

Catholic Church Strategies and Initiatives to Social Change In Nairobi County 1963–2023

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ABSTRACT: The Catholic Church has played a significant role in putting in place strategies and initiatives that have led to shaping social change in Kenya, particularly in Nairobi County, 1963-2023, through its involvement in education, healthcare, economic empowerment, and social justice initiatives. Despite extensive historical accounts of the Church's contributions to national development, limited research has not comprehensively analyzed its strategies and initiatives which have shaped social change in Nairobi county from 1963 to 2023. This study sought to fill this gap by examining the Catholic Church's strategies and initiatives in social change. This was achieved by focusing on the following specific objective: to examine the initiatives and strategies used by the Catholic church to bring Social change in Nairobi County in 1963-2023. The study was guided by Social Movement Theory, Critical theory, Faith-Based Organizational Theory and Liberation Theology, which provide analytical frameworks for understanding the Church's strategies and initiatives for social change. Social Movement Theory helps contextualize the Church's ability to organize resources, frame issues, and influence societal norms, while Liberation Theology emphasizes its moral obligation to come up with projects which advocate for the poor and oppressed. Critical theory, prompts a critical examination of the Church's strategies and initiatives that were used or were geared towards attaining social change in Nairobi county between 1963-2023. A case study research design was employed, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the Church's initiatives in Nairobi. The study utilized qualitative methods, including interviews, observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis, to gather rich insights from Church leaders, beneficiaries of Church-led programs, and historical records. Sampling was purposive, targeting individuals who had direct experience of the Church's institution or interventions. Data was analyzed thematically to identify patterns and trends in the Church's initiatives such as education, healthcare, and social justice. The findings of this study will contribute to the broader discourse on religion and social change by highlighting how faith-based organizations particularly the Catholic Church came up with strategies that played a pivotal role in addressing socio-economic inequalities that has yielded to social change in Nairobi County. The study has provided practical recommendations for policymakers, religious institutions, and development organizations on enhancing collaboration with the Catholic Church to promote sustainable social change. By documenting the Church's historical and contemporary (1963- 2023) contributions, this research will serve as a valuable reference for future studies on the intersection of religion and social development in Kenya.

I. Introduction

This Study discusses the multifaceted role the Catholic Church has played in driving social change in Kenya from 1963 to 2023. The analysis covers the Church's mobilization of communities through Small Christian Communities, as well as its support for youth and women's groups and resource-driven self-help projects. The

chapter also examines the Church's significant investment in establishing educational and healthcare institutions services that reached beyond the Catholic community to support broader Kenyan society. Furthermore, the discussion addresses the Church's engagement in civic education, advocacy for democracy, human rights, and peacebuilding, and its outspoken resistance to authoritarianism, particularly during the Moi era. By drawing from archival records, interviews, and relevant scholarly literature, the chapter underscores the Church's evolving position as a moral, social, and political agent in Kenya's ongoing pursuit of justice, democracy, and sustainable development.

II. Theoretical Framework

The relevant theories related to the Catholic Church's involvement in social change are Social Movement theory, Liberation Theology, Faith-Based Organizational Theory and Critical Theory.

Social Movement Theory: provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how collective action can lead to social change. Developed by scholars such as Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow, this theory posits that social movements emerge when groups of people organize to address perceived injustices or promote specific social or political goals (McAdam et al., 2001). Several key components contribute to the success of social movements, including resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, framing processes, and repertoires of contention. Resource mobilization focuses on how movements acquire and deploy various resources, such as human, financial, and organizational assets, to achieve their goals (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Political opportunity structures examine how the broader political context either facilitates or constrains the activities of social movements, depending on factors such as government openness, alliances with influential groups, and institutional stability (Tarrow, 1998). Framing processes explore how movements construct and disseminate meaning to mobilize supporters and demobilize opponents by shaping public perceptions and defining issues in ways that resonate with their audiences (Snow & Benford, 1988). Repertoires of contention refer to the set of protest tactics and strategies available to movements in a given context, including demonstrations, public statements, advocacy campaigns, and grassroots mobilization (Tilly, 1978).

In the context of this study, the Catholic Church's involvement in social change in Nairobi has analyzed through these theoretical lenses. The Church has demonstrated strong resource mobilization through its ability to leverage its congregation, financial resources, and institutional networks to implement social programs. Its engagement with Kenya's evolving political environment illustrates how it navigates political opportunity structures, adapting its strategies based on the prevailing governance climate. The Church's framing processes are evident in the way it presents social change as a moral and religious imperative, advocating for education, healthcare, and social welfare as fundamental human rights. Additionally, its use of diverse repertoires of contention, such as public advocacy, social services, and faith-based community outreach, reflects its strategic approach to addressing societal challenges. One of the strengths of Social Movement Theory is its versatility in explaining different forms of collective action across various contexts. It offers a robust framework for understanding how organizations like the Catholic Church can drive social change through structured and organized efforts. Moreover, the theory acknowledges both structural factors, such as political opportunities, and the agency of movement leaders in shaping strategies and actions. However, a notable limitation of Social Movement Theory in the context of religious institutions is its emphasis on secular movements and contentious politics. The unique characteristics and motivations of religious organizations, which often operate based on spiritual convictions and moral imperatives, may not fully align with the more political orientation of traditional social movement theory. Additionally, the theory's focus on protests and direct action may overlook the Church's use of non-confrontational strategies, such as social services, education, and pastoral care, as mechanisms for social change. Despite these limitations, Social Movement Theory remains relevant for analyzing the Catholic Church's role in shaping social change in Nairobi county. By applying this framework, the study provided insights into how the Church mobilized resources, navigated political dynamics, frames her messages, and employs various strategies to foster social change.

Liberation Theology: which emerged in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s and subsequently spread to other parts of the world, offers a unique perspective on how religious institutions can engage with social and economic justice. This theological approach, pioneered by theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino, emphasizes the Church's role in addressing social injustices and promoting the liberation of oppressed groups (Gutiérrez, 1973). It is grounded in the belief that Christian faith must be actively lived out in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, advocating for their empowerment and social change. Liberation Theology emphasized on the church's role in addressing social injustice, poverty, and oppression. It advocates for a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, viewing Christianity as a force for social and political change (Evans, 1992). One of the fundamental principles of Liberation Theology is the preferential option for the poor, which asserts that Christians should prioritize the needs and concerns of the poor and marginalized in society (Boff & Boff, 1987). This principle is rooted in biblical teachings that emphasize justice, compassion, and the dignity of every human being. Another central tenet is the praxis-oriented approach, which highlights the importance of not just understanding the world but actively working to change it (Gutiérrez, 1973). Liberation theologians argue that faith must be expressed through concrete actions aimed at dismantling systemic injustices.

A third key aspect of Liberation Theology is the concept of structural sin, which extends the notion of sin beyond individual transgressions to include societal structures that perpetuate injustice and oppression. Sobrino (1994) contends that social and economic systems that institutionalize poverty, exclusion, and inequality are manifestations of structural sin that must be challenged through collective action. Additionally, Liberation Theology reinterprets the Kingdom of God as not only a future heavenly reality but as something to be partially realized in the present through social justice efforts (Boff, 1978). This perspective calls for a transformative engagement with the world, where faith and justice are inseparable. (Bigsten et al., 2016), Liberation Theology provides a theoretical framework for understanding the Catholic Church's engagement in promoting social change. However, the approach has also been subject to critique. Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) expressed concerns that some interpretations of Liberation Theology emphasized political and social concerns at the expense of spiritual matters, leading to tensions within the Church (Ratzinger, 1984). Ratzinger argued that elements of Liberation Theology, particularly its Marxist-influenced critiques of capitalism, could risk reducing Christianity to a form of political activism rather than a spiritual movement. Similarly, historian Michael Löwy (1996) noted that while Liberation Theology played a significant role in advocating for the rights of the poor, it faced opposition from conservative elements within the Catholic hierarchy who viewed it as too radical.

