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DEMOCRATIC TRADE-OFFS IN KENYA DEVELOPMENT MODEL: ELITE CAPTURE, PARTICIPATION AND GOVERNANCE OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how the successive development models of Kenya, including the Vision 2030, the Big Four Agenda and the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA) have created democratic trade-offs towards achieving economic growth. The paper is based on elite capture theory and uses a comparative political-economy method, which combines qualitative research of policy texts, such as official national development plans and secondary governance indicators between 2008 and 2023. This analysis shows that, democratic erosion is not a mere policy failure, but systematically repeated development governance set up. Democratic displacement was created by vision 2030 with technocratic concentration, institutional insulation; Big Four Agenda increased this trend by squeezing accountability under executive acceleration; and BETA reorganized elite capture into localized spaces of participatory, with localized brokerage and co-optation. In all three models, the policy design varied to alter the shape of democracy, but not its content, which always arose due to the weak institutional constraints on elite power and the mischaracterization of participation and enforceable accountability. The article also adds to scholarship by applying the elite capture theory to a participatory development setting, refuting normative beliefs that inclusion is the sole means of increasing democratic legitimacy. To policy and practice, the results warn against reforms that are designed but not implemented by the institution and that the issue of economic ambition and democratic accountability can only be resolved by having power-limiting governance structures in practice.

Keywords: Participatory Democracy; Economic Planning; Elite Capture; Institutional Capacity

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INTRODUCTION

Vision 2030, the Big Four Agenda, and the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA) have defined Kenya development since the late 2000s and each of them was presented in state-written planning frameworks. All these frameworks expressed bold growth objectives and at the same time appealed to democratic ideals of participation, inclusion and accountability. In spite of these formulated goals, Kenya still faces chronic socio-economic inequality, unequal developmental results and eroding popular trust in the democratic institutions, which reflects a growing gap between economic aspiration and democratic legitimacy (African Development Bank Group, 2024; Stiftung, 2024; World Bank Group, 2024).

Kenyan political economy scholarship has reported significant aspects of development planning, governance reform and performance in institutions (Ong'era & Musili, 2019; Veney & Zeleza, 2013). Nonetheless, much of this literature looks at individual development strategies independently or looks at democracy as a normative standard and not as an analytical variable. The comparative research on democracy and economic performance also indicates that economic growth does not necessarily create democratic consolidation, especially in the situation of inequality and elite dominance (Gründler & Krieger, 2016; Jin et al., 2024; Sylwester, 2015). Consequently, the current literature provides a little insight into how power relations, accountability structures and democratic outcomes are reconfigured by the very models of development in the long term.

This disparity is especially clear in the Kenyan case, where both technocratic development plans, including Vision 2030 and the Big Four Agenda as well as the participatory models, including BETA, have failed to deliver democratically legitimate development results despite the significant difference in design and rhetoric. What has not been adequately discussed is not whether these models have been successful or not economically, but how the institutional structures of these models have been interacting with the pre-existing power structures to produce repetitive democratic trade-offs across successive policy regimes (Mhazo & Maponga, 2022; Persha & Andersson, 2014).

In filling this analytical gap, this paper will conduct a comparative political-economy analysis of the three largest models of development in Kenya between 2008 and 2023 with regard to the institutional processes through which economic planning connects with power, accountability and resource allocation. The analysis offers reasons why democratic erosion has continued through policy transitions despite repeated reform attempts by studying the role of centralized authority in elite behaviour and participation capacity through participatory design and implementation (Booth, 2012; Persha & Andersson, 2014).

By doing this, the paper will re-historicize the Kenya development experience as a democratic trade-off issue implicated in governance institutions as opposed to a series of discrete policy failures. It builds on the elite capture theory by showing that both technocratic and participatory development models can reproduce democratic deficits in settings of a weakly insulated institutions (Hickey et al., 2014; McCollum et al., 2018). In this perspective, the research explains why new economic reforms have not broken the old tendency of elite rule and waning democratic legitimacy and forms part of wider discussions on the governance of development in hybrid and transitional democracies (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

This paper is grounded on Elite Capture Theory which is placed on an institutional political-economy outlook. Elite capture theory describes the process by which development resources, decision making power and policy advantages are systematically usurped by politically linked actors, who in many cases, do so via formally inclusive or decentralized governance systems (Musgrave & Wong, 2016; Persha & Andersson, 2014). Instead of viewing elite capture as an intermittent failure of governance, the theory sees it as a structural result of asymmetric power relations, poor accountability institutions and institutional design susceptibilities (Booth, 2012).

