

TOWARDS CLIMATE DISASTER RESILIENCE. AN APPRAISAL OF DEVOLVED DISASTER POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN VIHIGA COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the complexities of decentralized climate disaster policy implementation in Kenya, focusing on policy approaches, external stakeholder influences, and challenges in decentralization and public participation. While a top-down approach prevails, a growing recognition of the bottom-up approach is evident. Several influences on public policy implementation including external stakeholder involvement, policy capacity, politics, government collaboration, are observed to significantly shape policy implementation outcomes. Devolution, while introducing local autonomy, also engenders challenges related to policy consistency. Public participation faces hurdles like awareness gaps. The findings provide insights for policymakers, emphasizing the need for a balanced disaster policy implementation approach, strategic collaboration with stakeholders, and careful consideration of challenges associated with decentralization and public participation. This research contributes to refining strategies for resilient and effective climate disaster policies in Kenya, catering to the diverse needs of local communities.

Keywords: Disaster Management, Climate Change, Devolved Governance, Public Policy, Policy Implementation

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INTRODUCTION

For much of our lives, climate change has been perceived as a distant concern looming on the horizon, but its present-day effects have gradually gotten more concerning, and with forecasts consistently projecting more worrying political and ecological challenges in the future (Wainwright & Mann, 2018). Its slow onset nature, has meant its impacts when observed in the short term, initially seem inconsequential; however, upon careful examination over an extended duration, their long-term consequences become increasingly concerning (UNFCCC Secretariat, 2012). According to World Meteorological Organization (WMO) (2021), nearly 12,000 weather and climate related disasters were recorded between 1970 and 2021 globally, costing the world economy an estimated USD 4.3 trillion in economic losses. The occurrence of these disasters and their destruction has been noted to disproportionately affect the developing world (O'Brien et al., 2006). Extended exposure to risks and hazards overwhelms existing disaster management frameworks, resulting in adverse human impacts that communities, governments and humanitarian agencies struggle to cope with, often forcing the incurring of unbudgeted expenditure or diversion of resources away from other important issues (Hillier, 2018).

The management of climate change and addressing the disaster risks it presents, is also crucial to the attainment of sustainable development and building more resilient communities (Kaylani, 2019; Dzvimbo et al, 2022). In the developing world however, balancing between climate action and other more pressing concerns such as poverty and economic development is especially challenging, but the preservation of development gains made thus far relies heavily on how resilient they are to disaster events. To adequately combat the increased scope and magnitude of climate disaster occurrences there is a need for transformation of disaster governance to enhance coherence, planning, policy making, finance, and coordination amongst all parties involved to reflect the increasingly broad nature of disaster risks (CRED, 2020).

Manifold efforts across the world have been advanced to address climate change and its resulting disaster risks, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Localized grassroots responses could be seen as too limited for a problem with a worldwide scale, unilateral state actions on many occasions have inhibited international collaboration, and multilateral international approaches could appear too broad for a problem with localized implications. While disaster management efforts are necessary at all levels, a grassroots bottom-up approach has been advanced, owing to local governments and the stakeholders at that level having the best suited social capital, situational awareness, community connections and culture critical for disaster policy implementation (Greve, 2016).

Climate projections for East Africa anticipate an increase in precipitation and the risk of floods, as well as drought occurrences that affect food production and migration patterns (Atwoli et al., 2022; Serdeczny et al., 2017). Alive to this reality, Kenya has joined international endeavors to address them. The nation for instance is a signatory to the 2015 Paris Agreement, for which its National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP) is modeled, to mainstream climate change into government sectoral operations and guided by the Climate Change Act (Government of Kenya, 2018). In terms of disaster management, the country adheres to the Sendai Framework, for which its national policies such as the National Disaster Response Plan (NDRP) of 2009 and the National Emergency Response Plan and Standard Operating Procedures (Sops) of 2014 align with, and guided by the National Disaster Risk Management Act of 2023. The implementation of these policies in the country's two-tier government system; the national and devolved county governments however, relies on numerous factors including; implementation approaches, prioritization, collaboration, implementation capacity.