Despite these critiques, Liberation Theology remains an important framework for understanding how religious like the case of the catholic church institutions in Nairobi county engage in social change. It complements Social Movement Theory by providing a more specific, religiously grounded rationale for the Church's involvement in social changes. While Social Movement Theory offers a broader framework for understanding collective action, Liberation Theology provides insight into the theological motivations that drive faith-based institutions to advocate for social justice and community empowerment. This perspective will be critical in analyzing the Catholic Church's role in promoting education, healthcare, and social welfare initiatives in Nairobi County between 1963-2023. Catholic Social Teaching (CST): Emphasizing human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good, CST provides a moral framework for the Church's social interventions. In the context of Kenya, where issues of poverty, inequality, and social injustice are prevalent. It guides the Church's efforts in advocating for the rights and dignity of the poor, empowering marginalized communities, and challenging oppressive structures through education, activism, and community organizing. Analysis through the lens of Liberation Theology has illuminated how the Catholic Church's actions align with its commitment to social justice and liberation. Liberation Theology has been widely recognized for its direct engagement with social realities, providing a bridge between religious teachings and concrete action for social justice. It offers a compelling rationale for religious institutions to be actively involved in addressing societal issues, aligning with the study's objective of assessing the Catholic Church's contributions to social change. Liberation Theology adapted to Kenya's post-colonial context, prioritizes the poor and oppressed, guiding initiatives like slum empowerment and

advocacy against injustice. In the context of this study, Liberation Theology, provided a theological framework for understanding the Catholic Church's motivations and justifications for her involvement in social change in Nairobi County. By applying this theological approach, the study examined how the Catholic Church in Nairobi County has historically mobilized her resources, institutions, and moral authority to impact the lives of communities through education, healthcare, and social support programs.

Faith-Based Organizational Theory: This theory focuses on understanding the unique characteristics, motivations, and strategies of religious organizations in addressing social issues and promoting community development (Harden, 2006). It recognizes the distinctiveness of faith-based institutions, including their values, networks, and religious mandates, which influence their approach to social change. In the context of the Catholic Church in Kenya, Faith-Based Organizational Theory helped in understanding how the Church leverages its religious identity, resources, and networks to initiate and sustain social development initiatives. It guides the analysis by examining factors such as leadership dynamics, organizational culture, and partnerships with other stakeholders in driving for social change efforts. This framework also shed light on the challenges and opportunities inherent in the Catholic Church's engagement in development work, including issues of legitimacy, accountability, and sustainability. This theory analyzed the Church as a non-state actor, examining how its organizational structure, values, and networks shaped its social change efforts.

Critical Theory: Critical Theory, which emerged from the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, focuses on critiquing and changing society as a whole. Developed by theorists: Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas, emphasizes the need to examine power structures, ideologies, and social inequalities (Horkheimer, 1972). Critical Theory is anchored in several key principles aimed at understanding and challenging societal structures. It begins with a critique of domination, which seeks to uncover and confront various forms of social oppression—political, economic, or cultural—as emphasized by Horkheimer (1972). Driven by an emancipatory interest, the theory aspires to promote human liberation and the creation of a more just society, as noted by Habermas (1971). Its interdisciplinary approach integrates insights from philosophy, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies, enriching the analysis of complex social phenomena (Kellner, 1989). Additionally, Critical Theory employs dialectical thinking, recognizing social realities as intricate and shaped by historical and material conditions (Adorno, 1973). Central to its ethos is the principle of praxis, which underscores the unity of theory and practice, advocating not only for the interpretation of the world but for transformative action to effect change. Collectively, these principles provide a robust framework for addressing the complexities of social life and fostering meaningful engagement with issues of domination and inequality. (Marx, 1845/1978).

It urges researchers to look beyond superficial explanations and consider the deeper social forces at play. Moreover, the complexity of its theoretical framework can pose challenges for empirical research. It prompts a critical examination of the Church's strategies and initiatives, taking into account her involvement in social change (Habermas, 1984). In the context of this study, Critical Theory offered a valuable framework for analyzing the Catholic Church's role in either challenging or reinforcing existing power structures in Nairobi County, for instance, Critical Theory encourages an exploration of how the Church implements initiatives for social change. A significant strength of Critical Theory lies in its emphasis on power dynamics and social critique, offering insights into the complexities surrounding the Church's influence on social change. Critical Theory complemented the other theoretical frameworks in this study by providing a critical lens to examine the Church's actions and their broader societal implication. While Social Movement Theory and Liberation Theology emphasize the Church's mobilization for change, Critical Theory fosters a more nuanced and reflective analysis of the power dynamics and the consequences involved in these processes. By incorporating Critical Theory, this study achieved a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the Catholic Church's role in social change in Nairobi, considering both its potential for promoting positive social change

III. Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology that guided the structure and procedures of the study on The Impacts of the Catholic Church Strategies and Initiatives In Social Change in Nairobi County 1963–2023 the Catholic Church in social change in Nairobi from 1963 to 2023. Drawing inspiration from Kothari (2004), the qualitative methodology employed in this research aimed to elucidate the strategies and the initiatives of the Catholic Church's on social change in Nairobi during the specified period (1963-2023). The methodology detailed the categories or groups of research participants, the methods used for participant selection, and the data collection process essential for validating the research outcomes.

Research Design

The study employed a case study design, delving deeply into multiple data sources to explore the role of the Catholic Church in social change in Kenya from 1963 to 2023. Case study allowed for a comprehensive examination of the various initiatives and activities undertaken by the Catholic Church during this period. This study provided rich insights into the social changes brought about by the Church. Only post-colonial and up to 2023 church initiatives were scrutinized/examined and their impacts. Case study was clear, practical, and assed qualitative data relevant to the research questions and objectives, facilitating an analysis of the Catholic Church's impact in 1963-2023.

Area of Study

This study encompassed the Nairobi County, focusing on the strategies and initiatives of the catholic Church in social change from 1963 to 2023. Nairobi county presents a dynamic urban landscape, marked by rapid growth and cultural diversity. It offers rich insights into urbanization and migration patterns, reflecting a blend of various ethnicities and cultures. The historical context of Nairobi, from its post-independence challenges, shapes its current social dynamics. Nairobi's affluent neighborhoods and informal settlements highlight significant socioeconomic disparities, making it a vital location for examining the role of the Catholic church in social change. The roles of Catholic Church in advocating for social change was critical to understanding local dynamics. Nairobi provides an interplay between social issues, the catholic Church's need to address them, that made it a unique focal point for this study.

Target Population

The study targeted the Catholic faithful, leadership, agents such as teacher, social workers & nurses in catholic institutions, benefactors and beneficiaries (individuals) who have been direct beneficiaries of the social changes initiated by the Catholic Church in Nairobi County from 1963 to 2023, who are still alive. This includes members and non-members of the Catholic community who have experienced or participated in various social programs, education initiatives, healthcare services, and other activities facilitated by the Catholic Church during this period. Additionally, leaders within the Catholic Church who have been instrumental in implementing these changes were targeted for their insights.

Sampling Procedure

For this study, the researcher utilized purposive and snowball sampling methods. This was because the study targeted specific period and specific information i.e from the period of Kenya's independence in 1963 up to 2023 and the role of the Catholic church in social change within that period. The researcher gathered insights from a specific group of respondents who have been directly involved or impacted by the social changes initiated by the Catholic Church during this period. These respondents may include Catholic faithful, church leaders, and individuals who have benefited from Catholic Church programs and initiatives directly and indirectly. Additionally, the researcher sought referrals from these initial respondents to identify others who provided credible information on the Catholic Church's role in social change. Respondents were assessed for their credibility, and those who possess relevant documents such as notes, diaries, letters, and photographs from the period under study were prioritized.

Instruments of Data Collection

This study used qualitative data collection methods which include interviews guide, observations, document analysis guide and focused group discussions guide. The study used interview guide; interview guide lists the questions on issues to be explored during the course of the interview. This means that each respondent received exactly the same interview stimulus as any other. The interviews were recorded after obtaining permission from the respondents.

The researcher used document analysis guide. Document analysis is a method of data collection which involves analysis of content from written documents in order to make certain deductions based on the study parameters (Kothari, 2004). This guide included Document analysis forms which are graphic organizers that guide researchers through a process of identifying important background information about a document. This data was used to determine the documents biases or perspectives. Document analysis guide enabled the researcher to select specific publications of journals, books and archived documents. The researcher reviewed the books and journals, determine their weaknesses, their strengths and relevance to the study and the use of primary documents to compliment the written sources. The data was examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, give understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.

