CORRUPTION IN INFORMATION PROCESSING AND PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY-EVIDENCE AND LESSONS FROM COUNTY GOVERNMENTS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Many devolved governments seek to address corruption through information processing and there is scant data on whether these efforts lead to improved public service delivery. This paper attempts to address this empirical gap by looking at corruption in information processing and public service delivery in the devolved governments of Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties. The paper is the result of an empirical study that looked at the impact of corruption in information processing on public service delivery. The study utilized institutional theory, commons theory, policy networks theory and multiple streams framework. The methodology used was qualitative, with 126 interviews and 2 focus group discussions with 9 key stakeholders from each county. Thematic analysis was carried out and findings showed that corruption in information processing adversely affected the accessibility and quality of public services in both counties. The authors make recommendations for the counties to help them eradicate corruption in information processing and a conceptual model is shared, for further studies in this area.

Key words: *Corruption in information processing, dissemination procedures, embezzlement, bribery, public service delivery.*

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INTRODUCTION

Devolved governments mainly carry out information processing through dissemination procedures and through dissemination channels, and by determining the accessibility of dissemination channels, they are able to choose the appropriate channels for the release of information (Martins, Fernandes, Rohman, & Veiga, 2018). Thus,

information processing is an important mechanism for sharing information with the public. Studies show that corruption is reduced when information is availed to the public, as this improves transparency (Martins, Fernandes, Rohman, & Veiga, 2018).

Information processing is particularly critical for countries like Kenya where the policy of awarding 30% of the procurement tenders to women, youth and those living with disabilities is being implemented in the devolved governments (Oyugi & Getuno, 2019). It is expected that such information is disseminated to these groups so that they can seize the opportunities available to them, and in turn, improve their businesses and livelihoods. However, corruption in information processing can hamper such efforts, as studies have showed that when corruption is present in information processing, it increases dissemination costs and limits the accessibility of information to critical audiences (Rabbiosi & Santangelo, 2019). This in turn has a ripple effect, as it ultimately affects the accessibility and quality of public services.

This paper looks at corruption in information processing due to the critical nature that information disclosures play in eradicating corruption and improving service delivery (Villeneuve, Mugellini, & Heide, 2020). The paper focuses on dissemination procedures, dissemination channels and the accessibility of dissemination channels, as these have been known to be critical in information processing (Rabbiosi & Santangelo, 2019). The paper also focuses on embezzlement and bribery as these have been reported to be the main types of corruption in the Kenyan counties (Auditor General, 2018). Public service delivery is an area of focus due to the fact that it is one of the main functions of the devolved governments. The paper is interested in the accessibility and quality of public services as these aspects have been mainly ignored in previous studies (Kimenyi, 2018: Wagana, 2017). The paper is interested in accessibility in terms of geographical reach and

affordability of public services. The focus of the quality aspects of public services is as defined by the SERVQUAL model of reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness. This approach sees reliability as accuracy and dependability of services, assurance as the knowledge and courtesy of public officials, tangibles as equipment, human resources and infrastructure at the disposal of service delivery, empathy as individual attention and caring attitude of public officials providing services and responsiveness as willingness to help and provide prompt services on the side of the public officials (Prentkovskis, et al., 2018).

The paper is informed by the following theories:

Firstly, *the commons theory*, which argues that resources held in common are prone to overuse and depletion, leading to a tragedy of the commons (Ghorbani & Bravo, 2016). In the context of information processing, this paper views public information as a common that is prone to a tragedy of the commons if not safeguarded. The paper also argues that when corruption is present in information processing, public information is prone to depletion, leading to a breakdown of social order.

Secondly, *the institutional theory,* which looks at institutions in society that affect organizational behavior, through their ability to influence allocation of resources and to accord legitimacy to organizations (Lammers & Garcia, 2017). Thus, the institution of government influences counties as they are dependent on government for resources and legitimacy. In the context of Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties, this paper argues that the institution of government is capable of influencing information processing practices within the counties and when such influence breeds corruption, information processing practices may lead to poor services.