This research aims to investigate the influences of devolved decentralization on the implementation of disaster policy implementation, the impediments to successful policy implementation, and public participation in the implementation of these policy exercises.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Public Policy Implementation

Public policies outline future aspirations and the resources and techniques for attaining them, while implementation entails the transition from policy aspirations to actions (Khan, 2016). Public policy scholarship is broadly classified into three perspectives; the top down, bottom up and synthesis approaches. The top-down approach comprehends public policy implementation to occur in a hierarchical chain; based on the ambitions of top-ranking administrators who design policies and pass them down to subordinate policy implementers (Pressman & Wildawsky, 1984). As such, this approach emphasizes command and control in highly centralized governance structures. The bottom-up approach emerged from the shortcomings of the top-down approach, favoring a participatory approach to policy implementation with emphasis on the behaviors of actors across the policy implementation chain (Lindquist & Wanna, 2015). The bureaucracy, whom Lipsky (2010) labels ‘street level bureaucrats’ are placed at the center of policy implementation, and through their exercise of discretion and autonomy significantly influence policy outcomes. Through this they enjoy a perceived freedom in the prioritization or even altering goals and policy positions to suit their circumstances, resulting in divergence between policy aims and outcomes (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). The synthesis approach, emerging out of the partial validity of the preceding two approaches, advances a triangulation perspective that merges core ideas from both. Forward and backward mapping is advanced, where top-level policymakers recognize and consider the plight of implementers, which is essential for goal consensus building (Elmore, 2002).

Factors Influencing Disaster Policy Implementation

Stakeholder involvement heavily influences policy outcomes, and international DRR frameworks such as the Sendai Framework encourage multi stakeholder involvement in the implementation process. Lomborg (2003), notes the media, researchers, and organizations as strong influences in the climate space, with all of them exerting influence on the overall outcome of policy exercises.

Williams (2021) argues for implementation capacity being the most influential concept in contemporary development, evidenced by the popular reference to it in contemporary development policy practice and research. Dewa et al. (2021) identify the most significant capacity issue in disaster policy implementation as the insufficiency of funds for disaster management agencies to carry out their duties. Munsaka et al (2021) additionally identify finances, equipment and infrastructure, human resource and weak coordination as the capacity shortfalls that derailed Cyclone Idai responses in Zimbabwe.

Disaster risk reduction and resilience demands the involvement of multiple stakeholders, each with their own interests, and some of which resist policy changes (Glavovic et al., 2010). The understanding of disaster risk and resilience varies depending on stakeholders. When policies fail to meet their intended objectives, policy failure occurs. A 2013 UK National audit report identified four broad causes of policy failure: overambitious policy expectations, multilevel policy implementation, uncollaborative policy making and the erratic nature of politics (National Audit Office, 2013).

Decentralization and Public Participation

Decentralization has drawn widespread scholarly enthusiasm, drawing support from the belief that it brings government closer to the people and as such encouraging bottom-up driven development and improving governance (Faguet & Pöschl, 2015). Decentralization sits in between the central government and the people, either providing opportunities linking them, or further reinforcing their differences which bears on the outcomes of policy implementation exercises. It serves as a crucial tool for building disaster risk resilience and risk reduction (Nyandiko, 2020) and is increasingly preferred in disaster governance owing to its relative

proximity to the people, and the belief that decision making and implementation is more responsive at the local level. This proximity is especially beneficial because local governments can tap into local wisdom in disaster response planning, coordinating responses and building resilience for future catastrophes. Localized disaster governance programs also allow for public participation, through which the local communities can voice their concerns and provide their input on their concerning issues (Angell, 2005; Lyon, 2015; Quaranta, 2013). Despite its wonderful promises however, the attainment of public participation through decentralization is notably difficult, owing to the lack of clearly specified guidelines for it, and the awareness and the ability of the public to utilize the channels of participation made available to them (Samaddar et al, 2015). To facilitate more public involvement, Zivari et al. (2019) observe some important elements including the creation of awareness, acquisition of skills and knowledge, creation of an enabling environment, organizational development, and active participation.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Vihiga County in western Kenya, to assess the progress made in the implementation of policies passed down from the national government as well as those formulated and implemented by the county government. The choice of Vihiga as the research site was informed by the elaborate prioritization of climate change and disaster management through policy adoptions and their inclusion in their development plans.

The findings are drawn from 15 in-depth interviews with three interviewees each from: county government executive officers, street level policy implementers, local researchers and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Additionally, two Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions with 10 participants each drawn from residents of the area were conducted to get their commentary on the activities of the county government. The County Integrated Development Plan (2023-2027), Climate Change Act and Disaster Management Bill 2020.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The study investigated the influence of devolution in Kenya and its influence on policy implementation relating to disaster governance and climate change, since the adoption of devolved governance from 2013 to date.

Informants expressed a high enthusiasm for devolution in driving climate change action and managing disasters, with most of the respondents preferring county government policies and legislations to national government policies because of ease of implementation. One county government administrator observes, ‘our policies at the county government are easier for our officers to implement, because they are created with the common ‘*mwananchi*’, (Swahili for citizen) in mind. Most of our officers find it easier to implement them because they live in these places they work and interact with wananchi every day.’ Another county informant observes ‘devolution has made significant progress in mainstreaming DRM for local planning through County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs). 2 percent of county government budgets across the country is allocated to Disaster Risk Management (DRM)...overall, strengthening devolution will also strengthen national disaster risk management efforts.’ Respondents also acknowledged a dependence on top-down policy implementation in their line of duty, which aligned closely with NGOs and policy researchers.

