

# Family Ethical Formation and Good Governance for Sustainable Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Kenyan Illustration

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800774>

Received: 27 August 2026; Accepted: 1 September 2026; Published: 17 September 2026

## ABSTRACT

Structural and institutional reforms undertaken across Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s have consistently failed to translate into the good governance that sustainable development requires. This is a puzzle that has occupied governance scholars for decades without ever quite being resolved. This article's principal contribution is a conceptual model explaining how family-level moral socialization can produce either civic-oriented institutional integrity or particularistic patronage, depending on the direction in which family trust is transferred. Drawing on a critical integrative literature review across institutional theory, virtue ethics, the capability approach, and African communitarian ethics, we argue that institutions require morally formed agents to function as intended. Such formation begins substantially within the family, and that its civic or particularistic orientation, rather than its mere presence, determines whether it strengthens or subverts governance. The model is illustrated through Kenya's post-2010 constitutional devolution. In it far-reaching institutional redesign coexisted with the persistence of clan and kinship-based patronage in county-level procurement and service delivery. Four propositions are advanced for future empirical testing. Furthermore, we conclude that good governance, properly understood, is a precondition for sustainable development rather than an end in itself. It requires attention to both institutional design and the moral formation of the people who inhabit institutions.

**Keywords:** Family Ethical Formation; Virtue Ethics; Good Governance; Sustainable Development; Institutional Reform.

## INTRODUCTION

### The Governance Problem

Since the 1980s, Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries have undertaken successive rounds of institutional reforms. Such range from structural adjustment programs to constitutional and anti-corruption reforms, largely in pursuit of sustainable development. Notwithstanding these efforts, the region continues to record some of the weakest scores globally on government effectiveness and control of corruption (Sun et al., 2026). This persistent governance deficit continues to undermine the very development outcomes such reforms were designed to secure.

Comparative governance indicators confirm the scale of the problem: composite measures of government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and control of corruption have consistently placed SSA among the world's lowest-scoring regions for more than two decades, notwithstanding periodic improvement in individual countries (Kaufmann et al., 2010). This is not, we would argue, a transitional difficulty that time alone will resolve. It is a structural pattern that successive reform generations have failed to break, and it is this stubborn persistence, more than any single episode of reform failure, that motivates the present inquiry.

### The Limits of Institutional Explanations

Institutions matter because they structure the incentives and constraints within which people act (North, 1990).

And yet institutional reforms alone have repeatedly proven insufficient. Hussen (2023) found that improvements in regulatory and democratic institutional quality across SSA yield uneven and slow economic returns. Similarly, Ekeocha et al. (2023) found that institutional quality's contribution to economic performance across 42 SSA countries remained muted despite extensive reform activities. Behuria (2025) shows, moreover, that even sophisticated political-economy frameworks for analyzing institutional changes in developing countries have struggled to escape contested and sometimes circular explanations of why reform outcomes vary so widely. All of this suggests that, prior to institutional design, greater attention must be given to the moral disposition of the agents who operate within institutions.

Andrews (2013) goes further still, arguing that many institutional reforms in developing countries amount to what he terms “isomorphic mimicry.” This refers to the adoption of forms and structures that resemble those of high-performing states without the underlying functionality that made those structures work in the first place. Reforms are frequently designed to satisfy external donors and international benchmarks rather than to solve the specific problems they nominally address. This dynamic helps explain why formally impressive legislation so often coexists, quite comfortably, with unchanged practice on the ground.

### **Why Human Agency and Moral Formation Matter**

Institutions are ultimately operated by human agents, and the quality of their conduct depends on the moral character those agents have acquired (MacIntyre, 1981). Moral character is not innate. It is cultivated gradually, often imperceptibly, through socialization within networks of trust and reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). This process of moral cultivation is not merely a philosophical abstraction.

Social learning theory demonstrates that much human behavior, including ethical conduct, is acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within an individual's earliest social environments (Bandura, 1977). Children, after all, do not require explicit instruction to learn what is rewarded, tolerated, or punished. They absorb these lessons simply by watching how the adults around them behave, long before they can put the underlying norms into words. This, we suspect, is precisely why formal ethics training delivered later in life, however well designed, so often struggles to displace dispositions formed in childhood.

### **Why the Family Matters**

Within the African context, such socialization occurs substantially, though not exclusively, within the family, an important site for transmitting moral, cultural, spiritual, and social values across generations (Gyekye, 1997; Kupangwa et al., 2024). The family is therefore foundational, though not exclusive, to moral formation.

This priority does not imply that the family determines moral outcomes alone. Schools, religious institutions, peers, and wider social environments also shape moral formation. Evidence from Kenya shows that parenting, schools, peers, and broader social conditions interact in children's moral development (Itigi, 2018), while research in Tanzania emphasizes the shared role of families and schools (Mngarah, 2017). The family's influence is thus foundational but dynamic, interacting with other socializing institutions throughout development.

Developmental psychology supports this claim from a different disciplinary perspective. Family socialization research shows that parents and caregivers shape children's emerging moral and social competence through modelling, discipline, and the quality of parent-child relationships (Grusec, 2011). Thus, the family's influence is supported not only by African communitarian philosophy but also by empirical developmental science, providing a complementary foundation for the argument.

### **What the Literature Has Not Adequately Explained**

Where informal, family-derived norms of reciprocity are shown to sustain corrupt practices (Olivier de Sardan, 1999), governance scholarship has often treated this as a background cultural fact. It has paid less attention to the possibility that the same norms might, under different conditions, support rather than undermine institutional integrity. Comparatively little attention has also been given to the mechanisms through which family formation shapes public conduct. Even less is known about the conditions under which family-derived solidarity

strengthens civic behaviour rather than curdling into clan loyalty and patronage. This distinction is elaborated more fully in the theoretical framework below. It constitutes the central contribution of this article.

Rothstein (2011) comes closest to bridging this gap. He argues that the quality of government depends substantially on generalized social trust and impartial institutional treatment. Both are shaped by norms formed outside the state itself. Yet his account stops short of identifying the family as the primary unit in which such norms originate. Instead, it treats socialization as a diffuse societal condition rather than as a traceable developmental process. We take the argument one step further. We examine the family as a formative unit of moral and social development and ask how family-derived norms may shape public conduct. To our knowledge, this step has not yet been adequately developed in the literature.

