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Decision-Making Processes and Operational Performance of Community-Based Organizations in Kajiado North Sub-County Kenya

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Abstract

Community-based organizations (CBOs) depend on timely and legitimate decisions to allocate scarce resources, coordinate implementation, and maintain stakeholder confidence. This study examined the relationship between decision-making processes and the operational performance of CBOs in Kajiado North Sub-County, Kenya. A descriptive-explanatory design and convergent mixed-methods approach were used. The study covered all 31 registered and active CBOs. Quantitative data were obtained from 84 board officials, while qualitative evidence was drawn from 22 key informant interviews with project managers. Decision-making was assessed through participation, protocols, timeliness, transparency, stakeholder input, escalation procedures, and communication. Decision-making processes were positively associated with operational performance ($r = 0.503$, $p < 0.001$). The reported multiple regression coefficient was positive after adjustment for other organizational-design variables ($\beta = 0.318$, $p = 0.005$). Timeliness and transparency were relative strengths, but formal protocols and urgent-decision escalation were inconsistent. The findings suggest that stronger reported CBO performance accompanies timely decisions combined with clear procedures, participation, transparency, and communication. CBOs should document routine and urgent decision pathways, clarify authority, and review decision quality periodically.

Keywords: *community-based organizations, decision-making, operational performance, participation, transparency, Kenya*

1. Introduction

Community-based organizations are important grassroots institutions for delivering health, education, livelihoods, environmental, women's empowerment, and social-development interventions. Their proximity to communities allows them to identify local priorities, mobilize participation, and adapt services to circumstances that may be less visible to larger institutions. These advantages, however, do not automatically produce effective operations. CBOs must still decide how to allocate limited resources, respond to implementation challenges, engage beneficiaries, and account to boards, donors, public authorities, and communities.

Decision-making is therefore a central organizational process rather than a purely administrative activity. Decisions determine which needs receive priority, who participates, how quickly an organization responds, what information is considered, and how scarce resources are deployed. Timely decisions can prevent implementation delays, while participation can strengthen ownership and commitment. Transparency and clear protocols can also improve accountability and reduce uncertainty about who is authorized to decide. Conversely, centralized, poorly communicated, or rushed decisions may weaken trust, create resistance, delay activities, or waste resources.

The challenge is particularly relevant to CBOs operating in Kajiado North Sub-County. The area combines rapidly urbanizing centres with rural and pastoralist communities and includes organizations working across social development, health, education, conservation, and livelihoods. These organizations often operate under resource constraints and changing community needs. They require decision processes that are both responsive and accountable. Yet evidence cited in the wider study indicates persistent weaknesses in centralized decision-making, consultation, documentation, and coordination among grassroots organizations.

Previous studies associate participation, decision timeliness, transparency, and formal protocols with organizational outcomes. However, the evidence is fragmented: different studies emphasize individual dimensions, focus on NGOs rather than CBOs, or examine urban and non-Kenyan contexts. Limited evidence therefore explains how these decision-making dimensions operate together among CBOs in a mixed rural, urbanizing, semi-arid, and pastoralist setting. This contextual and conceptual gap matters because procedures that work in well-resourced or highly formalized organizations may not translate directly to community organizations that depend on voluntary leadership, informal relationships, and constrained administrative capacity.

This article examines the relationship between decision-making processes and the operational performance of CBOs in Kajiado North Sub-County, Kenya. It asks whether more effective decision-making is associated with better operational performance and explores how participation, protocols, timeliness, transparency, stakeholder input, escalation, and communication shape this relationship. The null hypothesis was that decision-making processes have no statistically significant relationship with operational performance. Because the research was cross-sectional, the article interprets the evidence as association rather than definitive causation.

2. Literature Review

Rational Decision-Making Theory

The theoretical framework links structured decision procedures with organizational action. A rational decision process identifies a problem, considers alternatives, evaluates available information and selects a course of action. March and Simon (1958) situate decisions within organizational structures and behavioural constraints. For this article, the framework provides a way to examine whether participation, transparent procedures and timely choices are associated with operational performance, rather than assuming that every decision follows an ideal sequence.