Thirdly, *the policy networks theory*, which advocates for policy change through the influence of policy brokers and policy actors who exchange resources,

information and strategies in the policy environment (Gowa, 2019). In the context of information processing, policy networks play a critical role in information dissemination and may determine dissemination procedures, dissemination channels and their accessibility. When there is corruption in information processing, such channels become inaccessible and affect public service delivery.

Fourthly, *the multiple streams-framework*, which looks at policy change as the product of the convergence of a problem stream, a policy stream and a politics stream which coalesce to create a policy window (Mackey, 2019). The paper looks at this theory in the light of its ability to predict policy change, as information processing is often utilized by policy makers as an antidote to corruption. Consequently, it has been associated with the policy (or solutions) stream in this framework. However, studies have shown that corruption does exist in information processing and there is a need to elevate it to the problem stream so that policy solutions can be found.

METHODOLOGY

The study interviewed 126 respondents and carried out 2 focus group discussions involving 9 key stakeholders in each county. The study targeted government officers in strategic functions, as shown in Table 1. Focus group discussions involved women, political leaders, minorities, non-governmental organizations, business leaders, youth, religious leaders, professionals and persons living with disability. Additionally, 12 members of the public were interviewed and these were sampled from various service delivery points within the two counties. This was essential due to the need to incorporate the views of the recipients of public services. 24 suppliers were also targeted for interviews in each county as these were considered vulnerable to corruption within information processing when trying to access information on tenders and when looking for payments for the goods and services they have supplied.

Table 1: Units of analysis and observation

Units of Analysis	Units of Observation	Total
2 counties	10 public officers (executive)	20
2 counties	8 public officers (legislature)	16
2 counties	9 key stakeholder groups	18
2 counties	12 suppliers (executive)	24
2 counties	12 suppliers (legislature)	24
2 counties	12 members of the public	24
Total:	**63 Units of Observation**	**126**

Source: (authors).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study findings showed that corruption in information processing caused adverse effects on public service delivery in both counties. Both counties did not have proper information dissemination procedures, which the data shows, was due to corruption, as budgets allocated to information processing were embezzled, and information blocks were reported, in a bid to extort bribes from the public. Respondent N8 captured it this way:

> … in an organization, there should be clear ways of passing information amongst the staff and the general public. The modes of communication should also be reliable. Here at the counties, we do not care about these procedures or those who live in the remote areas. If we have tenders or jobs, they are

advertised in the newspaper, so if you have no access to the newspapers, too bad... Since we have the information, we can hoard it and anyone needing it, will have to bribe us. Although applying for these tenders and jobs is not a guarantee that you will succeed. You have to bribe and even bribing, can fail. It depends on who has deeper pockets than you...I sell to the highest bidder...we use the cyber cafes to collect bribes on our behalf. They charge the public for government forms which should be free. When members of the public come to our offices, we direct them to a specific cyber where they pay the bribe before receiving the service they want (Mwangi, 2022).

The data demonstrates the chaotic manner in which information processing is handled in both counties, as cartels had taken hold of the processes. Information was sold to the highest bidder and cyber cafes played a huge role as bribe collection dens. Public officials utilized their authority to approve documents for bribery and they were in control of who could receive information and when. In the absence of dissemination procedures, corruption thrived. The data confirms studies that show that hoarding of information does not empower the public to play an oversight role and leads to increased corruption (Martins, Fernandes, Rohman, & Veiga, 2018).

Respondents N26 and K35 narrated how information was withheld from the public in order to sell it to them after they pay bribes. Respondent K35 captured it in these words:

> ... In the county laws, *kila kitu imewekwa vile inafaa kutekelezwa* (everything is put in its place), *hata vile revenue inafaa kuchukuliwa* (even how revenue should be collected and the charges for each service), but we hide that information from the public. I take advantage of that. *Na tukijua mtu anaelewa haya maneno huwa tunacheza chini.* (Loosely interpreted it means – if we know someone understands what we are doing, we don't

bring a lot of hullabaloos about it so that it doesn't escalate to something ugly) (Mwangi, 2022).

The data shows how the public is kept in the dark about official charges for various services so that the public officials can extort them for bribes. Thus, information processing is used for corruption rather than being an anticorruption tool. The data confirms studies that show that information asymmetry between public officers and members of the public is the major cause of corruption in information processing (Mulyaman, Ismail, & Raya, 2019).

