

# ISOMORPHISM IN MANAGEMENT OF COUNTY GOVERNMENTS, KENYA

Salamu, Lydia (Maseno University); Fredrick Aila (Maseno University)

Corresponding Author: faila@maseno.ac.ke

## Abstract

Institutional theory argues that the primary objective of organizational change is formal legitimacy. In other words, organizations adapt their internal characteristics in order to conform with the expectations of the key stakeholders in their environment. In this regard, the promulgation of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) marked a major milestone in the way the country is governed. It stipulated the dispersal of political power and economic resources from the centre in Nairobi to the grassroots in a process known as devolution. As a result, 47 county governments and the Senate were established following the March 4, 2013 General Election as part of the implementation of devolution. Being a new form of governance, many Kenyans had questions concerning what form of management structures the county governments will undertake; will they conform to the structure of national government-isomorphism or adopt better management systems. The aim of this paper is therefore to study isomorphic pressures in management of the county governments in Kenya. Specifically it seeks to explain why so little change has been observed and way forward. Literature on devolution and isomorphism reveal that county governments are forced to conform to the wishes of national government in a bid to gain their independence since it is the national government which assesses their workings to see whether more functions can be assigned to them. A decade later, marked change has been realized at the grassroots level, albeit with myriad challenges. Although all laws required to give effect to the system of devolved governments are in place and the bills were passed in time, there is need to: strengthen the structures and systems, enhance accountability, conduct more civic education and eradicate corruption in order for county governments to function effectively and efficiently.

## Key words:

Kenya; Institutional Theory; Institutionalisation; Isomorphism

## Institutional Isomorphism

Developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), institutional isomorphism seeks to improve and take on unique characteristics that improve what they are good at in order to be the best organization possible. Institutional isomorphism says that when an organization becomes a legitimate contender (a respected or recognized entity within the industry) that other entities will adopt similar practices in an effort to obtain the advantage or authority. In other words, other organizations will seek to get what their competitor has. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified the following three types of isomorphic pressures that are common in organizations: (1) coercive isomorphism that stem from political influence and the problem of legitimacy; (2) mimetic isomorphism, resulting from standard responses to uncertainty; and (3) and normative isomorphism, associated with professionalization institutional mechanisms.

On the aspect of legitimacy, Thornton and Ocasio (2008) define it as the fundamental cornerstone of institutional theory, thus, may not necessarily entail achieving efficiency, performance and consequently success from assimilating and institutionalising a technological innovation. In line with this argument, Scott (2008) also posited that organisations are not passive pawns controlled by the demands of their environments, but are active players, capable of responding strategically and innovatively to environmental pressures.

Institutional theory, according to Tolbert and Zucker (1999) posits that actors accept and follow social norms unquestioningly, without any real reflection and seek legitimacy, status and reputation (Barley 2008; Deephouse and Suchman 2008) more than efficiency Thornton and Ocasio (2008). Institutional theory, therefore, primarily assumes that organisations and organisational actors seek to gain legitimacy in their environments in order to be accepted and thus ensure their long-term survival as observed by Barley (2008). This theory comprises of two elements: institutional effects and institutionalisation process Mignerat and Rivard (2009). Institutional effects are processes in which institutions affect other institutions, organisations or organisational entities. According to institutional processes, the relationship of an organisation within its institutional environment causes some set of organisations to become more similar over time through resemblance of a focal organisation to other organisations in its environment (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Liang *et al.* 2007; Greenwood *et al.* 2008). Different researchers utilised various terms to explain this process such as institutional isomorphic pressures, institutional mechanisms, and institutional pressures (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 2008; Currie 2011).

While using France, Nigeria, and India, three of the regions used as part of the GLOBE Project, and three organizational theories (a) resource dependency, (b) institutional, and (c) stakeholder organizational theories presented by Hatch (2013), Fadare (2013) presents a description of how each theory might or might not work in the three different cultures by application of isomorphic pressures. He asserts that Institutional theory of organization is an extension of resource dependence theory. Hatch (2013) explained that although organizations require resources such as raw materials, capital and labor to survive, organizations that have all these resources but lack acceptance of the societies in which they operate – regulators, government agencies, laws and courts, professions, interest groups, and mobilized public opinion - will end up failing. Thus in an input-output model, an organization must have inputs such as raw materials, labor, capital, equipment as well as social legitimacy to be able to generate outputs. (p. 74). He concludes by saying that In relation to the institutional theory, while France is required to implement all European Union Directives and constantly puts organizations under pressure to conform to these expectations, Issues of poverty, nepotism, political god-fatherism, and corruption prevalent in India and Nigeria means that organizations are not always put under as much pressure to conform to expectations-an aspect that is ailing the national government and which the county governments are borrowing.

