

Recentering Cultural Identity and Territorial Development in Planning for Social Cohesion in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how inclusive community engagement in Kenya's spatial and economic planning systems can enhance social cohesion. Despite Kenya's legal framework for participatory governance; anchored in the Constitution (2010), County Governments Act (2012), Physical and Land Use Planning Act (2019), and Urban Areas and Cities Act (2011); territorial planning remains largely top-down, limiting community-driven decision-making. Bureaucratic resistance, resource inequities, and political interference further marginalise key groups, including youth, women, PWD and informal settlers. The study adopted a mixed-methods design integrating qualitative and quantitative data, archival and document analysis, spatio-temporal modelling, and policy analysis. Using county-level case studies, it examines mechanisms such as public participation fora, community-led spatial planning, and indigenous baraza systems that strengthen cultural identity and collective urban ownership. These insights were complemented by engagements with state institutions, NGOs, development partners, research entities, and academia to strengthen data triangulation. The study also explores the theory-praxis dichotomy in territorial planning, examining how global planning philosophies are interpreted and adapted to Kenya's socio-political realities. By linking Kenya's Vision 2030 with SDG-11 on sustainable urbanisation, the research advocates for culturally sensitive strategies, such as integrating indigenous knowledge systems and digital civic platforms, to address spatial inequalities and enhance trust in governance. The findings propose an adaptive planning framework that aligns theory with praxis, ensuring that territorial planning not only fosters regional equity but also strengthens cultural inclusivity and social cohesion in Kenya's rapidly evolving urban landscape.

Introduction

Kenya's contemporary spatial planning paradigm reflects a deep structural contradiction: the imposition of global spatial models over heterogeneous Indigenous territorial systems. The theoretical foundations of Kenya's planning profession, which are rooted in Eurocentric pedagogies introduced during the colonial period continue to frame land administration, ownership regimes, and human settlement patterns through non-Indigenous logics of space, property, and development. These frameworks have persisted into the post-colonial era, marginalising African spatial worldviews and practices, even as ongoing reforms and counter-reforms expose the continued influence of colonial-era legal architectures on land governance and planning outcomes (Klopp & Lumumba, 2016). As Home

(1997) demonstrates in his analysis of British colonial urbanism, planning in Kenya emerged not as a neutral technical exercise but as a mechanism of territorial control, racial segregation, and spatial ordering (Home, 1997). These colonial spatial logics, institutionalised through planning legislation (Government of Kenya, 2019; Government of Kenya, 2012; Government of Kenya, 2011) and professional training, continue to shape Kenya's contemporary planning paradigm, favouring Eurocentric models over Indigenous territorial epistemologies.

Background and Context

Despite a progressive governance framework, comprising the Constitution of Kenya (2010), Urban Areas and Cities Act (2011), the County Governments Act (2012) and the Physical and Land Use Planning Act (2019), planning practice remains culturally detached and structurally

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fragmented. Although the Constitution embeds robust principles of spatial justice and participatory governance, their operationalisation has been uneven. Key constitutional provisions, including Articles 1, 10, 35, 118, 119, 124, 201, 221, and 232, affirm the sovereignty of the people, national values and ethics, the right to information, public participation in legislative processes, fiscal accountability, and the promotion of inclusive and responsive public service. If fully actualised, these principles could implicitly integrate cultural identity and social cohesion into territorial planning. Yet, these constitutional mandates for inclusion and equity often fail to translate into culturally responsive implementation, perpetuating spatial injustices and marginalising diverse identities in planning processes. This gap between principle and implementation is further reinforced by skewed civic education, inconsistent public participation mechanisms, and fragmented stakeholder engagement, all of which collectively undermine the democratic intent of Kenya's devolved planning system.

On the other hand, devolution in Kenya, which was conceived as a mechanism for equity and grassroots empowerment, has in some contexts evolved into a political tool for asserting county autonomy, generating new forms of territorial fragmentation. As counties consolidate control over land and resources within their political jurisdiction, interregional socio-ecological networks have continually weakened, disrupting watersheds, pastoral mobility routes, biodiversity linkages, and cultural landscapes that historically supported social cohesion and ecological resilience. The governance of ecological commons, which include river basins, rangelands, and pastoral corridors, is increasingly shaped by county-based administrative logics as opposed to cultural or ecosystem boundaries, resulting in planning silos which erode long-standing interdependences and Indigenous custodianship practices (Akall, 2021; Boone, et al., 2019). Post-devolution governance has in many cases shifted responsibility for water and sanitation to county administrations without institutionally matching catchment-based management, producing fragmented oversight of transboundary watersheds (World Bank, 2019; NEMA, 2021). Parallel policy and planning trends across East Africa have increasingly enclosed pastoral mobility and weakened traditional transhumance corridors, consequently dismantling pastoral networks that historically sustained ecological resilience and cultural landscapes (Herbert & Birch, 2002; UN, 2020; Kirkbride & Grahn, 2008; Young & Sing'Oei, 2011). Large-scale development corridors and mega-projects such as LAPSET (Aalders, Bachmann, Knutsson, & Kilaka, 2021) and the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) (Nyumba & Waruingi, 2022; Thorn, Marchant, & Hobbs, 2022) have similarly been implemented with limited integration of cultural landscapes or biodiversity linkages, further exacerbating the fragmentation of socio-ecological systems and eroding long-standing custodianship practices.