When used in the development models in Kenya, the elite capture theory

offers a common explanatory framework of why centralized and participatory strategies have produced democratic trade-offs. Technocratic and executive-led planning, as a part of the Vision 2030 and the Big Four Agenda, concentrated power in national institutions, enabling quick decision-making and limiting the possibility of democratic control and the strength of the powers of the elite in the large-scale development projects (African Development Bank Group, 2024; Veney & Zeleza, 2013). Although centralized arrangements enhanced the implementation capacity in the short run, it also decreased accountability, as well as citizen ownership, and consequently resulted in eroded democratic legitimacy (Stiftung, 2024).

Participatory and bottom-up processes under BETA increased the number of players in the economic processes formally, especially at the county level. Nevertheless, when there were no well-established institutional insulation and enforcement systems, these spaces of participation tended to turn into new venues of elite brokerage, patronage and partisan distribution of resources (McCollum et al., 2018; Mhazo & Maponga, 2022). Here, the participation did not push the elite power but transformed its avenues, leading to what this paper theorizes as participatory elite capture.

The theory of participatory democracy is not used in this study as the primary explanation model, but as a reference standard of normativity and design. Although participatory democracy focuses on inclusion, deliberation, and citizen voice (Dapprich, 2024; Hahnel, 2020), this paper takes these factors as being contingent on institutional setting as opposed to being democratizing per se. Equally, the endogenous growth theory is used instrumentally to describe the economic logic of Kenya development models including, investments in human capital, infrastructure and innovation without assuming that growth-oriented strategies have to generate democratic gains (Kopp et al., 2024; Romer, 1994).

This paper postulates democratic trade-offs as a product of development governance and not as by-products of ineffective policy implementation by foregrounding elite capture as the prevailing model of development politics. This theoretical stance allows a comparative analysis across policy regimes to be systematic and offers a consistent basis on which the results of the empirical research on economic performance, institutional capacity, participation and democratic legitimacy can be interpreted.

METHOD

This paper uses a comparative qualitative political-economy research design to present how democratic trade-offs have been created by Vision 2030, the Big Four Agenda and Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA) in Kenya, as part of achieving economic growth. Qualitative comparative analysis will be suitable when there is a need to explain patterned institutional outcomes in one national context over time, not to estimate causal effects in a statistical way (Bennett, 2023; George, 2019). The design is clearly explanatory and aims at institutional mechanisms between development governance and democratic outcomes.

The main analysis tool is elite capture theory, which directs the interpretation of the case. Instead of defining elite capture as a failure of governance, the research operationalises it as a process by which power imbalances, institutional structure and accountability systems determine the developmental outcomes (Booth, 2012; Persha & Andersson, 2014). Such theoretical basis permits comparative systematic analysis both between development models and analytical consistency.

The empirical basis of the study is the primary state planning and policy documents, which are viewed as the authoritative statements of development goals, institutional structure, and implementation rationality. They are Kenya Vision 2030, the related Medium-Term Plans, official policy frameworks and progress reports of the Big Four Agenda (Government of Kenya, 2007, 2017, 2018, 2021) and the BETA planning tools, especially the Fourth Medium Term Plan 2023 - 2027 (Government of Kenya, 2024). The documents are treated as primary data since they stipulate the formal governance frameworks within which development is

Nomor eISSN : 2829-1794 Volume 5 No. 1, April 2026 Hal : 21-34

sought.

To place institutional assertions and substantiate performance patterns, the analysis selectively appeals to secondary quantitative indicators and sectoral statistics generated by national and international institutions. The sources are triangulated as opposed to being causally inferred. Besides this, there is a limited use of perception-based evidence based on trusted citizen surveys to shed light on the dynamics of democratic legitimacy and public trust as is good practice in governance studies (Grindle, 2007).

Interpretation of democratic commitments to participation, accountability and devolution is based on the Constitution of Kenya (2010) as the normative-institutional framework. Constitutional provisions are not considered as any empirical result but a reference standard in which the development governance arrangements are evaluated.