Frumkin and Galaskiewicz (2004) examined whether public sector organizations, when compared to organizations in the business and nonprofit sectors, are more or less as susceptible to mimetic, normative, and coercive pressures. They discovered that governmental organizations are in fact more vulnerable to all three types of institutional forces than other organizations, while the effect of institutional variables on for-profits and nonprofits is more sporadic. They suggested that government action, or more generally state intervention, has consistently been conceived as playing a central function in initiating the structural transformation of other organizations. While the new institutionalism is usually thought of as being primarily a cultural theory of organizations, emphasizing inter-organizational diffusion of rituals and roles, the new institutionalism has a political core that points to public sector organizations as the drivers and triggers of institutionalization. Government licensing, inspection, and regulation are the levers that act on nonprofit and business organizations. The three seminal formulations of institutionalism can be seen as constituting together a slow progression toward an understanding of the centrality of public sector organizations in fueling the symbolic and isomorphic changes that these organizations undergo.

This review specifically centers on how isomorphic pressures affect county governments in Kenya as they try to comply with the wishes of national government considering that the county governments have executive and legislative authority, including the accompanying mandates and powers, to raise limited revenue, establish policies, plans, budget and governance. This means that although the two levels of government are distinct, they remain inter- dependent.

### **Mechanism of Institutional Isomorphic Change**

At an analytic level, only coercive isomorphism is linked to the environment surrounding the organizational field. Mimetic and normative processes are internal to the field and help explain the spread of roles and structures. When organizations are subjected to outside coercive scrutiny, evaluation, and regulation, they tend to react defensively and gravitate toward isomorphic transformation. As the pressures from the outside grow, organizations are led to find ways to either diffuse or eliminate this pressure by changing their practices. One of the easiest ways to change is to adopt those routines and structures that are defined by law or government agencies as legitimate. To do so may ensure survival by minimizing conflict. The process of institutionalization is intimately tied with the idea of an organizational field. Rather than simply emerging as the product of the natural interaction of organizations, fields are constructed for a purpose. They are the ultimate product of coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism, and they reflect the slow homogenization and convergence of organizational forms. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) take a strong position on the emergence of fields, arguing that they are constructed and that they serve as information networks fueling standardization and professionalization. Pundits have questioned the notion of devolved corruption (PWC, 2016), that is, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

#### **a. Coercive Isomorphism:**

Kenya is a sovereign state and in order for it and organizations within the country to avoid breaching of the law, the government enacted regulations and laws that are stipulated in the constitution of Kenya to constantly put organizations under pressure to conform to these expectations. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explained that “the existence of a common legal environment affects many aspects of an organization’s behavior and structure”. Similarly, county governments have put in place regulations and laws and also establish agencies to enforce these regulations and laws; however, the national government still holds many functions (34), as opposed to the (14) held by county governments. Allocation of functions has remained contentious because the county governments are expected to apply to the national government over the functions they are ready to undertake, for which they will be assessed. This means county governments must fulfill all regulations set by national government before they are allowed to undertake more functions thus coercive pressure. Interestingly, resources need to follow functions for effectiveness. It is apparent that that there is a mismatch in the proportion of resources retained at headquarters and that disbursed to county governments for key ministries such as health and agriculture (Simiyu, 2014).

#### **b. Mimetic Isomorphism:**

According to Hatch (2013), institutional pressures to be perceived as being successful may lead organizations to pretend as if they indeed are successful. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) posit that when organizational technologies are poorly understood, when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainties, for example, at the centre of implementation cycle of devolution is the restructuring of the public administrators and service delivery at the local level. These systems have existed for long and have deep roots and for this reason restructuring has led to

duplication of duties. The Constitution was silent on the roles of public administrators in the county governments thus a parallel administrative unit to that of county governments has been instituted. The result is job duplications, rising of wage bill, mistrust and confusion of roles. A case point is how governors keep clashing with county commissioners (previously Provincial Commissioners).

A recent report by World Bank shows that only 10 counties managed to spend 30% of its allocation on development projects. While this may be attributed to huge inherited debts, inefficient revenue collection systems, ambitious spending targets and limited allocations from the national government, a major reason is poor interpretation of regulations or lack of proper channels of accountability-a factor that has shadowed the national government. The county governments of Mombasa and Machakos bought police vehicles a task which is under the domain of national government. This means money was channeled to a different course.

