

Making Values Based Monitoring and Evaluation Work for Devolution Harmonization Programs in Kenya

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Making Values Based Monitoring and Evaluation Work for Devolution Harmonization Programs in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The conceptual paper fills in the acute gap between the constitutional promise of devolution in Kenya and the actual implementation process by exploring how a Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (VBME) framework can be implemented to bring more harmony between national and county governments and among county governments themselves. Using a conceptual type of research design, the study combines the secondary literature review, national policy reports like the Kenya National M&E Policy of 2022, and empirical reports to develop a new analytical model. The model is informed by the Public Value Theory, Institutional Theory, Stewardship Theory, and politics of evidence. The results show that the current M&E systems, including the County Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (CIMES) are structural incompatible with the fundamental values of devolution. They serve as vehicles of siloed compliance and not of equity, accountability and collaborative governance. Experimental data show that context-specific norms such as transparency and inclusiveness form important predictors of harmonization program performance. This study to transition from finds that transformational change is necessary to shift from the compliance-driven and values-driven measurement, with a framework of the VBME being suggested to assess and reward cooperative stewardship and fair results. Recommendations include piloting co-created value-based indicators within a few counties, enhancing requirements regarding participatory M&E, and investing in the capacity building through trans-disciplinary capabilities. This study adds to M&E theory and practice by illustrating that grounding evaluation systems with foundational values in public systems is a functional requirement towards the realization of coherent and legitimate decentralized governance in Kenya and similar settings.

Keywords: Values-based monitoring and evaluation, Devolution harmonization, Kenya, Public value, Intergovernmental relations.

INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has become a strategic aspect of successful contemporary governance, a necessary tool to translate policy into practice, direct strategic resource distribution and hold oneself accountable to the population (Mwaguni, 2020; Mohamed & Kulmie, 2023; Matsiliza, 2019). This role is highly probed in a decentralized form of governance where the co-ordination or harmonization among various levels of government defines the success of national

development agendas. The landmark devolution that Kenya adopted through the Constitution of 2010 is a radical restructuring of the state that seeks to strengthen democracy and equitable development, as well as strengthening the delivery of the public service. However, the success of this system will be dependent upon successful harmonization which is a complex and dynamic process that will be functioning on two parallel planes. It involves vertical adjustment among national and county governments, and the horizontal alteration among county governments themselves in their own departments, agencies and projects. Enduring issues, such as overlapping policies, conflicting mandates, and inconsistent service delivery and intra-county program silos indicate that there is material deficit in harmonization (Bilala, 2024; Mbate, 2017). This gap highlights a major flaw of existing M&E frameworks, which have mostly been focused on technical compliance and financial spending. They do not quantify and reward the fundamental beliefs of equity, accountability, inclusivity, and collaborative governance that devolution was intended to promote.

Intergovernmental and intra-county coordination is inherently vital to the performance of devolution and its programs. Globally, scholars of evaluation note that in complex and multi-level governance systems, M&E should go beyond the measurement of simple outputs to address the complex relational and procedural systems surrounding the implementation of policies (Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Aston et al., 2022; Guerzovich & Aston, 2025). This is an urgent need that is echoed in the Kenyan context. Ambiguity in functional assignments, differences in fiscal flows and capabilities, and, in some cases, a history of centralist control hamper harmonization vertically (Turkel & Turkel, 2016). Horizontally, across all 47 county governments, there is the internal coherence challenge. The isolated implementation of programs by siloed departments weakens the integrated vision of County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) and results in the inefficient use of resources and fragmented services to citizens (Stofile, 2017; Kimaro, Fourie & Tshiyoyo, 2018). This is a two-layered dilemma that is not exclusive to devolution but a more generalized systemic problem with Kenyan public administration. This can be seen in other contexts such as gender-responsive procurement, where strong policies cannot have a transformational change simply because of coordinated implementation failures and effective evaluation failures (FSD Kenya, 2023). Even the current infrastructure on M&E available, such as the National Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (NIMES) and its county counterpart (CIMES), despite offering

needed framework, tends to fuel these disconnections. This is done through concentration on department-specific separate outputs instead of determining the quality of teamwork and synergy of combined results that determine success at both the levels.