## Why Kenya

To render this argument concrete rather than merely theoretical, the discussion draws throughout on Kenya with reference to the 2010 constitutional devolution reforms. Such offers a well-documented instance in which far-reaching institutional redesign coexisted with the persistence of clan- and kinship-based patronage (D'Arcy & Cornell, 2016; Kanyinga, 2016). Kenya's Chapter Six leadership-integrity provisions make the link between institutional reforms and moral conduct explicit in a way few other constitutions do. Its post-2010 experience is by now comparatively well documented at both the national and county levels (Muwonge et al., 2022).

Kenya's suitability as an illustrative case is further reinforced by a rich body of scholarship on the relationship between ethnicity and politics in the country. This literature shows that ethnic identity has been continuously mobilized and reshaped through political competition. It therefore cannot be understood simply as a fixed, pre-political fact (Lynch, 2011). This scholarship also supports our claim that family- and clan-based loyalty in Kenya is not merely a static cultural inheritance. Rather, it can become a politically activated orientation. This is precisely the kind of variation that the conceptual model developed below seeks to explain.

## Purpose and Contribution

This article critically integrates literature on institutional reforms, virtue ethics, and development ethics to construct a conceptual model of how family-based ethical formation relates to governance quality and, through governance, to sustainable development in SSA. It contributes in three ways. First, theoretically, it integrates institutional theory, virtue ethics, and the capability approach into a single explanatory account. Second, conceptually, it introduces family ethical formation as an upstream determinant of institutional integrity. It distinguishes between a civic pathway and a particularistic one. Third, mechanistically, it identifies three processes through which family ethical formation may influence institutional integrity: moral habituation, trust transfer, and capability formation. It also identifies an alternative pathway through which these same processes may instead produce patronage.

Following Whetten's (1989) guidance on what constitutes a theoretical contribution, we focus on three possibilities: new constructs, new relationships between existing constructs, and new boundary conditions on established relationships. From this perspective, we argue that the article's three contributions extend beyond incremental applications of existing theory. They offer a fresh specification of how family-level moral formation conditions the relationship between institutions and their performance. In doing so, they draw attention to a dimension of institutional performance that governance scholarship has not sufficiently theorized.

## Research Questions

Four research questions guide the analysis:

1. What does existing literature reveal about the limits of institutional reforms in addressing governance deficits in Sub-Saharan Africa?
2. How do institutional theory, virtue ethics, and the capability approach explain the relationship between ethical agency and institutional performance?
3. Through what mechanisms might family-based ethical formation influence institutional behavior, and under what conditions does it produce civic rather than particularistic outcomes?
4. How does Kenya's post-2010 devolution experience illustrate or qualify the proposed relationship?

## Significance of the Study

Situated within Development Studies, this article bridges institutional economics and ethics. These two fields have rarely been placed in sustained conversation with one another. It also understands good governance not as an end in itself, but as a precondition for sustainable development. For policymakers, the article offers a complement to technocratic reform paradigms by shifting attention towards socialization and moral formation rather than sanctions alone. Finally, it develops a theoretically grounded research agenda for empirical testing within Kenya's devolved counties and, we hope, beyond them.

## Conceptual Clarification

Five terms recur throughout this article. They are also used rather loosely in adjacent literatures. We therefore define each term here to avoid ambiguity:

**A value** is what an individual or group considers desirable, whether or not it is consistently acted upon. **A virtue**, by contrast, is an acquired disposition to act in a morally appropriate manner. It is formed through repeated practice rather than merely declared preference. Unlike a value, a virtue is defined by habitual conduct rather than stated belief (Aristotle, 2009; MacIntyre, 1981).

**Ethical formation** refers to the social process through which such moral dispositions are acquired and reinforced over time. The family is one of several agents in this process, but it is developmentally among the earliest. **Social capital**, meanwhile, is a property of relationships and networks. It consists of the relational resources generated through trust, reciprocity, and associational ties (Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000). It is therefore distinct from individual character.

On this reading, ethical formation explains how the individual dispositions that populate a social network are produced in the first place. Social capital, by contrast, describes the relational resources and stock of trust that emerge within that network. The two are related, but they are not interchangeable. Keeping them distinct helps clarify what is cause and what is consequence.

**Finally, corruption** is understood here, following the standard definition in the field, as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). This definition is important because it locates corruption at the intersection of institutional opportunity and individual disposition. That is the position we adopt and apply consistently throughout the article.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Framework

Three complementary theories anchor the present analysis. Institutional theory explains why formal and informal rules matter. They structure the incentives within which agents act (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). However, its originator was careful to distinguish formal rules from the informal norms and enforcement culture that ultimately determine whether such rules are honored in practice (North, 1990). This is a distinction we lean on repeatedly in what follows.

Virtue ethics explains how moral character, understood as the disposition to act rightly independent of external sanction, is cultivated through practice and community rather than acquired instantaneously through rule compliance (Aristotle, 2009; MacIntyre, 1981).

The capability approach explains why good governance should be evaluated in terms of the expansion of substantive human agency, rather than institutional design alone. It also draws attention to ethical agency as a capability worth cultivating. This view is consistent with the broader development-ethics tradition, which holds that authentic development should be judged by its contribution to human agency and dignity, rather than by economic growth alone (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Crocker, 2008; Goulet, 1995).

Taken together, these three theories suggest that institutions require morally formed agents to function as

intended. They also point to the family as an early and especially influential site of moral formation.

This account is not intended to replace competing explanations of governance failure. It also rejects the idea that corruption results primarily from morally deficient individuals. Corruption can arise from institutional incentives, political competition, economic insecurity, weak enforcement, and elite capture (Behuria, 2025). Our argument is that institutional incentives and ethical dispositions interact in shaping behaviour. Neither is sufficient on its own.

Neopatrimonial and moral-economy accounts, for example, explain corruption as embedded in socially legitimized kinship obligations (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Olivier de Sardan, 1999). This dynamic is particularly visible in Kenya in the transformation of *harambee*. Originally rooted in a communal ethic of self-help, *harambee* has also been appropriated as a vehicle for patronage politics (Waiguru, 2006).

The present framework is therefore complementary to these accounts rather than a rival to them. Its contribution is to specify the family as an upstream bedrock where the norms underlying such obligations are initially formed. It does not displace existing explanations. Rather, it adds a developmental account of how the relevant dispositions and norms may come into being.