### **c. Normative Isomorphism:**

This is institutional pressure brought about from professionalism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) defined professionalism “as the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control the production of producers”. Hatch (2013) extended this definition of professionalism by including cultural expectations such as “the education or religious beliefs of organizational members”. All organizations have a mix of professionals and non-professionals who work for them. The posts of county governments are elective thus peoples’ choices prevail over professionalism. Such conditions promote nepotism, prejudice and corruption in selection of other workers. It is not unusual to find a graduate working under a ‘form four leaver’ due to dynamics of elections. Moreover most county governments lack qualified staff to legislate laws. In terms of remuneration, county governments offer higher salaries and allowances than that of professionals in the national government and their counterparts who used to work in local councils. This is coupled with allegations that the amount of work done is less and not so defined.

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that all three types of isomorphic pressures affect the management of county governments. Being newly instituted, the devolved governments have to rely on the regulations set by the national government and other bodies set up to ease the transition thus they resemble the national government. Isomorphism is not a hindrance to efficient management of county governments since if the rules and regulations are followed to the letter, the results would translate to better managed governments. The issues that cause poor management of the counties are:

1. Politicized implementation of devolution,
2. Lack of capacity by county government to draft bills,
3. Corruption and lack of transparency
4. Poor civic education.

The following recommendations may enable better management of county governments:

1. Structures and systems, including legal frameworks, HR, financial, administration, management and service delivery structures need to be strengthened for citizens to enjoy service delivery.
2. Civic education to be carried out regularly so that there is full participation of citizens in issues concerning the county. This will enhance transparency and accountability.
3. Politicians to desist from power struggle and concentrate more on passing bills that benefit the counties. On the part of citizens, care must be taken while choosing county leaders in future.

4. Corruption to be fought from top-down by ensuring all leaders engaged in such practices are prosecuted and stripped of their titles.

## References

- Barley, S.R. (2008). Coalface Institutionalism, in R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin and R. Suddaby (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Organisational Institutionalism*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 491–518.
- Constitution of Kenya (2010)
- Currie, W. L. (2011), *Institutional theory of information technology*, *The Oxford Handbook of Management Information Systems: Critical Perspectives and New Directions*, pp. 137–173.
- Deephouse, D.L. and Suchman, M. (2008). Legitimacy in Organisational Institutionalism, in R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin and R. Suddaby (eds.). *The Sage Handbook of Organisational Institutionalism*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 49–77.
- DiMaggio, P.J., and Powell, W.W. (1983), The Iron Cage Revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organisational fields, *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147-160.
- Fadare O. S (2013). Resource dependency, Institutional and Stakeholder organizational theories in France, Nigeria and India. *International Journal of Management and Sustainability*, 2(12), 231-236.
- Fredrik Bjorck (2004). "Institutional Theory: A New Perspective for Research into IS/IT Security in Organisations," HICSS, p. 70186b, Proceedings of the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS'04)-Track 7.
- Frumkin, P., & Galaskiewicz, J. (2004). Institutional isomorphism and public sector organizations. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 14(3), 283-307.
- Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Suddaby, R. and Sahlin-Andersson, K. (eds.) (2008). *Handbook of organisational institutionalism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hatch, M. (2013). *Organization Theory: Modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edn., Oxford.
- Liang, H., Saraf, N., Hu, Q., Xue, Y. (2007). Assimilation of enterprise systems: The effect of institutional pressures and the mediating role of top management. *MIS Quarterly*, 31(1), 59-87.
- Mignerat, M., and Rivard, S. (2009). Positioning the institutional perspective in information systems research, *Journal of Information Technology*. 24(4), 369–391.
- Powell, W. W. & Dimaggio, P. J. (1991). *The new intuitionism in organizational analysis*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- PWC (2016). *Fighting corruption at the subnational level Risks and opportunities in devolved states*. Retrieved from [www.pwc.com/publicsector](http://www.pwc.com/publicsector) on 25th April 2023.
- Tolbert, P. S., and Zucker, L. G. (1999). *The institutionalization of institutional theory. Studying Organisation*. Theory & Method. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 169-184.
- Thornton, P.H., and Ocasio, W. (2008). *Institutional logics*. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organisational institutionalism* (pp.99–129). London: Sage.
- Scott, W. R. (2008). *Institutions and organisations; ideas and interests* (3rd ed.). Reference and Research Book News, Sage Publications, Inc.
- Simiyu, F. N. (2014). Devolution of agriculture in Kenya: A reality or nonsense on stilts? [https://www.academia.edu/8724872/Devolution\\_of\\_Agriculture\\_In\\_Kenya\\_A\\_Reality\\_or\\_Nonsense\\_On\\_Stilts\\_](https://www.academia.edu/8724872/Devolution_of_Agriculture_In_Kenya_A_Reality_or_Nonsense_On_Stilts_)