It is analysed in three successive phases that are in line with the qualitative document analysis and historical institutionalism (Bowen, 2009). To determine the core institutional characteristics, such as decision-making authority, participation mechanisms, accountability structures and modalities of implementation, first, each development model is rebuilt using its main documents.

Second, the features are explained by the elite capture theory to define leading mechanisms that promote democratic trade-offs, including institutional concentration, accountability compression, and participatory brokerage. Third, a cross-model comparison is made to see the repetitive patterns and variations of different policy regimes.

During the analysis, both theory and evidence are used in a recursive fashion. Development models are not seen as a set of policy texts but as institutional arrangements within political and administrative contexts. Interpretive validity is predetermined by convergence on the results of various documents and indicators of governance rather than single sources.

The tables that are presented in the Results and Discussion sections are analytical syntheses created by the authors and not copies of raw data. They bring together the reports of various official sources to enable systematic comparison between the models of development. In line with the qualitative comparative methodology, the presentation of findings is by surface patterns that need to be expounded on through tables (George, 2019). Authoritative planning and statistical reports provide numerical values, which are organized and interpreted according to the analytical judgment of the author.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Democratic Trade-offs in Development Governance through Analytical Framework

Democratic trade-offs in the governance of development are systematic tensions whereby the aim of achieving economic growth limits, replaces or restructures democratic accountability, participation and legitimacy. These trade-offs have not been incidental policy failures in the Kenyan situation but rather are repetitive products of an institutional design of the economic planning and execution. To comprehend these dynamics, it is important to go beyond outcome evaluation and to analyse how development models are being subjected to the power of institutions and elite incentives.

The best explanatory lens that can be used to explain this task is the Elite Capture Theory. In its simplest form, elite capture refers to the circumstances where politically or economically advantaged parties impose the disproportionate influence on the policy agenda, resource distribution, and developmental rents, which is frequently facilitated by formally inclusive forms of governance (Musgrave & Wong, 2016; Persha & Andersson, 2014). More importantly, the capture of elites is not limited to centralized or authoritarian systems. Empirical studies also show that even in decentralized and participatory setups, the dominance of the elite may be reproduced in case of weak institutional protection, fragmented accountability, or information asymmetry (Hickey et al., 2014; Persha & Andersson, 2014).

The proposed study is based on a conceptualization of democratic trade-offs as

an endogenous aspect of development governance, which is produced through three mechanisms that are interdependent. The first one is institutional concentration, according to which development models concentrate the decision-making power at the executive or technocratic level in order to speed up the implementation. Such concentration, as well as increasing short-term coordination and policy coherence, also undermines horizontal accountability and alienates participatory oversight. In the long run, the trade-off is reflected in a deteriorating democratic legitimacy especially when ambitious growth goals are not achieved (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Booth, 2012).

The second mechanism is the participatory distortion, which occurs when the participatory structures expand the formal inclusion but do not modify the power relations. The theory of participatory democracy presupposes that participation of citizens contributes to the growth of legitimacy and accountability (Dapprich, 2024; Hahnel, 2020). But practical experience of hybrid governance situations demonstrates that participation tends to be procedural and not substantive, which allows elites to take control over the consultative spaces, broker access to resources and justify predetermined choices (McCollum et al., 2018; Mhazo & Maponga, 2022). When this happens, the participation does not nullify democratic trade-offs but translates them at different institutional levels.

Third is the expectation of inflation where the development models create hopes among the people through high targets and rhetorical inclusion. This leads to an expectation of failure in the administration, and when this capacity fails to deliver the expected results, the expectation of failure starts to build (Gründler & Krieger, 2016; Jin et al., 2024). This is especially true in the context of these environments where economic performance is distorted and where disparity here to remain, as citizens are increasingly tied to development planning and elite enrichment, but not to the common good.

These processes operate in technocratic as well as participatory models of development but in varying ways depending on the institutional design. The absence of inclusion and the lack of transparency in centralized models create democratic trade-offs, whereas the presence of co-optation and brokerage in participatory models does. The similarity of these routes is that no intensive institutional insulation can exist to limit the role of the elite, hold them accountable, and align participation with decision-making authority (Booth, 2012; Persha & Andersson, 2014).

