

Rethinking Development Control: *Participatory Governance and Development Control Effectiveness in Nairobi Residential Areas*

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Abstract

Development control is a statutory administrative mechanism of urban planning often criticised for inconsistency, discretionary decision-making, lack of transparency and limited community participation. A qualitative case study was carried out in Karen and Buruburu residential areas on community participation in development control. Data collected from key informants, focus group discussions, field observations and secondary sources revealed a discrepancy between the formal planning process and development control decision-making, identifying institutional fragmentation, political influence and weak participation as major governance challenges. Development control mechanisms operated under a negotiation process shaped by power relations, political influence and fragmented institutions. Effectiveness was undermined by lack of transparency, where regulatory institutions lacked accountable discretionary development practices, reducing participation to tokenism. The paper concludes that effective development control depends on a predictable regulatory framework, community participation, enabling governance practices and accountable decision-making in approving plans. A participatory development control model providing coordination, transparency and criteria for development control decisions is proposed.

Keywords: Community participation, development control, discretion, Nairobi, participatory planning, regulatory institutions, urban governance

INTRODUCTION

Development control is a central instrument in urban planning, intended to regulate land use, guide spatial development, and safeguard the quality of the built environment. However, in many rapidly urbanising cities—particularly in the Global South—its effectiveness has increasingly come under scrutiny. Traditional development control systems, largely rooted in technocratic and regulatory approaches, have often failed to adequately address the complex socio-political and economic realities shaping contemporary urban development.

In Nairobi, this challenge is especially pronounced in residential areas. Despite the existence of a comprehensive legal and institutional framework—including the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the Physical and Land Use Planning Act (2019), and the County Governments Act (2012)—development

control outcomes remain inconsistent and, at times, at odds with established planning regulations. These inconsistencies manifest as unregulated development, non-compliance with zoning and building standards, and the proliferation of land-use conflicts within residential neighbourhoods. Furthermore, development control processes in Nairobi are shaped by competing interests, power asymmetries, and discretionary decision-making, which often privilege private development interests over collective public good.

The limited capacity of planning institutions, inadequate coordination among stakeholders, and restricted access to information further constrain effective community engagement. Consequently, residents are frequently excluded from decisions that directly affect their living environments, leading to the emergence of residents' associations

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as alternative platforms for contesting development decisions and demanding accountability.

Participatory approaches in urban planning have increasingly been recognised as essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive development outcomes. Empirical studies demonstrate that community participation enhances the quality of planning decisions, promotes social learning, and supports more rational and context-sensitive policy formulation (Li et al., 2020; Meaton & Alnsour, 2012; Aldegeishem, 2023). Alnsour (2014) further argues that participatory planning reorients development processes toward people-centred priorities, enabling communities to actively pursue their socio-economic aspirations.

While existing studies have examined community participation in broader governance and development contexts, there is limited empirical understanding of how participation specifically influences development control processes and outcomes within Nairobi's residential areas. In particular, the relationship between the nature, level, and effectiveness of community participation and the quality and consistency of development control decisions remains underexplored.

This gap highlights the need to rethink development control beyond its traditional regulatory paradigm by interrogating the role of community participation in planning practice. Such a rethinking requires moving from tokenistic and procedural engagement toward more substantive, transparent, and outcome-oriented participatory governance.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the effectiveness of community participation in development control in Nairobi's residential areas, with a view to identifying the factors shaping participatory outcomes and proposing pathways to strengthen participatory governance in urban planning.

This study contributes to planning scholarship by demonstrating that the effectiveness of development control depends not only on regulatory compliance but also on meaningful community participation and participatory governance. It further contributes to planning practice by proposing a participatory development control framework for strengthening governance

in Nairobi's residential areas.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- i. Evaluate the effectiveness of community participation in influencing development control outcomes in residential areas.
- ii. Develop a participatory development control framework that can be embedded within Nairobi's planning system.

THEORY

The debate on development control and community participation is extensive, covering theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and practice. This section reviews the literature and theoretical frameworks underpinning the key concepts of the study. It concludes that promoting community participation in development control fosters sustainable development outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in planning theory and participatory governance literature, which together provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the relationship between development control and community participation. The study adopts a multi-theoretical approach drawing on communicative theory, collaborative planning theory, and Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation. Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation demonstrates that participation occurs along a continuum from manipulation to citizen power, where communities progressively gain influence over decisions affecting them. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives explain the dynamics of decision-making, power relations, and institutional processes within development control systems.

