

Military-led urban governance and urban county capacity: Assessing the Nairobi metropolitan services experiment in Kenya (2020–2022)

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<https://doi.org/10.51867/ajernet.7.3.104>

ABSTRACT

Urbanisation has raised governance pressures in many developing countries, especially in terms of service provision, infrastructural development, and crisis response, occasionally revealing the lack of capacity of civilian agencies. The Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) deployed a military-led urban governance arrangement in 2020, the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS), which brought an opportunity to study the contribution of military leadership in enhancing the capacity of Nairobi County. This study examined the impact of NMS on urban county capacity in Nairobi City County through the lens of what is happening in the city under military-led governance. The study used a convergence parallel mixed-methods research design comprising structured questionnaires for 350 residents and semi-structured interviews for 35 purposively selected government officials and county leaders guided by Civil-Military Relations Theory and State Capacity Theory. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in analysing quantitative data, while thematic analysis was used for qualitative data. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis were employed for quantitative data, while thematic analysis was used for qualitative data. The results showed that the respondents observed better service delivery (74.0%), faster pace of building infrastructure (69.8%) and better capacity for responding during crisis (65.5%) during the NMS period. The inferential analysis also showed a strong positive and significantly stronger relationship between military-led urban governance and urban county capacity ($r = 0.742$, $p < .001$) and accounted for 55.1% ($R^2 = 0.551$) of the variation in urban county capacity. The study finds that military-led urban governance can significantly contribute to urban administrative capacity through better coordination within the institutions, effective mobilisation of resources, and swift decision-making. However, it is essential to make these gains concrete within civilian accountable governance systems. The findings support the debate about urban governance and civil-military relations, and the evidence will be used when considering governance reforms to improve urban service delivery and institutional capacity in fast-growing cities.

Keywords: Civil-Military Relations; Military-Led Urban Governance; Nairobi Metropolitan Services; State Capacity; Service Delivery, Urban County Capacity

I. INTRODUCTION

Urbanisation is emerging as one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century that would call for efficient service provision, sufficient infrastructure and good governance in cities. UN-Habitat (2020) report states that 56% of the global population lived in urban areas. This proportion is projected to increase to 68% by 2050. The growing needs for health services, public transportation, housing, sanitation, environmental management and other vital urban services are not being met by existing urban institutions, especially because of rapid urban growth (World Resources Institute, 2021). Effective urban governance is, therefore, playing a key role in delivering better services, building institutional capacity and advancing towards sustainable urban development. The challenges serve to highlight the need for novel governance structures that will increase administrative efficiency and achieve urban resilience.

Governments around the world have taken various institutional measures in response to rising challenges of urban governance (Linke, 2019). While the responsibility for administrative functions is largely civilian, extreme cases that have called military assistance into civilian governance include administrative inefficiency, failure, political unrest, public health crises, natural disasters, and others. Military institutions have distinct capacities, such as disciplined leadership chains, hierarchical functions, logistical capacity, and the ability to mobilise resources quickly, and to decide and act in cooperation with the agencies involved in the governance processes and emergencies (Kalkman & Bollen, 2024). In this regard, armed forces have been contributing to civilian governments during disasters, in the field of infrastructure construction, and in humanitarian assistance, post-conflict reconstruction, and emergency management, and are acting within the scope of law and institutional arrangements.

Many developed nations have minimal civilian-military relations beyond assisting civil authorities in times of emergency. For instance, according to Cohn (2022), the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 prohibits involvement of the

United States military in domestic law enforcement under certain circumstances. Despite this, the Armed Forces were very active in their contributions during Hurricane Katrina and during the COVID-19 pandemic as logistics, emergency responders, and humanitarian responders (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). For the UK, a legal *ex post facto* structure of support to civilian agencies by the armed forces is established by Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) (House of Commons Library, 2023). The experiences highlight that there is a potential for military engagement to have a positive impact on governance, if there are clearly set legal and institutional parameters in which the participation takes place.