For CBOs, the theory directs attention to more than the final choice. It highlights the procedures through which information is gathered, participants are consulted, authority is exercised, and reasons are communicated. Clear protocols can reduce ambiguity about who decides and what consultation is required. Transparency allows members and stakeholders to scrutinize decisions, while communication supports implementation. These mechanisms can strengthen accountability and institutional trust, both of which are important for organizations dependent on community legitimacy and donor confidence.

Bounded rationality qualifies the ideal of fully informed optimization. Decision-makers face limits of time, information and attention; they may seek a satisfactory option rather than evaluate every possible alternative (March & Simon, 1958). This qualification is relevant to CBOs responding to urgent needs with limited administrative resources. Clear procedures can help leaders manage those constraints, but the framework does not imply that more documentation invariably produces better decisions. The analytical question is whether workable procedures support both responsiveness and accountability.

Empirical Review

Participation gives organizational members and relevant stakeholders an opportunity to contribute information and perspectives. Participatory processes can increase ownership and commitment to implementation because those affected understand how and why a decision was reached. Smith and Lee (2021) associated participatory decision-making with transparency, member commitment, and project success. In CBOs, participation can also improve the fit between organizational choices and community priorities. Excessive consultation, however, may delay urgent action, while nominal participation can mask the continued concentration of authority.

Formal decision protocols establish authority, consultation requirements, documentation standards, and escalation routes. Otieno (2019) found that clearly defined protocols supported coordination and performance among Kenyan grassroots organizations, although application was inconsistent. Protocols are particularly useful where volunteer leadership, boards, staff, and project teams share responsibilities. They can prevent conflict and enable routine decisions to proceed without unnecessary referral. For urgent matters, predefined escalation procedures can preserve speed without abandoning accountability.

Timeliness concerns the speed with which choices are reached and implemented. Delayed decisions can interrupt procurement, activity scheduling, beneficiary support, and reporting.

Evidence from African community organizations has linked faster decisions to project completion and beneficiary satisfaction (Abebe & Mwangi, 2020). Yet speed alone does not establish decision quality. A rapid decision made without relevant information or consultation may produce resource wastage, weak acceptance, or corrective work later.

Transparency concerns whether participants and stakeholders can understand the process, authority, evidence, and reasons underlying a choice. Transparent decision-making can strengthen accountability, reduce perceptions of favouritism, and build donor and community confidence. Wanjiru (2022) similarly associated transparency with accountability and donor confidence among Kenyan NGOs. These findings suggest that operational performance depends on the interaction of decision dimensions: timely action is more sustainable when supported by clear authority, appropriate participation, transparent reasoning, and effective communication.

Operational performance in this study refers to the CBO's ability to use resources efficiently, complete projects within planned timeframes, meet targets, respond to beneficiaries, maintain service quality, and demonstrate financial and stakeholder accountability. These outcomes may be influenced by many organizational and environmental conditions. Decision-making is nevertheless expected to make a distinct contribution because it translates information, priorities, roles, and resources into organizational action.

Conceptual Framework

Decision-making processes are the focal explanatory variable and operational performance is the outcome. Participation, protocols, timeliness and transparency are represented through seven questionnaire items, including stakeholder input, urgent escalation and communication of reasons. Governance structure, role definition and coordination mechanisms remain additional predictors in the original regression model. Keeping these predictors preserves the distinction between the bivariate decision-making relationship and its adjusted association with performance. The framework proposes an association; it does not assume that the study tested mediation, interaction or a causal mechanism.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive-explanatory design using a convergent mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation. The quantitative strand measured patterns and relationships, while interviews provided contextual explanations of how decisions were made and how those decisions affected implementation.