Communicative and collaborative planning theory provides a contemporary framework that emphasises dialogue, deliberation, and consensus-building among stakeholders. Rooted in Habermas' theory of communicative action, it views planning as a social process integrating technical expertise and local knowledge (Healey, 1997; Forester, 1989). Collaborative planning further highlights institutional capacity, trust, and coordination among actors in achieving effective planning outcomes (Healey, 1999). In development control, where government

agencies, developers, and communities interact, this approach is particularly relevant. However, collaborative processes are often constrained by power imbalances, elite domination, and weak institutional arrangements, limiting their effectiveness (Fung & Wright, 2003; Hiller, 2003).

Civic Framework of Participation in Development Control

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation provides the central analytical framework for this study by conceptualising participation as a function of power distribution (Arnstein, 1969). The model distinguishes between non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power, highlighting that participation is not merely about involvement but the degree of influence communities have over decision-making. In many planning contexts, including development control in Nairobi, participation remains tokenistic, with communities informed or consulted but lacking real decision-making authority (Moser, 1989). This framework is useful for assessing the effectiveness of participatory processes and identifying gaps between formal provisions and actual practice.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that development control is not solely a regulatory function but a governance process shaped by power relations, institutional dynamics, and participatory practices. Their integration supports the argument that rethinking development control requires a shift from technocratic approaches towards more inclusive, participatory, and collaborative planning systems.

Development Control and Urban Planning

The world is urbanizing at an unprecedented rate, with urban populations accounting for just over half (56.2 per cent) of the global population (UN-Habitat, 2020). Projections indicate that most future urbanization will occur in the developing world, particularly in Asia and Africa. In Kenya, the urban population is estimated at 27 per cent, with an annual urbanization rate of approximately 4.3 per cent (World Bank, 2016). Rapid urbanization is widely recognized as a driver of economic development. However, it also presents significant social and political challenges, including overcrowding, concentrated poverty, crime, street violence, and the rapid transmission of disease.

Planning standards in Sub-Saharan Africa have been criticized for being overly restrictive and disconnected from socio-economic realities (Rakodi, 2001; Watson, 2009). Rakodi (2001) argues that failure to address the needs of urban actors through appropriate standards inevitably results in widespread non-compliance. Such non-compliance is further driven by private developers' pursuit of profit maximization, even when developments compromise occupant safety and convenience (Rakodi, 1995; UN-Habitat, 2003).

Development control is frequently criticized for both the decisions it produces and the processes through which they are made. Dissanayake (1987:1) notes common complaints that development control is sluggish, complex, costly, and stifles initiative. Amos (1980) similarly observes that many members of the public view development control as limiting their aims and aspirations.

Increasingly, development control extends beyond physical form to incorporate social and economic outcomes. It is applied to minimise adverse environmental impacts, regulate market forces, promote social equity, and support economic development. In this respect, development control is linked to the core functions of safeguarding safety, health, and convenience (Litchfield & Darin-Drabkin, 1980; Dissanayake, 1987).

Development Control and Institutional Arrangements

Institutional arrangements form the foundation of land-use planning and management and operate within shifting social, economic, political, and environmental agendas (Healey et al., 1988). Such arrangements have been described as comprehensive, integrated, and communicative planning (Healey et al., 1988; Adam & Watkins, 2008; Rydin, 2011).

The development control arena is often characterized by multiple institutions performing overlapping development management functions, with no coordinating framework to synthesize their activities toward sustainable neighbourhood outcomes. Schilderman (2002) describes institutions as the "hardware" forming legitimate governance structures. Within this system, individuals, households, neighbourhoods, cities,

and national bodies interact at different levels, creating complex, overlapping, and at times contradictory “rules of the game.”

Development Control and Participation

Studies have consistently concluded that participatory approaches in urban planning support the achievement of planning goals and more rational policy decisions (Li et al., 2020; Meaton & Alnsour, 2012; Aldegeishem, 2023). Alnsour (2014) argues that participation reorients planning towards sustainable development and people-centred interests, enabling communities to pursue socio-economic aspirations. Related scholarship suggests that integrating community participation into development management enhances social learning and contributes to sustainable development outcomes (Zuhair & Kurian, 2016; Aldegeishem, 2023).