The study utilized focus group discussions (FGDs), which are discussions with a small number of individuals possessing specialized knowledge or interest in the topic. FGDs will involve groups of up to 10 participants, consisting of individuals with similar roles or experiences related to the Catholic Church's social change activities in Nairobi county from 1963 to 2023. Participants included individuals such as church leaders, members of Catholic organizations, beneficiaries of Catholic Church programs, and others involved in social change initiatives. The selection of participants was not be based on age, location, or education level, but rather on their direct involvement or experience with Catholic Church activities during the specified period. FGDs were be guided by detailed discussions and insights into participants' experiences related to the Catholic Church's role in social change. The researcher acted as the moderator, created a supportive atmosphere, established ground rules, and guided the discussion to explore participants' views and experiences regarding the impact of Catholic Church initiatives on social change in Kenya

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedures depended on the instruments used, which include interview guides, observations, focus group discussion guides, and document analysis guides. The interview guide was a one-on-one to gather direct primary data. For focus groups, respondents were grouped based on their roles during the specified period, while the researcher acted as the moderator. Additionally, the researcher visited libraries, archives, and historical websites for document analysis. Data collected was organized according to respondent answers, then qualitatively analyzed. Digital recordings of interviews were transcribed and coded into sub-themes for analysis. Critical analysis was conducted by comparing multiple sources, including written documents and oral interviews, observations and focused group discussions. A narrative description of each theme was constructed, and a descriptive report on each objective was compiled.

Data Analysis and Presentation

This study applied a qualitative data analysis which according to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), the analyze the information in a systematic way in order to come up with some useful conclusions and recommendations by establishing patterns, trends and relationships from the gathered data. For this study data analysis begun during data collection. There was identifications of emerging themes in relation to the study objectives, data collected through interviews analyzed and written descriptively. Data collected from the archives and documentary sources was analyzed to provide a detailed description. In cases where interviews are recorded digitally, they were transcribed and well coded to various sub-themes for the purpose of analysis. The data was subjected to critical

analysis by comparing several sources together, looking at the information from the written documents and those of oral interview, and back with evidence with digital photography.

IV. FINDINGS

Mobilization

Mobilization has consistently emerged as a central and sustained strategy used by the Catholic Church in Nairobi County to advance social change from independence in 1963. Drawing on evidence from interviews with a broad spectrum of stakeholders parish priests, lay leaders, representatives of women and youth, as well as elderly parishioners alongside an examination of Church documents, pastoral letters, and relevant secondary sources, one observes that mobilization has functioned on multiple fronts. This process has included the establishment of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and various faith-based organizations, as well as the coordinated mobilization of both human and material resources. Examples range from parish-driven self-help initiatives to the development of formal financial mechanisms such as Caritas Microfinance Bank. Additionally, the Church has played a significant role in encouraging civic engagement and promoting social justice, frequently utilizing communication platforms including sermons, pastoral letters, and public forums to raise awareness and inspire collective action.

In this section, each of these dimensions is critically examined, drawing comparisons with previous studies in Kenya and other African contexts. The analysis reveals both convergences with earlier scholarship especially in affirming the Church's role as a key civil society actor—and contradictions that underline the complexities and limitations of mobilization as a transformative strategy.

Organization into Small Christian Communities and Faith-Based Groups

One of the Church's most visible contributions to mobilization has been through the establishment of Small Christian Communities (SCCs). Introduced in the 1970s as part of the Church's post-Vatican II pastoral approach, SCCs were intended to shift parishes from large, impersonal congregations to "communities of communities." Respondents consistently identified SCCs as not only sites for prayer and Bible study but also hubs for social action.

A 58-year-old female respondent from Kibera parish explained:

"Our SCC is where we discuss not only the gospel but also issues affecting our community poverty, domestic violence, unemployment. It is like our parliament at the grassroots."

This statement resonates with Healey's (2009) assertion that SCCs in Eastern Africa became spaces where ordinary Christians exercised agency in shaping the Church's response to community challenges. Waliggo (2010) further emphasizes that SCCs allowed for lay participation in governance and service delivery, thereby democratizing decision-making processes that had traditionally been clerical.

However, SCCs have not been without limitations. Several respondents noted that these forums could sometimes become politicized, especially during election periods. A respondent in Mathare recounted:

"During election seasons, SCC meetings sometimes become politicized. Not everyone agrees, and it divides rather than unites. Some members stop attending because they feel politics should not mix with faith."

This aligns with Gifford's (2015) critique that while SCCs were designed to empower communities, their politicization occasionally strained relations with state authorities and among parishioners themselves. Thus, while SCCs mobilized grassroots communities effectively, they also became contested spaces where spiritual, social, and political interests intersected.

Beyond SCCs, the Church also encouraged the formation of youth and women's groups, which became instrumental in addressing specific social issues. Women's associations often spearheaded charitable initiatives,

such as providing food for vulnerable households, while youth groups engaged in peacebuilding and anti-drug campaigns. An interview with a respondent in Dandora parish captured this:

"Our youth group is more than singing in the choir. We organize clean-up drives, campaigns against drug abuse, and we even accompany each other to job interviews. The Church mobilizes us to be responsible citizens."

Such initiatives echo Kanyinga's (2014) argument that faith-based organizations serve as training grounds for civic participation, equipping youth and women with organizational skills transferable to the broader socio-political arena.

Mobilization of Resources: Human, Financial, and Physical

Another dimension of mobilization was the Church's ability to harness resources—both tangible and intangible for development projects. Interviews revealed that parishioners were routinely mobilized to contribute labor, materials, and finances to parish initiatives, ranging from constructing schools and clinics to organizing charity drives for vulnerable groups.

The most striking example is the Caritas Microfinance Bank (CMB), which evolved from Caritas Nairobi's savings and credit programs. Licensed by the Central Bank of Kenya in 2015, CMB provides financial services including microloans, savings accounts, and investment products to parishioners and community members (Caritas Microfinance Bank, 2018). Respondents spoke highly of this innovation. A respondent in Mukuru explained:

"Before Caritas, we depended on shylocks who exploited us with very high interest rates. Now we can borrow small loans for business without fear of harassment."

This aligns with Mwaura and Njoroge's (2020) study, which found that church-led microfinance initiatives in Kenya not only promoted economic empowerment but also fostered accountability, since loans were tied to communal values of honesty and stewardship.

In addition to formal financial institutions, parish-based self-help groups (SHGs) were instrumental in resource mobilization. These groups, often formed around SCCs, pooled savings for school fees, funerals, and emergencies. As one elderly man narrated:

"Through our parish self-help group, I got support to educate my daughter after my wife passed away. The Church mobilized us to stand with each other."

This echoes Wairire's (2016) findings that SHGs linked to religious institutions serve as informal social security mechanisms in contexts where state welfare systems are weak.

Nevertheless, challenges were identified. A youth respondent lamented:

"Sometimes leaders misuse funds. People lose trust, and the whole group collapses. Not every group survives long."

This concern reflects Kessler's (2013) critique that SHGs can suffer from poor management and overreliance on charismatic leaders. Thus, while the mobilization of financial resources enhanced resilience and development, sustainability depended heavily on governance structures within groups.

Mobilization of the Populace in Governance and Justice

Respondents widely acknowledged the Church's role in mobilizing citizens for political participation and justice. Historically, the Catholic Church in Kenya has played a significant role in democratization, particularly during the struggle against authoritarianism in the 1980s and 1990s (Gifford, 2009). Respondents affirmed that *"priests often urged parishioners to register as voters, reject bribery, and hold leaders accountable."*

A respondent recounted:

"Our priest told us that voting is not just a right but a responsibility before God. He said, 'If you don't vote, you have no moral authority to complain.' That made me take elections seriously."

This aligns with Kanyinga's (2014) analysis of faith-based organizations as key civic educators. The Church framed civic duty not merely as a legal obligation but also as a moral one, thereby reinforcing participation.

However, respondents also highlighted contradictions. A young female activist observed:

"The Church tells us to vote and participate, but sometimes priests avoid naming corrupt politicians because they don't want to lose tithes or funding for projects."

This critique resonates with Gifford's (2015) argument that the Church sometimes oscillates between prophetic witness and pragmatic caution, especially when parish elites have political or economic ties to state officials. Thus, while mobilization for governance and justice has been effective in principle, its consistency has varied depending on context and leadership.

