Performance of Kamuthi Housing Cooperative Society in Kenya Under Neoliberalism, Democratization and Devolution, 2000- 2020

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the performance of Kamuthi Housing Cooperative Society in Kenya under neoliberalism, democratization and devolution between 2000 and 2020. The study was guided by the social identity model of collective action and the patron-client relationship theories. The study adopted the Historical and Descriptive Research Designs. Primary and secondary data were gathered for the study. Primary data were obtained from in-depth interviews, observations, photographs, and government documents concerning land and cooperative societies. Secondary data were obtained from published books, Journal articles, unpublished Ph.D. and MA theses/projects, newspapers, and magazines from the Kenyatta University Postmodern Library, and internet sources. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed in the study, where the identified highly knowledgeable informants led the researcher to other informants of the same caliber. Interview and observation schedules were used during the data collection exercise. The collected data were subjected to historical and thematic analyses, and the findings are presented in a descriptive form. Maps and photographs were also included in the thesis. Findings reveal that in the neo-liberal era, KHCS performance remains constrained by persistent structural weaknesses in Kenya's land governance system, including bureaucratic delays in titling, regulatory inconsistencies, and challenges in financial accountability within cooperative institutions. The study recommends that the Kenya Government should streamline land titling processes, harmonize regulatory frameworks, and strengthen cooperative financial accountability through digitization, audits, and capacity building to improve overall performance outcomes.

Keywords: Cooperatives, Kamuthi, Neoliberalism, Democratization, Devolution

Background to the Study

Humanity's long-standing tradition of collective activity and mutual benefit is reflected in the cooperative movement. Apicella and Silk (2019) note that cooperation was one of the characteristics of early Homo sapiens, which originated in Africa roughly 200,000 years ago. Before the Agricultural Revolution approximately 10,000 years ago, humans lived as hunter-gatherers and were organized into small family groups who worked together to secure their survival by hunting for and sharing food. Along similar lines, Onuoha (1975:13) disputes the Darwinian viewpoint that human societies are defined by competition and the survival of the fittest, relying on history to show that human cooperation is historically significant, as are selflessness, sympathy for others, mutual assistance, and cooperation among humans. As a result, the development of families, clans, villages, and cities can be understood as accomplished through cooperation.

Over time, formal cooperative institutions developed. According to Abeidait (1975), cited in Holman (1990), cooperatives existed in the form of guilds of craftsmen in ancient Egypt circa 3000 B.C, religious monasteries during medieval times, guilds in Europe, the ejidos in Mexico, the mir system in Russia, and dairy farms in France. Each of these cooperatives continued a tradition of collective ownership, mutual support, and economic cooperation.

The modern cooperative movement emerged in Europe between the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Williams (2007), the pioneers of the movement were reformers who championed collective ownership and democratic economic organization. The movement gained momentum with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and its resultant social and economic issues. Onuoha (1975:14–15) observes that in response to that phenomenon, workers formed cooperative societies to improve their living conditions. It was during that period, in 1844, that the Equitable Society of Rochdale Pioneers was founded. The pioneers developed the Rochdale Principles, which became the gold standard to run cooperatives.

The cooperative model became popular throughout Europe and beyond beginning in the late 1800s (Bijman, 2016). Cooperative principles spread to many areas of Africa as a result of colonial expansion, although Africans had long practiced their indigenous systems of cooperation for many years through farming, harvesting crops, and working as a community (Ouma, 1989).

In Africa, the growth of modern cooperatives was linked closely to colonial economic policies. According to Wanyama et al. (2009:365–368), colonial governments supported cooperative development for promoting the production and marketing of farm produce for export. For example, in Kenya, the first formal cooperative society was set up in 1908 by European settlers in Lumbwa, Rift Valley, and in the 1920s many others were formed to jointly purchase farm inputs and market their agricultural produce (Kobia, 2011:30). The Cooperative Societies Ordinance (1931) brought together all settler-owned cooperatives and illegalized African participation (Hyden, 1973; Wanyama et al., 2009; Zeleza, 1990).

