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Corruption as a Governance Challenge in Kenya. A Case of Meru County

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Abstract

Corruption remains a persistent governance challenge in Kenya despite the legal and institutional measures established to curb it. While scholars have paid considerable attention to corruption at the national level, limited empirical work has examined its forms within devolved units, particularly in Meru County. This paper examined the common forms of corruption in Meru County. The study was grounded in the principal-agent theory and adopted a mixed-methods design. From a target population of 1,099,376 adults, the study sampled 295 respondents (278 questionnaire respondents and 17 key informants) using the Slovin formula, and collected data through questionnaires and key informant interviews. Of the 278 questionnaires administered, 207 were completed and analyzed, yielding a response rate of 75.9%, along with 17 key informant interviews. The study analyzed quantitative data using SPSS (version 30) and qualitative data thematically using MAXQDA. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .76$), and validity was confirmed through expert review and factor analysis. The study found nepotism and favoritism in hiring to be the most prevalent form of corruption, endorsed by 71.0% of respondents (mean = 3.81), followed by misuse of public funds (61.4%) and embezzlement of county resources (59.4%). Procurement fraud attracted the lowest agreement (43.5%) and the widest dispersion, suggesting limited public visibility rather than low incidence. Word frequency analysis corroborated this ordering, with money-related terms recording 198 mentions and recruitment-related terms 155. The study concludes that corruption in devolved units operates chiefly through the allocation of public posts and the handling of county revenue. It recommends competitive and publicly documented recruitment, tighter expenditure reporting and the publication of tender awards to expose an area currently shielded from scrutiny. The findings apply to county public service boards, county assemblies, and anti-corruption agencies.

Keywords: *Corruption, Governance, public funds, nepotism, Meru County, Kenya.*

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1. Introduction

Corruption lacks a universally accepted definition, yet governance literature consistently describes it as the misuse of public office for private gain (Ikubaje, 2025; Treisman, 2007). Its persistence across political systems has made it one of the most studied obstacles to effective governance, since it diverts public resources, distorts decision-making, and weakens the institutions that serve citizens. However, the forms corruption takes are not uniform. They vary with the structure of the state, the discretion available to public officers and the points at which citizens interact with government.

Comparative scholarship illustrates this variation. Safrizal et al. (2021), examining five Asian states, found that officials exercise power for private gain in ways that shift with context. Quah (2020) reported that corruption in Asia typically takes the form of political patronage and clientelism, with leaders in India and Bangladesh rewarding supporters with public jobs and contracts. The World Bank (2025) documented bribery for access to public services as a common practice across the same region. In the United States, Graycar (2015) identified state capture and the exchange of money for preferential treatment, while Glaeser and Sachs (2024), pointed to vote buying and the maintenance of crony networks.

African evidence points to heavier financial forms. Hope (2023), found embezzlement of public funds, procurement fraud and illicit financial flows across South Africa, Zimbabwe and Uganda, concluding that such practices divert resources away from health, education and infrastructure. Uneke (2010) identified grand corruption, exercised through the abuse of high office, as the dominant form in Southern Africa. Vyas-Doorgapersad (2024) recorded bribery, nepotism, fraud, and abuse of authority in South Africa, while the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024) reported bribery, nepotism, and misuse of public funds as widespread in Nigeria. Hanna et al. (2019) observed that petty corruption in African bureaucracies typically requires citizens to pay to obtain services they are already entitled to.

In Kenya, Martini (2012) found bribery to be a consistent condition for accessing public services. Githongo (2006) identified embezzlement of funds intended for service delivery as a common problem in the counties, attributing it to weak oversight following devolution. The Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (2023) named procurement irregularities, nepotism and patronage, bribery and kickbacks, and the hiring of ghost workers as the most common forms in county governments. These accounts show that corruption exists in devolved units, but they do not identify which forms predominate in any county, or whether the national ordering holds at that level.

This gap matters because devolution transferred substantial discretion over recruitment, revenue collection and procurement to the counties. The forms of corruption that emerge under that discretion may differ from those documented in central bureaucracies. Existing studies have largely examined corruption at the national level and have not disaggregated its forms within specific devolved units. Meru County, with an adult population exceeding one million and a substantial devolved budget, has attracted no dedicated study of this kind. This paper addresses that gap by identifying the common forms of corruption in Meru County and their relative prominence.