Problem Statement and Knowledge Gaps

Kenya has made notable progress in institutionalising spatial planning through strengthened legal frameworks, county-level planning instruments, and expanding professional capacity. However, contemporary scholarship

and practice reveal persistent gaps that constrain the integration of cultural identity and territorial development into planning for social cohesion. Firstly, there is limited empirical research on how cultural identity substantially informs, or is excluded from, territorial planning processes in Kenya. Existing planning scholarship largely prioritises technical, regulatory, and land-use driven perspectives, thus leaving cultural identity, local epistemologies, and lived spatial practices overlooked. This gap is further compounded by poor documentation and institutionalisation of Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) systems, particularly their spatial logics, settlement patterns, and environmental stewardship traditions. Additionally, the absence of contextualised pedagogy in planning education means that culturally grounded spatial knowledge is rarely translated into planning models, tools, or decision-making frameworks. As a result, territorial planning continues to rely heavily on external paradigms, reinforcing a disconnect between planning practice, community identities, and culturally embedded ways of engaging with space.

Secondly, cultural landscapes, ILK systems, and heritage practices remain weakly integrated into county planning frameworks. Infrastructural proposals in several County Spatial Plans (CSPs); which include dams, major road corridors, industrial hubs, and urban expansion zones; are often conceptualised within administrative boundaries, with limited consideration for transboundary ecological dynamics such as watershed integrity, pastoral mobility routes, and wildlife migration corridors. This planning orientation contributes to the fragmentation of socio-ecological systems that traditionally operated across landscapes rather than jurisdictions. Similarly, recurrent disputes over resource-rich borderlands and shared natural assets, as with cross-county water resources and grazing territories, illustrate how subnational territoriality entrench competitiveness rather than cooperative approaches to resource governance. For example, the tensions between the north-western counties of Turkana and West Pokot in parts of the Kerio Valley underscore how county-based planning may inadvertently reinforce jurisdictional claims at the expense of integrated, landscape-based management rooted in long-standing cultural and ecological interdependence.

Thirdly, there is limited understanding of how spatial planning shapes social cohesion in Kenya. Much of the planning literature focuses on urbanisation, development control, or service delivery, offering little insight into how spatial decisions influence inter-community relations, identity affirmation, or territorial belonging, despite the classification of spatial planning as a social science.

This gap is evident in complex multicultural landscapes such as the Mau Forest Complex, one of Kenya's five major water towers[1] and a region characterised by overlapping Indigenous territories, diverse livelihood systems, and contested heritage practices (IGAD, 2011; Government of Kenya, 2009). These cultural differences directly affect conservation outcomes, spatial management practices, and socio-economic empowerment, yet they are rarely analysed through a social cohesion lens. The oversight is significant given Kenya's history of boundary politics, ethnic contention, and spatially embedded

inequalities. Furthermore, spatial planning scholarship typically approaches socio-ecological systems through sectoral silos, while devolution has introduced administrative boundaries that frequently misalign with ecological and cultural landscapes. Research on watersheds, rangelands and pastoral mobility remains fragmented, leaving limited insight into how devolved planning can support, rather than fracture interdependent ecological and cultural systems.

Research Questions, and Contribution

This study examines how cultural identity can be recentered within Kenya's territorial planning frameworks to strengthen social cohesion and promote context-responsive development. It is guided by three overarching questions. Firstly, how can cultural identity be meaningfully reintegrated into territorial planning in Kenya? Secondly, in what ways do spatial planning processes shape social cohesion, inter-community relations, and territorial belonging? Thirdly, to what extent do county spatial planning frameworks recognise, integrate, or overlook cultural landscapes, Indigenous and local knowledge systems, and community identity? Together, these questions position the study to contribute to a reimagining of planning practice through a culturally grounded, socially cohesive, and territorially responsive lens.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framing

This study is grounded in the premise that spatial planning is not merely a technocratic exercise, but a cultural, political, and territorial project shaped by the identities, values, and power relations embedded within space. Territorial development scholarship (Torre, 2025; Torre, 2015; Rodríguez-Pose, Bartalucci, Lozano-Gracia, & Dávalos, 2024) emphasises that regions evolve through the interaction of spatial organisation, socio-cultural dynamics, socio-economics and governance arrangements; yet planning in Kenya continually favours administrative and economic logics over lived cultural geographies. Drawing from cultural landscape literature (Fleming, 1984; Oakes & Price, 2008), the paper positions 'landscapes' as repositories of memory, identity, and socio-ecological practice, arguing that territorial planning which overlooks these dimensions risks eroding the very foundations of social cohesion it seeks to foster.

Participatory governance and spatial justice further provide a normative framework for evaluating whether planning processes equitably recognise diverse identities and distribute spatial opportunities. Finally, decolonial planning and Indigenous knowledge scholarship (Smith, 1999; Watson, 2009) illuminate how post-colonial planning systems continue to reproduce Eurocentric spatial models that marginalise Indigenous territorialities, epistemologies, and custodianship practices. This article therefore advances the analytical stance that recentering cultural identity within territorial planning is essential to achieving socially cohesive, ecologically attuned, and context-responsive development trajectories.

Research Methodology and Scope

The analysis presented in this paper draws from a broader doctoral investigation on 'The Diffusion of Territorial

Planning Philosophies in Kenya.' It employs a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive approach to examine the interplay between cultural identity, territorial development, and social cohesion in Kenya. Recognising that planning practices are influenced by both institutional frameworks and community perspectives, the research combines comparative case study analysis with in-depth qualitative inquiry to capture the diversity of experiences across counties. Sixteen counties[2] were purposively selected based on the presence of County Spatial Planning (CSP) frameworks, with each representing distinct cultural communities and providing a cross-section of urban and rural contexts through which the influence of territorial planning on social cohesion could be examined. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants, including county spatial planners, economists, environmental officers, forest conservators, policymakers, and community leaders. These were complemented by focus group discussions with residents to explore perceptions of participation, inclusion, and cultural recognition. Participant observation in planning forums, alongside document review of County Spatial Plans, development blueprints; particularly County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) and sectoral strategic plans[3]; and relevant policy reports, provided additional insights into institutional practices and policy implementation. Data was thematically analysed to identify patterns and narratives around the integration of cultural identity into planning and its effects on social cohesion, while spatial analysis was employed where applicable to map out the location of cultural assets and social infrastructure. The study focused on current planning practices post-devolution, capturing contemporary approaches while acknowledging historical influences on cultural heritage and planning. Overall, this methodology enables a nuanced understanding of how cultural identity can be recentered in territorial planning to enhance social cohesion in Kenya.