Policy capacity, conflicting stakeholder interests, politics, weak collaboration between the national and county governments, inadequate public participation, and policy multiplicity were observed as the key challenges in the implementation of disaster management policies. As noted by one informant ‘Management of disaster responses in the country has been the disaster itself. Resources invested into disaster management have been very little.’ A policy researcher reckons ‘as a country we have very good policies, but our capacity to implement them is

wanting. Look at the money we lose to dubious procurement and poorly executed projects such as dams which have killed people. Nobody ever knows whether the allocated money goes to the intended purposes.’ Another one observed ‘DRM is a shared function between the national and county governments, but we lack clear guidelines for their collaboration for disaster management.’ A local NGO respondent opines that ‘What Kenya lacks are proper DRM policy and legal frameworks for coordination. National disaster institutions mandates are limited because of lack of legal infrastructure for their operations. The country has for a long time struggled with adopting comprehensive disaster policies, and to this date still has no disaster laws yet.’ The complexity of policy stipulations was noted by the respondents to affect the implementation of policies by county government implementers in the initial stages, but they expressed a gradual improvement over the years.

While devolution brought government closer to the people, establishing public participation and the incorporation of local knowledge which is essential for public policy implementation remains problematic. One local resident informant notes ‘Public participation only exists on paper. In practice politicians and the government just use it to rubber stamp decisions they have already made on their own, to fulfil legal requirements for public participation.’ Asked on why this was so, most of the respondents observed that despite the mention of public participation in policy documents, there lacked prescribed national and county government guidelines on how it should be conducted which resulted in inconsistencies.

DISCUSSION

Policy Implementation

The results of this case study shed light on the intricacies and implications of decentralized climate disaster policy implementation in Kenya. The discussion revolves around three key issues: the effectiveness of different policy implementation approaches, the factors influencing decentralized disaster policy implementation, and the challenges associated with decentralization and public participation.

At the basal level, the results of this study lend support to Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) theorization on the highly centralized nature of public administration. The national government in Kenya still retains overall decision-making power, which constrains the autonomy of county governments in performing their mandates. Hierarchical frameworks for decision making, in which policies are developed by the national government and passed down to local governments, as well as county government policies developed by county governments and handed down to frontline implementers characterized disaster management efforts at Vihiga County. While such an approach guaranteed uniformity, the implementers noted that it oftentimes resulted in well-meaning policies from both the national government and county government, that failed to account for the specific needs of the local population and impractical for them to implement.

On the contrary, respondents also expressed high enthusiasm for the potential of bottom-up policy implementation approaches, aligning with Lipsky (2010) on the local influences on policy implementation exercises. They stressed local governments’ proximity with the people facilitating active non-state actor involvement, public participation, and taking into account the unique needs of the people. The respondents identified policy capacity limitations as the primary constraining factor they faced during policy implementation.

The respondents when asked on which of the two approaches was the more appropriate, preferred a combined framework akin to the synthesis approach as argued by Elmore (2002) and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) that ensured uniformity of national goals across the respective regional county governments, while remaining adaptable to and taking into consideration the nuanced needs of the various counties. The study underscores the importance of flexibility in policy frameworks, allowing for adaptation to the unique climate challenges

faced by different regions. A bottom-up approach, involving the frontline policy implementers and the local communities directly affected by policy decisions, is however deemed essential for addressing the nuanced vulnerabilities associated with climate disasters.

Factors Influencing Disaster Policy Implementation Outcomes

In its 5-year development plan, the County Integrated Development Plan (2023-2027), County Government of Vihiga (2023) acknowledged climate change and its accruing impacts including heavy precipitation which often sees floods that destroy infrastructure. Alongside, increasing population pressure has resulted in rising demand for land often leading to clearing of forest areas and hillslopes, increased urbanization and unsustainable utilization of natural resources. The institutional capacity evidenced in the weak policy and supportive institutional frameworks often led to unclear and unproductive implementation exercises as acknowledged by the county government in its own development plans. A lack of clear county policy project management framework, engendered by weak technical capacities and non-participatory models of implementation encouraged policy failure as well. Pending bills from previous financial years have often led to unplanned expenditures and discouraged the private sector and experts from working with the county government out of fear of non-payment. Insufficient human resource endowment in the absence of technical skills and competence often leads to policy failure. Delayed decision-making owing to rigorous bureaucratic procedures often delays the budget making and approval processes which affected disaster efforts by the county government (County Government of Vihiga, 2023). Program sustainability frameworks especially for donor funded programs such as the National Agricultural and Inclusive Growth Project (NARIGP) and Agricultural Sector Development Support Program (ASDSP) pose challenges to sustaining the gains already made so far in future when such funding facilities end.