The study covered all 31 registered and active CBOs in Kajiado North Sub-County through a census approach. Three board executive officials—the chairperson, secretary, and treasurer—were targeted in each CBO, giving 93 potential questionnaire respondents. One project manager from each CBO was separately targeted as a key informant. Eligible participants had served in their positions for at least one year. Eighty-four questionnaires were completed, representing a 90.3% response rate, and 22 of 31 planned key informant interviews were conducted, representing 71.0%.

A structured questionnaire used five-point Likert-scale items to measure decision-making and operational performance. Decision-making indicators covered member participation, established protocols, timeliness, transparency, stakeholder input, urgent-decision escalation, and communication of reasons. The pilot decision-making scale had reported internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.792). The operational-performance scale assessed resource use, feedback, target achievement, project completion, financial transparency, and accountability. A semi-structured interview guide elicited project managers' experiences of participation, authority, speed, transparency, and implementation outcomes.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics summarized questionnaire ratings, Pearson correlation examined the bivariate association, and multiple regression assessed decision-making alongside governance structure, role definition and coordination mechanisms. The significance threshold was 0.05. The reported decision-making tolerance was 0.684 and variance inflation factor was 1.463. The dissertation describes graphical checks of residual normality and equal variance. These diagnostics do not address the possible dependence of responses from officials belonging to the same organization.

Instrument Development and Quality Assurance

Questionnaire content was reviewed by two research supervisors and a field expert familiar with CBO governance and programme management. Their review considered clarity, relevance, coverage and alignment with the study constructs. The questionnaire was piloted at Ololulunga Environmental Conservation CBO in Narok County, outside the main study. The reported alpha coefficients were 0.792 for decision-making and 0.811 for operational performance. These estimates describe internal consistency in the pilot; they are not evidence that the scales are valid in every setting. The interview guide was also pre-tested with three project managers from organizations outside the main study.

Data Collection and Integration

Board officials completed questionnaires through face-to-face administration. Research assistants received training on study objectives, administration and confidentiality. Completed forms were checked, coded and entered into password-protected files. Project managers participated in a separate interview strand because their implementation responsibilities offered a complementary perspective to board oversight. The two groups were not combined into a single statistical sample: 84 questionnaire responses underpin the quantitative analysis, while 22 interviews contribute contextual evidence.

Interview transcripts were read repeatedly, coded against the study constructs and reviewed for additional emerging issues. Related codes were grouped into themes and checked against the transcripts. Integration compared convergence and divergence between the numerical patterns and managers' accounts. This approach allowed positive overall survey ratings to be considered alongside reports of centralized authority, inconsistent consultation and implementation difficulties. Interview statements illustrate experiences; they do not establish the prevalence of each practice across all CBOs.

Ethical Considerations

The dissertation reports ethical clearance from St. Paul's University and research permits from NACOSTI and relevant county authorities. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Respondents were informed about the study and confidentiality arrangements. Records were protected and access restricted to the researcher. Reporting avoids identifying individual organizations or participants in connection with sensitive governance or financial findings.

4. Results

Decision-Making Practices

Decision-making processes received an aggregate mean of 3.55, indicating an overall positive assessment but with meaningful differences across practices. Timeliness was the strongest feature, followed by transparency and communication of the reasons behind major decisions. Formal protocols were the weakest feature, while urgent-decision escalation was only moderately established. The pattern suggests that many CBOs are able to act promptly even though the procedures governing authority, consultation, documentation, and escalation are not consistently institutionalized.

Table 1 Decision-Making Practices among CBOs

Decision-making indicator	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Members participate in key decisions	3.62	1.086	High, but varied
Clear and established decision protocols	2.80	1.297	Moderate; weakest area
Decisions are made on time	4.06	0.567	High; strongest area
Processes are transparent	3.82	0.824	High
Stakeholder input is considered	3.57	1.009	High, but varied
Urgent decisions have an escalation process	3.30	1.003	Moderate
Reasons for major decisions are communicated	3.68	1.184	High, but varied
Aggregate	3.55	Not reported	Mean of item means

The relatively high timeliness score indicates that most organizations could respond without prolonged delay. Transparency and communication were also positively perceived, suggesting that decision processes were often open and that members generally received explanations. Participation and stakeholder input were positive but showed greater variation, meaning that experiences differed across organizations. The weakest score for formal protocols reveals a gap between practical action and institutionalized procedure. This gap matters because informal arrangements can work while leadership relationships remain stable but may be less dependable during conflict, turnover, emergencies, or donor scrutiny.