In this context, democratic outcomes are not considered as independent variables but as the outcomes of development governance structures. Endogenous growth logic based economic growth strategies focus on investment, innovation and productivity but are still politically mediated processes (Romer, 1994). Without the institutional structures that put a check on elite motivation and prevent the capture of participatory spaces, even in a macroeconomic environment where the numbers are improving, growth-oriented policies can lead to an increase in democratic tension. That is why positive growth rates in Kenya have co-existed with a decreasing level of public trust and beliefs about accountability shortages (African Development Bank Group, 2024; Stiftung, 2024).

This analytical framework allows systematic comparison of the Kenya successive development models since it operationalizes the elite capture as a mechanism and not a residual explanation. It enables the analysis to trace the influence of changes in centralization, participation and institutional capacity on the different but related democratic trade-offs. Importantly, it also establishes the criteria by which empirical evidence presented in subsequent sections through targeted tables, will be interpreted. Tables can therefore be viewed as tools of finding patterns that need to be defined rather than the alternatives to analytical reasoning.

It is based on this framework that Vision 2030, the Big Four Agenda and BETA are analysed as three forms of institutions which all exhibit the same underlying democratic dilemma: a chronic division between economic aspiration and democratic responsibility in a context of highly entrenched elite power.

Nomor eISSN : 2829-1794 Volume 5 No. 1, April 2026 Hal : 21-34

Vision 2030: Technocratic Growth, Democratic Displacement

Vision 2030 is the most ambitious effort at institutionalising long-term economic change in Kenya by centralised planning and technocratic co-ordination. The strategy, introduced as a national development blueprint in 2007, is expressly structured on three pillars economic, social and political achieved through the successive Medium-Term Plans (MTPs) which establish sectoral priorities, flagship projects and the responsibilities of implementation (Government of Kenya, 2007). Although the framework formally recognizes participation and democratic governance, its implementation architecture favours centralized delivery systems and expert coordination, which provides an environment that allows democratic displacement.

The main governance logic of Vision 2030 is based on the parallel delivery and monitoring institutions such as the Vision 2030 Delivery Secretariat and flagship project authorities which are meant to evade bureaucratic inertia and hasten implementation (Government of Kenya, 2007). This structure represents a technocratic belief in linear implemented capacity, according to which centralization of priorities and coordination is likely to provide predictable results. Politically-economically speaking, however, this kind of institutional concentration reduces the transaction costs of politically linked actors and undermines the horizontal and societal accountability mechanisms which allows the elite to be captured (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Booth, 2012).

Table 1. Vision 2030 Growth Targets versus Realised Outcomes (2008–2023)

Period	Average GDP Growth (%)	Vision 2030 Target (%)	Persistent Gap (%)
2008–2012	4.2	10.0	- 5.8
2013–2017	5.1	10.0	- 4.9
2018–2022	3.9	10.0	- 6.1
2023	5.4	10.0	- 4.6

Source: *Author's compilation, informed by Kenya Vision 2030 planning documents and World Bank data.*

The analytical interest in Table 1 does not lie in the shortfalls in growth but in the institutional assumptions revealed by it. The targets of Vision 2030 were set in planning documents which assumed the stability of political commitment, coordination and minimum opposition of its implementation at all levels of governance (Government of Kenya, 2007). Where the assumptions failed, continuing underperformance was then converted into expectation inflation whereby high targets were reiterated without a corresponding rebalancing of institutional capacity. Empirical evidence proves that these expectation gaps negatively affect democratic legitimacy by weakening trust in planning institutions especially when growth discourses are very politicised (Gründler & Krieger, 2016; Jin et al., 2024).

Elite capture under the Vision 2030 worked more on selective inclusion as opposed to direct exclusion. The procurement systems, land acquisition procedures and flagship project siting decisions became formally rule-based but factually influenced by the nearness to the executive and technocratic power. The concentration of benefits in space and sectoral patterns of investment recorded in consecutive MTP reviews confirm the existence of spatial and sectoral concentration of benefits, which strengthens the views that development accrues disproportionately to politically influential actors, not the citizens in general (African Development Bank Group, 2024). The BTI governance diagnostics also confirm the

decrease in accountability and trust at this time but are not applied in this section as the cause, but as the validation in the context (Stiftung, 2024).