Conceptual-Methodological Bridge

While existing scholarship on inclusivity and participatory planning in Kenya often focuses on grassroots dynamics and end-user engagement (Horn, 2021; Ouma, 2023; Onyango & Paliwal, 2024), comparatively little attention has been paid to the capacities, practices, and limitations of top-down institutions and statutory bodies charged with implementing participatory ideals. Yet, as Kenya's planning system remains predominantly technocratic and state-driven, understanding these structural and institutional dynamics is critical. This study thereby operationalises the concept of cultural identity as an infrastructural element of planning, examining how selected state departments and agencies; county governments; planning entities; and statutory bodies interpret, negotiate, or sideline Indigenous and local knowledge systems and social cohesion in spatial and economic planning processes. Using a combination of county case studies and key informant interviews with institutional actors, the methodology captures the complex interplay between policy aspirations; as articulated in the Constitution of Kenya (2010), Physical and Land Use Planning Act (2019), County Spatial Plans and County Integrated Development Plans; and the lived realities of

diverse communities. This dual lens provides a holistic understanding on how planning practices either sustain or disrupt cultural continuities within Kenya's multi-ethnic and devolved governance context.

Where Theory Meets Practice

Theoretical Foundations

The philosophical foundations of territorial planning are anchored in the principles of sustainability, equity, and foresight. At its core, territorial planning involves the integrated coordination of land, infrastructure, and resources across spatial and administrative boundaries (Healey, 1997; Yiftachel, 1989). Its primary ambition is to overcome fragmented governance systems that often prioritise economic efficiency at the expense of ecological integrity and social equity. Effective territorial planning, therefore, demands seamless coordination across multiple governance levels: local, regional, and national (UN-Habitat, 2021); as well as active collaboration between public and private sectors. This integrative approach not only accommodates diverse stakeholder interests but also aligns planning initiatives across scales. Moreover, it requires a high degree of flexibility and adaptability to shifting socio-economic and environmental dynamics (Knickel, et al., 2021). This underscores the need for strategies that are regularly reviewed and updated to address emerging challenges. Central to this process is meaningful community participation, which ensures that development outcomes reflect local priorities and aspirations (Fainstein, 2009). By fostering civic awareness and facilitating inclusive public engagement, territorial planning can promote transparency, accountability, and trust in governance systems. Building on this, scholars such as Soja (2009) and Harvey (1973) argue that the pursuit of spatial justice entails not only distributive justice; ensuring equitable spatial access to resources; but also, procedural justice, where marginalised communities are actively involved in planning processes.

Consistent with broader territorial planning scholarship, Kenya's planning framework seeks to transcend fragmented, sectoral approaches that have historically prioritised economic efficiency over ecological integrity and social equity (Ayonga & Rukwaro, 2022). However, the implementation of territorial planning under devolution reveals persistent institutional, scalar, and coordination challenges: county planning remains sector-based with weak integration across departments and functions; implementation capacity is constrained by limited resources and coordination gaps; and adaptive responses to socio-ecological dynamics; especially in arid and semi-arid regions; require more flexible, contextually grounded approaches. Furthermore, while participatory mechanisms were introduced to enhance inclusion under devolution, their effectiveness in empowering diverse stakeholders remains uneven, raising important questions about the realisation of equitable and socially cohesive territorial planning in Kenya.

Social Cohesion in Multi-Ethnic Contexts

In multi-ethnic societies, territorial planning is meant to function not merely as a technocratic instrument but as a

cultural and political mediator capable of weaving dissimilar identities into a cohesive socio-spatial fabric. As Mbembe (2001) and Sandercock (2004) argue, social cohesion in such contexts is not an innate condition but an outcome of disputed and negotiated spatial narratives, mobilities, shared landscapes, and public spaces that act as arenas of encounter and dialogue. These interwoven spatial narratives are particularly critical in settings where histories of marginalisation and resource-based conflict have entrenched ethnic divisions. Healey's (1997) conception of collaborative planning underscored the need for dialogic processes that build trust across cultural and political fault lines, enabling stakeholders to co-create territorial futures that resonate with diverse lived realities. However, in many African contexts, as Watson (2009) warns, planning frameworks transfused from 'the west' eventually fail because they assume high levels of institutional trust and civic infrastructure that are either absent or fragile. These foreign planning models exacerbate exclusion, reinforcing elite capture of space and unwittingly perpetuate historical injustices under the guise of neutrality.

Kenya's own experience illustrates these challenges. Despite constitutional commitments to participation and equity, planning practices frequently reproduced historically embedded patterns of spatial inequality, shaping uneven access to land, infrastructure, and political representation. As Huchzermeyer (2011) demonstrates in their analysis of African urban planning, technocratic and regulatory planning frameworks often reinforce exclusionary spatial outcomes, which in Kenya intersect with ethnicized histories of land allocation and political power (Huchzermeyer, 2011). This dynamic has fostered the emergence of territorial enclaves that fracture the national spatial fabric and undermine aspirations for a cohesive, collective nationhood. A strikingly recent manifestation of this fragmentation is the formation of Regional Economic Blocs (KLRC, 2025; Abuyeka, 2020), which, while intended to promote inter-county collaboration, often reflect political convenience and territorial competition rather than genuine spatial integration. At the same time, recurring policy debates on the disbandment or restructuring of Regional Development Authorities introduce further uncertainty into Kenya's territorial governance architecture. Given the historically integrative role of these authorities in managing shared resources; particularly around major water bodies and regional socio-economic systems[4]; their potential weakening risks further fragmenting an already strained territorial matrix. In such contexts, fostering social cohesion requires moving beyond procedural participation towards culturally responsive planning approaches that acknowledge and legitimise diverse ontologies, epistemologies, and embedded power relations within multi-ethnic territories.