The paper is grounded in the principal-agent theory, which conceives governance as a delegation relationship in which citizens, as principals, entrust authority to public officers acting as their agents. Corruption arises when agents exploit that delegated authority for private benefit and principals lack the information needed to detect and sanction such conduct. The theory highlights the points where discretion is greatest and monitoring is weakest, where distinctive forms of corruption are expected to concentrate.

1.1 Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was:

To assess the common forms of corruption in Meru County.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative and qualitative strands to measure the prevalence of each form of corruption while describing how it operates. The design was appropriate because perceptions of corruption require both measurements to establish relative prominence and narrative evidence to establish the mechanism. The study was conducted in Meru County, Kenya.

The target population comprised the 1,099,376 adult residents of Meru County as recorded in the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census. A sample of 278 respondents was drawn using the Slovin formula at a 6% margin of error. Key informants were selected purposively and comprised officers of the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission, procurement officers, secretaries in the offices of sub-county administrators, and Members of the County Assembly, all of whom hold governance or oversight responsibilities that place them close to the practices under investigation.

The researchers collected data using a semi-structured questionnaire and an interview schedule. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale covering forms of corruption, along with open-ended items inviting respondents to describe the practices they considered most prevalent. The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with key informants. A pilot study involving 28 respondents, representing 10% of the sample, was conducted in Tharaka Nithi County. Reliability was assessed using the Cronbach alpha coefficient, applying the threshold of .70 recommended by Malhotra (2010), and the forms of corruption scale returned a coefficient of .82 against a full-scale value of .76. Validity was established through expert review within Tharaka University and confirmed through exploratory factor analysis, which returned a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of .637 and a significant Bartlett test of sphericity.

The Director of Postgraduate Studies and the Ethics Committee of Tharaka University authorized the study, and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation issued a research permit. Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences, generating percentages, means and standard deviations. The study analyzed qualitative data thematically using MAXQDA, supported by word-frequency analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses and interview transcripts. Table 1 presents the response rate.

Table 1: Response Rate for the Data Collection Instruments

Instrument	Targeted	Response	Percentage
Questionnaires	278	207	74.5
Key informant interviews	17	17	100.0
Overall	295	224	75.9

A response rate of 75.9% meets the thresholds set by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), who recommended 50% as adequate for analysis, 60% as good, and 70% and above as excellent for any social study. The rate obtained was above 70% and therefore large enough and representative enough to generalize the results to the wider adult population of Meru County. The high return is attributable to the drop-and-pick administration and the follow-up visits made during collection. Both reduced the loss of instruments.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Demographic Information of the Respondents

Table 2 presents the distribution of the questionnaire respondents by gender, age and level of education. The near-even gender split (50.7% male vs 49.3% female) indicates that the reported perceptions are not skewed toward either sex. The fact that 78.3% of respondents were aged 18 to 45 means the data are dominated by adults who most frequently transact with county offices for jobs, services, and permits and therefore encounter the situations in which corruption arises. With 78.2% holding a college qualification or higher, respondents could interpret the scale items accurately and form considered judgments on governance and integrity.

Table 2: Demographic Information of the Questionnaire Respondents

Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	105	50.7
Female	102	49.3
Age bracket (years)		
18–25	43	20.8
26–35	56	27.1
36–45	63	30.4
46–55	41	19.8
56 and above	4	1.9
Level of education		
Primary	13	6.3
Secondary	32	15.5
Tertiary/College	76	36.7
University	51	24.6
Postgraduate	35	16.9

The demographic characteristics of the key informants show that gender information was recorded for only 7 of the 17 respondents: 4 (57.1%) were male and 3 (42.9%) were female, while the remaining 10 respondents did not indicate their gender. Regarding age, 6 respondents (35.3%) were aged 36–45 years, 6 (35.3%) were aged 45–50 years, 3 (17.6%) were aged 35–40 years, and 2 (11.8%) were aged 40–45 years. Based on these figures, 82.4% of respondents were aged 36 years and above, although the age categories overlap and should not be treated as mutually exclusive. In terms of education, 9 respondents (52.9%) had university-level education, while 8 (47.1%) had college-level education, indicating that all 17 respondents had

post-secondary qualifications. Table 3 summarizes the key informants' demographic information.