The Cooperative Societies Ordinance (1945) allowed Africans to create and join cooperatives. While most cooperatives in Kenya during this time were sponsored/mandated by the government, they experienced numerous managerial difficulties (Hyden, 1973; Wanyama et al., 2009). Kenyan cooperative membership exploded during the 1950s due to the Mau Mau War that sped the implementation of the Swynnerton Plan (1954), and the subsequent land consolidation policies adopted in Central Kenya. The Plan also allowed and promoted African cash crop farming and marketing through cooperatives (Bager, 1980; Kanogo, 1992). Land consolidation created a class of landless people whose lands had been taken away. It was this group that used self-help organizations, cooperative societies, and land buying companies to meet the demand for available land.

After gaining independence from Britain in 1963, land-buying cooperatives became an integral part of Kenya's land redistribution program. During the period from 1963 to 1966, 820 cooperative societies were formed, with just under half being land-buying cooperatives (Zeleza, 1990). It was during this period that the Kahawa Farmers' Cooperative Society (KFCS) (later became KHCS) was created in 1964 to purchase a settler-owned farm located in Kahawa within Nairobi and became one of the largest land-buying cooperatives. The focus of this research was to explore how KFCS acquired and owned land between 1964 and 2020 as part of the broader Cooperative Movement in Kenya.

Statement of the Problem

The cooperative movement in Kenya dates back to the early 20th century, when the first formal cooperative association was registered in 1908. Following World War II, African nationalism surged, prompting legislative measures that allowed Africans to form and/or join cooperative societies. Subsequently, Africans were permitted to establish and join cooperatives. Much of Kenya's fertile land was occupied by Europeans. This was a critical consideration during the quest for independence from colonial rule through constitutional means (Lancaster House Conferences) and armed rebellion (Mau Mau). Following independence in 1963, many families, especially in Central Kenya (Kikuyu ethnic group), made land acquisition through cooperation their top priority. Many of these individuals founded cooperative enterprises and received assistance from the Kenyatta government to acquire land left vacant by departing European settlers.

The cooperative purchasing model established a base for land acquisition and development not only in the Rift Valley, but also in the then Nairobi City Council (NCC). Out of this collective self-help movement, the Kahawa Farmers' Co-operative Society (KFCS) was created in 1964. The KFCS has operated continuously since 1964, whereas many contemporaries within the cooperative movement ceased operation. The study traces the emergence and performance of the KFCS (later Kamuthi Housing Cooperative Society) as an important participant in land buying during the 1960s and 1970s; the difficulties of the 1980s and 1990s; and KFCS's successful adaptation to the challenges of the last few decades. This is intended to demonstrate how the cooperative movement, through KFCS, serves as a vehicle for ordinary individuals to access land and create sustainable livelihoods. The study's objective is outlined below.

Specific Objective of the Study

Performance of Kamuthi Housing Cooperative Society (KHCS) in Kenya under neoliberalism, democratization and devolution, 2000–2020.

Significance of the Study

This study helps determine the history of the co-operative movement by providing additional information on co-operative societies that facilitate land purchases in Nairobi City County's urban area. This is an area with limited historical research on this type of co-operative compared with the Central and Rift Valley areas. The study makes a significant contribution to academic literature by enhancing our understanding of urban co-operatives focused on land acquisition, thereby facilitating socio-economic transformation. In addition, this study provides insights into the development, opportunities, and challenges that urban co-operatives face for co-operative regulators and land governance institutions, assisting them in developing better policies for equitable access to land, urban planning, and the sustainable development of co-operatives in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cooperative organizations function as adaptive responses to exclusion from the marketplace and socio-economic disparities at the global level. Wanyama (2009) states that cooperatives exist within a context of shifting political economies, between state-controlled and market-liberalized economies. As many states reduced direct support for cooperatives as a result of the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s and 2000s, they were expected to operate at a competitive level in free markets. Due to exposure to competition, many cooperatives improved their efficiency, worked in poorly regulated environments, and faced higher incidences of managerial inefficiency (Wanyama et al., 2009). Likewise, Kobia (2011) argues that cooperatives need to embrace new technologies, financial innovations, and strategic partnerships to remain competitive in liberalized economies. Should they fail to do so, they are likely to become marginalized in urban land and housing markets.