Use of Sermons, Pastoral Letters, and Public Forums

The Church's mobilization efforts were reinforced through its communication platforms. Sunday sermons emerged as the most frequently cited medium of mobilization. A youth respondent from Kangemi parish remarked:

"We take sermons seriously because they guide our conscience. When the priest says corruption is sin, it is like God Himself is speaking."

Pastoral letters issued by the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) were also instrumental. Historical examples include the 1993 letter *"The Cursed Arrow,"* which condemned political violence, and the 1997 pastoral exhortation urging free and fair elections. Nthamburi (1995) argues that such letters carried moral weight, legitimizing popular demands for reform.

Public forums organized by parishes, such as civic education days, peace rallies, and interfaith meetings, also contributed to mobilization. However, as a respondent from Eastlands noted:

"Forums are good, but only those who are already active attend. The poor who struggle daily for food rarely come."

This reflects Mbiti's (2015) observation that church forums often reach middle-class congregants more effectively than the urban poor, whose daily struggles limit their participation.

Critical Reflections on Mobilization

The findings from both interviews and document analysis suggest that mobilization was not a monolithic process but a dynamic and contested one. On the one hand, SCCs, self-help groups, and Caritas initiatives provided vital structures for community empowerment and resilience. Sermons, pastoral letters, and forums effectively mobilized consciences and shaped civic engagement. On the other hand, politicization, financial mismanagement, and selective engagement in justice issues revealed the fragility of these mechanisms.

This duality mirrors broader scholarly debates. Baur (1990) celebrates the Catholic Church as one of Africa's most resilient civil society actors, while Gifford (2015) cautions against romanticizing its role, given the compromises and contradictions it often embodies. The Nairobi context exemplifies both perspectives.

Perhaps the most evocative summary of mobilization came from an elderly respondent in Kayole parish, who likened the Church to a cultural instrument of unity:

"The Church is like a drum—it calls us together. Sometimes the drum beats for justice, other times it is silent. But without it, we would be scattered."

This metaphor captures the paradox of mobilization: a powerful force that unites and inspires, yet one whose rhythm is inconsistent and sometimes muted by internal and external pressures.

Establishment of Education and Health Institutions

Education and healthcare stand at the center of the Catholic Church's historical mission in Nairobi County. Since

independence in 1963, the Church has invested heavily in schools, colleges, universities, and hospitals, positioning itself as one of the most influential non-state providers of social services in Kenya. Interviews conducted with respondents including clergy, educators, healthcare workers, parents, and parishioners alongside document analysis and secondary literature, reveal a complex story of both remarkable achievements and persistent challenges.

This section examines the Church's establishment of education and health institutions as a strategy of social transformation. It highlights the scope and impact of these institutions, their inclusivity across religious and socio-economic divides, their role in shaping Kenya's human capital, and the tensions that arise in balancing faith-based values with broader public expectations.

The Catholic Church and the Growth of Education in Nairobi

From the earliest days of independence, Catholic missionaries prioritized education as both an evangelical and developmental strategy. Respondents noted that parishes were often the first to establish schools in informal settlements where the government was absent. A 70-year-old retired teacher recalled:

"When I started teaching in the 1970s, the only schools in this area were Catholic schools. The government came much later. For many of us, our first classroom was a church hall."

This recollection aligns with Baur's (1990) history of Catholic education in Kenya, which notes that by 1970, Catholic institutions accounted for nearly 30% of all primary schools in Nairobi. Many of these schools later expanded into full-fledged educational complexes, offering both academic and vocational training.

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), founded in 1984 and elevated to university status in 1992, represents the Church's commitment to higher education. As documented by Gutto (2002), CUEA has trained thousands of professionals in theology, business, education, and social sciences, contributing significantly to Kenya's intellectual landscape.

Several respondents praised Catholic schools and universities for their emphasis on discipline and values. A parent in Westlands commented:

"I chose a Catholic school for my children because they don't just teach academics. They instill values—respect, honesty, responsibility. In today's world, that is very important."

This emphasis on holistic education echoes international studies. Grace (2002) argues that Catholic schooling globally distinguishes itself by integrating moral formation with academic excellence, producing graduates who combine professional competence with ethical responsibility.

Accessibility and Inclusivity of Catholic Education

An important theme emerging from both interviews and literature is the Church's commitment to serving not only Catholics but also people of all faiths. Respondents noted that Catholic schools in Nairobi are open to Muslims, Protestants, and non-religious students. A Muslim respondent who attended (an alumni) a Catholic high school reflected:

"I never felt excluded. Yes, we prayed in the Catholic way, but the teachers respected our religion. What mattered was discipline and hard work."

This inclusivity is confirmed by research from Ojo (2017), who observes that Catholic schools in Africa often serve as "bridges of interreligious dialogue" by fostering environments of tolerance.

At the same time, concerns were raised about accessibility for the poor. Several respondents criticized the rising fees in elite Catholic schools, which place them out of reach for ordinary families. A respondent from Mukuru lamented:

"The Church says it serves the poor, but some Catholic schools charge fees that only the rich can afford. We feel abandoned."

This criticism reflects debates in the literature. According to Somerset (2009), faith-based schools in Kenya often face tensions between sustaining quality education and maintaining affordability. While elite Catholic schools

provide world-class facilities, they risk alienating the very populations the Church historically served.

Catholic Healthcare Institutions: Hospitals and Clinics

Healthcare emerged as another critical area where the Church has contributed to social change. Respondents consistently identified Mater Hospital, founded in 1962 by the Sisters of Mercy, as an emblematic institution. Mater's reputation for high-quality care has made it a reference point in Nairobi's health system. A nurse interviewed at Mater reflected:

"Working here, I see how the Church combines professionalism with compassion. We are taught that every patient is a child of God, regardless of their ability to pay."

The Church has also established smaller health facilities in parishes and informal settlements. Clinics run by parishes in Kibera, Kariobangi, and Dandora were frequently mentioned by respondents as lifelines for the poor. A parishioner in Kibera observed:

"If it were not for the Catholic clinic, many of us would die without treatment. The government hospitals are too far, too crowded, and sometimes too corrupt."

These testimonies confirm findings by Olivier et al. (2015), who highlight that faith-based health providers in Africa contribute up to 40% of health services, particularly in underserved areas. In Kenya, Catholic health institutions remain integral to maternal health, HIV/AIDS care, and primary healthcare delivery.

Service to the Poor and Marginalized

The Catholic Church's institutions in education and healthcare were frequently praised for their outreach to the poor. Respondents recalled initiatives such as bursaries for needy students, free medical camps, and subsidized treatments. A single mother in Kayole recounted:

"My son would not be in university today if not for the parish bursary. The Church paid his school fees when I had nothing."

Such initiatives resonate with Catholic Social Teaching, particularly the principle of the "preferential option for the poor" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Scholars such as Deneulin and Bano (2009) argue that this commitment underpins the Church's role in fostering social justice.

However, respondents also noted contradictions. While some institutions serve the poor, others appear to prioritize wealthier clientele. A healthcare worker in Nairobi West remarked:

"Mater is good, but it is expensive. Sometimes we wonder, is it still for the poor? Or has it become like any other private hospital?"

This concern echoes Green et al. (2012), who note that faith-based hospitals in Africa increasingly face pressures of financial sustainability, leading them to adopt business models that compromise accessibility.

Tensions Between Faith and Professional Mandates

Interviews and literature also reveal tensions between faith-based values and professional demands in education and healthcare. In schools, respondents pointed to strict Catholic doctrines regarding sexuality education. A teacher in a Catholic high school observed:

"We are encouraged to teach abstinence, but the reality is that students also need comprehensive sex education. Sometimes the Church's guidelines clash with what we know is needed."

This reflects debates in the literature. Agnew (2011) highlights tensions in Catholic education globally, where adherence to Church teaching sometimes conflicts with evolving social realities.

In healthcare, similar tensions emerged around reproductive health. A respondent who had worked in a Catholic clinic explained:

"We could not provide contraceptives because of Church teaching. Yet women would come begging for help. It was painful to turn them away."

This echoes Olivier et al. (2015), who document how Catholic health institutions in Africa struggle to balance fidelity to doctrine with responsiveness to public health needs.

Contribution to National Development

Despite these tensions, the Church's institutions remain critical to Kenya's national development. Catholic schools have produced leaders in politics, business, and academia. Respondents cited prominent alumni such as former President Mwai Kibaki (educated in Catholic institutions) as evidence of the sector's influence.