Culturally-inclusive planning thereby necessitates the creation of institutional and spatial avenues where multiple identities are not merely acknowledged but actively shape territorial outcomes. This calls for methodologies that embed Indigenous and local systems of reciprocity and stewardship into formal decision-making processes. Only by grounding planning in the socio-cultural logics of place

can territorial development transcend the binaries of 'formal' and 'informal' and nurture the trust and solidarity essential for multi-ethnic coexistence.

Indigenous and Local Knowledge Systems in Contemporary Territorial Planning

Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) Systems embody holistic frameworks of ecological, spatial, and cultural understanding, deeply rooted in place-based ontologies and intergenerational stewardship practices (Matunga, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). Unlike Eurocentric planning paradigms, which often conceptualise land as an inert commodity, indigenous epistemologies regard land as a living entity, intertwined with social relations, cultural identities, and spiritual values (Lindsay-Latimer, Allport, Potaka-Osborne, & Wilson, 2024; Dei & Karanja, 2022). This relational approach to territory challenges the technocratic rationalities underpinning conventional spatial planning, offering a critical lens for rethinking territorial governance in multi-ethnic contexts such as Kenya. The integration of ILK systems into contemporary planning processes remains an epistemological and institutional challenge. Tools such as Participatory Geographic Information Systems (PGIS) have emerged as promising mediators, translating oral histories, sacred sites, and communal land-use practices into spatially grounded evidence. Kenyan community-driven initiatives, notably Muungano wa Wanavijiji's[5] mapping of informal settlements, illustrate how PGIS can enhance the negotiation power of marginalised communities, increasing their visibility in planning processes, and improve access to urban services. However, participatory mapping alone is insufficient; without accompanying institutional capacity, digital literacy, and enabling policy frameworks. Such innovations risk reproducing dominant power structures rather than dismantling them.

To address these challenges, this paper advocates for an inclusive territorial planning framework grounded in three interlinked pillars: participatory governance, adaptive hybridity, and equitable resource distribution. Grassroots-led initiatives such as Makueni County's community-managed sand dams (MCSCUA, 2022) and Turkana's Indigenous drought-detection systems[6] demonstrate the potential of hybridised approaches that blend local knowledge with scientific innovation. Integrating global tools; such as GIS mapping and circular economy principles; with indigenous practices exemplified by the Mijikenda Kaya Forests' biodiversity management (Kioko, Jefwa, Nyangila, & Mbua, 2019) provides a model for adaptive hybridity that is both ecologically resilient and culturally coherent. In these sacred forests, Participatory Forestry Management (PFM) under the Kenya Forest Service formalise ecological and socio-economic user rights, complementing traditional stewardship practices, taboos, and communal governance (C.K.Koech, Ongugo, Mbuvu, & Maua, 2009). Recognised as UNESCO World Heritage sites[7], the Kaya Forests illustrate how culturally rooted governance can sustain biodiversity and social-ecological cohesion when supported by enabling policies and institutional recognition. However, translating such hybrid approaches into formal planning requires institutional capacity to recognise, resource, and operationalise decentralised knowledge systems. Without

supportive policy frameworks and governance mechanisms bridging local and formal planning, innovations; ranging from participatory mapping to community-managed water infrastructure; risk remaining peripheral or being co-opted in ways that reproduce dominant power structures rather than foster transformative, equitable territorial governance.

Urbanisation Without Urbanism: Disrupting Indigenous Systems and Place Identities

Urbanisation across the globe reveals recurring challenges; including cultural erasure and the displacement of livelihoods (Sakketa, 2023); which cut across diverse socio-political contexts, raising critical questions about how territorial planning can balance rapid urban growth with the preservation of cultural identities and socio-ecological systems. In Canada, over half of the country's Indigenous population now resides in former colonial cities, marking a significant demographic shift from rural to urban settings (Trovato & Price, 2024; Bush, 2025). Recent initiatives to 're-indigenise' (Bennett, 2024) these urban landscapes seek to address this reality by embedding cultural markers, incorporating Indigenous governance frameworks, and securing urban land-use rights. Such efforts represent an important recognition of Indigenous presence and agency within contemporary planning processes. However, the enduring legacies of settler colonialism often relegate these interventions to symbolic gestures, with limited structural impact on how urban spaces are governed and experienced (Bennett, 2024). This contrast highlights a deeper challenge in territorial planning: the need to move beyond technocratic approaches to embrace cultural identity as a vital component of urban development. In contexts where planning has historically functioned as a tool of exclusion, integrating Indigenous knowledge systems and governance practices offers a pathway to more equitable and culturally grounded urban futures.

In China, state-led urban expansion has historically relied on the hukou (household registration) system to control internal migration, effectively uprooting rural populations and relocating them into urban peripheries (Tian, Xu, Li, & Yu, 2022; Chan & Zhang, 1999). This institutionalised migration strategy not only disrupted traditional livelihoods and eroded social networks but also marginalised rural cultural practices within urban planning regimes. Urban redevelopment efforts; such as the demolition of chengzhongcun (urban villages); further entrenched cultural erasure, replacing long-established rural-urban communities with homogenised developments that cater to commodified urban elites (Buckingham & Chan, 2018). Despite this, China's 2014 National New-Type Urbanization Plan (PRC, 2014; Chen, Liu, & Lu, 2016) initiated a staged reform of hukou classifications; replacing agricultural and non-agricultural statuses with unified residency permits, beginning with smaller cities, then extending to larger ones (Kannan, 2018). More recent policies include point-based systems and measures in cities like Tianjin that grant urban hukou based on property ownership, though these reforms remain piecemeal and uneven across regions (Liu, et al., 2020). While notable progress has been made; including a 2024 commitment to fully delink public services from hukou status (PRC, 2024); the central state's emphasis on phased liberalisation

reflects persistent local resistance and fiscal constraints that limit full integration.