A further qualification is necessary before we proceed. Families are not homogeneous, and family ethical formation is not necessarily uniformly civic. Families differ by class, rural or urban setting, education, ethnicity, household structure, and gender relations. Some families reproduce honesty, accountability, and solidarity, while others reproduce nepotism, exclusion, or ethnic prejudice. This heterogeneity is not incidental to our argument. It is the boundary condition that determines which of the two pathways set out below actually operates in a given case.

### **The Central Distinction: Civic Versus Particularistic Trust Transfer**

Our central theoretical claim is that, on its own, family ethical formation does not produce good governance. Its effects depend on the type and orientation of that formation. Family-based values may translate into civic responsibility or particularistic loyalty. Research on family socialization supports the view that parents' civic beliefs, social trust, and participation can shape children's civic values and sense of social responsibility (White & Mistry, 2016).

Where family solidarity is oriented towards the wider public good, it can plausibly generalize into civic solidarity and, in turn, public service motivation. Where it is oriented narrowly towards clan or kin, the same disposition may instead reinforce clan loyalty, patronage, and ultimately corruption. Research suggests that the relationship between family ties and wider social trust is conditional rather than automatic (Herreros, 2015). Family-derived solidarity may therefore extend beyond the family or remain concentrated within it.

We describe this process as trust transfer. The mechanism is the same in both pathways, but its object and orientation differ. Recent research distinguishes between particularized trust, directed towards known individuals and groups, and generalized trust, which extends beyond immediate social circles (Glanville & Shi, 2020). This distinction helps explain why trust formed within close relationships may support wider cooperation in some contexts but remain confined to the in-group in others.

### **Kenya's Institutional Reform Trajectory and Its Limits**

Kenya's own reform trajectory illustrates the puzzle with particular clarity. The 2010 Constitution decentralized executive and legislative power to forty-seven county governments. It also explicitly codified leadership integrity, financial accountability, and the role of the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission as constitutional obligations of public office. Yet these formal reforms have not always translated into corresponding changes in institutional practice. The Kenyan experience therefore raises an important question: why do significant changes in formal institutions coexist with the persistence of informal practices that undermine institutional integrity?

An independent assessment coordinated by the Government of Kenya and the World Bank, nine years into devolution, found that the contribution of devolved government to service delivery had been decidedly mixed.

The process was constrained by ambiguities in intergovernmental financing and the persistent politicization of frontline administration (Muwonge et al., 2022). Kanyinga (2016) similarly observes that devolution reconfigured, rather than eliminated, the ethnic and patronage-based competition for public resources that had characterized Kenyan politics long before 2010. Devolution thus altered the institutional location of political competition without necessarily transforming the underlying norms and incentives that shaped it.

Careful case analysis further suggests that devolution may have entrenched at the local level some of the practices that were previously problematic at the national level. These include rent-seeking and ethnic patronage, particularly in county-level public procurement. Inflated project costs and preferential treatment of politically connected contractors remain recurring concerns (D'Arcy & Cornell, 2016). The persistence of such practices is significant because it demonstrates that formal decentralization does not automatically produce more accountable or impartial institutions.

More recent audit evidence provides further support for this pattern at the county level. Successive reports by Kenya's Office of the Auditor-General document irregularities that are difficult to attribute to administrative error alone. During the 2022/23 financial year, for example, a Nairobi-based contractor that had failed to complete a KSh 869 million health-facilities contract awarded in 2020/21 was subsequently awarded another KSh 344 million contract for Mama Lucy Kibaki Hospital through restricted tendering. Work on the latter contract stalled after KSh 165 million had already been disbursed. In Marsabit County, a KSh 13.7 million school-bus tender was restricted to a single bidder who was not on the county's list of registered suppliers. The entire procurement process was completed within six days. In Kiambu County, the government reportedly paid in full for livestock and farm inputs, although only a fraction of the items was delivered. In Siaya, meanwhile, the cost of a stadium project increased from KSh 394.6 million to KSh 488.7 million without documented justification (Nation Media Group, 2024).

Similar concerns emerged in Nairobi County during the following financial year. Garbage-collection equipment budgeted at KSh 51.6 million was priced at more than KSh 425,000 per skip, yet only 41 of the 120 units had been delivered a year after payment. In another case, a medical insurance contract valued at KSh 648.9 million was renewed with the incumbent provider without competitive procurement records on file (Nairobi Wire, 2025; Office of the Auditor-General [OAG], 2025). These cases do not, by themselves, establish a systematic pattern across all county governments. They are nevertheless important because they illustrate how formal procurement procedures can coexist with practices that appear to favour particular contractors or politically connected interests.

The broader survey evidence points in the same direction. The Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission's most recent national survey identified favoritism as the third most commonly witnessed form of corruption. Tribalism and nepotism were each identified by more than one in ten respondents. County health services were also singled out as the most corruption-prone devolved function (EACC, 2025). Transparency International Kenya's Bribery Index similarly indicates that public confidence in institutions responsible for policing corruption remains low. This helps explain why relatively few of the irregularities documented in successive audit reports appear to result in effective sanctions (TI-Kenya, 2025).

None of this evidence can, by itself, establish that family ethical formation is the operative mechanism behind these outcomes. Demonstrating such a relationship would require primary interview or survey data capable of examining how family-based norms shape individual behaviour within public institutions. The available evidence does not provide such a test. It does, however, substantiate a central premise of the theoretical model: the gap between formal rules and informal practice is not merely a historical artefact of the immediate post-2010 period. Rather, it appears to have persisted across roughly a decade and a half of devolved government.

In effect, Kenya substantially changed its formal institutional rules, but many of the informal norms governing public behaviour have proved more resistant to change. Kinship, ethnic, and political obligations can continue to influence how public authority is exercised and how public resources are distributed. This closely reflects North's (1990) distinction between formal and informal institutions. The Kenyan experience therefore suggests that institutional reform is necessary, but may not be sufficient, to transform the norms and practices through which formal rules are interpreted and enacted. Sustainable institutional change may require attention not only

to the design and enforcement of rules, but also to the underlying ethical and social norms that shape how public actors respond to them.

### The Informal Moral Economy of Corruption

It has long been argued that, Corrupt practice across the continent is sustained by a generalized social logic of reciprocal obligation, including obligations to kin, that is publicly stigmatized yet routinely practiced (Olivier de Sardan, 1999). Rather than treating corruption simply as individual misconduct, Olivier de Sardan (1999) shows how it can become socially embedded in networks of solidarity, gift-giving, negotiation, and redistributive obligation. Kenya offers a particularly well-documented illustration of this logic.