Historically, cooperative development in Africa has been driven by government involvement, political support, and the effects of structural adjustment programs. According to Mutemi (n.d.), Kenya's 1997 Sessional Paper No. 6 and the 1997 Cooperatives Societies Act changed policy to support a market-driven system, reducing the state's ability to regulate cooperatives. This increased the autonomy of cooperatives but also created governance gaps that allowed mismanagement, corruption, and capture of cooperative resources by the elite (Wanyama et al., 2009). Despite these challenges, some cooperatives have successfully adapted to the changing environment, diversifying their economic activities and strengthening their internal governance systems.

Kenya's development of cooperatives has been linked to three important areas: land acquisition and use, urbanization, and the political economy of Kenya. According to Muthuma (2012), cooperative development has gone through three key policy stages: paternalistic state control, laissez-faire liberalization, and facilitative-regulatory intervention. The laissez-faire liberalization period (1990s to early 2000s), with less government oversight, resulted in both improved innovation and the degradation of institutions depending on the quality of governance. In addition, Kamau & Gitau (2004) note how cooperative societies and land buying cooperatives have been instrumental in facilitating ordinary Kenyans to access land in urban areas (formerly in settlers' areas) where ownership of land as an individual was impossible; however, many of these entities have experienced leadership difficulties, corruption, and ethnic mobilization tendencies.

Cooperatives' centrality in land acquisition in Kenya's independence period is well documented in the literature on this subject. Studies by Hyden (1973) and Zeleza (1990) emphasize that cooperatives played an essential role in acquiring land from 1963 onwards through funded settlement schemes backed by international aid; similarly, Gitau (2001) and Ngugi (2011) observe that the lack of available land after colonial dispossession and the continued post-colonial land policies meant that Kenyans needed to rely upon collective forms of land acquisition.

Wa Wamwere (1992) and Kanyinga (2016) argue that the state patronage system, the nature of the governance system, and existing political networks influenced access to land and the benefits of cooperation. Their findings indicate that the success or failure of cooperatives was not entirely based upon the contribution of the members, but was also based upon their relationship with political elites and other institutions of privilege. While helpful in providing a lens through which we may understand the dynamics surrounding some cooperatives, this literature is less capable of explaining the evolution of housing cooperatives in the urban areas of Nairobi in response to both neoliberal and real estate finance pressures and the resulting changes within the devolutionary processes of governance.

According to recent research on devolution and co-operative structures, the implementation of county governance structures as enshrined in the new constitution of 2010 has substantially changed the governance structures of cooperatives. According to Masibili, Ochieng and Ochieng (2021:74), devolution was intended to align cooperatives to local development goals, including SDG goals such as poverty reduction and urban development. However, they also found a weak connection between county planning systems and the cooperative framework, limiting the ability of cooperatives to deliver on their development objectives. This is particularly true in the housing cooperative sector where cooperatives straddle the urban land market, county planning authorities, and cooperative investment structures driven by member input.

Overall, the literature reviewed here shows that cooperatives have been studied extensively in land acquisition and rural development, but there has been little research on urban housing cooperatives such as Kamuthi Housing Cooperative Society (KHCS) under the conditions of neo-liberalization, democratization, and devolution from 2000 to 2020. Particularly, there is a lack of understanding of how KHCS has coped with land value inflation, changes in the regulatory framework, political decentralization, and market-driven urban expansion during the period under review. This study bridges these knowledge gaps by using KHCS as a case to explore the relationship between cooperative governance, the urban land market, and the devolved political and institutional land system.

Theoretical Framework

The research utilizes the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA) and the Patron-Client Relationship theory to provide insight into how collective organization, identity, and political networks impact the establishment and functioning of the Kahawa Farmers' Cooperative Society (KFCS/KHCS). According to SIMCA (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), three interrelated factors influence collective action: perceived injustice, group efficacy, and social identity. Perceived injustice is defined as feelings of shared deprivation as reflected in the historical land dispossession of African land to Europeans. This provided a basis for motivating landless and land-hungry Kenyans to mobilize through the KFCS/KHCS to gain access to land after regaining independence. Group efficacy embodies the belief that groups can be more effective at generating action than individuals, as demonstrated by KHCS members who pooled financial resources to buy tracts of land that they could not have bought individually. Finally, social identity is the individuals' sense of belonging to a group, particularly based on ethnicity and/or socio-economic status.