Similarly, Catholic hospitals have contributed significantly to Kenya's fight against HIV/AIDS. Mater Hospital, for instance, has been a pioneer in prevention of mother-to-child transmission programs (Ngugi et al., 2014). Respondents emphasized that such contributions demonstrate the Church's role as a partner in achieving Kenya's Vision 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Critical Reflections

The establishment of education and health institutions by the Catholic Church in Nairobi County illustrates the transformative power of faith-based initiatives. Respondents consistently expressed gratitude for the opportunities these institutions provided, especially for marginalized communities. At the same time, concerns about elitism, affordability, and doctrinal rigidity point to the need for ongoing reform.

As one elderly respondent summarized:

"The Catholic Church built schools and hospitals when no one else cared. But today, she must ask itself are these still for the poor, or only for those who can pay?"

This statement captures the paradox at the heart of Catholic institutional mobilization: the balance between service and sustainability, fidelity to faith and responsiveness to changing realities.

Civic Education / Creation of Awareness

Civic education has been one of the Catholic Church's most enduring contributions to public life in Nairobi County, particularly as it intersects with moral formation, community organizing, and the defense of human dignity. Evidence from 15 interviews and document analysis revealed that the Church's civic role extended to awareness-raising on human rights, democratic processes such as elections, constitutional reforms, and peacebuilding. Parish-level catechesis, the work of the Catholic Justice and Peace Department (CJPD), and interfaith collaborations were repeatedly mentioned by respondents as key drivers of civic awareness. As one parish animator noted:

"Our Bible study on Sundays became a doorway to talking about the Constitution, not a detour from it".

This section discusses the Church's civic education efforts comprehensively, situating the findings within wider scholarly and policy debates.

Human Rights Education

Across dioceses, CJPC structures have mainstreamed human-rights literacy in parish Small Christian Communities (SCCs), youth groups, and women's associations. CJPD's mandate explicitly focuses on justice, peace, good governance, and human rights, and its parish-based trainings often use adapted handbooks and Lenten campaign materials to connect biblical themes with constitutional guarantees (Catholic Justice and Peace Department [CJPD], n.d.). One diocesan coordinator stated:

"We begin with human dignity in Genesis, but we always end with Chapter Four of our Constitution and what people can do when those rights are threatened."

The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR) has often partnered with the Catholic church groups in human rights awareness campaigns. Its annual reports document civic education sessions, monitoring of electoral processes, and grassroots human rights training (KNCHR, 2011, 2018). Similarly, the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) ran community newsletters such as *Mizizi ya Haki* ("Roots of Rights"), which were widely distributed in rural and peri-urban areas as the only civic materials available during the 2010 referendum (KHRC, 2011). A youth respondent noted:

"People trust their parish office to host a training more than a hotel hall in town."

The Church also collaborated indirectly with constitutional advocacy groups such as Katiba Institute, which

combined public education with litigation and policy engagement. In one parish, a CJPC volunteer explained: *"We taught what Article 37 means, and then showed the community what to do when a ban on assembly is imposed"*

These civic forums gained additional relevance after a 2025 court ruling affirmed the constitutional right to assemble and demonstrate (Katiba Institute v. Inspector General of Police, 2025).

Yet, scholarship warns against romanticizing the Church's civic engagement. Gifford (2009) argues that the Catholic hierarchy has often reflected elite entanglements, resulting in selective attention to structural injustices. Orvis (2003) similarly warns that civil society groups in Kenya including faith-based actors often focus on urban constituencies, leaving rural communities underserved. One coastal catechist echoed this concern:

"We run many town-based seminars, but the ranching zones and fishing beaches are hard to reach; it's where rights violations are also routine."

Democratic Processes: Voter Education Before Elections

Before elections, the Church pivoted its civic role toward voter education, focusing on voter registration, ballot secrecy, electoral procedures, and combating misinformation. The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) identified religious organizations as central partners in its Civic and Voter Education (CVE) framework (IEBC, 2021). A CJPD officer respondent observed:

"People will ask the parish priest whether their names are on the register before they ever check the portal."

Election observer reports consistently recognize this role. The Carter Center (2018) praised religious leaders' peace messaging in 2017 but noted that fewer organizations conducted voter education during the tense re-run. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM, 2017) similarly observed uneven coverage and late-start voter education campaigns. Respondents confirmed these challenges:

"Training budgets dry up just when we need to translate material into local languages; then we lean on Sunday announcements and WhatsApp audios."

By 2022, the context shifted to digital spaces. EU observers noted disinformation on social media and gendered online harassment of candidates (EU EOM, 2022). A CJPC volunteer explained:

"We taught Form 34A in the church hall, then spent the evening debunking Facebook posts about it"

While voter education improved democratic preparedness, contradictions emerged. Religious leaders frequently emphasized moral responsibility, sometimes verging on implicit endorsements. As one parish animator noted:

"We say 'vote your conscience,' then parishioners ask who that is—there's pressure to go further, and some clergy do"

This tension reflects broader scholarly critiques: while peace messaging is crucial, it risks muting legitimate accountability demands if not paired with substantive engagement on justice (United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2014).

Constitutional Changes

The Church played a dual role during constitutional reform, particularly during the 2005 and 2010 referenda. Parish civic forums explained provisions on devolution, the Bill of Rights, and governance reforms, while pastoral letters critiqued clauses on abortion and Kadhi courts (Daily Nation, 2010). As one diocesan staffer explained:

"We taught the draft cover-to-cover but told people why we disagreed with parts. Parishioners appreciated the honesty even if we differed at the ballot."

Katiba Institute (2021) emphasized that the 2010 Constitution should be seen as a product of broad social struggles, requiring continued implementation and civic vigilance. Mutunga (2007) described the role of religious institutions as "constitution-making from the middle," recognizing both their catalytic and constraining influences. Post-2010, the Church's civic education has shifted toward constitutional implementation, often highlighting rights to assembly, participation, and access to information. For example, CJPD volunteers reported using court cases challenging bans on demonstrations as teaching moments (Katiba Institute v. Inspector General of Police, 2025).

Yet, challenges persist. Regulatory hostility to NGOs such as the suspension of civic education programs in 2016

has sometimes constrained civil society's space (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Respondents described difficulties obtaining permits, with one parish leader saying:

"Some county offices treat a civic forum like a political rally."

Peace building

Kenya's history of electoral violence has made peacebuilding a central strand of the Church's civic education. Respondents cited parish-led forums, interfaith dialogues, and platforms like the Uwiano Platform for Peace and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission's (NCIC) "Elections Bila Noma" campaigns as critical (NCIC, 2022). A women's group leader recalled:

"We convened a mothers' circle after a hate-speech incident; the next Sunday our priest preached on James 3 [the tongue]"

Peacebuilding literature affirms this role. ECES (2023) found that faith-based actors reduced tension during the 2022 elections. However, USIP (2014) described Kenya's 2013 elections as producing a "tense calm," suggesting that peace messaging sometimes suppressed grievances without addressing structural issues. A youth respondent articulated this critique:

"We teach peace, but the young men ask, 'What about land? Jobs?' If civic education doesn't touch those, it feels like we're just asking them to keep quiet."

Recent research highlights women's leadership in faith-based mediation as particularly impactful (Ramadhan, 2024). Respondents affirmed this, noting that women's desks often de-escalated disputes at the neighborhood level, though resource constraints limited scale.

Communication Modalities

The Church's civic education strategies employed diverse methods: Sunday sermons, pastoral letters, parish church council meeting and Small Christian Communities. CJPD's Lenten Campaigns have become particularly significant, integrating scriptural reflection with practical civic steps such as attending public forums and reporting hate speech (CJPD, n.d.). As one respondent put it:

"Our new pulpit is also a group chat"

Observers have urged religious educators to adapt to hybrid analog-digital civic spaces, especially to counter misinformation (IEBC, 2022; EU EOM, 2022).

Critical Reflections

Overall, civic education by the Catholic Church has had profound impact on public awareness of human rights, democratic processes, constitutional change, and peacebuilding. This finding aligns with Uraia Trust's (2019) conclusion that civic education improves citizen participation and accountability. Respondents consistently affirmed that Church-led programs were accessible and trustworthy.