Respondent N3 had this to say:

> ... Each department deals with its information *kivyake* (its own way). The staff in procurement are even taken for training and informed about the laws but they still break them. The ICT and Finance staff block access to IFMIS (Integrated Financial Management Information System) when they don't want you to access funds. So, corruption *hapa ni lazima* (compulsory) if you want to be helped (Mwangi, 2022).

The data confirms the haphazard way information processing was undertaken in the counties, as each department had the leeway to decide how to deal with information. This left a big loophole for corruption to thrive through the abuse of discretionary power and through the formation of cartels that cut across various departments. The data confirms data from the rest of the world which showed that individuals within information processing who have discretionary power are the major perpetrators of corruption in information processing (Moradi, Quaquebeke, & Hunter, 2018; Andvig & Moene, 2014).

The researchers encountered respondent N24 who wanted to be bribed before he could part with any information for this study. After the researchers convinced him to share information, he revealed the existence of proxies within information processing who manipulate information to suit their

paymasters and hide information their paymasters do not wish to get into the public domain. He also talked of interdepartmental cartels that hid information to facilitate bribery and embezzlement.

The data confirms corruption was very common within information processing, to an extent the respondent was bold enough to ask for a bribe from the researchers. It also shows information processing was not done transparently. Thus, the data contradicts studies that have reported that devolution improves transparency and reduces corruption (Garman, Haggard, & Willis, 2001; Alam & Gerbaba, 2019).

Respondents K16, N3 and N30 dismissed automation of revenue within the counties as a non-starter. They said the officials always ensure the automated systems do not work so as to facilitate embezzlement of revenues. Respondent K16 put it this way:

> … Revenue collection should be fully automated but it is not, where would the bosses get their cuts? The automation of revenue collection, tendering, requisitions, contract awards, dissemination of county news and ongoing projects and many other functions, are all prone to information being manipulated with the core objective of stealing funds. Even records are manipulated, which denies the citizens their right to accountability. My work as ICT is to rubber stamp what the top bosses want. In as much as I keep the county systems and soft wares up to date to prevent the system from collapsing and to prevent viruses, most of the critical work has to be checked and approved by the bosses. They keep all the approvals to themselves so as to avoid airing out their dirty linen. Even HR records have to be approved. Whatever I put on the website has to also be approved. But the job vacancies and tenders I post on the county website are merely for public relations. The bureaucracy here makes sure no information is leaked about what we are doing, as it can lead to

immediate dismissal. I can block some email addresses from sending in applications and only receive applications from those we favor. Corruption here is as normal as having a cup of tea. Big tenders are always shelved in secrecy. Huge tenders such as for schools, roads, hospitals, are rarely advertised or shared publicly… Also, with partial adoption of ICT in this county, some services like county approvals, licenses and work permits take such a long time, as this facilitates monies to be collected *kado* (bribery) (Mwangi, 2022).

Thus, automation of information processing was interfered by cartels that embezzled revenues. Delays were also deliberately created, to ensure the public paid bribes. Junior staff were made to rubber stamp what the bosses desired. Information about tenders was hidden and approvals were delayed, to ensure the public was milked for bribes. Corruption has been normalized within the information processing systems. The data is in line with studies that show that corruption often happens in the shadows and in opaque working environment, which lack public information disclosures (Lee, Iwasa, & Dieckmann,2019).

Respondent N3 was particularly suspicious of anyone approaching him and revealed that the practice was not to release any information, for fear it might be misused or misconstrued. If this situation is viewed from the institutional theory perspective, these habits seem to be mainly borrowed from institutional practices, where government entities are known to release little information to the public, fearing security breaches through the release of sensitive information (Lee, Iwasa, & Dieckmann,2019). The absence of policy networks in the data shows that there are no active policy actors who may be able to resolve the corruption in information processing within the counties. From the multiple streams-framework view point, the problem stream may have crystallized as the public recognizes the corruption problem within information processing. However,

the policy and politics streams are absent from the data, so there is no policy window that could crystallize policy change in this area soon. In terms of the theory of the commons, information is a common that ought to be safeguarded for the benefit of everyone and the hoarding practices brought by corruption could lead to the tragedy of the commons.