The interview findings clarified this contrast. Some project managers described decisions as occurring through board meetings and consultations and characterized their organizations as participatory. Others reported that a few leaders made decisions or that urgent situations led to centralized action. Participants linked timely decisions with project efficiency and early completion, and linked transparency with donor confidence. At the same time, they reported that delays affected implementation, rushed decisions could lack consultation, and poor funding decisions could delay activities or waste resources. The qualitative evidence therefore shows that speed produces better operational outcomes when paired with information, consultation, and communication.

Association with Operational Performance

Decision-making processes had a moderate, positive association with operational performance ($r = 0.503$, 95% CI [0.321, 0.642], $p < 0.001$). CBOs reporting more effective decision processes therefore tended to report stronger operational performance. The confidence interval remained entirely positive, supporting the stability of the observed direction. The result supports a positive bivariate association but does not establish that decision-making alone caused performance differences.

Table 2 Correlation between Decision-Making and Operational Performance

Variables	Pearson r	95% confidence interval	p value	N
Decision-making processes and operational performance	0.503	0.321–0.642	< 0.001	84

The result is consistent with the reviewed literature linking participation, timeliness, transparency, and formal procedures with project completion, accountability, beneficiary satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness. It also supports Rational Decision-Making Theory by showing that organizations with more systematic and inclusive decision arrangements tend to function more effectively. The qualitative evidence adds an important qualification: CBOs do not operate under complete information or unlimited administrative capacity. What appears most useful is not a complex bureaucracy but a small set of clear, adaptable procedures that preserve consultation and accountability without preventing timely action.

Independent Contribution within the Organizational-Design Model

The original four-predictor regression table reports a positive adjusted association between decision-making and operational performance ($B = 0.173$, $SE = 0.060$, standardized $\beta = 0.318$, $t = 2.878$, $p = 0.005$). Governance structure, role definition and coordination mechanisms were included in that model. Table 3 retains the reported coefficients so that the focal estimate is interpreted with its adjustment variables. Decision-making has the numerically largest reported standardized coefficient, although the study did not test whether it differs statistically from the coordination coefficient of 0.308.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Model for Operational Performance

Predictor	B	Standard error	β	t	p value
Constant	6.821	2.314	—	2.948	0.004
Governance structure	0.229	0.108	0.250	2.130	0.036
Role definition	0.124	0.058	0.150	2.138	0.035
Decision-making processes	0.173	0.060	0.318	2.878	0.005
Coordination mechanisms	0.357	0.148	0.308	2.405	0.019

5. Discussion

The reported adjusted coefficient suggests that decision-making remains associated with performance when the other organizational-design ratings are included. It should not be interpreted as a causal effect or as proof that decision-making is more important than coordination in the population. The coefficients are close and no formal test of their difference was reported. The practical contribution lies in identifying decision procedures as a plausible area for organizational improvement, supported by the interview accounts, while recognizing that governance, roles and coordination remain part of the same working environment.

The evidence connects organizational arrangements with everyday implementation. Board oversight and defined responsibilities provide an administrative foundation, but activities still require decisions about budgets, priorities, timing and stakeholders. Managers associated timely choices with project progress and transparent choices with confidence. Their accounts also described the costs of rushed funding decisions and weak consultation. These explanations are consistent with the proposed framework, but the study did not directly measure or test the intervening mechanisms; they remain interpretations for further investigation.