UN-Habitat (2020) and Aldegeishem (2023) identify several positive impacts of community participation, including improved decision-making, inclusion of community priorities and needs, socio-economic benefits, increased awareness of urban issues, better-informed publics, improved information sharing and problem-solving, enhanced transparency and accountability, strengthened trust, and greater satisfaction with planning decisions. These elements provide a foundation for collaborative urban governance, where multiple actors are recognised as legitimate participants in shaping development outcomes.

Participation in development control has therefore been advocated as a means of ensuring planning is people-centred and responsive to local knowledge. It can increase residents’ sense of ownership while strengthening transparency and accountability in planning processes (Arimah & Adeagbo, 2000). Participation also broadens decision-making space and helps residents feel meaningfully included in shaping their neighbourhoods. This position is reinforced by studies suggesting that residents have a vested interest in the quality of their neighbourhood environments, making participatory approaches essential for sustainable development (Rukwaro & Olima, 2003; Onyango & Olima, 2008).

Challenges of Development Control

Failure to provide for citizen participation in

urban planning processes is a significant barrier to sustainable and inclusive urban growth in Africa. This is compounded by weak development control and enforcement, obsolete planning processes, and limited knowledge of procedures relating to compliance with land-use regulations (AFD, 2022).

Studies estimate that non-compliance with planning policies and standards in Africa ranges between 30 and 60 per cent. Building standards are frequently violated with regard to building lines, plot ratio, ground coverage, and land-use change (Nwaka, 2005). Weak development control and enforcement have contributed to densification in areas planned for low density, resulting in strained infrastructure and declining living environments (Arimah & Adeagbo, 2000; Kironde, 1992a; Onyango & Olima, 2008; Mwangi, 2016). In Kenya, research shows that despite active regulatory oversight, systemic non-compliance with planning and building standards persists (Rukwaro, 2025).

Debates on the Concept of Community Participation

Debates on the origins of community participation persist, largely reflecting a paradigm shift from top-down development approaches in which communities were treated as passive recipients of programmes. Weaknesses of these approaches prompted researchers to challenge non-participatory methods. A major driver of participation was the pursuit of sustainable development outcomes (Johnson & Walker, 2000). This shift emphasised people-centred development, viewing individuals and communities as active contributors to decision-making (Mompoti & Prinsen, 2000; Chambers, 1993; Kelly, 2001).

Mansuri and Rao (2013) relate the resurgence of participation since the mid-1980s to reactions against top-down investment projects and the social costs of structural adjustment.

The importance of community participation in decision-making has long been acknowledged by administrators, officials, and community leaders (Cooper, Bryer & Meek, 2006; Rosener, 1975; Yang & Pandey, 2011; Bryson et al., 2013). Despite this recognition, limited understanding remains on how to design effective participation processes

(Bryson et al., 2013).

Arnstein (1965) associates participation with power and control, emphasising the empowerment of previously excluded groups within political and economic processes. Christopher Alexander similarly argues that participation fosters a sense of ownership by bringing people together to contribute ideas about their environment (Moser, 1983).

Mansuri and Rao (2013) distinguish between organic participation (community-led collective action countering the state) and induced participation (government- or donor-initiated participation through decentralization and community-driven development). They argue that success depends largely on state responses to community organisation and the extent of space provided for meaningful participation.

Gaventa (2003) argues that participation has expanded beyond community projects to include policy, politics, governance, and socio-economic spheres. This broader understanding links participation to citizenship, rights, responsibilities, and accountability relationships between public service providers and citizens (DFID, 2010; Jones & Gaventa, 2002).

Speer (2012) similarly conceptualises participatory governance mechanisms as strategies for improving responsiveness and service delivery through citizen involvement in budgeting, policy design, and monitoring government spending. She concludes that impacts may be positive but are often limited, citing participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Musekiwa and Chatiza (2013), in examining residents' associations, highlight their role in articulating citizen rights and lobbying local governments. They argue that residents' associations often bridge weak links between residents and councils. When administrative engagement and negotiation fail, associations may resort to the courts as a final mechanism for redress.

Community participation embraces a range of approaches, including surveys and consultations of residents in decision-making processes. Through these consultations, planners tap into

community opportunities within local settings. This participatory approach is valuable in complex socio-economic contexts where global issues and environmental challenges require tailored solutions (Margayaningsih, 2024).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between community participation and development control effectiveness within the broader context of urban governance. It is grounded in the theoretical perspectives discussed above and aligned with the study objectives.