Table 3: Demographic Information of the Key Informants

Demographic Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	4	57.1
	Female	3	42.9
	Not indicated	10	—
Age	35–40 years	3	17.6
	36–45 years	6	35.3
	40–45 years	2	11.8
	45–50 years	6	35.3
Education	University	9	52.9
	College	8	47.1

3.2 Common Forms of Corruption in Meru County

Table 4 presents responses to the five statements on the forms of corruption, expressed as percentages with item means and standard deviations.

Table 4: Perceptions of the Forms of Corruption in Meru County

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	SD
Bribery is common when accessing public services	1.4	12.6	28.0	39.6	18.4	3.61	0.97
Nepotism and favoritism influence hiring and promotions	0.0	9.2	19.8	51.7	19.3	3.81	0.85
Misuse of public funds is widespread	0.0	10.1	28.5	46.9	14.5	3.66	0.85
Procurement fraud is a major issue	9.2	18.8	28.5	26.1	17.4	3.24	1.21
Embezzlement of county resources occurs frequently	0.5	16.4	23.7	42.0	17.4	3.59	0.98

SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neutral, A = agree, SA = strongly agree; values are percentages. M = mean and SD = standard deviation on a 1–5 scale.

Nepotism and favoritism in hiring and promotions attracted the strongest endorsement. Seven in every ten respondents, or 71.0%, agreed or strongly agreed that recruitment is shaped by personal and political connections, while 19.8% were undecided and 9.2% dissented, giving a mean of 3.81. Perceptions of financial impropriety followed closely. 61.4% affirmed misuse of public funds, compared with 10.1% who disagreed, yielding a mean of 3.66; similarly, 59.4% agreed that county resources were embezzled, with a mean of 3.59. Respondents agreed with bribery while accessing public services at 58.0% and disagreed at 14.0%, yielding a mean of 3.61. Procurement fraud alone failed to command majority endorsement, with agreement at

43.5%, the highest dissent in the section at 28.0%, the lowest mean at 3.24 and the widest dispersion at 1.21.

The ranking is consistent across both criteria. Unfair recruitment ranks highest on both the proportion endorsing it and the item mean, making it the most prevalent form of corruption in the county. The two items on public money occupy the middle ground and are separated by a margin too narrow to be meaningful, suggesting residents see misuse and embezzlement as facets of a single problem. Procurement fraud stands apart, and its position warrants careful reading. The combination of lowest agreement, highest dissent and a standard deviation of 1.21 signals uncertainty rather than considered rejection. Tendering is negotiated away from public view, and residents who never observe it are poorly placed to judge its integrity.

Word frequency analysis of the open-ended questionnaire responses and the interview transcripts was conducted to establish which practices respondents raise unprompted. Figure 1 presents the results.

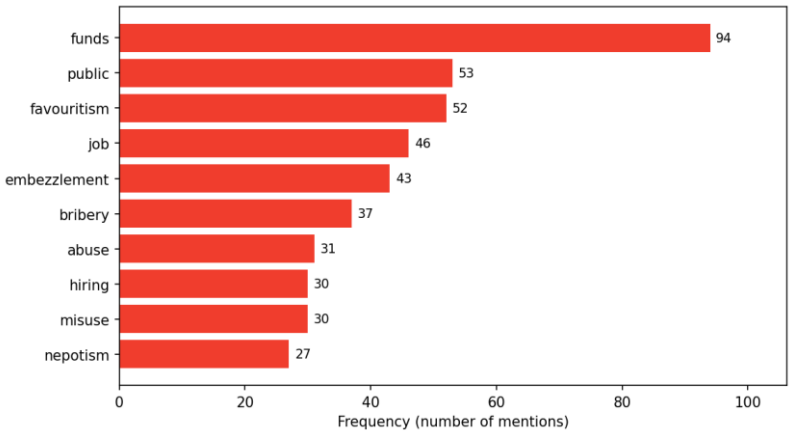


Figure 1: Word frequency for the forms of corruption

Grouping related terms clarifies the pattern. Words describing the mishandling of money were most common, with funds used 94 times, embezzlement 43, abuse 31 and misuse 30, giving 198 mentions. Words describing unfair recruitment followed, with favoritism used 52 times, job 46, hiring 30 and nepotism 27, giving 155 mentions. Bribery stood alone with 37 mentions, while procurement and fraud together attracted only 6.