Yet contradictions persist. First, the Church's peace-first rhetoric sometimes downplays justice, a critique emphasized by USIP (2014). Second, its stance during the 2010 referendum illustrates tensions between neutrality and moral guidance (Daily Nation, 2010). Third, the reach of civic education is often uneven, with urban and elite congregations better served than rural and marginalized communities (Orvis, 2003).

As one experienced CJPD trainer summarized:

"We don't replace the state; we accompany citizens to claim it."

This statement captures the Church's role as an intermediary civic educator shaping awareness, fostering peace, and encouraging accountability, while grappling with its own contradictions and external pressures.

Lobbying

In this study, "lobbying" refers to the Church's deliberate, organized engagement with public authorities to influence policy and law in ways that advance justice, human dignity, and social development. Drawing on at least fifteen key informant interviews and document analysis, I treat lobbying as both a set of formal practices submitting memoranda to parliamentary committees, meeting heads of state and cabinet secretaries, issuing

pastoral letters and position papers and an informal moral intervention in public discourse through sermons, media briefings, and interfaith coalitions. As one diocesan Justice and Peace officer put it,

"We try to sit at the table, but when the door is closed, we preach at the door—always respectfully, but firmly."

A lay civic educator echoed this dual strategy:

"You have to have the theology of justice, yes, but you also need the technocracy of a memo"

Across the Kenyan context, the Church's lobbying is institutionalized through the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) and its commissions/ Department most notably the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission/Department (CJPC/CJPD) and Caritas Kenya, the Bishops' humanitarian and development arm (KCCB, n.d.; Caritas Kenya, 2019). These bodies frame public positions, mobilize diocesan structures, and interface with government ministries and legislative committees. The CJPD describes its role as promoting justice and challenging oppressive structures, while "sensitizing individuals, communities, and the whole nation on justice and peace issues" language that situates lobbying within Catholic Social Teaching's concern for the common good and human dignity (CJPC/CJPD, n.d.; Gifford, 2009).

Institutional pathways and repertoires

Episcopal leadership and statements

At the national level, Catholic bishops frequently articulate collective positions on governance, ethics, and policy. These statements pastoral letters, communiqués, press conferences often call for accountability, condemn abuses, and propose concrete reforms. For example, in 2024 KCCB publicly criticized a "culture of lies" in government, linking unfulfilled promises to failures in essential services, including health care; the statement urged truthfulness, service, and policy consistency (ACI Africa, 2024). Such high-visibility interventions represent moral lobbying, shaping agenda-setting and public expectations of officeholders.

"A pastoral letter is our legislative bill in moral language," one bishop remarked, *"and it must be precise—naming the harm and the hoped-for remedy"*

Direct engagement with executive and legislative actors

Bishops and KCCB secretariat officials also meet state leaders to present concerns and recommendations. Media coverage documents, for instance, Catholic bishops' consultations with President William Ruto at State House in April 2024, where governance and social issues reportedly featured (The Star, 2024). Similarly, when the Senate considered the Reproductive Health Care Bill (2019), the KCCB submitted a formal memorandum requesting withdrawal of the bill, arguing constitutional and ethical objections; Church representatives appeared before the Senate Health Committee to defend their position (Vatican News, 2020; Kenya Law, 2019). These practices exemplify procedural lobbying: filing memoranda, giving committee evidence, and seeking executive responsiveness.

"When you table a memorandum, you translate moral claims into legal language—articles, clauses, safeguards," explained a canon lawyer involved in the process.

Development arms as policy interlocutors

Caritas Kenya, established in 1973, and diocesan CJPD units often engage line ministries on social protection, livelihoods, peacebuilding, and humanitarian response. Their "street-level data" from programs and community structures provides the evidence base for policy advocacy—e.g., on targeting safety nets or aligning county plans with SDGs (Caritas Kenya, 2019). Caritas Kenya's sustainable development reporting highlights how Church programs surface inclusion gaps, feeding into national dialogues on leaving no one behind (Caritas Internationalis, n.d.).

"Policy makers will listen longer when you arrive with evidence and not only exhortation," a Caritas program manager noted.

Interfaith and civil society coalitions

Historically, Catholic bishops have joined wider faith platforms to amplify reform agendas. The late-1990s Ufungamano Initiative, a broad interfaith–civil society coalition, played a catalytic role in constitutional reform advocacy, organizing public participation and articulating citizen demands (Kapinde, 2018; Kibwana, 1999). Coalitional lobbying of this sort leverages moral authority across religious traditions to press the state toward inclusion and accountability, even as coalition unity has sometimes been fragile—e.g., disagreements around Kadhis’ courts contributed to Muslim leaders’ withdrawal in 2003 (U.S. Department of State, 2003).

“Coalitions give us reach, but they also test our ability to compromise without losing conscience”

Thematic arenas of lobbying

Constitutional reform and governance

During the 1990s–2000s, Church leaders advocated constitutional overhaul to curb executive excess and entrench rights (Branch, 2011; Gifford, 2009). Ufungamano’s civic forums and petitions pressed Parliament toward a comprehensive review process (Kapinde, 2018). Yet Church positions were not monolithic: in the 2010 referendum, Catholic bishops opposed clauses relating to abortion and expressed concerns around Kadhis’ courts, ultimately campaigning for a “No” vote an instance where lobbying adopted a protective stance on moral doctrine, even as the draft passed (BBC News, 2010). This demonstrates the ambivalence of religious lobbying: at times converging with democratization movements, at other times prioritizing doctrinal reservations over broader constitutional bargains. A senior priest reflected

“We supported reform in principle, but we could not trade away the right to life”

Catholic lobbying around elections often emphasizes peace, integrity, and credible administration. In 2022, bishops publicly called for calm and respect for due process, a pattern observable in previous cycles as well (Nairobi News, 2022). After episodes of state violence, episcopal statements have urged accountability and dialogue e.g., during the June–July 2024 protests against the Finance Bill, bishops condemned killings and called for investigations and national conversation (ACI Africa, 2024). Scholars note both the constructive influence of such interventions and moments of perceived partiality among church elites, especially during the 2007–08 crisis (Hendrixson, 2011; Kofi Annan Foundation, 2014). The mixed record underscores how religious authority can contribute to de-escalation while also being entangled in elite polarization.

Anti-corruption, public ethics, and fiscal justice

Catholic lobbying has persistently targeted corruption as a moral and development crisis. Pope Francis, during his 2015 visit to Nairobi, condemned corruption as a “path to death,” reinforcing local church advocacy for integrity systems (Holy See, 2015). More recently, KCCB has linked fiscal policy to ethical governance—criticizing opaque taxation measures and urging responsible finance to shield the vulnerable; episcopal leaders have discussed these concerns directly with the executive (The Star, 2024; Catholic Mirror, 2025).

“When the budget hurts the poor, it becomes a pro-life issue,” argued a Justice and Peace officer.

Evidence from our interviews suggests that fiscal lobbying is increasingly technical combining moral frames with proposals on transparency, public participation, and social protection targeting.

Education and family policy

The bishops have consistently engaged the Ministry of Education on curriculum content and the role of sponsors in public schools. In 2023, KCCB objected to proposed changes that would dilute the influence of sponsors, framing sponsorship as a historic partnership in value-based education (ACI Africa, 2023). Catholic lobbying has also opposed the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), arguing for age-appropriate, values-based approaches and parental primacy; multiple statements and campaigns marked 2020–2023 (ACI Africa, 2020; Religion Unplugged, 2023). Critics counter that Church opposition undermines efforts to address adolescent reproductive health and rights; here, the Church’s lobbying is normatively contested within Kenya’s plural civic space. In a focused group discussion one parent leader argued,

"We are not anti-education; we are pro-formation,"
while a youth advocate responded,
"Values without accurate health information can be dangerous"

Reproductive health legislation

The Reproductive Health Care Bill (2019) became a focal point of lobbying. KCCB and allied groups submitted a memorandum urging the Senate Health Committee to withdraw the bill, contending that its provisions conflicted with constitutional protections for life and promoted objectionable practices (Vatican News, 2020; Kenya Law, 2019). The bishops' advocacy combined legal argumentation (Article 26 on the right to life) with Catholic bioethics. Supporters of the bill, including women's rights advocates, argued that it modernized reproductive services and protected women's health (Safe Abortion Women's Right, 2020). The episode illustrates both the Church's access to legislative processes and the depth of normative disagreement, with public health and rights frames colliding with religious freedom and conscience protections. As one of the diocesan lawyers reflected,
"Parliament expects evidence and constitutional reasoning; we must present both"

Peace and security

During the 2007–2008 post-election crisis, religious bodies lobbied relentlessly for cessation of violence and a political settlement. While the African Union Panel led formal mediation, Christian and interfaith leaders amplified calls for dialogue and supported community peace efforts (Lindenmayer & Kaye, 2009; Kofi Annan Foundation, 2014). Yet scholarship also records criticism of segments of church leadership for perceived alignment with political factions at various points during the crisis (Hendrixson, 2011). This duality effective moral suasion alongside moments of elite proximity recurs in Kenyan analyses of faith-based political engagement.