Community participation is the independent variable, comprising access to information, participation mechanisms, level of engagement, and community agency. Meaningful participation depends on access to planning information and opportunities for engagement through public consultations, stakeholder forums, and public notices, enabling communities to influence development decisions (Agarwal, 2001; Rowe & Frewer, 2004; Gaventa, 2003).

The relationship between participation and development control is mediated by institutional and governance factors, including the legal and policy framework, institutional coordination, planning authority capacity, and political interference. Weak coordination, limited institutional capacity, and political influence undermine effective participation and consistent decision-making (Healey et al., 1988; Watson, 2011).

Development control effectiveness is the dependent variable and is reflected in compliance with planning standards, transparency, accountability, consistency, and institutional responsiveness (Litchfield & Darin-Drabkin, 1980). Effective development control promotes sustainable urban development, while weak participation and ineffective regulation contribute to land-use conflicts, environmental degradation, and declining quality of life (UN-Habitat, 2020; Nwaka, 2005).

Overall, the framework demonstrates that development control effectiveness depends on the interaction between community participation and institutional governance, providing the basis for analysing participatory governance in

development control.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding this study, illustrating the relationships between community participation, institutional and governance context, development control effectiveness, and urban development outcomes.

The figure illustrates the conceptual framework underpinning this study. It demonstrates that community participation influences development control effectiveness through the mediating role of institutional and governance context. Effective development control contributes to sustainable urban development, whereas weak participation, poor governance, and ineffective regulation result in unsustainable development outcomes. The framework therefore positions participatory governance as central to improving development control in Nairobi's residential areas.

By integrating participatory theory, institutional theory, and development control practice, the framework provides a foundation for empirical analysis and supports the development of a participatory development control model for sustainable residential development in Nairobi.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employs a qualitative research approach appropriate for investigating complex social and institutional processes. A case study design is adopted as the primary methodology. Development control, as a governance process, is embedded within institutional, political, and socio-economic environments, making the case study approach appropriate. This approach is based on the understanding that development control and participation are socially constructed processes that cannot be fully understood through objective measurement alone. Instead, they require interpretation of the meanings, experiences, and perceptions of different actors. The interpretivist approach enables the study to capture diverse realities relating to inclusion, exclusion, power, and governance across institutional and social contexts.

The study is conducted in Nairobi City County, a rapidly urbanising metropolitan area characterised by increasing development pressures, land-use conflicts, and challenges in enforcing planning regulations. Nairobi provides an appropriate context for examining development control

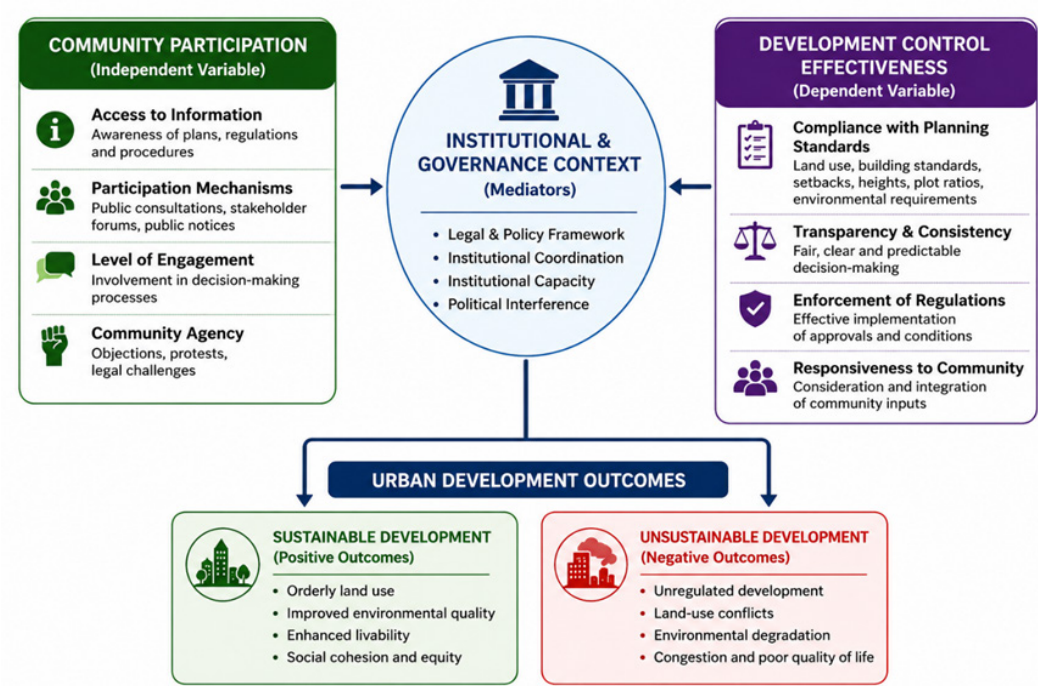


FIGURE 1
Conceptual framework linking participation, governance, development control, outcomes
Source: Author's compilation from reviewed literature, 2026 study synthesis

