, corruption, political interference, institutional weakness, and uneven access to digital infrastructure. Public Value Theory predicts that reforms will be successful only when they balance efficiency with equity, transparency, participation, and social justice. However, the theory has been criticized for conceptual ambiguity because "public value" is difficult to define and measure across diverse social groups, political contexts, and service sectors (Mabotja et al., 2024).

Public Value Theory therefore requires auxiliary support from Institutional Theory and Governance Theory. Institutional Theory explains why public managers may fail to create public value even when reform goals are clearly stated, since institutional routines, political incentives, and administrative cultures can constrain reform implementation (Singh et al., 2024). Governance Theory extends this explanation by depicting that public value is rarely produced by government acting alone; rather, it emerges through collaboration, coordination, accountability, and participation among multiple actors (Rhodes, 1997).

Governance Theory

The governance theory was originated by Rhodes in 1996 (Rhodes, 1996) and it provides the relational and implementation-oriented lens for understanding public sector management reform and service delivery. The theory postulates that contemporary public administration is no longer the exclusive responsibility of central government but involves networks of actors, including national government ministries, county governments, regulatory agencies, private sector organizations, civil society, development partners, and citizens (Rhodes, 1997). In relation to public sector management reform, Governance Theory predicts that reforms are more likely to improve service delivery when they promote coordination, collaboration, transparency, citizen participation, shared responsibility, and multi-level accountability. This is particularly relevant to Kenya because reforms such as devolution, e-government, public-private partnerships, participatory planning, and county-level service delivery require interaction among multiple institutions and stakeholders.

The theory is useful because it captures the complexity of service delivery in reforming states. Public services are delivered through interdependent systems rather than isolated bureaucratic units, and reform outcomes often depend on how well actors coordinate across administrative boundaries. In Kenya, the promise of devolution rests on the assumption that bringing government closer to citizens improves responsiveness and equity, while digital governance assumes that technology can enhance transparency, access, and efficiency. Governance Theory predicts that these reforms will improve service delivery only where institutions cooperate effectively, citizens can participate meaningfully, and accountability mechanisms prevent elite capture or resource misuse. However, scholars critique Governance Theory for sometimes overstating the benefits of collaboration and underestimating power asymmetries, coordination failures, political capture, and institutional fragmentation. This critique is important in the Kenyan context

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because multi-actor governance can widen accountability gaps where roles are unclear, oversight is weak, or political actors dominate participatory spaces. Thus, the theoretical gap in Governance Theory is that it explains the importance of networks and collaboration but does not always specify how power imbalances and weak institutions should be managed.

Emerging Propositions

The critical literature shows that public sector reforms do not automatically improve service delivery; their effectiveness depends on institutional capacity, political commitment, accountability systems, citizen participation, and contextual fit. This leads to a context-sensitive public value–institutional governance perspective, which argues that reforms enhance service delivery only when managerial tools are embedded in strong institutions and guided by public value and accountability principles (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015; McCourt, 2018). It rejects the idea that New Public Management tools are universally transferable and instead emphasizes the interaction between reform design, institutional context, and citizen outcomes (Vakulenko & Mattei, 2023). Empirical evidence further shows that performance-based reforms improve service delivery only when supported by enforcement mechanisms, incentives, and stakeholder engagement, as seen in Kenya where outcomes remain uneven due to political interference and weak enforcement (Hope, 2012; KIPPRA, 2021; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Proposition 1*:* The effect of public sector management reforms on service delivery may be predicated upon the mediating influences of internal institutional factors.

Proposition 2: The effect of public sector management reforms on service delivery may be moderated by external environmental factors.

It also depicts that digital public service delivery improves efficiency, transparency, and access only where digital transformation is accompanied by institutional readiness, inclusive infrastructure, and citizen capability. Digitalization has been widely associated with improved transparency, reduced transaction costs, faster service access, and better monitoring of public services (Haug et al., 2024; Latupeirissa et al., 2024). In Kenya, digital platforms such as e-Citizen and Huduma-related service innovations have enhanced administrative convenience and improved access to selected government services (Meru & Kinoti, 2022; Koko & Moi, 2024). However, the literature also reveals that digital reforms may reproduce exclusion where rural communities, low-income groups, elderly citizens, and persons with limited digital literacy lack reliable access to ICT infrastructure (Wang & Ma, 2022; Haug et al., 2024). This proposition therefore reframes digitalization not simply as a technological reform but as an institutional and equity-sensitive governance reform. Future studies should examine how digital infrastructure, data governance, institutional capacity, digital literacy, and trust in government platforms shape the relationship between digital reforms and service delivery outcomes.