Harambee, an indigenous ethic of communal self-help historically used to fund schools, clinics, and community projects, was progressively transformed into a mechanism of patronage politics. In this system, contributions and favors flow along kinship and ethnic lines, while public office becomes a channel for fulfilling extended-family obligations rather than an impartial public duty (Waiguru, 2006). More recent research similarly finds that kinship networks in Kenya can reinforce nepotism, ethnic cronyism, and clientelism (Oindo et al., 2021).

Consequently, anti-corruption reforms premised solely on external monitoring may misdiagnose the underlying problem. Where corrupt behavior is sustained by internalized, family-derived norms of reciprocity, structural deterrents are likely to be continually renegotiated around those norms rather than displacing them outright. Recent ethnographic research in Kenya reinforces this point, showing that personalistic trust based on kinship and ethnic identities continues to shape political patronage and citizen–state relations (Zidaru, 2024). Addressing corruption, therefore, requires attention not only to institutional controls but also to the social norms and obligations that shape how public office is understood and exercised.

### The Family as a Unit of Ethical Formation

Six family-formed virtues merit particular attention because of their bearing on ethical public service: **honesty, respect, hospitality or generosity, communal responsibility or solidarity, humility, and diligence**. This is not an exhaustive or uncontested list; justice, courage, and fairness could equally be included. These six are selected because the mechanisms linking family practice to public conduct are particularly clear.

**Honesty** is the quality of being truthful, sincere, and straightforward in what one says or does. It is learned within the household through correcting falsehood and modelling truthful speech, long before a child encounters a formal code of conduct. In public office, it provides a foundation for financial disclosure, transparency, and accountability.

**Respect**, understood in the Ubuntu sense as recognition of the dignity of others through their shared membership in a human community, is first practiced in relationships with parents and elders and can later extend to colleagues, citizens, and others (Metz, 2011). The family thus provides an initial setting in which respect is learned and internalized.

**Hospitality and generosity** refer to the willingness to warmly welcome, care for, and freely share one's resources with others without anything in return. They are cultivated through sharing household resources and caring for others. In Kenya, these dispositions are also visible in the wider tradition of *harambee*. Extended into public service, they may encourage a service orientation rather than an extractive one.

**Communal responsibility or solidarity** is cultivated where household responsibilities are understood as shared rather than individually owned. It reflects the Ubuntu maxim that a person is a person through other persons. When extended to the wider civic community, this orientation may make corruption appear as a betrayal of those whom public office is meant to serve. When it remains particularistic, however, the same sense of obligation can reinforce loyalty to family or close networks at the expense of public interests.

**Humility** is the quality of recognizing one's own strengths and limitations without pride, while treating others with dignity. It is learned through correction and the subordination of individual preference to household

harmony, may help moderate the abuse of power. By restraining excessive self-importance, it can encourage listening, accountability, and responsible exercise of authority.

**Diligence** it quality of being careful, committed, and persistent in carrying out one’s responsibilities to the best of one’s ability. It is often developed through age-appropriate household responsibilities, can cultivate habits of conscientiousness and perseverance. These may subsequently be expressed in reliable and responsible service delivery.

Recent scholarship on Ubuntu-based ethical leadership similarly identifies character development, collectivism, and participative leadership as important requirements for reforming Africa's public sector (Sipondo, 2025). These values parallel dispositions that can be cultivated within family life, supporting the argument that ethical public service depends, at least in part, on character formed before individuals enter public office rather than on values that institutions can simply manufacture.

These six virtues, however, are not unconditionally beneficial, and their translation into civic rather than particularistic outcomes cannot simply be assumed. Communal responsibility and solidarity, while capable of generalizing into public-spirited cooperation, can just as readily reinforce in-group loyalty that excludes non-kin, precisely as the *harambee* case illustrates: a disposition to share and cooperate becomes civic virtue only when its boundary is drawn around the public rather than around the clan (Waiguru, 2006). Hospitality and generosity are similarly double-edged. Extended indiscriminately, they may support a service orientation in public office; extended selectively along kinship or ethnic lines, the same disposition shades into favouritism and the particularistic allocation of public resources documented in the procurement examples discussed later in this article.

Even respect and humility, which appear more straightforwardly civic, can in some family and community settings reinforce deference to authority in ways that discourage the very whistleblowing and challenge to wrongdoing that good governance requires. The pathway each virtue takes, in other words, depends less on the virtue’s presence than on the breadth of the community to which it is felt to apply, and on whether the institutional environment rewards or punishes its extension beyond the family. This qualification is consistent with, rather than a departure from, the article’s central theoretical claim that orientation, not mere presence, is decisive; it also means that any empirical test of the propositions below should measure not only the strength of a given family-formed disposition but also the breadth of the in-group to which it is directed.