because of its complex institutional framework, diverse socio-economic conditions, and active public discourse on urban governance. Two residential areas—Karen and Buruburu—are selected as case studies. They provide contrasting socio-economic characteristics, development patterns, and forms of community organisation (Table 1). Their selection enables an in-depth exploration of how development control and participation unfold across different residential settings, generating nuanced insights into governance processes. Karen represents a low-density, high-income residential area experiencing subdivision and change-of-use pressures, while Buruburu represents a medium-density, middle-income estate facing challenges of densification and infrastructure strain. Together, these contrasting contexts provide a comprehensive basis for analysing development control and participatory governance.

Data Sources

The study employs multiple data collection methods to ensure depth, richness, and triangulation, using both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data are collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with residents, officials of residents' associations, regulatory authorities, and built environment professionals. They explore perceptions of development control, decision-

making processes, institutional roles, and participation. Focus group discussions capture collective perspectives and shared experiences, particularly among residents and institutional actors, providing insight into community dynamics, conflicts, and governance processes.

Secondary data are obtained from policy documents, development approval records, legal cases, academic literature, and media reports. In addition, social media data are analysed to capture informal expressions of public opinion and participation. These sources provide contextual and longitudinal perspectives on development control and governance practices.

Sampling Strategy

The study employs purposive sampling, consistent with a qualitative research design. Respondents are selected based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in development control and participatory processes. This approach ensures the collection of rich and relevant data aligned with the research objectives. The sample includes residents, officials of residents' associations, government officers involved in development control, and professionals such as planners, architects, and engineers. These respondents represent key stakeholders within the development control system and provide diverse perspectives on governance processes. Their selection is guided by the need to capture multiple viewpoints and reflect

TABLE 1

Comparative development control practices in Karen and Buruburu residential areas

Dimension	Karen	Buruburu
Planning Framework	Formal LPDP with explicit zoning and density controls	Comprehensive estate plan with fixed residential typologies
Primary Source of Contestation	Approvals perceived to violate the LPDP (commercial use and densification)	Deviations from the original estate layout and housing form
Resident Expectations	Rule-based and predictable decision-making	Preservation of estate identity and neighbourhood order
Nature of Discretion	Exemptions justified through technical rationales	Selective tolerance and uneven enforcement
Perceived Impact	Erosion of trust in formal planning instruments	Erosion of collective neighbourhood identity
Overall Development Control Experience	Negotiated and uncertain despite formal plans	Arbitrary and inconsistent despite planned origins

Source: Author's analysis (2026)

the complexity of development control as a multi-actor governance process. Purposive sampling enables the inclusion of participants who possess firsthand experience of planning approvals, regulatory enforcement, public participation, and neighbourhood development issues. Data collection continues until thematic saturation is achieved, that is, when additional interviews and discussions no longer generate substantially new insights. This strategy enhances the credibility and depth of the findings by ensuring that the perspectives obtained are information-rich and directly relevant to understanding the effectiveness of participatory governance in development control.

Analytical Approach

Data are analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. This involves interview transcription, data organisation, coding, and identification of recurring themes. The analysis is inductive, allowing patterns and categories to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori.

Thematic analysis is guided by the research objectives and conceptual framework. Key themes include the nature of development control, forms of community participation, institutional arrangements, and governance effectiveness. These themes are analysed to understand how development control operates, why particular outcomes occur, and how the system can be improved.

Validity and Reliability

The analysis also compares data from different sources to identify consistencies and divergences. This enhances the validity of the findings and supports a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. To ensure rigour, the study employs methodological triangulation using multiple data sources and methods. Data are cross-checked across interviews, observations, and documentary sources to enhance credibility. Iterative verification is undertaken to account for changes in governance processes over time. Reflexivity is also applied, with the researcher remaining aware of potential biases and interpreting findings from participants' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are observed throughout the study. Participants are informed of the purpose

of the research, and participation is voluntary. Informed consent is obtained, and confidentiality is maintained through anonymised responses. Data are used strictly for academic purposes.