Table 2. Institutional Configuration and Democratic Effects under Vision 2030

Institutional Feature	Intended Function	Observed Democratic Effect
Centralised delivery secretariats	Accelerated implementation	Reduced parliamentary and public oversight
Flagship project model	Strategic prioritisation	Elite influence over project selection
Limited participatory integration	Technical efficiency	Marginalisation of citizen voice
Parallel monitoring systems	Performance tracking	Weak accountability enforcement

Source: *Author's compilation, informed by Kenya Vision 2030 planning documents, African Development Bank (2024) and governance diagnostics.*

The democratic trade-offs observed under Vision 2030 are therefore structural rather than incidental. While participatory language is present in the blueprint, participation is not institutionally embedded within implementation or monitoring processes. This disconnect reflects a broader technocratic logic in which democratic accountability is treated as an outcome of growth rather than a constraint on governance. Elite capture theory predicts such outcomes where institutional insulation is prioritised over accountability, even within formally democratic systems (Persha & Andersson, 2014).

Notably, Vision 2030 set precedents in terms of institutions that influenced the future development models. Parallel delivery structures and centralized priority setting, which had become normal, developed a path dependency where subsequent reforms also had the vulnerabilities to accountability. Instead of being a short-term aberration of democratic standards, the Vision 2030 institutionalised a system of governance where economic ambition was to be achieved by means of an arrangement that systematised the externalisation of democratic costs.

Big Four Agenda: Executive Acceleration and Accountability Compression

The Big Four Agenda was developed in 2017 as a politically prioritised development agenda that aims to accelerate the provision of four sectors deemed economically catalytic and electorally salient, namely manufacturing, food security, universal health coverage and affordable housing (Government of Kenya, 2017). The Big Four Agenda was explicitly positioned as a short-term remedial intervention, unlike the long-term technocratic planning of Vision 2030, as the official documents explained the need to respond to sluggish implementation, lack of coordination and citizen disgruntlement with the rate of socio-economic change (Government of Kenya, 2021). This change represented a reorganisation and not a renouncement of centralised governance, which heightened executive power in the prioritisation and provision of development.

The institutional characteristic of the Big Four Agenda was executive acceleration. Presidential prioritisation made the agenda the top priority in government planning, where the sectoral ministries had to re-align budgets, reporting lines and implementation schedules. Although such a structure increased visibility and political pressure, it also tightened accountability systems by subordinating parliamentary accountability, intergovernmental coordination and political consultation to executive time constraints. Elite capture, in such acceleration, broadens the capacity of selective allocation and brokerage because development resources are directed through politically centralised decision nodes (Booth, 2012).

Nomor eISSN : 2829-1794 Volume 5 No. 1, April 2026 Hal : 21-34

Table 3. Sectoral Targets and Delivery Outcomes under the Big Four Agenda (2018–2022)

Sector	Stated Target	Observed Outcome	Accountability Implication
Manufacturing	15–20% of GDP	~7.5%, stagnant	Weak monitoring and policy overload
Affordable Housing	500,000 units	<10,000 units	Executive control over project siting
Universal Health Coverage	Universal enrolment	Partial, uneven rollout	Fragmented intergovernmental roles
Food Security	National self-sufficiency	Mixed regional outcomes	Climate and fiscal risks externalised

Source: *Author's compilation, informed by Big Four Agenda policy documents and progress reports and World Bank data.*

The significance of Table 3 lies in the mismatch between prioritisation intensity and delivery capacity. Big Four reports acknowledge financial constraints, institutional fragmentation and coordination bottlenecks, but these weaknesses were not addressed through institutional realignment, but additional executive control (Government of Kenya, 2021). Consequently, poor performance did not activate corrective accountability systems but rather created iterative reprioritisation in an already tightened governance space. This trend is consistent with elite capture theory that predicts the loss of accountability in instances where there is a convergence of authority and urgency without the attendant enforcement mechanisms (Persha & Andersson, 2014).

This is depicted in the affordable housing pillar. Even though presented as a redistributive intervention, housing delivery was based on centrally organized partnerships and land acquisition procedures that shed no light on the processes. According to the progress reports, the selection of projects and their implementation were not evenly distributed throughout the regions as most politically strategic urban centres received priority over the wider considerations of spatial equity (Government of Kenya, 2021). Governance diagnostics support the fact that perceptions of accountability are falling in this time, but this is done as a contextual indicator but not a causal driver.