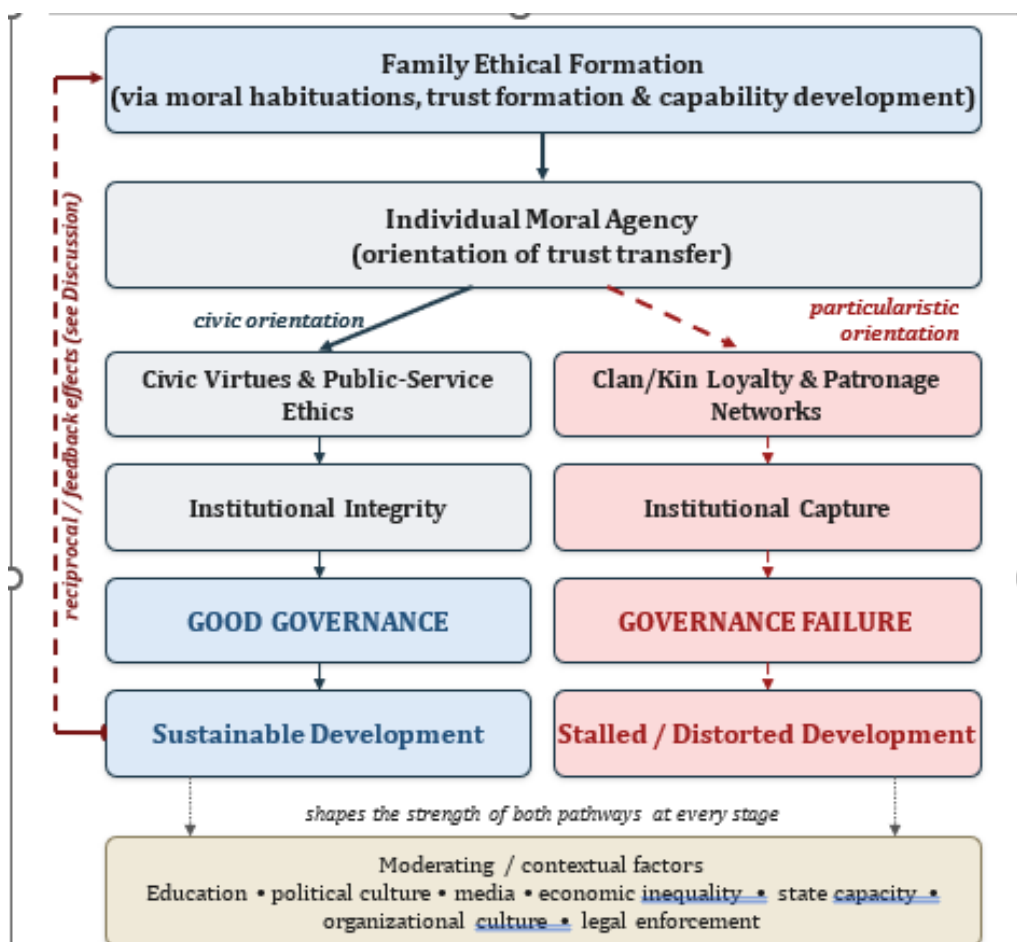
**Table 1 Family-Formed Virtues and Their Governance Manifestations**

| Family-formed virtue     | Family mechanism                                       | Civic manifestation                           | Governance outcome                       | Potential particularistic distortion                                            |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Honesty                  | Correction of falsehood; modelling of truthful speech  | Truthfulness in public statements and records | Financial disclosure and accountability  | Selective disclosure that protects kin or associates from scrutiny              |
| Respect                  | Deference to parents and elders                        | Recognition of citizens' dignity              | Inclusive, non-discriminatory governance | Deference to elders or patrons that inhibits challenge to their wrongdoing      |
| Hospitality / generosity | Sharing of scarce household resources                  | Service orientation toward the public         | Responsive social welfare provision      | Selective favour-giving that reinforces patronage rather than universal service |
| Solidarity               | Shared, non-individually-owned household duties        | Sense of public responsibility                | Collective action and cooperation        | In-group loyalty that excludes non-kin and normalizes nepotism                  |
| Humility                 | Correction; subordination of self to household harmony | Restrained exercise of authority              | Reduced abuse of public power            | Reluctance to challenge authority, discouraging whistleblowing                  |
| Diligence                | Age-appropriate chores and responsibilities            | Work ethic in assigned duties                 | Reliable service delivery                | Effort channelled toward serving patrons rather than the public                 |

## Conceptual Framework

Family ethical formation operates through moral habituation, trust formation, and capability development, shaping individual moral agency. When expressed through civic virtues, this agency informs ethical behaviour in public service, which in turn contributes to institutional integrity, good governance, and ultimately, sustainable development. This chain is not deterministic. Rather, it is conditioned by several moderating variables, including education, political culture, the media environment, economic inequality, state capacity, organizational culture, and legal enforcement. These factors may strengthen or weaken the translation of household-level virtue into institutional behaviour (Fourie & Rathbone, 2024). These moderating variables are not confined to the final step from institutional behaviour to governance outcomes: in principle, each can strengthen or weaken the translation from one stage of the model to the next, from moral agency into virtue, from virtue into institutional behaviour, and from institutional behaviour into governance quality, as Figure 1 below now makes explicit. Education and organizational culture, in particular, may cut either way, reinforcing whichever orientation, civic or particularistic, a family has already instilled, or compensating for it (see Anticipated Objections, below).

Critically, the model also specifies an alternative pathway, shown on the right-hand side of Figure 1 below. Where family or clan trust is oriented towards particularistic rather than civic interests, the same process may instead produce particularistic loyalty, patronage, and, ultimately, institutional capture. Kenya's devolved counties illustrate this alternative pathway rather vividly. Decentralized formal authority, in the absence of a corresponding civic orientation in family- and clan-based trust, may simply relocate patronage rather than resolve it (D'Arcy & Cornell, 2016; Muwonge et al., 2022). Figure 1 also depicts a plausible reciprocal pathway running from governance outcomes back to family ethical formation, a possibility discussed more fully below. The resulting model is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of family ethical formation and good governance for sustainable development. A single origin (family ethical formation) forks at the point of individual moral agency into two mutually exclusive pathways, depending on whether trust transfer is oriented civically or particularistically. Moderating factors condition the strength, not the direction, of either pathway at every stage of the causal chain. The dashed arrow at left depicts a plausible reciprocal pathway, whereby governance outcomes may in turn reshape family-level norms over time (see Discussion).

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design and employs a critical integrative literature review. This approach is appropriate because the aim is to synthesize interdisciplinary scholarship and construct a novel conceptual model, rather than to test a causal hypothesis empirically. The article is therefore based on a careful review of existing literature rather than new fieldwork. This approach makes it possible to bring insights from institutional economics, virtue ethics, and development ethics into a coherent conceptual argument.

Sources were located using six established academic databases: Scopus, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor and Francis Online, and SAGE. Google Scholar was also used to identify additional relevant sources and address remaining gaps. The search was conducted iteratively between January and June 2026, prior to submission. It was repeated at the revision stage to capture literature published in the interim. Search strings combined terms such as “institutional reform,” “corruption,” “family ethics,” “moral formation,” “virtue ethics,” “capability approach,” “neopatrimonialism,” and “social capital,” using the Boolean operators AND and OR.

The search strategy was adapted to the requirements of the respective databases. In Scopus and ScienceDirect, for example, the core strategy took the form (“institutional reform\*” OR corruption OR “moral formation” OR “virtue ethic\*”) AND (Africa OR “sub-Saharan Africa” OR Kenya). In JSTOR and SAGE, the equivalent strategy combined “family AND ethic\* AND governance” with “neopatrimonial\* OR patronage AND Kenya.” A second, narrower search incorporated the terms “Kenya,” “devolution,” *harambee*, and “county government” across all six databases. This was intended to identify literature with particular relevance to the Kenyan case. The reference lists of key retrieved articles were also hand-searched to identify additional sources not captured through the database searches.