Study Limitations

This study is limited to a qualitative investigation of development control in Nairobi City County, using Karen and Buruburu as case studies. Consequently, the findings provide in-depth contextual insights but are not intended for statistical generalisation to all urban areas. Nevertheless, the findings offer analytical insights that may be transferable to comparable urban governance contexts.

RESULTS

Development Control in Practice: Divergence from Regulatory Frameworks

The findings reveal a persistent gap between formal planning frameworks and actual development outcomes. Although Nairobi's development control system is supported by regulatory tools such as zoning ordinances, Local Physical Development Plans, and national legislation, these are not consistently applied in practice. In Karen, despite the existence of a clearly defined Local Physical Development Plan, developments that contradicted zoning regulations and density requirements were frequently approved. Residents reported submitting multiple objections to such developments, yet these rarely influenced final decisions, reinforcing the perception that regulatory frameworks are selectively enforced.

A similar pattern was observed in Buruburu, where widespread deviations from approved plans were evident. These included unauthorised extensions, encroachment on road reserves, increased building heights, and conversion of residential units to commercial uses. The findings suggest that development control is not strictly rule-based but operates as a negotiated process shaped by discretion, informal practices, and competing interests. Informal negotiations before and during the approval process further reinforce the view that development control decisions are influenced by factors beyond formal policy provisions.

The Institutional Dynamics and Decision-Making Processes

The study established that the institutional framework governing development control is characterised by fragmentation, weak coordination, and discretionary decision-making. Multiple actors—including county departments, national agencies, and professional bodies—are involved in the approval process, yet their roles are poorly integrated. In several instances, development applications were processed without adequate consultation with relevant technical departments, leading to internal conflicts and implementation challenges.

Decision-making authority was concentrated within specific offices, limiting transparency and accountability. Although formal development approval procedures exist, the process is often influenced by informal interactions and discretionary practices. This creates uncertainty and undermines the system's predictability. Respondents described the process as inconsistent, with similar applications receiving different outcomes depending on the context and actors involved.

Power Relations and Political Influence

A central finding of the study is the significant influence of power relations and political dynamics on development control outcomes. The analysis demonstrates that development control operates within a broader political economy in which actors possess unequal levels of influence. Developers with access to political networks secured approvals for developments that did not comply with existing regulations, often through lobbying and negotiation.

Regulatory officers reported pressure from political actors to approve certain developments, even when these were inconsistent with planning policies. This introduces informality into the decision-making process, where political considerations override technical assessments. The findings confirm that power dynamics are a critical intervening variable shaping development control outcomes, as reflected in the conceptual model. These dynamics contribute to conflicts among residents, developers, and regulatory authorities, weakening the integrity of the planning system.

Procedural and Indirect Nature of Community Participation

The study found that community participation

in development control is limited in scope and largely procedural. Participation mechanisms are primarily confined to statutory requirements, such as newspaper advertisements for change-of-use applications and site notices for proposed developments. These mechanisms are inadequate for meaningful engagement, providing limited information and few structured opportunities for dialogue.

In practice, participation is reactive rather than proactive. Residents typically engage in development control processes after becoming aware of developments they perceive as problematic. This engagement takes the form of objection letters, petitions, protests, and, in some cases, legal action. The absence of structured participatory platforms within the approval process means that community input is not systematically integrated into decision-making.

Low Participation in Development Control

The findings indicate that community participation in development control is generally ineffective. While legal provisions support participation, their implementation is inconsistent and often symbolic. Residents reported that their contributions rarely influenced decisions, reinforcing the perception that participation serves more as a procedural requirement than a substantive component of governance.

Key indicators of limited effectiveness include lack of transparency in decision-making, weak feedback mechanisms, and continued approval of contested developments. In both case study areas, residents expressed frustration that participatory processes failed to prevent developments negatively affecting their neighbourhoods. This contributed to mistrust between communities and regulatory authorities and increased conflict within the development control system.

Inadequacy of Regulatory Tools and Compliance

The study further reveals that regulatory tools used in development control are often outdated, inadequate, and poorly enforced. Although zoning policies and building regulations provide a formal framework for guiding development, they are not responsive to contemporary urban dynamics and development pressures. In many cases, decisions are guided by precedent rather than policy, reflecting a system that adapts informally to

changing conditions.