The Patron-client theory explains the dynamics of the political and resource-based relationships that impacted KHCS operations. Specifically, it describes the patron-client relationship as being characterized by an uneven yet mutually beneficial relationship between the patron (political leader, elite, or cooperative official) and the client (member or lower-level actor). For KHCS, patronage dynamics can be observed through the interaction of cooperative leaders and their members and political actors, i.e., political leaders and government officials. These political actors facilitated KHCS members' access to land, obtaining the necessary approvals, and circumventing bureaucratic processes (titling) that effectively create and maintain access to land. In exchange for this access, KHCS members provided political support, loyalty, and/or financial support to these actors.

The two theories provide an analytical framework that illustrates how collective internal motivations of individuals acquired land (SIMCA) interact with the external political and institutional actors that shape access to, allocation, and governance of land (Patron-Client theory).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the Historical and Descriptive Research Designs. Primary and secondary data were gathered for the study. The study was conducted in Kahawa Ward, located in Roysambu Constituency within Nairobi City County, Kenya. Nairobi County is one of the 47 counties established under the 2010 Constitution of Kenya. Kahawa Ward is strategically positioned about 15 km northwest of Nairobi’s Central Business District along Thika Super Highway, accessible via Kamiti Road. It is bordered by Githurai to the east, Kahawa West to the west, Kahawa Barracks to the south, and Kiambu County to the north, making it a rapidly urbanizing peri-urban area influenced by Nairobi’s metropolitan expansion.

The target population comprised Kahawa Farmers’ Cooperative Society (KFCS) officials, approximately 7,000 members, employees, and cooperative officers from Kasarani Sub-County. The majority of members are predominantly Kikuyu and engaged in diverse socio-economic activities, including commercial and residential rentals, poultry farming, dairy and pig farming, as well as formal employment in public service and private business. This population provided relevant insights into cooperative operations, land acquisition, and socio-economic transformation.

Primary data were obtained from in-depth interviews, observations, photographs, and government documents concerning land and cooperative societies. Secondary data were obtained from published books, Journal articles, unpublished Ph.D. and MA theses/projects, newspapers, and magazines from the Kenyatta University Postmodern Library, and internet sources. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed in the study, where the identified highly knowledgeable informants led the researcher to other informants of the same caliber. Interview and observation schedules were used during the data collection exercise. The collected data were subjected to historical method and thematic analysis, and the findings presented in descriptive form.

Analysis, Interpretation and Presentation of Data

According to this paper, the KHCS (our case study) has developed and changed in response to -- and as a result of -- a combination of neoliberalism, democracy, and changes to the way the government is structured (called "devolution"). The result of these interactions fundamentally changed the political economy of Kenya and the cooperative sector as a part of it. Statistical data indicate that KHCS has evolved from a small, land-buying cooperative in 1964 with a membership of 152 to an institution with over 7,000 members in 2020, representing over 4,600 percent membership growth in 20 years. KHCS's evolution followed a non-linear path influenced by changes in macroeconomic factors; shifts in governance structures; generational change in leadership; and the land market within and without the NCC.

KHCS's performance can be understood as an adaptive response to structural changes in the economy brought about by neoliberal economic policies and accompanying reforms that have reduced the level of state intervention and oversight in the management and operation of cooperatives while increasing their exposure to market forces. Under the liberalized environment in which they now operate, cooperatives are generally expected to act independently as economically viable entities; KHCS emerged as a unique example of a cooperative that has demonstrated resilience in contrast to many of the collapsed or poorly managed cooperatives cited in the literature; however, though resilience and the diversification of its operations, including the acquisition of land for the construction/development of housing and through the establishment of partnerships with both financial and development institutions in the private sector.

The study finds that neoliberal reforms implemented in Kenya through structural adjustment programs (SAPs), including Sessional Paper No. 6 of 1997, have had a significant impact on the operating environment for cooperatives. State withdrawal from directly supervising and financing cooperative activities provided both opportunities and risks for cooperatives. For example, KHCS gained much independence and was able to partner with banks such as Cooperative Bank of Kenya and Sidian Bank, and work with private actors in the real estate industry with less bureaucratic red tape. In contrast, this liberalized environment also exposed cooperatives to governance issues as documented by Wanyama et al (2009) and Mutemi (undated), including poor management, speculative investments, and weak regulatory control.