The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed, English-language sources published between 2015 and 2026. Eligible sources addressed governance, institutional reform, corruption, or ethical and moral formation in sub-Saharan Africa or Kenya. Screening proceeded in two stages. Titles and abstracts were first assessed for topical relevance against the inclusion criteria. The full texts of potentially relevant sources were then examined to confirm eligibility and extract the thematic material used in the synthesis. Seminal theoretical works were retained regardless of publication date where they provided important foundations for the conceptual framework. These included works by North, MacIntyre, Sen, Putnam, Gyekye, and Olivier de Sardan, among others.

Opinion pieces, non-peer-reviewed commentary, and sources unrelated to governance, ethics, or family and social formation were excluded at the full-text stage. Duplicate records identified across databases and search terms were manually consolidated before screening. The retained sources were classified as either theoretical or empirical. Sources were considered theoretical when their primary contribution was conceptual or normative. They were classified as empirical when they reported original data or case findings. Both categories inform the analysis and are cited accordingly throughout the article.

Kenyan literature was selected where it addressed devolution, county governance, procurement, or patronage. This was intended to assess the explanatory relevance of the conceptual model rather than merely provide an illustration of it. Where sources presented contradictory findings, such as whether neopatrimonialism impedes or merely coexists with democratic consolidation, both positions are represented. They are not resolved in favour of the argument advanced in this article. This approach seeks to avoid selectively privileging evidence that supports the proposed model.

The retained sources were subsequently grouped thematically into four areas: institutional reform, the informal moral economy of corruption, family and moral socialization, and governance quality. These themes were then compared across disciplines. The comparison enabled the study to identify areas of convergence, tension, and complementarity within the existing literature. It also provided the basis for developing the conceptual model presented in the article.

A methodological limitation should, however, be stated clearly. This review does not provide a quantified search trail of the kind expected in a systematic review. It does not report the exact number of records identified, screened, or excluded at each stage. Nor does it provide a PRISMA-style flow diagram, because no such counts were tracked systematically during the original search. This limitation reflects the nature of the study. The review

was conducted as a critical integrative review rather than as a systematic review governed by a pre-registered protocol.

Two measures were nonetheless taken to improve transparency and reproducibility. First, the search and screening procedure is specified as precisely as the underlying record permits. This includes the databases consulted, the search period, the illustrative Boolean strategies used across databases, and the two-stage screening process. Second, duplicate records were manually consolidated, and every retained source was explicitly classified as theoretical or empirical. This makes it possible to identify the two traditions informing the synthesis and provides a more traceable basis for the conclusions.

The conclusions should therefore be understood as conceptual propositions grounded in a purposively selected but transparently described body of literature. They should not be interpreted as the results of an exhaustively enumerated systematic search. Researchers seeking to test the propositions advanced below, or to update the present synthesis, could usefully adopt a pre-registered systematic or scoping review protocol. Such an approach would complement the present account by providing a more comprehensive and quantitatively documented assessment of the available evidence.

## **LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS**

The theoretical model developed in this article applies broadly to Sub-Saharan Africa; its illustration, however, is deliberately confined to Kenya. Kenya was chosen because its Constitution explicitly links governance reforms to ethical leadership, and because a substantial and growing literature already documents its experience since 2010 (D'Arcy & Cornell, 2016; Kanyinga, 2016; Muwonge et al., 2022). This choice narrows the focus of the study. It is not a claim to represent the diversity of Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

In addition, because this is a conceptual review rather than an empirical study, it cannot prove a direct cause-and-effect relationship between family ethical formation and governance outcomes. What it offers instead is a reasoned argument for future research to test directly, and its conclusions should not be assumed to apply automatically beyond the Kenyan context, nor uniformly across Kenya's own diverse family and community structures.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Mechanisms**

Family ethical formation plausibly shapes institutional behavior through three mechanisms, each of which can take either a civic or a particularistic form. The first is early moral habituation. Family practices provide repeated behavioral reinforcement that can produce internalized dispositions, which may later shape ethical conduct in public institutions. This process, however, can be constrained by contradictory institutional or social incentives that override an otherwise well-formed disposition (MacIntyre, 1981).

The second mechanism is trust transfer. Trust developed within the family can extend to broader social relationships and eventually to civic or institutional settings. Such trust can support cooperation and accountability (Putnam, 2000). Yet the same process can follow a particularistic pathway. Family or clan trust may reinforce particularistic loyalty, which can develop into patronage and, ultimately, institutional distortion. As argued above, this pathway is theoretically as important as the civic pathway and may, in some contexts, be even more consequential.

The third mechanism is capability formation. Families that model deliberation, participation, and self-determination can expand a child's later capacity for ethical agency in public roles (Sen, 1999). Again, however, the exercise of such agency depends on the availability of institutional opportunities that allow it to be expressed.

### **The Kenyan Illustration in Light of the Mechanisms**

The Kenyan case illustrates particularly well why trust transfer can operate in either direction. Where extended family and clan loyalty constitute the dominant forms of trust acquired during childhood, the same mechanism

that might otherwise generalize into civic trust can instead extend into the ethnic patronage networks documented above (D'Arcy & Cornell, 2016; Kanyinga, 2016).

Structural reform and family ethical formation are, therefore, best understood as complementary rather than substitutable. Reforms establish the external architecture of accountability, while family formation may weaken or strengthen the internal disposition to honor that architecture voluntarily. Kenya's experience further suggests that where family level trust is not also oriented toward the wider public good, decentralizing formal authority may simply relocate the underlying moral economy problem rather than resolve it (Muwonge et al., 2022).

### **Anticipated Objections**

Several objections merit consideration here. One might reasonably ask why the family should be given priority over schools, religion, or the media as an agent of socialization. The claim advanced in this article, however, is one of developmental priority rather than exclusivity: other agents clearly matter, and may either reinforce or counteract the effects of family ethical formation depending on the orientation each carries. Recent comparative evidence on adolescents suggests that schools and families are not equally weighted across all domains of institutional evaluation, and that the two sources of socialization interact rather than simply substituting for one another (D'Agostino, 2026).