As a result, an enormous conceptual and practical divide exists within the boundary of the theory of public sector evaluation and realities of multi-level governance in Kenya. Although the 2022 National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy clearly seeks to synchronize M&E systems between all levels of the government and encourage a results-accountability culture (Government of Kenya, 2022), its workings are still predominantly technocratic. It has been found that context-dependent values such as transparency, inclusion, and contextual understanding are significant in enhancing program performance (Prosser et al., 2017; Gwidi & Kilei, 2022; Kioko & Moi, 2024). What is lacking though is a built-in framework that systematically operationalizes these values to respond to the twin harmonization problems. The literature and current practice lacks sufficient response to how an M&E system can be structured in such a way that it is able to measure and promote two processes simultaneously. This firstly involves collaborative stewardship, trust, and strategic alignment between the national and county governments and secondly, the dismantling of internal silos and encouragement of integrated planning, budgeting, and implementation within county governments. Today's systems can monitor individual departmental or project attainment of their discrete goals but cannot monitor whether integrated action across governmental boundaries, be it vertical or horizontal, is producing more public value. This encompasses, among others, improved health delivery, smoother planning of infrastructure, or increased citizen confidence in state leadership.

The study, thus, proposes to contribute to the field of knowledge and practice by addressing this two-layered issue using a conceptual research design. It explores the key question of "How can a values based monitoring and evaluation (VBME) framework be conceptualized to positively promote, measure and enhance harmonization at the vertical (national government and county government) and horizontal (county governments) level?" The research hypothesis is that to make M&E a true driver of integrative governance, it needs to be fundamentally re-imagined as an active platform of managing complex inter-organizational and intra-organizational relationships rather than a tool of the passive accountability (Vella et al., 2025). This necessitates internalizing the fundamental constitutional and governing principles like subsidiarity, equality, accountability,

openness, and shared care-giving in the DNA of the M&E system (Mazzucato et al., 2024). This involves creating indicators, data collection procedures and feedback systems that clearly monitor the quality of alignment between the government levels and level of programmatic synergy at the counties. A VBME model would move the assessment away, individually, to evaluate specific compliance (of current inquiry like ‘Did the department use its budget?’), to evaluating functionality and system achievement. It will include a new set of questions like “How well were national and county agencies cooperating in order to minimize regional inequity?”, and “To what extent does the county departments synchronize to provide an integrated package of services to a particular community?”

The logic behind this theoretical focus lies in the fact that it can integrate and utilize findings of the institutional theory, stewardship theory and the public value theory to develop a new model that would fit the Kenyan context of devolution. Institutional theory facilitates the examination of how both formal regulations (such as the M&E Policy) and informal norms influence the conduct of entities that engage with each other (Lin, 2021; Dkhili, 2018; Masyk et al., 2023). Stewardship theory proposes an alternative to strict contractual relations, which could induce harmonization in the relationships established (especially vertically), enhancing it by creating intrinsic motivation, trust, and a desire to commit the common good rather than resorting to strict control by the principal over the agent (Owalo, 2025; Seun et al., 2024; Keay, 2017; Schillemans & Bjurstrøm, 2020). The entire endeavor is guided by public value theory, which ensures that the final measure of success is the generation of substantive value to the citizens (Moore, 2021; Alford et al., 2017). Through merging these lenses, the study shall formulate a theoretical framework redressing M&E into culture-building and system-strengthening strategic intervention as opposed to technical audit role.

Through this, the inquiry seeks to present a robust theoretical instrument to policymakers at organizations such as the Intergovernmental Relations Technical Committee, the Monitoring & Evaluation Directorate and leadership of the county executives. It provides a roadmap towards transforming the existing M&E practice into a less divisive, more compliance-based process to a unified and value oriented management platform. The culture of collaboration and integrated thinking that is essential to the success of devolution is actively promoted through this platform. Lastly, the study presents an important addition to the wider academic and practical debate on the

topic of democratic decentralization proposing that to achieve significant harmonization, a values-based, deliberate strategy of evaluation is necessary. This can be described as one that works with aligned motivations and cuts institutional silos across all levels and also finds a way of persistently concentrating on synergistic creation of public value throughout the entire governance spectrum. This conceptualization, built herein is not an ultimate prescription, but rather a point of discourse, refinement, and actionable imagination in the quest of a more valid, relevant, and rational devolved system in Kenya.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The history of developments of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a mechanism of decentralized governance in the world can be characterized by an important conceptual shift between a mechanism of administrative conformity and a mechanism of governance based on strategic and value priorities (Kimaro et al., 2018; Stofile, 2017; Jackson & Kimutai, 2018). This trend in Kenya is institutionalized into the creation of the National Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (NIMES) and a devolved version of the same, the County Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (CIMES). Primarily, such systems had their initial conceptualization in technical managerial terms focused mainly on monitoring financial spending, comparing actual physical performance against the proposals such as the County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), and ensuring fiduciary responsibility (Government of Kenya, 2022). This methodological assumption, which was reflected in the initial policy documents, viewed harmonization as a logistical problem that could be resolved by using standard reporting templates and standard indicators (CoG, 2022; CoG, 2020). But such school of thought tended to take M&E out of the sophisticated political economy of intergovernmental relations. It did not consider the effects of power dynamics, mutually competing specific political interests, and bureaucratic cultures on what is measured, how data is perceived, and whose values are being put into consideration during evaluation (Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Aston et al., 2022; Guerzovich & Aston, 2025). Such historic emphasis of technical compliance, developing the infrastructure needed, created a systemic blind spot in regards to the relational and normative aspects of devolution and preconditioned the subsequent criticism as well as the recent drive towards more situation-dependent and values-reliant designs.