These outcomes coincide with previous research that contends neoliberalism has diminished cooperatives' accountability systems while simultaneously fostering an increase in entrepreneurship (Wanyama, 2009). Nevertheless, the KHCS experience represents an example of how a cooperative developed through strong leadership and a shared identity to mitigate deregulation challenges posed to its members.

Findings on democratization indicate that the political transition during Mwai Kibaki's presidency in 2002 had a major impact on the KHCS's performance. Renewed public trust, combined with macroeconomic stability and anti-corruption policies put in place by the government, created a more favorable environment for members to invest in cooperatives, fostering greater confidence among members than ever before. It also reignited dormant governance structures of the cooperative, including the Annual General Meetings (AGMs). The formation of a new KHCS leadership team, elected in late 2004, marked a major turning point toward greater transparency in cooperative operations and member involvement, as well as a changed organizational structure. These changes reflect the broader national governance and economic reforms that occurred between 2003 and 2007, which drove Kenya's GDP growth to an average of over 5 percent per year (RoK, 2007; Kanyinga, 2014). The results support the conclusion that democratization was positively correlated with improved cooperative performance through increased accountability, leadership legitimacy, and public trust.

The study indicates that generational transformation was one of the primary reasons for the renewal of KHCS, where the new generation of educated descendants reestablished a sense of community through their actions. According to SIMCA (Van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008), the younger generation of members created a new collective identity as residents of Nairobi who were land-hungry and unable to secure land through the formal market; using that new identity, they began to come together through cooperation. Their cooperative identity was based on shared experiences of injustice as a result of both historical dispossession of land and present shortages; once again, as is explained by SIMCA, the perceived injustice, collective efficacy, and strong social identities played a significant role in bringing this community together in an effort to rebuild and expand the cooperative. As a result, the cooperative was built not only as an economic structure but also as a social vehicle for the expression of identity and continuation of generations.

In addition, patron-client theory provides insight into how the KHCS operates politically within the context of Kenya's governing structure. The data show that leaders of cooperatives frequently serve as brokers between their members and members of the political elite, including members of parliament, county officials, and national bureaucrats. These relationships give cooperative leaders access to land, financing, and regulatory approvals; however, they also expose cooperative leaders to the dangers of elite capture and preferential treatment. The nature of these relationships resembles those described by Lande (1977) and Norris (1984) as reciprocal exchanges of resources and political support in patron-client relationships. The research found that those in leadership positions in the KHCS have a triadic relationship with members, cooperative officials, and government officials in relation to land registration and titling. This structure supports Stein's (1984) assertion that patronage systems thrive in environments characterized by institutional uncertainty and bureaucratic delays. KHCS's reliance on patronage networks due to the uncertainty created by regulatory bottlenecks and delays experienced with the issuance of land titles impacts the outcomes of the cooperatives.

The findings also demonstrate that the KHCS was greatly affected by the democratization of Kenya since 2002, which also led to institutional reform and economic recovery in Kenya. The Economic Recovery Strategy for Employment and Wealth Creation through Investment and the Vision 2030 framework both allowed for better infrastructure development, more access to credit, and greater investor confidence. These changes to the macro-economy of Kenya allowed KHCS to broaden its land acquisition programs from only Nairobi City County into Kiambu, Murang'a, Machakos, Kajiado, and Laikipia counties. The expansion of KHCS into these counties reflects the overall trend towards urbanization in Kenya and the increasing need for land and affordable housing in the Metropolitan areas of Kenya. The research is consistent with previous findings by Ngugi (2011), Gitau

(2001), and Kamau and Gitau (2004), which highlighted land-buying cooperatives as tools of land acquisition after independence. However, KHCS evolved from its previous form into a more organized real estate development entity that utilizes financial institutions and International Development partners.