Respondent N65 claimed that information was often deliberately disseminated through channels that were inaccessible to facilitate embezzlement of public funds. He put it this way:

> …there are people who cannot access some of these channels like noticeboards. If you place an ad on the 10th floor and I am disabled, how will I reach there? How will I know the noticeboard exists there? The *askari* (guard) at the ground floor cannot even let me past the gate, how will I get the information? How will this information be available to the blind? If you put in on the website, how many people have access to the internet? How will someone in Mathare, Kibra, Mukuru, Korogocho, get this information? These people will not have access to the county government portals and you deny them information that they are entitled to, then when the county is recruiting, or undertaking projects, communities become hostile and it was because the information did not reach them and the channels used were limited and inaccessible. To me the bureaucrats in these county governments don't want people to access information because they work in cahoots with suppliers due to the kickbacks for tenders... (Mwangi, 2022).

The data shows that information would be placed in unlikely places and inaccessible areas for persons living with disability. There were human barriers in the form of security guards, (and probably receptionists and secretaries) who acted as gatekeepers to critical information. There was no attempt to make information available to those

without internet or in formats accessible to the blind. The data captures the repercussions of failing to reach communities with information as hostilities can arise during project implementation. This situation affirms studies that have demonstrated the importance of information dissemination during the implementation of government projects in order to gain community support (Ahmad, Devarajan, Khemani, & Shah, 2005; Efriandi, Couwenberg, & Holzhacker, 2019). The data further shows the coverups involved in ensuring corruption goes on unabated. This confirms studies that have shown that devolved governments have reported over 83.7% bribery incidents (EACC, 2016).

Respondent N60 said the youth got information through rumors, friends, or social media, when staff in the county government shared with their children what was happening and those children posted the information on their social media pages. Thus, many of them were unable to quickly take advantage of government procurement opportunities like the AGPO program, due to receiving late and incomplete information, usually through third parties.

Respondent N61 reported the following:

> …society believes that women are mouthy and so as a woman, I might leak information because women are supposed to have big mouths, while men keep secrets. So, if there's a big job with good money, I will be kept in the dark and even if I get to know, the job won't be given to me because of this belief (Mwangi, 2022).

The data shows that women were being stereotyped as persons who cannot keep secrets, so government tenders and other crucial information was kept from them. Thus, they were discriminated during appointments. The data confirms studies from Thailand that showed women were locked out of lucrative jobs due to the belief that they were untrustworthy with information (Bjarnegard, 2018).

Respondent N14 said:

…the unwritten rule remains: who do you know, and what do you have? Due to selfish interests, tender information is only shared to favored suppliers, which is against the Public Procurement Act. The advertisements are meant to hoodwink the public…sometimes I only post it on the procurement portal, instead of advertising in all the channels, and I pocket the money saved… (Mwangi, 2022).

This data was corroborated by respondents N12, N30 and K53 who reported that the unwritten rule was about how much one could bribe and who you knew. Thus, hoarding information and giving leakage to those who bribed were tactics that ensured corruption continued to thrive within information processing. This confirms studies which show that such tactics were utilized in procurement malpractices where information would be leaked to a preferred tenderer and withheld from unwanted tenderers (Graeff & Kleinewiese, 2020; Prasetyono, 2019).

Respondent N21 explained:

… the closer you are to the source of information, the easier to access it and the farther you are, the hard it becomes to access such important information. So, there's an information distance, the closer you are to the source of information, the more lucrative your position, so people fight to get in there. This kind of information will also not be published under county websites and procurement portals, making it very difficult to acquire. So, I hoard it and sell it clandestinely… (Mwangi, 2022).

The data demonstrates how information processing was utilized to cover up corruption and get rid of unwanted suppliers, while being auctioned to the highest bidder. Thus, almost everyone wanted to be as close as possible to the source of information. This affirms studies that show that corruption in information processing is difficult to detect and auditors have a hard task uncovering it (Shon &

Cho, 2020; Hobdari, Nguyen, Dell'Erba, & Ruggiero, 2018).