The contemporary situation regarding M&E implementation in the Kenyan devolved system

indicates that there has been an ongoing and multifaceted policy-practice gap that speaks of the drawbacks of the purely technocratic model. Based on empirical research, there have always been fundamental flaws in the system that sabotage harmonization. Studies also show that there are gross operational gaps, including the lack of regular reporting and updating county performance data on online platforms, undermines the credibility of information required to support joint decision-making processes between the national and county governments (Odhambo-Abuya, 2025; Rumenya & Kisimbi, 2020; Kimwela & Odhambo-Abuya, 2025; Maalim, 2017). These technical breakdowns are indicative of more far-rooted, value-laden problems. These consist of long-term underfunding of M&E departments, severe crises of capacity, and inefficient legal systems of real stakeholder engagement, which extinguish the concepts of transparency and inclusivity (Bilala, 2024; USAID MTaPS, 2024). At the same time, the institutional acknowledgment of the necessity of a transformative shift is on the rise. An example of this can be seen in the national judiciary that has come out in several articles to highlight the necessity of ensuring M&E systems are strengthened in order to base government development in quantifiable results and to restore the waning citizen confidence. This is an indication of a high degree of acceptance that legitimacy is based on proven performance (The Judiciary, 2024; The Judiciary, 2023). This contrasting outcome between failures in implementation at the ground and the high level demands to results-based legitimacy characterizes the current predicament. It highlights the fact that the harmonization issue is no simple technical conundrum of data compatibility but a meaningful challenge of establishing a culture of governance being based on accountability, equity, and joint stewardship across and within levels of governments.

Theoretical involvement entails the use of lenses that are essential in diagnosing this issue and conceptualizing an effective VBME framework. Three linked theoretical pillars are the foundation of this study. First, Public Value Theory (Moore, 2021; Alford et al., 2017) redirects the assessment priorities on outputs and efficiency and raises an inquiry concerning what defines value to citizens. It supports the idea of prioritizing M&E based on substantive outcomes such as equitable access to service, increased civic trust, and responsive leadership, which makes the establishment of public value the main parameter of harmonization success arguments (Mazzucato et al., 2024). Second, the Institutional Theory provides methods to examine the influence of formal rules of institutions such as CIMES and informal rules such as political patronage or intergovernmental

competition on behavioral incentives (Stofile, 2017; Kimaro, Fourie & Tshiyoyo, 2018; Lin, 2021; Dkhili, 2018; Masyk et al., 2023). It postulates that to be effective, the core values in VBME need to be institutionalized, enshrined in sustainable routines, professional standards, and reward frameworks at both levels of government. Third, and most importantly, other emergent studies on the politics of evidence offer an invaluable critical perspective. This body of literature is a powerful argument that states that M&E can never be a neutral, technocratic practice but instead is political in nature. The power relations affect the choice of questions asked, the data that is considered valid, and the way the results are applied or disregarded (Parkhurst, 2016; Morse, 2016; Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Aston et al., 2022; Guerzovich & Aston, 2025). In devolution in the Kenyan setting, this translates to selective application of performance data to blame or credit-taking of political leaders and not problem-sharing. An effective VBME framework should, therefore, be politically savvy, structured to traverse such power-infused realities in an explicit versus having a belief that such can be avoided by technical design alone.