From a territorial planning perspective, these reforms highlight both the potential and limits of integrated planning in reshaping cultural landscapes. Despite reforms, rural migrants often maintain deep emotional, social, and economic links to their villages; refusing full urban assimilation and instead adopting ‘recombinant identities’ that blend urban living with rural cultural moorings (Alpermann, 2020). Yet mainstream planning systems continue to prioritise technical efficiency and economic metrics over cultural continuity, frequently overlooking the lived realities of hybrid identities. The Canadian experience further illustrates this dynamic: efforts to re-indigenise cities have often fallen short of structural transformation, inadvertently perpetuating Indigenous erasure and displacement (Engle, Agyeman, & Chung-Tiam-Fook, 2022). This serves as a cautionary parallel for multi-ethnic contexts like Kenya, where spatial planning remains heavily influenced by global paradigms that insufficiently engage with local socio-cultural specificities. For territorial planning to be unaffectedly inclusive, it must transcend bureaucratic reform and actively ‘humanise’ urban environments: validating cultural diversity, supporting split resident families, and legitimising hybrid place-based practices. In this light, China’s reforms underscore a wider lesson shared with Kenya; that technocratic planning models risk undermining cultural integrity unless they centre Indigenous epistemologies and lived connections to place. This paper argues that cultural identity is not merely an aesthetic or symbolic consideration but a critical infrastructure for social cohesion and equitable territorial development. Addressing this gap necessitates rethinking planning methodologies to foreground participatory, culturally grounded, and territorially coherent approaches that respond to Kenya’s complex social and ecological landscapes.

Kenya’s Legal Framework and the Practice-Reality Paradox

Kenya’s legal and policy framework for spatial governance is extensive and progressive, embedding principles of participation, equity, and rights-based planning. The Constitution (2010) anchors inclusive governance and devolved decision-making, while the County Governments Act (2012) operationalises devolution and intergovernmental coordination. Sectoral laws, including the Urban Areas and Cities Act (2011), Land Act (2012), Land Registration Act (2012), Sectional Properties Act (2020), Physical and Land Use Planning Act (2019), and the Environment Management and Coordination Act (EMCA, Cap. 387); provide statutory mechanisms for urban management, land administration, environmental protection, and cross-boundary planning. Complementing these are national planning instruments, notably the National Spatial Plan (2015-2045) and Sessional Papers on Land Policy (2009, 2017), which outline strategies for coordinated development, land use optimisation, and protection of cultural and ecological assets. Despite this robust framework, persistent gaps in implementation, enforcement, institutional capacity, and meaningful public engagement highlight a practice-reality paradox, where the

statutory vision of integrated and inclusive territorial planning often remains unfulfilled.

In practice, Kenya’s planning landscape is still dominated by technocratic and top-down approaches that privilege technical efficiency over socio-cultural inclusion. This disconnect manifests in three critical ways. Firstly, the marginalisation of women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and informal settlers persists despite constitutional safeguards. These groups are often tokenistically included in public participation processes without substantive influence on decision-making, reinforcing systemic exclusions. Secondly, local governance systems; such as barazas and Indigenous councils; remain largely unrecognised within contemporary planning frameworks, despite their deeply rooted legitimacy and capacity to mediate context-specific cultural and ecological knowledge. Thirdly, a bifurcated planning system persists, systematically advantaging elite communities while constraining access and mobility for lower-income groups, reflecting the lingering legacies of colonial spatial stratification.

This paradox reveals a deeper structural challenge in Kenya’s devolved governance: the failure to reconcile constitutional aspirations for equity and inclusion with the realities of fragmented institutional frameworks. A particularly critical gap lies in the marginalisation of Regional Development Authorities (RDAs), whose mandates were originally designed to manage Kenya’s complex ecological and economic systems across administrative boundaries. These authorities were tasked with coordinating development across river basins, water towers, and transboundary ecosystems, encompassing integrated watershed management, biodiversity conservation, and large-scale infrastructure planning, functions beyond the capacity of individual counties. Post-2010 reforms, coupled with the omission of RDAs in legislative instruments such as the Physical and Land Use Planning Act (2019), have left them institutionally vulnerable, with authority contested by counties asserting overlapping jurisdiction. The sidelining of RDAs risks fragmenting territorial planning, as their composite mandates; spanning hydrological systems, biodiversity corridors, and socio-economic linkages; cannot be absorbed by counties focused on localised priorities and constrained resources. Jurisdictional tensions, weak post-devolution legislative backing, limited political support, donor dependence, chronic underfunding, staffing shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and poor implementation of existing strategies collectively create administrative gridlocks, undermining efforts to establish integrated spatial frameworks capable of addressing cross-boundary challenges such as watershed degradation, unplanned urban expansion, and cultural landscape erosion. This institutional misalignment represents a missed opportunity to operationalise territorial planning at an ecologically meaningful scale, particularly in managing shared water resources, cultural landscapes, and regional development systems under devolution.