Compliance with regulations was low, with numerous instances of unauthorised development observed in both case study areas. Enforcement mechanisms are constrained by limited institutional capacity, political interference, and resource constraints. Consequently, enforcement actions are inconsistent and often selective, allowing non-compliant developments to persist.

Complex Development Approval Processes

The development approval process was found to be complex, time-consuming, and characterised by both formal and informal elements. Although supported by digital platforms, respondents reported that approvals often require persistent follow-up, personal engagement with officials, and, in some cases, informal facilitation. This undermines the transparency and efficiency of the system.

The study also identified a tension between improving efficiency in development approvals and ensuring meaningful participation. Efforts to expedite approvals, particularly in response to economic and performance pressures, often reduce opportunities for community engagement. This trade-off highlights a structural challenge within the development control system.

Knowledge and Awareness

The findings indicate that residents are generally aware of development control regulations and their rights to participate in planning processes. However, this awareness does not translate into effective influence over decision-making. Residents reported challenges relating to access to information, the technical complexity of planning documents, and limited transparency in the approval process. These factors contribute to information asymmetry and constrain meaningful participation.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the findings demonstrate that development control in Nairobi is shaped by the interaction of institutional structures, regulatory tools, power relations, and participatory mechanisms. While formal frameworks provide the basis for governance, actual outcomes are determined by informal practices, discretionary decision-making, and unequal power relations

among actors.

The study reveals that development control is rule-based in principle but negotiated in practice, participatory in policy but exclusionary in implementation, and institutionalised in structure but fragmented in operation. These contradictions highlight the limitations of existing approaches and underscore the need to rethink development control as an integrated governance process.

The findings further show that community participation is constrained by institutional weaknesses, political influence, inadequate participation mechanisms, and weak regulatory enforcement. Although legal and policy frameworks recognise the importance of participation, implementation remains limited.

The findings point to the need for a restructured approach to development control that integrates participation into decision-making, enhances transparency and accountability, and addresses underlying power imbalances. These insights provide a foundation for developing a revised conceptual and practical model for development control.

DISCUSSION

Development Control and the Limits of Technocratic Planning

The findings reveal a significant divergence between the formal structure of development control and its practical implementation, challenging the assumptions of rational and technocratic planning. Although development control in Nairobi is formally guided by zoning regulations, development plans, and technical standards, implementation remains inconsistent and influenced by discretionary decision-making. These findings support earlier observations that development control is often constrained by institutional weaknesses and socio-political realities rather than technical considerations alone (Dissanayake, 1987; Amos, 1980; Rakodi, 2001). They also reinforce the argument that development control operates within a broader governance context shaped by institutional arrangements, political influence, and competing interests rather than as a purely regulatory process (Healey et al., 1988).

Communicative Planning and the Reality of Limited Deliberation

Communicative and collaborative planning emphasise dialogue, consensus-building, and integration of technical and local knowledge in decision-making (Healey, 1997; Forester, 1989; Healey, 1999). The findings, however, reveal that these principles remain only partially realised in Nairobi. Participation is largely confined to statutory notices and reactive objections, offering limited opportunities for meaningful dialogue. This supports the critiques of Fung and Wright (2003) and Hiller (2003), who argue that collaborative planning is frequently undermined by unequal power relations and weak institutional arrangements. The findings therefore suggest that meaningful collaboration requires not only participatory mechanisms but also institutional reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and equitable participation.

Power, Participation, and the Limits of Tokenism

The findings strongly support Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation by demonstrating that participation in development control largely remains at the level of tokenism. Although communities are informed or consulted, they rarely influence final decisions. Similar observations have been made by Moser (1989), who argues that participation often becomes symbolic rather than empowering. While the increasing role of residents' associations indicates potential for greater citizen influence, meaningful participation will require institutional reforms that redistribute decision-making power and strengthen accountability, consistent with Gaventa's (2003) governance perspective.