Respondent N11 also reported:

…A tender might be starting on a 15th but I write the 25th. So, by the time the others realize there is a tender, the project is already halfway. Then there are scenarios where the tenders are given to foreigners… Training on how to register as a supplier, and how to log onto the portal and register in IFMIS are done secretly to limit the number of people who attend. Even after the training *unashtukia tu m-China ako na* tender (you wake up to find the tender has been given to a Chinese). (*He laughs*).

The data shows manipulation of information processing to suit certain suppliers. Training on the online procurement system and awarding of tenders to foreigners is done without any transparency. This affirms studies showing embezzlement through information processing where suppliers are used as conduits for stealing public monies (Mutangili, 2019).

Respondent N27 narrated:

…I can make innocent looking clerical mistakes deliberately and displace information to make it look like they were just minor issues. For example, even though it is a requirement that the various tenders be posted in the procurement portals, I can sometimes "forget" to post them. After this, I tell the preferred bidders about the availability of the tenders secretly and ask them to apply… (Mwangi, 2022).

Thus, information processing is run by cartels that care only about their own selfish interests. This confirms studies showing that procurement processes are often manipulated through information processing, where information is manipulated to suit a preferred supplier (Graeff & Kleinewiese, 2020; Prasetyono, 2019; Mutangili, 2019).

This position was affirmed by respondent N7 who reported:

> …I always bribe so that important information *inakaliwa* (sat on) and not given to third-parties…such information can include a lucrative transfer, a promotion, or payment of arrears…I rotate the same people within lucrative areas such as revenue collection, where there are opportunities for receiving bribes. To be posted there, they must *toa za macho* (bribe me) (Mwangi, 2022).

The data shows information hoarding was utilized to frustrate the public so they could bribe and even internally, there were cartels within information processing that one had to bribe, to get things done. Respondent N6 also reported:

> …If they don't pay me, I give the opposite information. I don't care if they are paralyzed. If they want my help, *wachote* (they must bribe me). (Mwangi, 2022).

Thus, internal cartels frustrated internal operations and had to be placated through bribes. This extended to payrolls as reported by respondent K12 who narrated:

> … there are separate payroll lists that have designations that are nonexistent. Ghost workers are a phenomenon, and the ghosts get paid anyway, just that it's known by the select few here. I know we have cases of *ukora* (criminality), where dates of employment were backdated and money stolen by the bosses, and the counties are notorious for not paying statutory dues and checkoff loans for staff, *mpaka watu wanagoma* (until staff go on strike) (Mwangi, 2022).

This demonstrates the level of corruption within information processing, that threatens the commons (budgets), as payrolls are utilized to embezzle public funds. Respondents N6 and K5 reported that both counties have invested in information processing technologies but this has not reduced corruption or translated into improved public services. Respondents K25, K23 and K10 reported that financial information was especially hidden, as leakages could reveal the cartels. Respondent K10 summed it this way:

> …if there is any corruption, it stays with us and it would be suicidal for any officer in the executive especially in a sensitive area like finance to say anything. Please make sure you don't quote me whatsoever. It would end my job. As you have noted, the executive has delayed in replying your letter requesting to do this research. We were alerted about it. You might actually never get a response… because you are being seen as "enemies of the county". Internally even departments don't get to know how their budgets are managed because everything is centralized in one person's office. The system, shields the executive. You will even get very junior officers frustrating you because they are under instruction to treat with contempt anyone seeking information. In fact, the screening begins from the gate…. (Mwangi, 2022).

The data confirms the dangers that information processing brings, to anyone who dares threaten the cartels by exposing them. Further respondent N20 said:

> … if information is not captured or keyed in properly and your name is missing, say from the bursary list, you have to "pass money under the table" (bribe) ... (Mwangi, 2022).

This confirms that money has to change hands for any service delivery within information processing. The situation points to a decadent system where information dissemination procedures were absent, or dysfunctional. According to institutional theory, this situation is typical of government institutions where information sharing with the public is not encouraged, particularly in third world countries and Africa (Prasetyono, 2019).

This situation was further captured by respondent K24 who said:

> …communication from the office of the governor is useless. Voting them was useless. They don't perform their duties. People get arrested by the *kajus* (county enforcement) even when they have done nothing and they must bribe before they are released (Mwangi, 2022).