An overview of existing similar studies indicates that there is a focused but dispersed body of knowledge that the current study aims to synthesize and develop. A considerable amount of scientific and analytical work has been devoted to listing the technical shortcomings of county M&E systems, generating useful audits of capacity shortfalls and technological failures (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Rumenya & Kisimbi, 2020; Kimwela & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Maalim, 2017; Mohamed & Kulmie, 2023). Simultaneously, there is significant policy advocacy around the normative integration of good governance practices such as participation and transparency in the local governance manifested in different action plans at the county level (Prosser et al., 2017; Gwidi & Kilei, 2022; Kioko & Moi, 2024). Nonetheless, there is a lack of a critical synthesis. There is no conceptual model that is consistent across the literature, and that operationally and systematically connects these underlying public values to the detailed mechanics of designing M&E systems to harmonize them on a two-level basis. The gap between the top-down promotion of values and the bottom-up, frequently politically disputed, activity of developing indicators, data governance protocols, and feedback loops that can support vertical and horizontal alignment in any meaningful way. Thus, although the issues of capacity and commitment are extensively documented, solutions are frequently highly technical or normatively visionary. They do not offer a practical roadmap of how to incorporate values in the daily practice

of intergovernmental monitoring and evaluation.

The study aims to answer five interrelated research gaps outlined in the existing literature. First, it addresses a conceptual gap by formulating a comprehensive VBME model specifically designed to meet the two-tier harmonization issue in Kenya, and not just any generic prescriptions of good governance. Second, it fills a contextual gap in that it bases its analysis on the unique political economy of Kenyan devolution as it identifies a context that constrains or facilitates value-oriented M&E, using the influence of fiscal dependencies, contentious mandates, and electoral cycles (Mbate, 2017). Thirdly, it involves a methodological gap. Although evaluating reporting failures is so often a quantitative task, there has been little methodological discussion of the ways in which other values such as trust, equity, or collaborative stewardship can be objectively measured and incorporated into regularized M&E practices (Vella et al., 2025). Fourth, the research provides a theoretical gap bridging the critical perspective of the politics of evidence literature (Parkhurst, 2016; Morse, 2016) and the normative provisions of the Public Value, Institutional, and Stewardship Theories to develop a stronger and realistic analytical model. Lastly, it points to a gap in empirical evidence. Limited in-depth longitudinal case studies have been conducted on the cause-impact relationship of the adoption of context-sensitive or value-oriented M&E practices to actual harmonization results, including less policy duplication or increased synergetic use of resources. This conceptual study seeks to offer a theoretically advanced, contextually informed and practically viable framework by focusing on these gaps. It proposes that to ensure true harmonization of devolution, M&E should be remodeled not as a mere compliance tool in active compliance auditing but a proactive, value-driven system to support all forms of negotiation, learning, and co-creation of public value at all levels of government.

METHODOLOGY

The conceptual research design used in this study forms a comprehensive framework of VBME configured to the devolution harmonization programmes in Kenya. This inquiry fits especially well into conceptual research since its primary goal is to come up with new analytical constructs and knowledge synthesis to answer multi-faceted and intricate issues in policy execution, but not to generate new empirical information (Jaakkola, 2020; Adams et al., 2017). The aim of the study is to theorize the ways in which core public values, including equity, accountability, transparency,

and inclusiveness can be operationalized systematically in M&E systems. This allows more productive and legal collaboration between the national and the county governments and even among the county governments. Such a practice is needed to go beyond technical compliance and settle on the normative and relational aspects of harmonization, frequently ignored in the context of traditional M&E practice but essential to the sustainability of devolution (Ravitch & Riggan, 2021; Hulland, 2020; Lakoff, 2023; Tsofa et al., 2023; Opalo, 2020; Ngigi & Busolo, 2019).

This approach is based on the systematic review and critical analysis of secondary literature and policy documents. No primary data is collected. Rather, the conceptual framework will be built on the synthesis of existing evidence and theory. Secondary data will be collected through a purposive search of some major categories of documents. The initial step in the examination of the topic is to evaluate the basic legal and policy framework of Kenya devolution, covering such documents as the Constitution of Kenya (2010), County Governments Act (2012) and the Intergovernmental Relations Act (2012). Second, a review is carried out on official documents on monitoring and evaluation policies and system, such as the Kenya National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy (2022) and the operational principles of the National Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System and its county-level analogue, the County Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (CoG, 2022; CoG, 2020). Third, the required theoretical lenses are offered by scholarly literature on the public value theory, institutional theory, the politics of evidence, and decentralized governance (Mazzucato et al., 2024; Parkhurst, 2016; Morse, 2016). Lastly, the conceptual framework is informed by the literature on the performance and challenges of devolution implementation in Kenya through relevant government reports, audits and independent studies on the performance and challenges of devolution implementation in Kenya (Bilala, 2024; USAID MTaPS, 2024).