Table 4. Governance Characteristics of the Big Four Agenda

Governance Dimension	Design Feature	Democratic Effect
Executive leadership	Presidential prioritisation	Reduced parliamentary oversight
Intergovernmental coordination	Ad hoc sectoral agreements	County marginalisation
Monitoring and evaluation	Sector-specific reporting	Fragmented accountability
Public participation	Limited consultation	Procedural inclusion only

Source: *Author's compilation, informed by Big Four Agenda reports, McCollum et al. (2018) and governance diagnostics.*

The involvement of the people in the Big Four Agenda was formally there but in substance limited. The consultation processes played a major role as they were used to sanction set priorities as opposed to influencing them. The experience set by health-sector priority setting in devolution shows that expedited policy settings have a propensity to side-line participatory deliberation, especially in situations where fiscal and political pressures prevail (McCollum et al., 2018). This proceduralising of participation strengthened the democratic trade-offs in that it undermined the connection between the

input of the citizens and policy outcomes.

Evidence based on perception also indicates that executive acceleration increased expectation inflation. Since the Big Four Agenda was framed several times as a transformative intervention, a sustained delivery gap became translated into scepticism in the population and waning trust. The citizen survey at the time is showing increased worry over accountability and equity in development delivery that supports the legitimacy costs related to compressed governance (Twaweza, 2019). These perceptions were not the results of lack of planning but were the results of having the concentration of power in a set of executive structures that restricted corrective feedback.

In comparison, the Big Four Agenda intensifies instead of discontinuing the logic of governance in Vision 2030. The agenda narrowed sectoral focus although the extent of intervention was limited by the fact that development delivery was linked to electoral cycles and executive authority. Therefore, the trade-offs that were based on democracy were not technocratic insulation but on accountability compression, in which the pace and visibility substituted deliberation and oversight. This structure prepared the way to subsequent reforms that were to reinstate participation without destroying the elite structures of influence.

BETA: Design and Reconfiguration of Elite Capture: Participatory.

In 2022, the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA) was presented as the flagship development agenda of the Kenya Kwanza government, which is specifically presented as a corrective to elite-driven and exclusive approaches to economic growth. Its discursive basis is captured in the Kenya Kwanza manifesto, which focuses on the grassroot entrepreneurship, the inclusion of informal economic actors and constitutional principles of participation and equity (Government of Kenya, 2022). Nonetheless, the process of operationalisation of BETA is achieved not by the manifesto per se but by formal state planning tools, primarily the Fourth Medium Term Plan (MTP IV) 2023-2027 that transforms the bottom-up rhetoric into technocratic planning architecture and budgetary frameworks (Government of Kenya, 2024). The differences between these two layers, political narrative and implementation regime is important in interpreting the democratic impact of BETA.

BETA is more participatory and decentralised at the design level, compared to the previous models. MTP IV gives a high priority to the implementation at the county level, MSME support, and agricultural value chains, and financial inclusion tools like the Hustler Fund (Government of Kenya, 2024). Participation is therefore predetermined as a democratic and economic policy. Nevertheless, contrary to the expectations of elite capture theory, the proliferation of participatory spaces without institutional insulations changes the place, but not logic, of elite influence (Musgrave & Wong, 2016; Persha & Andersson, 2014).

Table 5. Participatory Architecture under BETA and Observed Democratic Effects

Participatory Dimension	Design Intent	Observed Democratic Outcome
County-level engagement	Local ownership and responsiveness	Uneven participation quality
MSME financing (Hustler Fund)	Financial inclusion	Brokerage in beneficiary access
CIDP alignment	Policy coherence	Elite mediation of priorities
Public consultation forums	Deliberative governance	Procedural rather than substantive

Source: *Author's compilation, informed by BETA statements, MTP IV (2023–2027) and MSME validation briefs.*

The analytical value of Table 5 is the disproportional translation of the participatory design into the substantive impact. Although counties are officially placed as the

Nomor eISSN : 2829-1794 Volume 5 No. 1, April 2026 Hal : 21-34

implementation anchors, their ability to influence priorities is contingent on the strength of their administration, fiscal independence and relations of local power. Based on the validation exercises of MSMEs and sector briefs, it is often seen that access to financial instruments like the Hustler Fund is not bypassed, but mediated through groups, associations, and local intermediaries (Government of Kenya, 2024). It makes participation a contestation area and not an empowerment area.