To navigate these complexities, Kenya requires a governance model that balances county autonomy with mechanisms for effective inter-county and regional collaboration. This would entail revisiting and revitalising

the legislative frameworks underpinning RDAs, ensuring their integration into the devolved system as facilitators of cross-boundary planning rather than competitors for jurisdictional authority. Such reform aligns with the principles of territorial planning, which demand multi-scalar coordination, ecological sensitivity, and respect for cultural continuities across administrative boundaries. In particular, the Physical and Land Use Planning Act should be revised to accommodate territorial planning based on non-administrative boundaries; such as river basins, watersheds, and catchments; ensuring that ecological and socio-cultural systems are managed holistically. However, addressing these structural challenges demands more than mere bureaucratic reform. Territorial planning in Kenya must reorient itself toward humanising urban and rural linkages by validating cultural diversity, and legitimising the hybrid place-based practices that characterise Kenya's dynamic socio-spatial landscapes. As global experiences reveal, technocratic planning models risk eroding cultural integrity unless they centre Indigenous epistemologies and lived connections to place. In this regard, cultural identity emerges not as a peripheral concern but as critical infrastructure for fostering social cohesion and equitable territorial development.

'Tumetenga' Chronicles: Informality, Social Exclusion, and the Paradoxes of Urban Planning in Kenya

Kenya's informal settlements and peri-urban spaces provide a critical lens for interrogating the gap between progressive legal aspirations and the enduring reality of exclusionary planning practices. These spaces encapsulate the country's planning paradox. They are simultaneously hubs of vibrant socio-economic activity and the focus of policies that frame them as anomalies to be cleared, rather than as integral components of the urban fabric. 'Formal' planning regimes in Kenya disproportionately prioritise elite, planned spaces, often tailored to serve affluent populations and commercial interests, while informal settlements and peri-urban areas are marginalised or treated as aberrations to be eradicated. This dichotomy is deeply rooted in Kenya's colonial planning legacy, which institutionalised spatial segregation and racialised land allocation through policies such as the 1931 Native Lands Trust Ordinance and urban zoning frameworks that prioritised settler interests. Notably, colonial interventions focused more on land adjudication and registration for the purposes of resource extraction and settler occupation, rather than holistic spatial planning; a legacy whose ghosts still haunt contemporary practice to this day. Post-independence planning frameworks largely retained these structural biases, reproducing patterns of exclusion and neglect in rapidly urbanising contexts.

Contemporary planning practices continue this discriminatory trend by framing informal settlements as chaotic and undesirable, rather than acknowledging them as legitimate, adaptive responses to housing and livelihood needs in a constrained urban economy. Subsequently, informal areas are frequently subjected to forced evictions and misconceived upgrading initiatives that inadvertently reinforce cycles of vulnerability and perpetuate spatial injustices. State-led gentrification campaigns, often packaged as 'affordable housing' initiatives, displace entire communities and impose high-density vertical housing

schemes that fail to account for the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of affected populations; resulting in what are effectively vertical slums. Similarly, large-scale evictions along riparian corridors are carried out without coherent plans for resettlement or ecological restoration (Amnesty Kenya, 2024; Kinyanjui, 2024; Ngano, 2025), leaving behind scarred landscapes and dislocated populations. In such cases, aspirations for 'urban rejuvenation' often remain confined to the 'tumetenga...'/ 'tumepanga...' ("we have allocated funds for..."/ "we are planning to...") echo chamber; which are simply ambitious design fantasies and deferred promises that seldom materialise into substantive outcomes on the ground. These practices reflect a deeper reluctance within Kenya's planning system to confront its own paradox: a technocratic approach that privileges aesthetic and economic ideals over lived realities, ultimately undermining both spatial justice and urban resilience.

In peri-urban zones, which are increasingly under pressure from urban sprawl, planning interventions often ignore the hybrid rural-urban livelihoods and cultural systems that shape these landscapes, treating them instead as blank slates for speculative development (Maina & Waiganjo, 2024; Abuya, Oyugi, & Oyaro, 2019). This perpetuates not only spatial inequities but also entrenches informality as a defining feature of Kenya's urban fabric. Addressing this systemic imbalance requires a shift away from technocratic and exclusionary models towards inclusive, culturally grounded planning approaches that recognise informal and peri-urban spaces as integral components of Kenya's territorial development.

Indigenous Systems, Identity Politics, and Territorial Planning in Kenya

Kenya's spatial planning landscape is profoundly shaped by the intersection of ILK systems and the politics of identity within its devolved governance framework. Historically, Indigenous governance practices; such as customary land stewardship among the Turkana and Samburu, community barazas, and elder councils like the Mijikenda Kaya; have provided robust frameworks for territorial management and social cohesion. However, contemporary planning regimes, exemplified by the current first-generation County Spatial Plans, marginalise these systems in favour of technocratic and universalist models. The advent of devolution has further complicated this dynamic: as county governments assert political autonomy, territorial planning is increasingly instrumentalised for ethnic mobilisation and resource control. This politicisation fragments shared socio-ecological systems and sidelines culturally embedded approaches to land and resource management. Understanding and addressing these challenges is essential for reimagining Kenya's territorial planning paradigm in ways that integrate Indigenous epistemologies and mitigate the polarising effects of identity politics.

While current scholarship in Kenya increasingly focuses on participatory planning and the dynamics of informal settlements, significant gaps persist in bridging ILK systems; which encompass spiritual, ecological, and cultural epistemologies; with contemporary technocratic planning frameworks. This disconnect frequently

dehumanises urban and rural spaces, reducing them to technical assemblages rather than recognising them as lived environments where identity, memory, and collective care intersect. These gaps are evident in three critical dimensions. Firstly, there is an insufficient institutional integration of ILK systems into contemporary planning regulations and decision-making processes, which continues to marginalise local epistemologies in favour of technocratic approaches. Secondly, the adoption of innovative tools such as participatory GIS remains limited, despite their potential to translate oral traditions and cultural knowledge into actionable spatial data that could enrich planning processes. Thirdly, there is a notable absence of culturally inclusive frameworks that emphasise ecological continuity and embed cultural identity as a central pillar of territorial planning, resulting in interventions that are often disconnected from the lived realities of communities.