This secondary data is analyzed by applying an iterative procedure of thematic synthesis as well as conceptual mapping. It implies thorough analysis of the chosen articles to determine common themes and tensions, gaps, and best practices that pertain to values-based governance, and intergovernmental coordination (Mohamed & Kulmie, 2023). The analytical process is not simply descriptive but rather interpretative whereby the synthesized theoretical frames are used to understand the Kenyan context and to suggest new conceptual connections. It is done by mapping the translation of abstract constitutional and governance values into measurable indicators in the existing M&E plans, or lack thereof. It further involves examining institutional enablers and

impediments to the introduction of values such as equity and accountability into the intergovernmental processes, and the technical and political provisions needed to make VBME workable within the laid down NIMES and CIMES frameworks (Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Aston et al., 2022; Guerzovich & Aston, 2025).

The general policy intervention under analysis is the general harmonization of devolution in Kenya as required by the Constitution and operationalized by multiple structures of intergovernmental relations plus sector policy and development planning cycles such as the CIDPs. The research looks particularly at the redesign of the M&E subsystems that calculate these harmonization initiatives through the values-based lens. These involve a critical analysis of the directive of the National M&E Policy of 2022 to align systems across government levels, evaluating its potential and limitations to promote not only the procedural but substantive, value-based cooperation (Government of Kenya, 2022).

The protocol of this conceptual research is structured and phase based. The initial step is considered to be a thorough desk review and contextual analysis of the legal, policy and scholarly documents listed above in order to develop a comprehensive overview of the Kenyan devolution and M&E environment. The second step is dedicated to theoretical synthesis, during which the knowledge of the public value theory, institutional theory, and other political economy lenses are combined to construct a solid analytical perspective (Turkel & Turkel, 2016; Mbate, 2017). The third step is the framework development itself, during which specific VBME principles, candidate value-based vertical and horizontal harmonization indicators, and proposed implementation protocols are inductively derived based on the theory and recorded practice synthesis. Lastly, the framework is strictly contextualized in the Kenyan devolution architecture bearing in mind viable routes through which the architecture can be incorporated in the current planning, budgeting and reporting systems to make the architecture practically significant and useful to policy makers. The result of this methodological approach is a theoretically sound, context-specific conceptual framework that suggests a real-life process of reinventing M&E as a strategic instrument of nurturing values-based harmonization in devolved governance in Kenya.

FINDINGS

The theoretical exploration of how a VBME framework could be operationalized to harmonize devolution in Kenya provided conclusive results on 5 interconnected areas. Such findings are based on the rational examination of policy papers, state reports, and scholarly materials and introduce a clear diagnosis regarding the failure of existing M&E systems to facilitate coherent relations among governments and provide the indications of what a transformative alternative should offer. Together, the findings indicate that the technical and administrative inadequacies of such systems as the County Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (CIMES) are symptomatic of a more systemic flaw in the notion of conceptual deviation of the values of devolution itself.

The first and most measurable conclusion was the drastic dysfunction in terms of operations on the current M&E infrastructure. The total implementation gap was indeed proven by empirical evidence, as it was reported that 49 percent of the counties had not shared stories of project success or had not updated their electronic CIMES platforms in the past. This clearly impedes assessment of success (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Rumenya & Kisimbi, 2020; Kimwela & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Maalim, 2017). This inability to use mandated systems creates unreliable and outdated data, which has a direct negative impact on evidence-based decision-making at the county and nationwide levels. The lack of consistency in reporting procedures between counties also worsens the point of the very system, as comparative performance analysis and collective accountability towards harmonization outcomes could hardly be achieved (Stofile, 2017; Kimaro, Fourie & Tshiyoyo, 2018). This malfunction is not only a technical failure, but it demonstrates that this type of system is not institutionalized as an appreciated tool of management, but rather seen as an external load to compliance.

As it was revealed in the analysis, these operational failures have deep roots in poor institutionalization and acute shortfalls in capacity. It created a policy gap. While the national level has developed the policy framework, this system and policies are yet to be fully cascaded to counties nor assign strong legal and resource backing (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Rumenya & Kisimbi, 2020; Kimwela & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Maalim, 2017; Mohamed & Kulmie, 2023). M&E units in counties with such bodies are always hampered by insufficient and uncertain

funding, which restricts critical operations such as fieldwork and procurement of technology. The lack of such a resource is further furthered by a drastic gap in technical capacity, with the vast majority of county departments lacking assigned M&E focus persons and counties often lacking administrative institutions of the necessary technical and guiding M&E committees as recommended in the official guidelines (USAID MTaPS, 2024). Such capability vacuum creates superficial outputs of M&E that would be prepared to meet procedures but not to inform substantive planning, budgetary or policy priorities.