The results also reveal a practical tension. Respondents rated decision speed very highly while formal protocols and escalation pathways were weaker. High speed can reflect responsiveness and local knowledge, but it can also depend excessively on a few leaders. The interview accounts of centralized emergency decisions and rushed choices show why timeliness should not be treated as sufficient. Sustainable performance requires proportional procedure: routine matters should have delegated authority, major matters should receive appropriate participation, and urgent matters should follow a clear escalation route followed by documentation and communication.

The distinction between procedural openness and financial accountability also matters. The dissertation reports relatively positive perceptions of decision transparency but weaker perceptions of financial transparency and donor accountability. These measures address different aspects of organizational practice. An open meeting or communicated decision does not necessarily establish that financial records are complete or that external reporting is adequate. Capacity support should therefore connect decision records with budget authorizations, implementation responsibilities and subsequent reporting rather than treating transparency as a single undifferentiated practice.

The convergence between survey and interview findings is partial rather than uniform. Board officials generally rated participation positively, while managers sometimes described centralized authority. Differences in role, organization and decision urgency could account for this pattern. Because the available results do not link each quotation to its organization's survey scores, the analysis cannot establish which explanation predominates. Retaining these contrasting accounts improves the interpretation by showing the limits of aggregate ratings and the circumstances in which participation may be restricted.

6. Conclusions

Decision-making processes were positively associated with reported operational performance among the participating CBO officials. The reported adjusted coefficient also points to a positive relationship when other organizational-design dimensions are included. Interview accounts identify timeliness, consultation and transparency as relevant to implementation, while exposing weaknesses in formal protocols and urgent escalation. The findings support attention to decision procedures as one component of CBO management; they do not establish causal superiority over other organizational practices.

The study supports Rational Decision-Making Theory while adapting it to the realities of resource-constrained community organizations. CBOs cannot always obtain complete information or follow lengthy analytical processes. They can, however, use simple and explicit procedures that identify decision authority, minimum consultation, documentation expectations, urgent escalation, and communication responsibilities. Such arrangements can protect legitimacy and accountability while maintaining the speed required for community-level implementation.

7. Implications for Practice

CBO boards and managers should document a concise decision framework distinguishing routine, major, and urgent decisions. The framework should specify who has authority, who must be consulted, what information is required, how the decision will be recorded, and who will communicate it. Routine decisions can be delegated to reduce delay; major decisions should involve relevant members and stakeholders; and urgent decisions should follow a predefined escalation route and be reported afterward to the appropriate governance body.

Organizations should periodically review decision quality using practical indicators such as turnaround time, participation, implementation rate, reversals, resource implications, and stakeholder feedback. Government agencies, donors, and CBO-support organizations can incorporate decision mapping, documentation, facilitation, and escalation procedures into capacity-building programmes. The emphasis should be on affordable tools—decision registers, responsibility matrices, standard meeting records, and low-cost communication channels—that fit the administrative capacity of local organizations.

8. Limitations

The cross-sectional design cannot establish the direction of causation. Officials reported both organizational practices and performance, which introduces common-source and social-desirability risks. Multiple officials were drawn from the same CBO, but the reported regression does not document cluster-adjusted standard errors or a multilevel analysis. Within-CBO dependence could affect statistical precision. Attempted census coverage does not eliminate nonresponse or measurement error. The findings are limited to registered, active organizations in one sub-county and should not be generalized automatically to informal groups or other counties.

9. Future Research Directions

Longitudinal research could examine whether introducing clearer decision procedures precedes changes in project delivery and accountability. Comparative studies across counties could investigate how organizational size, resources and operating context shape decision practices. Future analyses should account for responses nested within CBOs and include administrative records or beneficiary assessments to complement officials' perceptions. Qualitative follow-up could distinguish routine from emergency decisions and examine whose views are excluded. Digital tools also warrant examination, particularly whether they widen participation and improve documentation without excluding members with limited connectivity.

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Data Accessibility Statement

The study data are not publicly available because they contain information provided by participating organizations and individuals. Requests for access may be directed to the corresponding author and will be considered in line with participant confidentiality and applicable ethical requirements.

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