Political dynamics plays a pivotal role in shaping disaster policy implementation outcomes especially in the developing world (Grindle, 2017). Respondents identified the influence of political decisions, party interests, and power dynamics as critical factors impacting the effectiveness of policies. Striking a delicate balance between political considerations and the need for evidence-based, sustainable policies emerged as a challenge.

The research noted the existence of divergence of interests amongst stakeholders, and that the balancing of their diverse needs and priorities posed a significant challenge to policy implementation. The perceived disconnect between the public's expectations and the actual policy outcomes underscored the importance of effective communication and community engagement. The influence of external stakeholders, including the media, researchers, and NGOs, was evident in shaping the trajectory of climate change and disaster policy implementation. Their role in raising awareness, providing expertise, and advocating for effective policies was acknowledged by policy practitioners. However, they expressed concerns relating to conflicting agendas and priorities which occasionally hindered a seamless collaboration. There was no clearly defined mode of non-state actor; the private sector, academia and NGOs involvement, which was mostly left to the discretion of the state. To alleviate this, the reconciling of the interests of all these stakeholders appears necessary, and as Bengé and Neef (2021) posit, a people centered approach provides a window of opportunity through which harmonization of multiple stakeholder interests can be made possible.

Collaboration between the national and county government, while notably evident, was still fragmented and characterized by limited cooperation. For successful collaboration, in a case study on collaborative decentralized disaster governance in Korea, Bae et al. (2016) observe that the national government ought to play its part in facilitating decentralized disaster governance, rather than merely hand down responsibilities to local governments. In Kenya, national government legal and policy frameworks often assign implementation responsibilities to county governments without providing the requisite resources and assistance. These collaboration problems went on to affect policy consistency and unified and coordinated

disaster responses. During a disaster, a unified response is crucial for minimizing the impact and ensuring efficient recovery. Collaboration is essential, especially important for clarity in disaster communication, establishing clearly defined chains of command, and optimal resource utilization in disaster management efforts. Properly coordinated approaches also help avoid duplication of efforts and thereby enhancing the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the disaster governance efforts.

Policy multiplicity was also noted, with the existence of multiple and often overlapping policies that sought to address similar issues. Policy implementers as a result are faced with dilemmas of prioritization and aligning with these policies. This also results in inconsistencies in the implementation across both levels of government which further complicates monitoring and evaluation of implementation progress. Multiplicity also results in confusion on stakeholder engagement, with their duties and responsibilities not being properly defined.

Decentralization and Public Participation in Disaster Policy Implementation

Public participation was noted to be done haphazardly, just to fulfill constitutional requirements and not necessarily to involve the population. As similarly argued by Trogrlić et al. (2021) local participation and local wisdom have oftentimes been acknowledged in disaster resilience policy deliberations, but their actual involvement in practice remains limited. Public participation, a cornerstone of decentralized governance, faces hurdles such as awareness gaps and accessibility issues. It was also established that there were lacking proper guidelines for public engagement in the county government policy plans, and weak frameworks for creation of public awareness subsequently limiting their involvement. Genuine incorporation of community input into decision-making processes is critical for the success of decentralized approaches. The study highlights the need for tailored communication strategies to enhance public awareness and ensure meaningful participation in shaping climate disaster policies.

Decentralization in climate disaster policy implementation offers both opportunities and challenges. While it provides local governments with autonomy, concerns arise regarding the potential for inconsistencies in policy application across regions. The study emphasizes the importance of balancing this autonomy with a cohesive national strategy to ensure the effectiveness and uniformity of climate disaster policies.

CONCLUSION

The study underscores the importance of flexibility in policy frameworks, allowing for adaptation to the unique climate challenges and disaster risks faced by county governments. A bottom-up approach, involving local communities in decision-making processes, is deemed essential for addressing the nuanced vulnerabilities associated with climate disasters. However, challenges such as resource constraints and capacity gaps at the local level hinder the seamless integration of localized strategies into the broader national framework. Understanding and navigating these dynamics are imperative for policy practitioners seeking to harness the positive influence of external stakeholders. The study emphasizes the importance of balancing devolved autonomy while also ensuring cohesive and uniform national climate disaster policies. The study highlights the need for enhancing public awareness to ensure meaningful participation in shaping climate disaster policies.

These nuanced insights into the complexities and challenges of implementing climate disaster policies offer valuable guidance for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders striving to enhance the resilience and effectiveness of climate disaster governance in the face of evolving climate challenges.

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