These counts track the questionnaire closely, though not identically. The scale ranked unfair recruitment first, whereas the spoken data ranked financial wrongdoing first, a divergence in language rather than substance. Unfair hiring appears under several terms, so its weight is distributed across four terms, while financial wrongdoing is anchored by the single word funds. Once the recruitment terms are aggregated, the two clusters sit close together, consistent with the narrow gap between their means. The bribery count tells the same story. Bribery drew 58.0% agreement, close to embezzlement at 59.4%, yet was mentioned 37 times against 43. Bribery is a compact concept with one common name and therefore generates fewer variants even where it is widely experienced. Frequency rewards concepts with many synonyms; agreement scores do not.

Procurement offers the clearest convergence between the two strands. It ranked last on the scale and barely surfaced in open speech. The scale registered uncertainty and the spoken data registered silence, both pointing to low visibility rather than low incidence. Figure 2 presents the same evidence as a word cloud, in which term size reflects frequency of use.

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Figure 2: Word cloud for the forms of corruption

The cloud shows funds and favoritism at the visual center, with job, embezzlement, bribery, nepotism, and hiring forming a dense surrounding band, and procurement-related terms faint at the margins. Corruption in Meru County is thus understood as two things above all: money taken and posts given unfairly.

Key informants described these practices in concrete terms. On the forms that predominate, one observed:

> *"Nepotism, favoritism and bribery when giving county jobs."* (Informant 1)

On the handling of county money, another stated:

> *"Embezzlement of funds, irregularities in procurement and bribery."* (Informant 5)

A third located the practice in daily dealings:

> *"Taking bribes and use of public funds to finance personal projects."* (Informant 6)

These accounts explain the ratings, showing how favoritism determines who is hired and how public funds are redirected for private ends.

The findings correspond with existing scholarship on several points and depart from it on one. The prominence of financial impropriety aligns with Hope (2023), who found embezzlement and procurement fraud across African states, and with the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (2023), which identified nepotism, patronage, and bribery as among the most common practices in Kenyan counties. The reported bribery aligns with Graycar (2015) on the exchange of money for preferential treatment and with Martini (2012) on bribery as a condition of access to public services in Kenya. Githongo (2006) similarly identified embezzlement of service delivery funds as a county-level problem attributable to weak oversight.

The departure lies in the ordering. Whereas Uneke (2010) placed grand corruption first in Southern Africa and Hope (2023) emphasized procurement fraud, this study prioritizes nepotism and favoritism. This difference aligns with the devolved setting. County governments control local recruitment and allocate local opportunities, so integrity failures surface first at the point of hiring, whereas the comparative studies examined central bureaucracies where large-scale embezzlement and tendering are the more visible entry points. Reading through the principal-agent framework, the finding shows agents exercising delegated authority over recruitment and revenue for private benefit while principals lack the information needed to detect it. The forms of corruption are shared across contexts; their ordering shifts with the level of government under examination. Quah (2020) offers a useful parallel, finding that patronage

and rewarding supporters with public jobs dominate where political leaders control local appointments.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that corruption in Meru County is predominantly relational and financial rather than contractual. It is most visible in how public posts are allocated and county revenue is handled. Nepotism and favoritism in hiring emerged as the most prevalent form, suggesting that personal and political connections have displaced merit in county recruitment. The misuse and embezzlement of public funds followed closely and residents perceive them as facets of a single problem. The uncertainty surrounding procurement fraud does not show that the practice is rare; rather, it shows that procurement occurs beyond public visibility, which is itself a governance weakness. Both the quantitative and qualitative strands converged on this ordering, which strengthens confidence in the conclusion.

5. Recommendations

The study conclusion informed the following recommendations:

i. The Meru County Public Service Board should place the allocation of county posts beyond personal and political discretion through competitive advertisement of every vacancy, shortlisting against published criteria, disclosure of interview panel composition and publication of appointment outcomes together with the scores on which they were based.

ii. The County Assembly should require periodic recruitment returns from the executive and examine any appointment that departs from the advertised criteria, thereby restoring the oversight the principal-agent relationship presupposes.

iii. The county treasury should tighten the handling of public funds through timely expenditure reporting and prompt action on audit queries, given that misuse and embezzlement ranked immediately behind unfair hiring.

iv. The county government should publish tender awards, contract values and supplier details in a form accessible to ordinary residents, so that an area currently shielded from view is brought within public scrutiny.

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