The data captures the disillusionment with the government due to frequent arrests by the county enforcement teams. Such disappointment led some staff to leak information to the media, as reported by respondent N33. This shows what happens ultimately when gaps in information processing cause corruption and poor service delivery. The data overall has not captured any policy networks from the media or civil society that could take up corruption within information processing.

PROPOSED MODEL

The authors presented a proposed model linking corruption in information processing as an independent variable and public service delivery as the dependent variable, as seen in Fig 1 below:

Corruption in Information Processing

Public Service Delivery
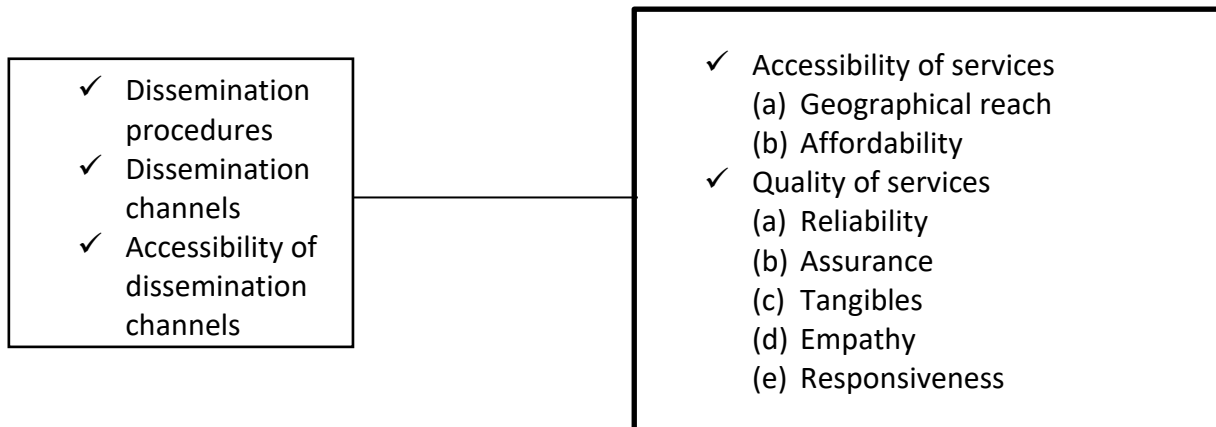
Independent Variable

Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

Dependent Variable

CONCLUSION

The findings showed that corruption in information processing adversely affected the quality and accessibility of public services in Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties. Suppliers and members of the public could not access requisite information without bribing and due to lack of information processing procedures, service delivery was prone to corruption. Dissemination channels were also not inclusive, as critical segments of the population, such as those with disabilities, living in the slums and with low literary levels, did not have access to the government information. Thus, dissemination channels that were utilized were geared to meet corruption ends and not to service delivery needs. This affected the quality of services provided as they fell short of the SERVQUAL standards of reliability, responsiveness, empathy, tangibles and assurance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers made recommendations to Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties to set up robust dissemination procedures and dissemination channels, and to ensure dissemination channels are accessible to their citizens in order to eliminate corruption within information processing. Setting up of information dissemination procedures will

ensure transparency and remove the discretionary powers given to public officials which are prone to abuse and bring about corruption. The counties need to ensure the dissemination channels are diverse, with special efforts made to reach areas with high poverty and low literacy levels. Special care needs to be taken to reach the elderly, the youth, women and those living with disabilities.

Significance

This research contributes empirical evidence to the existing literature on corruption in information processing in devolved systems of government. There is little, if any, empirical data available in this area, and hardly any data from Kiambu and Nairobi City Counties. The data contributes knowledge in an area with no theory of corruption and in an area where studies are still at an early stage. The data contributes to policy development in this area and forms the basis for potential policy change in eradicating corruption within information processing based on the recommendations from the study.

Further Research

The researchers recommend further research be carried out on corruption in information processing in order to validate the current findings and especially in Kenya where information processing is rapidly being adopted by devolved governments. The researchers also recommend other researchers to consider applying the proposed conceptual model as outlined in this paper, in order to validate the model and move scholarship forward in this field.

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