"If you stand too close to the fire to warm the crowd, you may be accused of starting it," a veteran peace practitioner observed.

Tactics, access, and leverage

The respondents described five recurring lobbying tactics:

Timed pastoral letters keyed to legislative calendars or public crises, which frame issues in ethical terms and often include concrete policy asks (e.g., calls for independent investigations, fiscal transparency, or specific bill amendments).

"We draft like policy analysts, but we speak like pastors," one communications officer said.

Committee memoranda and hearings, especially on health, education, and justice bills where Church representatives present evidence and propose text changes. The 2019/2020 reproductive health process is a case in point (Kenya Law, 2019; Vatican News, 2020).

Executive meetings and quiet diplomacy, leveraged by the bishops' symbolic authority; public readouts (e.g., April 2024 State House meeting) can amplify commitments and invite public scrutiny (The Star, 2024).

Interfaith platforms (e.g., Ufungamano's historical role; present-day IRCK forums) that broaden constituency reach and reduce confessional polarization around contentious reforms (Kapinde, 2018; Kibwana, 1999; U.S. Department of State, 2003).

Programmatic evidence via Caritas and CJPD networks to substantiate claims about poverty, social protection, or peacebuilding outcomes (Caritas Kenya, 2019).

Access is not guaranteed, however. Respondents noted that invitations and receptivity ebb with political cycles. When doors are closed, media advocacy becomes central.

"If a committee won't hear you, the press will," a diocesan CJPD director observed. Conversely, access can expose the Church to accusations of partisanship. As Gifford (2009) cautions in a broader analysis of Kenyan Christianity, proximity to power brings risks of co-optation and selective moral outrage. This aligns with our interviewees' concern to institutionalize conflict-of-interest rules in Church–state interfaces.

Effectiveness, tensions, and counter-narratives

Assessing effectiveness, interviewees credited Church lobbying with agenda-setting (putting integrity, social protection, and peace squarely on the public docket), procedural improvements (more public participation, committee hearings mindful of faith constituencies), and policy inflections (e.g., revisions or stalls on contentious reproductive clauses; stronger attention to sponsor roles in education). Document analysis supports these claims in part: the Church's memos and statements are cited in parliamentary deliberations and media coverage (Vatican News, 2020; ACI Africa, 2023). Yet outcomes are uneven. The 2010 constitutional referendum proceeded despite episcopal opposition, indicating limits to ecclesial influence when broader coalitions coalesce (BBC News, 2010). Three tensions recur:

First, pluralism vs. doctrine. On sexuality education and reproductive rights, Church positions meet robust counter-lobbying from rights groups and medical advocates. Critics argue that episcopal interventions can constrain public health responses; Church actors reply that child protection and the right to life are non-negotiable. The public record reflects this clash (Religion Unplugged, 2023; Safe Abortion Women's Right, 2020). As Respondent (health professional) put it:

"We need the bishops at the table—but we also need data-driven solutions."

Second, moral authority vs. political neutrality. During crises (e.g., 2007–

2008; 2024 protests), statements can be read through partisan lenses. Scholars document instances when church elites appeared to lean toward particular political narratives (Hendrixson, 2011; Kofi Annan Foundation, 2014). The remedy, several respondents suggested, is procedural: transparent criteria for interventions, cross-party consultations, and consistent denunciation of violence regardless of perpetrator.

Third, elite access vs. grassroots accountability. Bishops' meetings with executive leaders are symbolically powerful but can feel distant to parishioners unless accompanied by feedback loops. Diocesan CJPD forums and parish barazas partially address this, yet our interviewees recommended institutionalizing "downward accountability" for national statements e.g., publishing follow-up matrices and timelines.

"Lobbying must return to the pews," said a youth leader.

Comparative insights and literature dialogue

The Kenyan record reflects broader patterns identified in the literature on religion and public life in Africa. Appleby (2000) and Haynes (1996) note that faith actors can be ambivalently positioned capable of both peacebuilding and polarization. Kenyan cases mirror this ambivalence: the Church helped legitimate constitutional reform and peace processes, yet sometimes reproduced elite divisions (Branch, 2011; Gifford, 2009). Throup and Hornsby (1998) show how religious critiques of authoritarianism formed part of the multi-party opening; later analyses suggest that, in the competitive era, ecclesial voices must navigate greater partisan fragmentation (Hornsby, 2012). During the 2008 crisis, international analyses credited religious leaders with mobilizing moral pressure for dialogue, even as some alignments drew criticism (Lindenmayer & Kaye, 2009; Hendrixson, 2011).

On social policy, the Kenyan Church's stance aligns with comparative Catholic advocacy emphasizing life ethics, family, and subsidiarity in education positions that often collide with secular rights frameworks. The 2019/2020 reproductive health debate and subsequent CSE disputes thus exemplify a recurrent friction between comprehensive rights and confessional ethics a friction that democratic systems must manage through procedural fairness and substantive engagement. Our respondents, even when critical of episcopal positions, acknowledged that religious lobbying has the democratic virtue of public reasoning:

"They force the country to argue about first principles."

Normative contribution and forward-looking recommendations

From a normative perspective, Church lobbying contributes to Kenya's public sphere by sustaining moral vocabularies of the common good, human dignity, and solidarity especially in moments when technocratic policy debate risks losing sight of the vulnerable. The Church's unique assets a nationwide network, trust capital, and the ability to convene—generate leverage in governance debates. At the same time, the study suggests three

improvements:

Evidence-rich advocacy: Expand the use of Caritas/CJPD program data, independent audits, and policy modeling (e.g., social protection incidence, education outcomes) to strengthen claims in memoranda and hearings (Caritas Kenya, 2019).

Transparent engagement protocols: Publish annual lobbying agendas, meeting logs with state actors, and follow-up matrices on government commitments steps that can inoculate against perceptions of partisanship (The Star, 2024; ACI Africa, 2024).

Deliberative bridges: Institutionalize interfaith and civil society dialogue on contested issues (e.g., CSE, reproductive health), piloting citizen assemblies that include parents, teachers, clinicians, and youth. Historical experience (e.g., Ufungamano) shows that broad deliberation can channel disagreement into reforms rather than rupture (Kapinde, 2018; Kibwana, 1999).

A parish youth summed it up well:

"When the Church lobbies with facts, listens with humility, and speaks with courage, even those who disagree know they've been taken seriously."

Speaking Against Authoritarianism

The Catholic Church's role in challenging authoritarian rule in Kenya during the 1980s and 1990s stands out as one of the most defining moments in its history of public engagement. In earlier decades, the Church had largely concentrated on evangelization, social services, and moral formation. However, as the Moi regime tightened its grip on political life, silenced dissent, and manipulated ethnic divisions, the Church gradually stepped into the civic space as a voice of resistance. From pastoral letters to Sunday sermons, and from international advocacy to ecumenical coalitions, Catholic leaders and faithful found themselves at the frontline of democratic struggles. Respondents interviewed for this study emphasized that the Church became "one of the few institutions that could not be banned" (Respondent 04, lay Catholic activist), giving it a unique capacity to articulate grievances and mobilize citizens against state repression. A retired catechist vividly recalled those years, stating,

"In those years- 1980s-1990s, the parish was our parliament; the priest was our MP, and the pulpit was the only microphone not controlled by the state."

The historical background of this confrontation was marked by Kenya's transition into a de facto one-party state in 1969, when opposition parties were outlawed. By 1982, the constitutional amendment declaring Kenya a de jure one-party state consolidated authoritarianism under President Moi. The failed coup attempt of the same year provided a justification for widespread repression, detention without trial, and the silencing of intellectuals and political opponents (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Academic freedom was curtailed, newspapers censored, and critics within government purged (Mutua, 2008). In this environment, churches especially the Catholic Church and the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) emerged as the last remaining public space for dissent and democratic discourse (Branch, 2011; Gifford, 2009). As one retired Justice and Peace official explained,

"The Church filled the democratic vacuum left by a silenced press and a captured parliament."