Proposition 3*:* Technological innovations may mediate the relationship between public sector management reforms and service delivery.

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Moreover, the review reveals that decentralization improves service responsiveness and equity only when local governments possess adequate fiscal capacity, administrative competence, accountability systems, and participatory governance structures. Decentralization and devolution are frequently presented in public administration literature as mechanisms for bringing government closer to citizens, improving responsiveness, and strengthening local accountability (Ayee, 2023; Karyeija, 2012). However, evidence from Kenya and other African contexts shows that decentralization can also reproduce inefficiency, corruption, elite capture, and uneven service quality where local institutions lack capacity and oversight (KIPPRA, 2021; Onyango, 2024). This proposition therefore challenges overly optimistic assumptions in decentralization literature by arguing that proximity to citizens does not automatically produce better service delivery. Instead, devolution improves public service outcomes only when county governments have adequate resources, technical expertise, transparent procurement systems, citizen participation, and effective intergovernmental coordination (McCourt, 2018; Vakulenko & Mattei, 2023). Future empirical studies should therefore test the conditions under which decentralization enhances or constrains service delivery across counties, sectors, and citizen groups.

Proposition 3*:* Decentralization may moderate the effects of public sector management reforms on service delivery.

Taken together, these propositions constitute the paper's proposed ***Public Value–Institutional Governance Framework*** for future studies on public sector management reforms and service delivery. The framework integrates Public Value Theory, Institutional Theory, and Governance Theory by arguing that reforms should be evaluated according to three linked dimensions: whether they create citizen-valued outcomes, whether they are embedded in capable and accountable institutions, and whether they are implemented through inclusive and coordinated governance arrangements (Moore, 1995; Rhodes, 1997; Singh et al., 2024). This framework contributes to theory building by moving beyond fragmented reform models and offering an integrated lens for explaining why similar reforms may produce different outcomes across contexts. It also provides a basis for future empirical research to test how institutional capacity, political incentives, digital readiness, citizen participation, and accountability mechanisms moderate the relationship between public sector management reforms and service delivery in Kenya and comparable developing-country settings.

Discussion

To facilitate successful public sector reforms globally, it is critical for governments to strengthen institutional capacity and enhance accountability mechanisms. This includes building the capacity of public officials by providing continuous training, developing clear job descriptions, and implementing performance management systems that tie individual and institutional performance to both rewards and sanctions. Training programs should be designed

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to equip public servants with the skills necessary to manage reforms effectively, while clear guidelines must be set for assessing their performance. Additionally, strengthening anti-corruption frameworks is essential to ensure that public sector institutions operate with integrity. Independent oversight bodies, such as audit institutions and anti-corruption commissions, should be adequately resourced and empowered to monitor compliance with governance standards and ensure transparency and accountability at all levels of government (Hope, 2012; KIPPRA, 2021).

A key recommendation for advancing public sector reforms globally is to adapt and customize reform frameworks to suit local contexts. While global best practices, such as New Public Management (NPM) and Results-Based Management (RBM), provide valuable tools, they must be tailored to the specific political, economic, and institutional conditions of each country. Reforms should consider cultural nuances, governance systems, and socio-political dynamics that may influence the success of reform initiatives (Bukenya & Yanguas, 2013).

For public sector reforms to succeed globally, a focus on attitudinal and cultural change within public institutions is essential. Reform initiatives must foster a culture of service, transparency, and accountability, which requires shifts in the mindsets of public sector employees and leadership. This involves cultivating a mindset that prioritizes public service excellence over bureaucratic rigidity. Governments must invest in programs that encourage ethical behavior, team collaboration, and a strong commitment to public service values. Notably, the adaptability and flexibility of public sector reforms are critical for ensuring their success across different contexts.

Implications

Policy Implications

The paper has important policy implications for Kenya since it reveals that reforms do not automatically lead to improved service delivery simply because they have been formally adopted. For policymakers, the findings imply that public sector reforms should be designed and assessed according to their actual contribution to public value, including efficiency, accountability, equity, responsiveness, transparency, and citizen satisfaction. In the Kenyan context, reforms such as performance contracting, service charters, Huduma Centres, e-government platforms, and devolution should not be evaluated only by their existence or level of procedural compliance, but by whether they produce measurable improvements in service delivery outcomes. The paper therefore suggests that policy design should pay greater attention to the institutional and governance conditions that support reform implementation. Performance-based reforms require credible enforcement mechanisms, clear incentives, sanctions for non-compliance, and reliable citizen feedback systems.