This dynamic is what this study conceptualises as participatory elite capture. In contrast to technocratic or executive capture, participatory elite capture is mediated in a decentralised manner, with local elites using inclusive means to centralise power. The empirical evidence of participatory planning in Kenya indicates the same trends, with participatory institutions being dominated by organised and politically connected players where there are no robust accountability mechanisms (Sheely, 2015). The participatory expansion of BETA thus re-arranges elite capture on a spatial basis, moving it out of the arena of national executive to the County and community-based arena.

Table 6. Elite Capture Dynamics across Kenya's Development Models

Development Model	Primary Arena of Capture	Dominant Mechanism
Vision 2030	Central technocratic institutions	Institutional concentration
Big Four Agenda	Executive political apparatus	Accountability compression
BETA	County and participatory spaces	Brokerage and mediation

Source: *Author's compilation, informed by Government of Kenya planning documents and comparative institutional analysis.*

This reconfiguration has a democratic implication that is ambivalent. On the one hand, the rhetoric of participation and decentralisation of BETA create greater initial legitimacy through indications of responsiveness to historically marginalised actors. Conversely, the process of mediating participatory promises by local elites can result in increased levels of disillusionment due to the breach of expectations of inclusion at the nearest point of contact. The political trust literature indicates that the perceived procedural injustice at the local levels can undermine the democratic legitimacy as dramatically as the exclusion at the national levels (Jin et al., 2024).

An important mediating variable is institutional capacity. Those counties that have more effective administrative systems, open budgeting procedures and competitive politics are at a better position to translate participatory design into substantive results. On the other hand, counties with established patronage networks and ineffective checks have participation as an extra form of elite contention but not redistribution (McCollum et al., 2018). Such imbalance strengthens spatial disparity and makes national cohesion difficult since democracies are not the same in different localities.

Comparatively, BETA fails to address the democratic trade-offs that are found under Vision 2030 and the Big Four Agenda. Rather, it changes their expression. BETA replaces democracy by co-optation and mediation, where earlier models displaced it by centralisation and acceleration. These results undermine normative beliefs in the literature of participatory governance that inclusion is sufficient to improve democratic quality. In line with institutional political-economy views, the discussion shows that non-enforcement and insulation of participation recreate elite dominance in new manifestations (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Democratic Trade-Offs Continuity along the Kenya development path.

Comparative analysis of the Vision 2030, the Big Four Agenda and the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA) shows that the democratic trade-offs in the Kenya development path are not an isolated model phenomenon but structural recurrent that are inherent in institutions of

development governance. Although there is a great diversity in policy design, with techniques of technocratic insulation to executive acceleration and participatory decentralization, all models recreate democratic strain via different but interacting processes of elite capture. Such continuity highlights one of the main discoveries of the paper: a shift in development rhetoric and institutional constitution has not resulted in a shift in the underlying political economy of power.

In the three models, elite capture is the predominant causal force between economic ambition and democratic displacement. The institutional concentration under Vision 2030 arrangements enabled the elite capture by having the centralized technocracies and parallel structures of delivery isolate decision-making to the public and parliamentary scrutiny. Such an organization structure favoured coordination and efficiency but systemic marginalization of participatory accountability, which created a lack of legitimacy in cases where ambitious growth targets were failed (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Booth, 2012). Democratic trade-offs were mainly created by exclusion and obscurity.

The Big Four Agenda did not destroy this structure but made it even more politically immediate. Executive acceleration reduced the time required to be accountable, making subordination to speed and visibility. The correlation of development priorities with the electoral cycle increased the elite brokerage and selective distribution of resources at the expense of institutional learning and the corrective feedback loop. In this case, accountability compression had been used to describe democratic trade-offs instead of technocratic insulation, which proves that the narrowing of policy scope does not necessarily strengthen democratic governance (Jin et al., 2024; Persha & Andersson, 2014).