A third significant conclusion is related to how the systemic exclusion of the stakeholders suffocates the transparency and participatory governance principles of devolution. The analysis identified that the majority of counties have failed to establish legal frameworks that oversee the stakeholder participation in M&E cycle, which makes it impossible to develop a formal relationship with community-based organizations, civil society, or the populace (Prosser et al., 2017; Gwidi & Kilei, 2022; Kioko & Moi, 2024). This exclusion restricts contextuality and validity of M&E information because there is no direct citizen input on service quality and equity. It also leads to a lack of public accountability as research results are not usually made available in formats accessible to citizens to scrutinize (Bilala, 2024). A very sharp and isolated but still present counter-example was found in the Nairobi City County Open Government Action Plan, which is characterized by a more organized attempt to institutionalize participation by committing to broaden the use of digital instruments and by opening up open information (County Government of Nairobi, 2024a; County Government of Nairobi, 2024b). This example coincides with the values of accountability and transparency that a VBME framework would aim to quantify and strengthen.

More critically, the results reveal serious conceptual mismatch. The existing M&E mechanisms are not designed to evaluate its progress towards the further equity goals of devolution. Although one of the primary initial reasons behind decentralization was historical marginalization, M&E indicators continue to be vastly centered on financial absorption and physical output delivery, and little of the distribution outcomes among various demographic or geographic groups within counties (Mbate, 2017). This is bound to develop a paradoxical scenario in which the marginalized parts of the region are the focus of development programs, yet the M&E systems intended to monitor their development share the same underlying flaw, and thus threaten to perpetuate the results of inequity. A perceived professional agreement on this weakness is emphasized in the

advocacy by professional organizations on equity-driven, evidence-based decision-making (Kaberia & Mburugu, 2019; Omunga & Gitau, 2019).

A negative finding is quite significant in the form of political economy limitations that are actually employed to counter strong, value-based evaluation. The study found that institutional inertia and low political goodwill encourages a preference towards ceremonial compliance rather than actual appraisal because officials might view strict M&E as a risky move that would uncover their poor performance and draw unfavorable attention (Parkhurst, 2016; Morse, 2016). The absence of demand of quality M&E information by county assemblies and the population adds to this cycle. This perpetuates an abundance of leading to poor quality debates and decision-making because the political system cannot prompt higher quality data to be demanded (Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Aston et al., 2022; Guerzovich & Aston, 2025). These limits form a non-technical barrier that is really daunting to deploy a VBME framework, since they are directly associated with power relations and motivations and cannot be addressed only by system design.

Altogether, the evidence demonstrates a holistic diagnosis. The existing regime on M&E is also structurally unable to induce harmonization of devolution due to its operational dysfunctional nature, poor institutionalization, inadequate financial and technical resources, exclusionary process elements, and misaligned conceptually with the equity objectives it set itself to be promoting. This overall pattern of weaknesses in these systems is perpetuated by a politicalized economy that too often encourages compliance rather than actual accountability. This multifaceted crisis offers the essential and evidence-based rationale behind the underlying conceptual change advanced in this study. This is the de-escalation of a technocratic, compliance-driven paradigm in favor of a values-based paradigm that would explicitly aim to deal with these interrelated failures.

DISCUSSION

This discussion explores the major insights into a conceptual analysis of Kenya devolution M&E systems, meaning, theoretical implications and practical relevance in harmonization. The main conclusion is that the existing M&E systems are structurally weak, as they are passively compliant but not drivers of collaborative and fair governance that an effective devolution needs (Stofile, 2017; Kimaro, Fourie & Tshiyoyo, 2018). The analysis relates this main issue to the well-known

theories of public administration, discusses the major obstacles and possible ways of the reform, and recognizes the shortcomings and perspectives of the future of this important sphere to Kenya's governance.

The recorded malfunctions of operations, in which a considerable percentage of counties do not submit important data (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Rumenya & Kisimbi, 2020; Kimwela & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Maalim, 2017), are indicative of a more fundamental misalignment of institutions and ideas. These results are strongly reminiscent of the institutional theory, according to which organizations tend to ape the successful forms without understanding the purposes that they embody. This mechanism is called 'isomorphism' (Turkel & Turkel, 2016). In Kenya, the introduction of the CIMES and e-CIMES systems is a formal incorporation of the "best practice" structures. Non-compliance and insufficient county-specific policies related to M&E, however, imply that these mechanisms have not been formally institutionalized and sustained through commitment or tailored to local situations (Lin, 2021; Dkhili, 2018; Masyk et al., 2023). The systems are seen as being external imposition to national auditing and not as management tool to enhance the delivery of local services and intergovernmental collaborations. This breeds a vicious circle of bad data results engendering bad decision-making further diminishing the perceived value of the M&E system itself.