The study notes both negative and positive results from devolution. The purpose of devolution was to increase the powers of local government, decentralize authority, and improve service delivery to citizens (RoK 2010). However, counties have failed to provide regulatory frameworks, resulting in gaps in the governance of cooperatives. An example is NCC, where limited legislative oversight created uncertainty around regulations; this resulted in many cooperatives (housing and SACCO's) being set up with little or no regulation, leading to a lack of fiduciary oversight in the management of these entities (see Urithi Housing Cooperative Society and Ekeza Sacco). This is supported by Kanyinga (2016) and UN-Habitat (2017), who state that the difficulties of devolution can be attributed to limited capacity, political interference, and a lack of coordination between the county and national levels of governance. In comparison with other cooperatives, KHCS had good internal governance and formed effective alliances and partnerships with development entities. It was particularly successful due to its strategic diversification in venturing into real estate development and offering financial services. The establishment of an internal SACCO enabled members to save and access capital for land purchases and/or to develop their homes. These findings support Kobia (2011), who posits that cooperatives need to innovate, diversify their financial service delivery methods, and incorporate technology to remain relevant in competitive, deregulated, liberalized markets. KHCS's use of ICT systems, such as membership databases and communication platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, facilitated the organization's efforts to achieve greater transparency, mitigate the risk of fraud, and improve member relations. This integration of technology into the cooperative sector mirrors the trends toward cooperative modernization, with digitalization being a major driver of cooperative sustainability, which will play a critical role in shaping how cooperatives operate into the 21st century.

The research findings also show that KHCS has played an important role in urban development and housing provision in Nairobi and the surrounding counties. By partnering with companies like 14 Trees Kenya Ltd., Ivolve Company Ltd., and Hedge Consult Partners Ltd., KHCS has developed significant housing projects and infrastructure through large-scale urban housing and infrastructure development projects to alleviate the shortage of urban land. The partnerships show a shift towards cooperative development models involving both government and the private sector and using a combination of global capital, local membership, and state institutions. In his study, Muthuma (2012) shows that there has been a change in policy from being paternalistic to facilitative and regulatory in nature through cooperation with the government. KHCS' experience indicates that cooperatives require strong governance structures to avoid financial mismanagement or undue exposure to debt.

While the achievements of the KHCS are significant, the report shows that there were many obstacles, such as financial liquidity difficulties, litigation, land title delays, and outside shocks like COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic caused interruptions in the income of members, which decreased the amount of savings they were contributing and limited their ability to repay loans. As a result, the financial condition of the cooperative was harmed. Develtere and Popoutsi (2021) state that these were symptoms of the wider economic disruption caused by COVID-19 to cooperative systems around the world. In addition, delays in issuance of land titles and government inefficiency in land administration contributed to delays in project delivery. This situation further illustrates Kenya's systemic weaknesses in land governance.

According to the results, the performance of KHCS was influenced by the interplay of economic reforms and political transition within institutional and government structures. The implementation of neoliberal policies provided both opportunities and risks, including reduced state intervention (private enterprise). Conversely, democratization has strengthened governance and helped to rebuild public trust in institutions. The establishment of devolution has created local governance structures that have both enabled and restricted social action; the Social Identity Model of Collective Action provides a basis for understanding member integration and mobilization; while patron-client theory explains the networks that have been established through political and institutional means to provide members with access to resources and support. These perspectives illustrate the significant relationship between social identity, institutions, governance, and the political economy in the success of KHCS.

CONCLUSION

The study findings show that KHCS is a successful example of a cooperative transformation in Kenya's devolved and liberalized form of government. While many cooperatives in Kenya went out of business because of the negative effects of neoliberalism, KHCS was able to diversify by moving away from farming into property acquisition and large real estate properties, building stronger internal leadership structures, and mobilizing members through their common identity as cooperatives whose members have a shared interest in access to land. Furthermore, KHCS's adaptability was supported by forming partnerships with financial institutions, development organizations, and private-sector entities, which supported KHCS operations.

However, despite the evidence of KHCS being an example of a successful cooperative, its performance is still limited by the ongoing structural inadequacies in the land governance of Kenya, such as slow bureaucratic processes for issuing land titles, inconsistent regulations for providing land titles to cooperatives, and the difficulty of providing financial accountability for cooperative organizations. Ultimately, KHCS demonstrates that a successful cooperative is not solely dependent on external policies, but is also dependent on the internal strength of the organization (via organizational structure), the social cohesion within the organization (via social relationships), and the ability to effectively work through complex relationships with patronage networks, market forces, and changing state institutions.

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