BETA brought a qualitatively new structure by decentralizing power using participatory and county-level systems. Nevertheless, instead of solving the problem of democratic shortage, such disaggregation redistributed elite capture into localized modes of mediation and brokerage. Participation was increased on the basis of formal participation but substantially dependent on institutional capacity and power relations at the local level. Elite capture in the form of participatory elite capture was created through the participation space as a new arena of control in counties, where patronage systems were established. Democratic trade-offs became therefore not exclusion but co-optation, which increased the level of disillusionment when the promise of participation did not come true (Hickey et al., 2014; McCollum et al., 2018).

Developed in models, there are three structural conditions under which democratic trade-offs persist. First, there is a low institutional insulation against elite power despite the centralized or decentralized power. Second, there is no corresponding participation with enforcement mechanisms, which allows inclusion to co-exist with capture. Third, delivery capacity is always behind expectation inflation, transforming economic failure into democratic discontent (Gründler & Krieger, 2016; Jin et al., 2024). These conditions are cumulative and cause path dependence among policy regimes and not rupture.

The results thus respond directly to the research question. The successive development models in Kenya produce democratic trade-offs by institutional means that not only favour elite coordination, brokerage and mediation at the expense of accountability and constraint. The difference in the policy design changes the shape of the democratic displacement, but not its content. Each of the technocratic, executive-oriented, and participatory models is a trade of democratic accountability in the perceived benefits of implementation but none of these approaches puts in place the institutional conditions that would have to be established to balance economic ambition with democratic legitimacy.

This synthesis has an input to general discussions in the field of development governance by complicating normative assumptions that participation or decentralization is the solution to democratic deficits. Rather, the Kenyan case demonstrates that democratic quality in development depends not on the existence of forms of inclusion but rather the power structure, enforcement and accountability in institutions. Devoid of systems that can

Nomor eISSN : 2829-1794 Volume 5 No. 1, April 2026 Hal : 21-34

discipline elite conduct at various governance tiers, development models, whether with goodwill or not, tend to replicate democratic trade-offs.

The Kenyan development path is indicative of a structural dilemma, and not a progression of policy errors. Democratic erosion does not occur because development models do not include democratic principles rhetorically, but because they do not institutionalize those principles in a way that limits the power of elites.

CONCLUSION

The research serves scholarship in three significant aspects. First, it develops the elite capture theory since it shows that participation and decentralization may create specific democratic trade-offs in weakly insulated institutional spaces that defy normative assumptions in literature on participatory democracy. Second, it reinterprets the Kenya experience of development as a story of structural continuity and not policy discontinuity, demonstrating that repeated reforms have changed forms of governance without changing the underlying political-economic relations. Third, it provides a comparative, mechanism-based account of democratic trade-offs in a hybrid democratic setting that provides analytical lessons applicable not only to Kenya, but also to other developing states that seek to achieve inclusive growth under elite domination conditions.

Policy wise, the results warn against reform policies that puts design innovation or rhetorical inclusion in the forefront but does not focus on institutional enforcement. Neither participation nor technocratic efficiency nor executive focus can allow democratic consolidation in development governance alone. Rather, it demands institutional solutions that can regulate elite behaviour and hold them accountable at all governance levels and harmonize participatory mechanisms with actual decision-making power. Although the paper does not recommend particular technological or administrative remedies, it highlights the need to sequence participation with capacity and accountability as opposed to including as a naturalistic solution to democratic shortages.

There are a number of limitations associated with this study. First, the analysis will be based mostly on secondary data sources, such as policy documents, performance indicators and institutional reports. Although this method is suitable in terms of comparative institutional analysis, it restricts the capacity of the approach to capture micro-level perceptions and informal practices that influence the nature of elite capture. Second, the time-based aspect of the analysis limits evaluation of the long-term democratic impacts of BETA because the model is still in its infancy implementation. Third, the article does not use primary survey or experimental designs, which can be used to supplement document-based analysis with more precise evidence of the experiences of citizens and elite mediation on local scales.

These limitations could be overcome in future studies through the inclusion of longitudinal fieldwork, subnational comparative analyses, or mixed methods designs to study the dynamics of participatory elite capture as time goes on and across counties. This would enhance the knowledge on how institutional insulation can be operationalized in practice and under what circumstances development governance can balance economic ambition with democratic accountability.

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