Evidence from Kenya is consistent with this interactive view. Where schools promote universalistic civic values and provide alternative models of fairness, they may compensate for particularistic family socialization and widen a child's circle of trust beyond kin; evidence from Kenyan primary schools suggests that parenting, schooling, peer relationships, and the wider community jointly shape children's moral development rather than any one domain acting alone (Itegi, 2018), while research from neighbouring Tanzania similarly finds that families and schools function as complementary partners in moral formation rather than as competing or interchangeable influences (Mngarah, 2017). Conversely, where schools are themselves captured by ethnic or patronage networks, for instance through the politicized appointment of head teachers or the allocation of bursaries along kinship lines, they are more likely to reinforce than to counteract particularistic family socialization.

A fuller model of moral formation therefore treats the family as foundational but not self-contained: its civic or particularistic orientation is itself conditioned by whether the other institutions a child subsequently encounters pull in the same direction or in a compensating one. This refinement does not alter the article's central claim, but it does qualify the moderating variables identified in the conceptual model above: education and organizational culture, in particular, should be understood as capable of reinforcing or correcting family-level orientation, rather than as uniformly strengthening whichever orientation the family has already instilled.

A further objection might be that family ethical formation is indistinguishable from social capital or civic education. As clarified above, however, social capital describes network level stocks of trust, whereas ethical formation concerns the individual character that later populates those networks. Civic education, by contrast, is a deliberate intervention that generally occurs at a later stage than the diffuse and often tacit process described here.

A third objection concerns the risk of individualizing a structural problem. This is a fair concern. The article does not argue that corruption results primarily from morally deficient individuals. Rather, it argues that institutional incentives and ethical dispositions interact in shaping behavior. Reforming either one in isolation is therefore unlikely to succeed.

Finally, this remains a conceptual argument illustrated by, rather than tested against, a single country. The propositions below are consequently offered for future empirical scrutiny in Kenya and beyond.

### **Reciprocal and Feedback Effects**

The argument developed above runs primarily in one direction: from family ethical formation, through civic or particularistic virtue, to institutional integrity and, ultimately, governance quality. However, the relationship may also operate in the opposite direction. Governance quality can itself reshape the norms that families transmit to

the next generation. Where citizens routinely encounter impartial and rule-bound institutions, such experiences may reinforce and generalize civic orientations already present within families. They may also gradually cultivate such orientations where they were previously weak. Conversely, where institutions are visibly captured by patronage, families may rationally socialize children into particularistic strategies. Teaching children to rely on kinship and personal connections can become an adaptive response to an environment in which impartial institutions cannot be trusted.

The relationship between family ethical formation and institutional integrity is therefore not necessarily unidirectional. The two may be mutually constitutive and generate self-reinforcing cycles in either direction. Virtuous cycles may emerge when civic-minded families and impartial institutions strengthen one another. Vicious cycles may arise when particularistic family norms reinforce institutions shaped by patronage. Kenya's experience is not inconsistent with this possibility. If, as argued above, *harambee's* transformation from a communal practice into a more patronage-oriented practice reflected the political incentives created by the wider institutional environment (Waiguru, 2006), then institutional context helped reshape a family- and community-level norm rather than merely reflecting it. This suggests that ethical formation should be understood within the broader institutional environment in which families and communities operate.

Disentangling these directions of causation empirically, however, is a considerable methodological challenge. Cross-sectional data cannot easily establish whether family ethical formation influences institutional behaviour or whether institutional conditions, in turn, shape family norms. Longitudinal or panel designs would provide stronger evidence by tracking the same families and, ideally, the same public officials over time. Such designs could also be complemented by natural experiments arising from Kenya's institutional reforms. These approaches would help determine whether changes in institutional quality precede changes in family and community norms, or whether the reverse is more plausible. We therefore identify reciprocal causation as an important extension of the model proposed here. It remains beyond the scope of the present conceptual article and is not advanced as a relationship that the current study is able to test.

### Propositions for Future Research

Four propositions follow from the conceptual model:

1. Proposition 1: Higher levels of family-based ethical formation are positively associated with civic-oriented ethical behavior among individuals occupying public roles.
2. Proposition 2: The effect of family-based ethical formation on institutional behavior is mediated by civic virtues and public-service ethical orientation.
3. Proposition 3: The relationship between family ethical formation and institutional integrity is moderated by political culture, education, economic inequality, and state capacity.
4. Proposition 4: Where family-based trust is oriented toward clan or kinship rather than the wider public good, trust transfer may reinforce patronage rather than civic institutional trust.

### Operationalizing the Propositions

Each proposition can be operationalized using established measures drawn from adjacent bodies of literature. The purpose of this operationalization is to provide a practical basis for future empirical investigation. The measures proposed below are intended to translate the conceptual relationships identified in the propositions into observable variables that can be tested systematically.

For **Proposition 1**, family-based ethical formation could be measured through retrospective accounts of parental modelling, household norms concerning honesty, and disciplinary practices. Adapted family-socialization instruments could provide an appropriate basis for this assessment (Grusec, 2011). Civic-oriented ethical behaviour among public officials could, in turn, be assessed using measures of public service motivation (Perry, 1996), whistleblowing intentions (Near & Miceli, 1985), and compliance with established codes of ethics. Where available, self-reported measures could be complemented by observed compliance data obtained from the

records of the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC). A cross-sectional survey of county government employees, supplemented by relevant administrative data, would provide a suitable design for initially testing this proposition.

For **Proposition 2**, the central concern is whether civic virtue and public-service orientation mediate the relationship between family-based ethical formation and institutional behaviour. This relationship could be examined through structural equation modelling. In such a model, measures of family ethical formation would constitute the independent variables, while civic virtue and public-service orientation would serve as mediating variables. Institutional behaviour could be measured through self-reported conduct and, where possible, independently observed indicators. Standard mediation procedures would then be used to determine whether the proposed pathways are statistically significant.

For **Proposition 3**, the moderating variables identified in the conceptual model are political culture, education, economic inequality, and state capacity. These factors could be operationalized using existing county-level indicators. Relevant measures may include county fiscal absorption rates, education-attainment statistics, and county-level corruption indicators derived from the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission. These variables could be incorporated as interaction terms in a multilevel model. Such a model would allow individual-level characteristics and behaviours to be analysed alongside the wider institutional and socioeconomic conditions of the counties in which individuals are situated.