The lack of sufficient involvement of stakeholders (Prosser et al., 2017; Gwidi & Kilei, 2022; Kioko & Moi, 2024) and the mismatch with equity purposes indicate a profound lack of connections to the principles of Public Value Theory. According to this theory, the value that a public policy generates to a citizen is the ultimate measure of the effectiveness of that policy, which is not simply efficiency but equity, accountability, and trust (Moore, 2021; Alford et al., 2017). The existing compliance-based M&E value chain involves an almost total results and output bias, that is, it does not measure whether devolution is producing public value by generating, for instance, reduced regional inequalities or whether citizens are more satisfied with localized services (Mazzucato et al., 2024). The remarkable yet isolated case of the Nairobi City County Open Government Action Plan illustrates how an alternative solution would be possible. This is a deliberate way of structuring transparency and involvement into the mechanisms of governance aimed at developing trust and legitimacy among the people (County Government of Nairobi, 2024a; County Government of Nairobi, 2024b). The overall lack of these mechanisms elsewhere

establishes the fact that the current M&E regime is not programmed to quantify or incentivize the core values around which devolution was organized.

Changing the siloed, compliance-driven system to an integrated, values-driven system is a deep-rooted organizational issue. Cross-border case studies on IT transformation in the public sector have emphasized such changes need to involve shifting fragmented and functional units towards customer-based, multifunctional units that aim at achieving smooth service delivery (Vella et al., 2025). This is a direct reference to the Kenyan challenge of transitioning county government silos and a national government silos to a harmonized model. In other jurisdictions, success is underpinned by whole system change which deals with people, process, and technology at the same time, and effective leadership and vision which brings together disparate stakeholders (Kimaro et al., 2018; Stofile, 2017; Jackson & Kimutai, 2018). In the case of Kenya, this means that technical solutions to e-CIMES platform are inadequate. An effective VBME framework must be supported by parallel change in organizational culture, intergovernmental relationships, and leadership attitudes in both tiers of government to promote transparent and cooperative problem solving as opposed to unilateral reporting.

Political-economic obstacles such as institutional inertia and capacity constraints are major obstacles to the implementation of a VBME system (Mbate, 2017). Nevertheless, possible pathways are also noted with the findings. VBME integration should be viewed as a long-term capacity building project. Studies of transformational leadership indicate that, a leader who is inspirational, supportive of his or her team and formulates a vision worth following, can greatly increase group efficacy, commitment and proactive behavior. All these are fundamental to the successful implementation of a complex new system such as VBME (Seun et al., 2024; Keay, 2017; Schillemans & Bjurstrøm, 2020). Thus, developing transformational leadership in both the national monitoring directorate and county executive committees is not an incidental issue but a precondition of change (Owalo, 2025). Moreover, innovation is possible within constraints of resources. Experience in other sectors of the public sector implies selecting the "lean" solutions. This entails harnessing the ability of existing internal strengths, improving the current system with inexpensive digital technology, and testing simple, minimum-viable solutions to prove the value before scaling. A pilot use of VBME in several selected counties, designed in collaboration with all stakeholders, including the local authorities and non-governmental organizations, could

produce the proof-of-concept that could help catalyze its introduction.

There are a few limitations inherent to this study as a conceptual analysis. First, it detects issues on the macro level and suggests a theoretical framework but fails to give empirically validated information on the proposed framework on the basis of primary data gathered from and with county officials, national policymakers, and citizens. Second, it is diagnosed on a broader national level, missing the depth of the variability between all 47 counties, each representing a unique political economy, administrative strengths, and local needs (Bilala, 2024). Third, being a conceptual paper, it defines the “what” and the “why” of VBME but does not present a stepwise “how-to guide” on the implementation, which would also entail a lot of contextual adaptation.