Integrating Participation, Institutions, and Outcomes

The findings validate the conceptual framework by demonstrating that development control effectiveness depends on the interaction between community participation and institutional governance conditions. Weak institutional coordination, political interference, and discretionary practices reduce the effectiveness of participation, supporting Healey et al. (1988) and Watson (2011), who identify institutional fragmentation as a major constraint to effective planning. Similarly, the findings reinforce studies by Li et al. (2020), Meaton and Alnsour (2012), Alnsour (2014), UN-Habitat (2020), and

Aldegeishem (2023), which argue that meaningful community participation improves planning quality, transparency, and sustainable urban development. However, unlike these normative expectations, participation in Nairobi remains constrained by institutional and political realities, limiting its influence on development control outcomes.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that development control in Nairobi reflects a complex interaction between regulatory systems, institutional arrangements, power relations, and participatory practices. While existing planning theories provide a useful foundation, the empirical evidence shows that effective development control depends on governance reforms that integrate participation, strengthen institutional coordination, improve transparency, and reduce discretionary decision-making.

Conceptual Orientation of the Proposed Participatory Development Control Model

The proposed model is grounded in the study's conceptual framework and integrates principles from communicative planning, collaborative planning, Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, and governance theory. It positions development control as a governance process in which community participation is embedded throughout decision-making rather than treated as a procedural requirement.

Figure 2 illustrates the proposed participatory development control model. It demonstrates how a rule-based development control process, institutional coordination, and community participation interact through a systems-thinking approach to produce collaborative governance and sustainable development outcomes. The model emphasises continuous communication, transparency, institutional coordination, adequate access to information, and meaningful participation as essential governance mechanisms for improving development control effectiveness.

Contribution to Rethinking Development Control

The proposed model contributes to rethinking development control by shifting emphasis from regulation to governance. It integrates participation within institutional processes, addresses power imbalances, and strengthens

**FIGURE 2**

Proposed participatory development control model for collaborative governance framework

Source: Author's conceptualisation based on empirical findings and literature synthesis, (2026)

planning systems' capacity to respond to contemporary urban challenges. By embedding participation within decision-making and aligning it with institutional reforms, the model provides a practical framework for improving participatory governance, transparency, and accountability. Consequently, it offers a pathway towards more effective and sustainable development control in Nairobi while providing insights applicable to other rapidly urbanising contexts facing similar governance challenges.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that development control in Nairobi extends beyond a technical regulatory function and operates within a broader governance context shaped by institutional arrangements, political influence, discretionary decision-making, and community participation. Although Kenya possesses an established legal and institutional framework for development control, its implementation remains inconsistent, resulting

in selective enforcement, weak accountability, and limited public confidence in planning institutions.

The findings further establish that community participation remains largely procedural and tokenistic, with limited influence on development control decisions. While statutory mechanisms for participation exist, institutional fragmentation, weak coordination, political interference, and inadequate transparency constrain their effectiveness. Consequently, development control outcomes are frequently determined through negotiated governance rather than consistent application of planning regulations.

By integrating planning theory with empirical evidence, the study contributes to planning scholarship by demonstrating that effective development control depends not only on regulatory compliance but also on participatory governance, institutional coordination, and accountable decision-making. The proposed participatory development control model provides

a governance framework for strengthening transparency, collaboration, and institutional effectiveness while promoting sustainable residential development. Although developed from Nairobi's residential areas, the model offers insights applicable to other rapidly urbanising cities facing similar governance challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

- i. Strengthen participatory governance in development control. Planning authorities should institutionalise meaningful public participation by involving communities throughout the development control process rather than limiting participation to statutory notifications and objections.
- ii. Enhance institutional coordination. County governments and regulatory agencies should establish integrated development control mechanisms that improve coordination among planning departments, infrastructure agencies, environmental authorities, and professional institutions to ensure consistent decision-making.
- iii. Improve transparency and accountability. Development approval processes should be supported by transparent digital platforms that provide timely access to planning information, approval decisions, objections, and responses, thereby reducing discretionary practices and increasing public trust.
- iv. Strengthen regulatory enforcement. Planning authorities should consistently enforce development control regulations through clear approval criteria, regular monitoring, and proportionate enforcement measures to minimise selective implementation and non-compliance.
- v. Adopt the proposed participatory development control model. County governments should incorporate the proposed governance model into planning practice to strengthen institutional collaboration, improve stakeholder participation, reduce political interference, and enhance sustainable urban development.
- vi. Promote capacity building. Continuous training should be provided to planners, development control officers, community leaders, and residents' associations on

participatory governance, development control procedures, and collaborative planning approaches.

- vii. Undertake further research. Future studies should examine the applicability of the proposed participatory development control model in other counties and urban contexts, using comparative and mixed-method approaches to evaluate its effectiveness under different institutional and governance settings.

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