This paper argues that cultural identity is not an ornamental consideration but a structural foundation for social cohesion and equitable territorial development. Acknowledging and integrating cultural identity into planning processes strengthens social trust, supports ecological stewardship, and lays the groundwork for long-term territorial justice. This study further raises a critical question: How can Indigenous planning epistemologies and cultural identity frameworks humanise urbanisation across diverse political and ecological contexts? Addressing this question requires a comparative lens, drawing on global precedents such as reconciliation efforts with Indigenous and First Nations people, rural-urban integration challenges, and struggles with informality. These insights can inform the reimagination of planning frameworks in Kenya that are both culturally grounded and institutionally robust.

Implications and Recommendations: Reimagining Territorial Planning Through Cultural and Epistemological Pluralism

This study highlights a dichotomy in Kenya's territorial planning landscape: the disjuncture between progressive constitutional aspirations and the persistence of technocratic, exclusionary planning practices. The findings indicate that spatial justice and cultural identity are not peripheral to planning theory; rather, they constitute its

normative core in contexts marked by deep-seated colonial legacies and multi-ethnic territorial claims. This has significant implications on how territorial planning is conceptualised and operationalised in Kenya as well as in similar postcolonial settings.

Reconceptualising Cultural Identity as Planning Infrastructure

Prevailing planning frameworks in Kenya tend to instrumentalise culture as an aesthetic or symbolic layer atop technocratic designs. This study suggests that cultural identity should instead be theorised as an infrastructural element, underpinning social cohesion, ecological stewardship, and territorial justice. Integrating ILK systems into formal planning regimes not only challenges colonial epistemologies of space but also reorients planning towards relational understandings of land, community, and governance.

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, reframing Kenya's planning infrastructure requires adopting a holistic and pragmatic perspective. Firstly, it begins with recognising the predominantly top-down nature of planning systems, moving away from the normative rhetoric of bottom-up participation and the illusion of immediate grassroots transformation. This recognition enables a candid audit of existing structures, allowing for targeted and feasible interventions to address entrenched challenges. Secondly, it entails mapping the stratification of stakeholders; clarifying their entry points, roles, and contributions to the planning process. This step is essential for identifying gaps in institutional capacity, accountability, and participation. It interrogates where and how diverse actors; including state agencies, county governments, civil society, and Indigenous councils; enter the planning process, and how their contributions (or exclusions) shape spatial outcomes. Thirdly, these gaps must be isolated and addressed through context-specific remedies that enhance the efficacy, inclusivity, and responsiveness of planning frameworks. Participatory GIS, as conceptualised by McCall & Dunn (2012), offers a promising pathway for translating oral traditions, sacred ecologies, and communal land-use practices into actionable spatial data. However, without institutional reflexivity and robust policy frameworks, such tools risk being co-opted into technocratic regimes, reinforcing dominant power structures rather than disrupting them, the cycle that already plagues the system.