For **Proposition 4**, the distinction between particularistic and generalized trust could be examined using established survey measures. Items developed by Glanville and Shi (2020), together with generalized-trust measures used in Afrobarometer surveys, provide potentially useful instruments. These measures could then be related to indicators of patronage behaviour. One possible source of such indicators would be county procurement audit findings. Particular attention could be given to the incidence of single-sourced or restricted tenders documented in Auditor-General reports (OAG, 2025). Alternatively, patronage preferences could be examined through vignette-based measures. Respondents could, for example, be presented with hypothetical hiring or contracting situations and asked to indicate their willingness to favour relatives or members of their immediate social networks.

Finally, **longitudinal or panel research designs** would be especially valuable for testing Propositions 1 and 4. Both propositions concern developmental and relational processes that unfold over time. A single cross-sectional survey can identify associations, but it provides only limited evidence about how ethical orientations and patterns of trust develop and change. Longitudinal designs would therefore offer a stronger basis for examining the relationship between early family formation, the development of civic and ethical dispositions, and subsequent institutional behaviour. They would also make it possible to assess whether particularistic trust gradually becomes generalized civic trust or, alternatively, remains embedded within kinship and patronage networks.

### Sustainable Development Implications

Good governance is treated throughout this article as a precondition for sustainable development, not as a substitute for it. This relationship therefore deserves explicit rather than merely implied treatment. Recent cross national evidence indicates that governance quality is significantly associated with sustainable economic, social, and environmental development across 48 African countries between 2010 and 2022. This relationship operates through channels that include regulatory predictability, resource allocation, and public trust (Adebayo et al., 2025).

Where institutional integrity is compromised by patronage, as illustrated by the Kenyan procurement examples discussed above, the consequences extend beyond public finance narrowly understood. Diverted resources result in weaker health and education services, slower poverty reduction, less equitable access to public goods, and reduced institutional resilience to future shocks. These outcomes are not incidental to the Sustainable Development Goals agenda. They are central to it (Sun et al., 2026).

This general link is corroborated by evidence at both continental and county levels. Using Afrobarometer data from 34 African countries, Ouedraogo et al. (2026) find that individuals exposed to corruption in the medical sector are substantially more likely to forgo needed healthcare altogether. The effect of medical-sector corruption

on care-seeking is roughly three times larger than that of corruption encountered elsewhere in public life. This finding suggests that corruption in essential public services carries consequences that extend beyond the misuse of public resources. It can directly influence whether citizens are able or willing to access services that are fundamental to human well-being.

The Kenyan case provides further evidence of this relationship. Corrupt practices, including non-merit-based recruitment, the supply of substandard equipment, and informal payments, have been shown to undermine the efficiency of county health systems. They do so by increasing costs, reducing the quality of care, and weakening staff motivation (Munywoki et al., 2023). Maternal-mortality trends since devolution also reveal substantial variation across counties. While several counties recorded sustained declines in maternal mortality between 2012 and 2018, others continued to experience significant disparities. These differences appear to reflect variation in county-level governance and resource-allocation capacity, rather than national policy alone (Awe et al., 2023). The evidence therefore points to an important institutional dimension of health outcomes. The quality of governance can shape how effectively public resources are translated into essential services.

A parallel dynamic is evident in water-service delivery. Cross-national evidence from African utilities shows that corruption specifically within the utilities sector, rather than corruption in general, predicts unreliable access to water (Breen & Gillanders, 2024). Households that pay bribes to obtain connections may therefore secure a nominal link to the network without gaining a reliable supply of clean water. Taken together, these findings provide empirical support for the broader argument developed here. Diverted public resources are not merely a normative or ethical failing. They produce measurable consequences for health, infrastructure, and access to essential services. In this sense, corruption can directly undermine development outcomes that are central to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The conceptual model advanced here therefore suggests that family based ethical formation contributes to sustainable development by strengthening the civic orientation that supports institutional integrity. Its contribution is not an appended normative concern. Rather, it operates through the same governance channels that cross national empirical research has already identified as consequential.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has argued, through a critical integration of institutional theory, virtue ethics, and the capability approach, that institutional reforms in Sub Saharan Africa often underperform partly because they presuppose morally formed agents. Such formation occurs substantially, though not exclusively, within the family. The article's central contribution is the distinction between civic and particularistic trust transfer. Family ethical formation does not, by itself, straightforwardly produce good governance. Rather, its orientation determines whether it ultimately strengthens or undermines institutional integrity. Kenya's post 2010 experience, in which devolved formal institutions have coexisted with persistent *harambee* based patronage, illustrates this argument without exhausting its wider applicability.

Two boundary conditions on this claim deserve explicit statement. First, the illustration offered here draws on a single country whose constitutional order, Chapter Six in particular, makes the link between institutional design and ethical leadership unusually explicit; other Sub-Saharan African states without comparable constitutional language, or with markedly different family structures than Kenya's, may exhibit weaker, stronger, or differently mediated versions of the proposed pathways. The framework should therefore be read as a general theoretical claim whose specific mechanisms, particularly the strength of trust transfer and the salience of *harambee*-like cultural repertoires, require independent verification wherever it is applied.

Second, the model is likely to travel more readily to contexts sharing Kenya's combination of relatively strong formal constitutional design and persistent informal kinship obligation, such as several of its East African neighbours, than to contexts characterized by either substantially weaker formal institutions or substantially weaker kinship-based social organization, where the mechanisms of trust transfer described here may operate differently or may be dominated by other socializing institutions entirely. Comparative testing across a small number of carefully selected Sub-Saharan African cases, rather than a single additional case, would be the most efficient next step for establishing the boundaries of the model's applicability.

Three recommendations follow. First, governance reform strategies, including Kenya's enforcement architecture centered on the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission, should be paired with family and community level ethical formation through civic and educational institutions. Such formation should complement legislative and enforcement measures, not substitute for them. Second, development ethics and public policy curricula should integrate virtue ethics and capability approach reasoning alongside conventional training in institutional design. Third, the propositions developed in this article should be tested empirically, both within Kenya's counties and comparatively across other Sub Saharan African states. Longitudinal or mixed methods research could trace the pathways from family ethical formation to civic behavior and institutional performance.

Good governance in Sub Saharan Africa, on this account, should be pursued in the service of sustainable development rather than as an end in itself. It requires sustained attention to both institutional design and the moral formation of the people who inhabit those institutions. That formation must cultivate civic rather than merely particularistic orientations.

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