Within this context, certain Catholic leaders became symbols of resistance. Archbishop Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki of Nakuru remains perhaps the most iconic figure of this period. During the ethnic clashes of the early 1990s, which were widely believed to have been instigated by state actors, Ndingi openly accused government officials of arming militias to terrorize opposition communities (Haugerud, 1995). His prophetic warnings about bloodshed, delivered in sermons and press briefings, pierced through state propaganda and emboldened communities to speak out. A parish elder responded recalled,

"When Ndingi said blood was flowing, we knew the government could not hide its crimes anymore."

Scholars agree that Ndingi's fearless interventions marked a turning point in the Church's direct confrontation with authoritarian power (Gifford, 2009).

Cardinal Maurice Otunga, then Archbishop of Nairobi, also played a significant role, although with a somewhat more cautious style. Otunga's pastoral letters consistently decried corruption, moral decadence, and impunity, framing these issues as both spiritual and political ills. His diplomatic approach at times frustrated younger clergy who demanded bolder confrontation, yet his influence ensured that Catholic resistance retained institutional

legitimacy (Gifford, 2009). Bishop Alexander Muge of Eldoret offered another fearless example. His outspoken criticism of government repression and ethnic favoritism made him a target of intimidation. His sudden death in a car accident in 1990, shortly after a government minister warned him not to travel to Busia, was widely perceived as politically motivated. His death symbolized the risks borne by outspoken clergy and inspired younger priests to continue challenging the state (Mutua, 2008). As one youth leader responded retaliated,

"When Bishop Muge died, we cried but also vowed never to be silent again."

Equally influential was Bishop David Gitari of Mount Kenya East, whose fiery sermons and writings called for constitutional reform and multiparty democracy. His strong critiques of the Moi regime provoked violent retaliation; in 1989, his home was attacked by assailants believed to be linked to state security agencies (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Other bishops, such as John Njenga, Cornelius Korir, and Philip Sulumeti, also raised their voices, lending collective weight to pastoral letters and episcopal statements that condemned repression and called for justice. Their participation demonstrated that the Church's opposition was not confined to a few outspoken individuals but represented a broader institutional awakening.

The strategies the Church adopted were multifaceted. Pastoral letters issued by the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) became a key instrument of resistance. One of the most memorable was the 1992 pastoral letter titled *"A Call to Justice, Reconciliation and Peace"*, which condemned political violence and demanded free and fair elections (KCCB, 1992). These letters, often read in parishes nationwide, functioned as moral manifestos against authoritarianism. Parish sermons also became platforms for political education, embedding the language of justice and human rights into the liturgy. A parish priest remarked,

"You could silence the newspapers, but not the pulpit."

The Church also worked in ecumenical alliances, joining hands with the NCCCK and other faith groups in mobilizations such as the Ufungamano Initiative in the late 1990s, which pressed for comprehensive constitutional reform (Kapinde, 2018). These alliances amplified the reach of Church advocacy and made repression more politically costly for the regime. Furthermore, Catholic leaders engaged with international partners, including the Vatican and global human rights organizations, to draw attention to abuses in Kenya. This international dimension increased pressure on the Moi government to concede to reforms.

The literature on this period largely affirms the critical role played by Catholic leaders in resisting authoritarianism. Branch (2011) highlights how Church leaders filled the civic vacuum created by political repression, while Throup and Hornsby (1998) view the bishops' interventions as instrumental in opening political space for multiparty democracy. Yet, scholars such as Gifford (2009) and Mutua (2008) offer more nuanced perspectives, cautioning against overly romanticizing the Church's role. Gifford (2009) emphasizes that while certain bishops such as Ndingi, were prophetic, others within the hierarchy maintained close ties with the regime or avoided confrontation altogether. Mutua (2008) similarly argues that the Church initially supported state consolidation in earlier decades, only becoming vocal when repression reached unbearable levels. These critiques suggest that the Church's role was neither uniformly heroic nor wholly complicit, but a dynamic blend of both tendencies depending on leadership and context.

During a focused group discussion, respondent testimonies reflected these contradictions.

One activist commented,

"Fr. Kaiser's blood watered the tree of our democracy."

A sister observed,

"The Church was brave, but not united—some priests feared losing schools and hospitals if they opposed Moi."

Another respondent noted that

"Archbishop Ndingi's boldness...gave us hope; when he spoke, we felt protected."

Yet a priest emphasized the ambiguities, stating,

"Some clergy were too close to State House; we must admit the contradictions."

The legacy of this period is complex. On one hand, the Church helped embolden civil society, opposition politicians, and ordinary citizens to demand reform. Its resistance made repression visible and mobilized moral outrage, contributing to the eventual transition to multiparty democracy in 1992 and constitutional reforms in the following decades. On the other hand, the unevenness of Catholic opposition reveals the dual nature of

institutional religion: capable of being both an agent of liberation and a guardian of the status quo. These contradictions remain relevant today, as the Church continues to navigate tensions between prophetic witness and institutional caution.

Ultimately, the Catholic Church's stance against authoritarianism in Kenya during the 1980s and 1990s underscores the potential of religious institutions to act as moral counterweights to political repression. The voices of Ndingi, Otunga, among other bishops, continue to resonate in Kenya's democratic memory. Their courage demonstrated that the pulpit could indeed serve as a platform for justice when all other avenues were closed. As one respondent concluded,

"The voice of the Church must never be for sale; if it goes silent, the poor will have no advocate."

V. Conclusion

From the findings it shows that the diverse strategies employed by the Catholic Church in Kenya to influence social change from independence through the early 21st century have been having impact. Through mobilization, the Church successfully organized communities into Small Christian Communities, youth and women's groups, and self-help initiatives that became vehicles of grassroots empowerment and social solidarity. It further mobilized resources human, financial, and physical to implement development projects, often filling gaps left by state institutions. In education and health, the Church established schools, colleges, universities, and hospitals that have served both Catholics and the wider public, particularly the marginalized. These institutions became not only centers of service delivery but also spaces where social values and civic consciousness were cultivated.

The study also highlighted the Church's role in civic education, where it sensitized citizens on human rights, voter participation, constitutional reforms, and peacebuilding. This dimension demonstrated the Church's capacity to bridge spirituality and political responsibility, using sermons, pastoral letters, and civic forums to foster democratic awareness. Lobbying emerged as another key strategy, with bishops and clergy engaging government leaders to influence policy, defend justice, and resist harmful legislation. While sometimes accused of partisanship or selective engagement, the Church's lobbying has left a discernible imprint on Kenya's governance landscape.

Perhaps the most dramatic contribution was the Catholic Church's bold stance against authoritarianism in the 1980s and 1990s. Figures such as Archbishop Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki, Cardinal Maurice Otunga, among others, provided prophetic voices that denounced dictatorship, state violence, and corruption. Their actions demonstrated that the catholic Church could not only offer charity but also challenge oppressive structures that perpetuated injustice. Respondent testimonies in this study reinforced that, during times of repression, the Catholic Church provided a rare platform for public truth-telling, a "parliament of the people" when official spaces were silenced.

Nevertheless, the findings also revealed contradictions. The catholic Church was not a monolithic actor: while some leaders embodied prophetic courage, others remained silent or aligned with state interests, reflecting the institutional tensions between diplomacy and confrontation. Moreover, although the catholic Church's contributions were significant, they were not without contestation, as some civil society actors critiqued its influence in areas such as reproductive health and comprehensive sexuality education. These complexities underscore that the Catholic Church's role in social change has been both constructive and contested, simultaneously advancing justice while negotiating its own institutional interests.

In conclusion, the Catholic Church has played an indispensable role in shaping Kenya's social, political, and moral landscape. Its strategies of mobilization, institution-building, civic education, lobbying, and resistance to authoritarianism illustrate a dynamic engagement that evolved with historical contexts. While not without limitations, the Catholic Church's interventions provided moral leadership, fostered civic consciousness, and contributed to the broader democratization process. The lessons of this engagement remain highly relevant as Kenya continues to grapple with governance challenges, social inequality, and the demands of a pluralistic democracy.

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