Managerial Practice Implications

The paper also has significant implications for public sector managers and administrators responsible for implementing reforms in Kenya. It suggests that managers should move beyond treating reforms as administrative routines or compliance requirements but instead focus on how reform instruments are translated into

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practical service delivery improvements. Public managers need to strengthen institutional capacity, improve coordination across departments and levels of government, and ensure that reform tools are supported by adequate resources, skilled personnel, and clear accountability structures.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies can consider operationalizing an empirical study anchored on the public value theory, new institutional theory, and one of the contingencies theories to investigate the influence of institutional factors and external environmental contingencies on the relationship between public sector management reforms and service delivery in developing countries. This will help in future analysis of the concepts of public sector reforms and public service delivery.

Conclusion

The analysis of public sector reforms and service delivery in Kenya, as well as in comparative global and African contexts, demonstrates that reform is not a linear process, but rather one shaped by complex political, economic, and institutional dynamics. Over the years, Kenya has implemented various reform strategies, ranging from performance contracting and service charters to decentralization; while augmented with digitalization. While these interventions have yielded modest improvements in efficiency and access, their full potential remains largely unrealized due to enduring issues such as corruption, political interference, bureaucratic inertia, and inequitable resource distribution. These factors have significantly hindered the effectiveness of public institutions in meeting citizen expectations and delivering quality services.

From this analysis, three observations can be drawn. First, performance-based systems are more effective when accompanied by strong enforcement mechanisms and stakeholder engagement. Second, digital service delivery enhances efficiency but must be supported by equitable access to ICT infrastructure, especially in rural areas. Third, decentralization improves service responsiveness only when local governments possess sufficient capacity, resources, and oversight mechanisms. These propositions provide a theoretical and practical foundation for future studies and reforms focused on optimizing public sector performance in Kenya and similar developing contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare in relation to the study.

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Appendix 1.

Table 1: Empirical Review Summary

Authors & Study	Objective	Review Type	Overarching Goal/Aim	Search Strategy	Studies Included	Analysis & Synthesis	Key References
Knox & Sharipova (2023)	Examine public sector reforms and service delivery	Critical literature review	Explain how reform frameworks improve service delivery	Review of academic & policy literature	Public sector reform literature	Qualitative synthesis of frameworks	Knox & Sharipova (2023)
Amin et al. (2024)	Analyze reform themes	Literature review	Understand reform drivers	Literature review	Themes: decentralization, e-governance, corruption	Thematic synthesis	Amin et al. (2024)
Jing & Fan (2023)	Compare reforms across countries	Comparative review	Draw global lessons	Comparative review	Multi-country cases	Comparative analysis	Jing & Fan (2023)
Ayee (2023)	Assess decentralization in Africa	Comparative/policy review	Understand governance outcomes	Review of African cases	African countries	Comparative synthesis	Ayee (2023)
Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017)	Examine NPM reforms	Comparative review	Explain reform trajectories	Literature review	Developed countries	Comparative synthesis	Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017)
Kippin &	Assess	Policy	Evaluate	Literatur	Performa	Policy	Kippin &

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Kippin (2024)	performance reforms	review	accountability reforms	e review	nce reform literature	synthesis	Kippin (2024)
Sukarno et al. (2024)	Assess digital reforms	Case review	Show digital governance impact	Case-based review	Singapore	Case synthesis	Sukarno et al. (2024)
Onuorah & Bosso (2024)	Analyze decentralization challenges	Comparative review	Explain governance issues	Literature review	Nigeria & Africa	Thematic synthesis	Onuorah & Bosso (2024)
Mabotja et al. (2024)	Examine reforms in South Africa	Case review	Assess reform outcomes	Literature review	South Africa	Case analysis	Mabotja et al. (2024)
Cheche & Muathe (2014)	Assess performance contracts	Empirical review	Evaluate reform tool	Literature review	Kenya	Analytical synthesis	Cheche & Muathe (2014)
KIPPRA (2021)	Analyze Kenya reforms	Policy report	Evaluate reform effectiveness	Policy review	Kenya	Policy analysis	KIPPRA (2021)
Meru & Kinoti (2022)	Assess digital service delivery	Empirical review	Evaluate e-government	Literature review	Kenya	Thematic analysis	Meru & Kinoti (2022)
Koko & Moi (2024)	Examine reform differences	Empirical review	Assess inconsistencies	Literature review	Kenya	Comparative analysis	Koko & Moi (2024)
Koko & Moi (2021)	Analyze service charters	Empirical review	Evaluate barriers	Literature review	Kenya	Analytical synthesis	Koko & Moi (2021)
Onyango (2024)	Analyze governance challenges	Policy review	Explain reform failures	Literature review	Kenya	Thematic analysis	Onyango (2024)

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