Upon this analysis two main recommendations can be made. The urgent focus of the policymakers and practitioners in the Kenyan intergovernmental system would be to embark on participatory design to pilot the VBME framework. It must include technical officers of the national government, the county governments, civil society, and M&E experts to develop together a relatively small set of indicators based on value and a sufficient implementation guideline concerning a selected number of sectors. To the academic and research community this conceptual work should be preceded by sound empirical research. Future work must adopt the mixed methods approach to examine the political economy of M&E reform at the county level, pursue longitudinal research on the effects of pilot VBME interventions, and create context-specific instruments of intangible value measurement such as trust and equity in the devolution process. Finally, harmonizing VBME is not a technical process but rather transformational, as it involves a radical reconsideration of the essence of the evaluation process of not only controlling outputs but also through co-creation of public value to all Kenyans.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main research question that informs this conceptual study is the understanding of how a VBME framework can be conceptualized to effectively drive and evaluate the harmonization of devolution programs in Kenya, not only in the verticality between national and county governments but also in the horizontal within the county governments themselves. In answering this question, the study used a conceptual form of research design, engaging in a systematic

synthesis of secondary data, national policy documents such as the Kenya National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy of 2022 (Government of Kenya, 2022), and empirical reports about the performance of devolution. The objective was to go beyond the technical critique of current M&E systems and create theoretically sound model that clearly connects the act of evaluation with the fundamental governance values needed to bring harmony, such as equity, accountability, transparency, and collaborative stewardship.

The most valuable deduction of this inquiry is the obvious recognition of a systemic mismatch between the current M&E regime and the original objectives of devolution. It was found that the dysfunction of such frameworks as the County Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation System (CIMES) is manifested in the widespread non-reporting and the lack of institutionalization at the county level (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Rumenya & Kisimbi, 2020; Kimwela & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Maalim, 2017). More importantly, these systems act first of all as instruments of upward financial compliance, but not to quantify or incentive the substantive values on which devolution was founded (Mbate, 2017). This is well-founded given empirical research that highlights context-specific M&E principles such as inclusion and transparency are statistically significant predictors of harmonization program performance (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Rumenya & Kisimbi, 2020; Kimwela & Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Maalim, 2017). The research therefore asserts that a paradigmatic shift in the approach away from compliance-concerned to values-oriented evaluation not only desirable, but also imperative. The feasible solution is presented through the proposed VBME framework based on the synthesis of the theories of Public Value, Institutional, Stewardship, and the Politics of Evidence (Moore, 2021; Alford et al., 2017; Steinfeld, 2023; Keay, 2017; Schillemans & Bjurstrøm, 2020; Parkhurst, 2016; Morse, 2016), which identifies the pathway to turn M&E into a proactive platform rather than a passive audit platform to achieve the objective of equitable development outputs.

Like any other conceptual study, this one too has limitations that qualify its findings and point to the kind of future work that is required. The main weakness is that it is based on documentary and secondary analysis, and as such, the proposed VBME framework is yet to be empirically tested through implementation. Although it identifies macro-level systemic problems, it fails to reflect the entire range of on-the-ground political realities, differences in capacities, and local innovations in each of the 47 counties. The framework gives a general and normative chart but needs to be

modified and substantiated in particular counties to demonstrate the practical operational problem and reorient its indicators and operations.

To fill this gap between theory and practice, the research provides various important gaps that need further research and intervention. Future empirical studies ought to test hypotheses of mixed approaches with piloting and testing the VBME framework in targeted counties and sectors. This research would allow tracking the effects of value-based indicators on decision-making and intergovernmental relations longitudinally (Ochen-Ochen, 2025; Aston et al., 2022; Guerzovich & Aston, 2025). Moreover, parallels of the same involving other decentralized governance approaches that address similar integrative evaluation challenges would provide good learning towards adaptation in Kenya. To policymakers and practitioners, the short-term solution would be to establish a co-creation process jointly by the national and county governments, civil society, and professionals in evaluations to develop and test a simplified set of values-based indicators (Prosser et al., 2017; Gwidi & Kilei, 2022; Kioko & Moi, 2024). This too ought to be combined with specific investment in transdisciplinary capacity building going beyond technical data skills to include competencies in facilitating, collaborative leadership, and negotiating the evident tensions between standardization and local context (USAID MTaPS, 2024).

On a broader disciplinary and real world spectrum, the study is significant to more broad debate on participative government, political reform and the political economy of evidence. It shows that successful M&E within complex, multi-level systems of governance can never be a technocratic, politically neutral activity. The framework recognizes and operates with the controversial realities of devolution by making explicit values core in the evaluation. In practical sense, this study offers a diagnostic instrument and a futuristic framework to the national and county governments that seeks to offer an organized means of restructuring the systems of monitoring of these governments back to the constitutional promise of devolution. To the donors and other development partners concerned with Kenya devolution, it posits that they should invest in the software of governance, values, relationships, and capacities, and the hardware of systems and technology. In the final analysis, the success of VBME working is a starting point to make sure that devolution can accomplish its transformative role of providing equitable, accountable, and coherent governance to all Kenyan citizens.

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