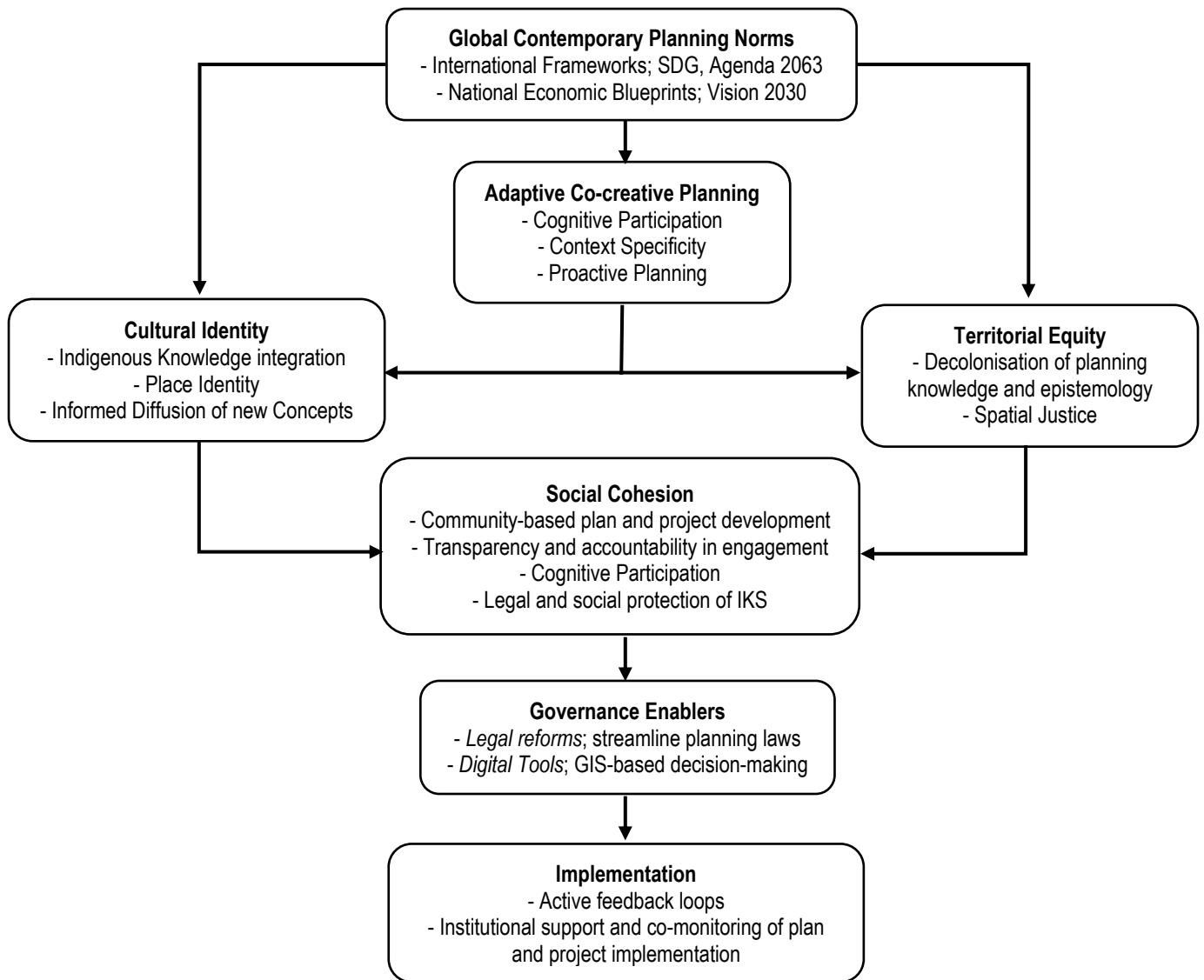


Figure 1. Reimagining Territorial Planning Through Cultural and Epistemological Pluralism

From a legal-institutional perspective, it is imperative to streamline legal statutes to embrace cognitive participation, territorial development, and ILK systems. This necessitates legislative and policy reforms aligned with contemporary shifts in the discipline, from ecological management and river-basin planning to socio-cultural interaction and inclusive economic growth. Institutional reforms of Regional Development Authorities are also crucial. Their mandates must be strengthened to safeguard critical ecosystems and prevent their erosion by the competing political interests of devolved units; a pressing concern in light of recent government proposals to disband these bodies under pressure from the Council of Governors and presented for consideration through the National Treasury and Economic Planning (Government of Kenya, 2025) for the current administration in the financial year 2025/2026. This framework underscores the urgency of structural reforms to recalibrate Kenya's planning apparatus towards cultural sensitivity, ecological resilience, and territorially cohesive development. This framework therefore calls for a move beyond narrow proceduralism and economic instrumentalism that dominate Kenya's planning practice, towards a

transformative planning paradigm. It conceptualises planning not merely as a technocratic tool but as a socially and ecologically embedded practice; a dialogic process where global ideals of sustainability converge with localised epistemologies to produce territorially grounded and culturally responsive development outcomes.

Towards an Adaptive and Dialogic Planning Paradigm

This paper contributes to territorial planning theory by highlighting the critical role of cultural identity and ILK systems in shaping equitable and resilient development outcomes in postcolonial, multi-ethnic states. Using Kenya as a practical lens, it showcases how globalised, technocratic paradigms; when transplanted indiscriminately; tend to disrupt historically interconnected socio-spatial fabrics and perpetuate territorial fragmentation under devolution. Building on Brenner's (2004) 'rescaled territoriality' and Soja's (2009) 'spatial justice', the study advances a multi-scalar, dialogic planning framework that integrates epistemological justice, participatory governance, and ecological continuity. It argues that effective planning requires an ontological shift: from conceiving space as an abstract, neutral grid to

recognising territory as a culturally inscribed, contested, and lived domain. This paradigm provides a pathway for reconciling global ideals of sustainability with localised epistemologies of place, offering transferable insights for territorial governance in other postcolonial and multi-ethnic contexts.

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Kenya’s water towers: <http://kenya.restorationatlas.org/> ↑

The 16no. counties selected comprise: Bungoma, Murang'a, Lamu, Kericho, Siaya, Kajiado, Makueni, Migori, Nyeri, Kilifi, Nyamira, Samburu, Bomet, Narok, Kwale, and West Pokot counties. County selection was based on the availability and maturity of county spatial planning frameworks. Specifically, counties were only included where a County Spatial Plan had been fully prepared, formally ratified by the respective County Assembly by January 2025, and was actively under implementation. In addition, only counties that had made their County Spatial Plans publicly accessible; both in physical form and through digital platforms; were considered, ensuring transparency and enabling systematic review of planning content and practice. ↑

This refers to Strategic Plans developed by the relevant ministries, state departments and state agencies as well as state research and regulatory institutions engaged in spatial, economic or environmental planning. ↑

The six Regional Development Authorities (RDAs) were originally conceived as basin-based institutions to plan, coordinate, and implement integrated development across major river systems, Lake Victoria and the Indian Ocean transcending administrative boundaries to promote equitable resource sharing and socio-ecological cohesion. They were established by the following statutes: the Tana and Athi Rivers Development Authority (est. 1974), the Kerio Valley Development Authority (est. 1979), Lake Basin Development Authority (est. 1979); Ewaso Ng’iro South River Basin Development Authority (est. 1989), Ewaso Ng’iro North River Basin Development Authority (est. 1989), Coast Development Authority (est. 1991) (Government of Kenya, 1981; Government of Kenya, 1989; Government of Kenya, 1989; Government of Kenya, 1979; Government of Kenya, 1991; Government of Kenya, 1991). While their statutory mandates remain intact, their enabling laws predate the Constitution of Kenya (2010) and have not been substantively reconfigured to align with devolved governance structures. As a result, RDAs occupy an ambiguous institutional space; neither fully integrated into intergovernmental planning frameworks nor effectively linked to county-led spatial planning. ↑

Muungano wa Wanavijiji - <https://www.muungano.net/> ↑

Turkana’s Indigenous drought-detection systems comprise intergenerational, place-based knowledge practices embedded in everyday pastoral life. These systems integrate observations of vegetation dynamics, weather patterns, wildlife behaviour, and livestock health, including body condition, fertility, disease prevalence, and grazing behaviour, to guide mobility, herd management and human settlement. ↑

Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1231/> ↑