In other African nations, military participation in governance encompasses, besides emergency response, infrastructure development, urban planning and public administration. For instance, the Egyptian Armed Forces is central to the planning, designing and execution of large-scale infrastructure projects and urban development programmes since 2013 (Pérez-Houis, 2026; Medhat, 2024). Similarly, Uganda and Tanzania have also been depending on the military institutions to play a supportive role in the development of infrastructure, provision of public services, and rural development when civilian institutions are not fully capable (Czuba, 2024). These interventions have, in most cases, been linked to more efficient projects and more rapid implementation of development projects, but also raised concerns about accountability, civilian control, survival of institutions, and constitutional governance.

The case of Kenya is unique in terms of the study of military engagement in urban governance. Before the formation of Nairobi City County in 2020, Nairobi City and County had a history of governance issues such as lack of adequate infrastructure, congestion, inadequate waste management, poor public service delivery and allegations of corruption. The challenges hampered the ability of the county administration to offer critical services and undermined public trust in urban administration (Architectural Association of Kenya, 2026). The Government of Kenya, in turn, created NMS in March 2020 by transferring certain functions previously carried out by counties to the National Government. Under the leadership of Mohammed Abdalla Badi, Major General, NMS took on the responsibilities of healthcare, transport, public works, urban planning and public utilities.

The NMS experiment presented a governance paradox. Proponents pointed to these military rule benefits: improved discipline, administrative efficiency, inter-agency coordination, infrastructure development, provision of services, and emergency response care during the COVID-19 crisis (Sverdlík et al., 2025). However, critics argued that the operational efficiencies were achieved at the cost of the constitutional principles of devolution guaranteed by the Constitution of Kenya 2010, and at the cost of the loss of democracy, public accountability, and civilian control (Odhiambo, 2025). That brings up a central governance question in the NMS experience: whether it is possible to enhance administrative performance through military authorities without jeopardising democratic authority and civilian control.

There have been only a few studies that have examined the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) operational successes and one that examined the NMS's dilemma on governance (K'Akumu, 2023); another study (Odhiambo, 2025) criticizes the structure of the NMS as “developmental militarism”, while empirical reviews cover its successful turnaround of infrastructural services in the municipal administration, there is little empirical data on governance opportunities provided by KDF-facilitated governance of urban administration. Little is known about its impact on service delivery, infrastructure development, crisis response, institutional coordination, and overall urban county capacity. As a result, there is limited understanding of the role and influence of military-led governance on urban governance in highly urbanising cities.

Against this background, this study addresses the following research question: How did military-led urban governance under the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (2020–2022) influence urban county capacity in Nairobi, Kenya? The study adds to the existing literature on urban governance and civil-military relations in urban development by analysing the results of citizens' perceptions and the experiences of important urban stakeholders in the context of military-led urban administration, and sheds light on the governance opportunities that military-led urban administration presents. The findings are also relevant to discussions about policy and administrative reforms for a more effective and more democratic response to urban governance challenges.

Therefore, the study aimed at assessing the key opportunities created by KDF-led urban governance with evidence from Nairobi metropolitan services (2020–2022). The study built on the existing scholarship on military governance in civilian affairs and gave empirical evidence that can be used to guide public policy, urban planning and governance practice to come up with innovative strategies for urban governance in fast-growing urban county cities.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Kenya's devolved system aims to encourage democratic and accountable exercise of power, self-governance, citizen participation and access to services (Republic of Kenya, 2010). But, governance in the city demands the administrative capacity of institutions to coordinate functions, source required resources and provide for services efficiently. In Nairobi City County, concerns relating to the performance of devolved functions led to an agreement for the transfer of the following four functions; health, transport, county planning and development, and public works,

utilities and ancillary services, to the National Government (Republic of Kenya, 2020). The transfer, which was formalised in the deed of transfer dated 25 February 2020, has resulted in a governance arrangement under Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS), which has raised questions about how effective NMS has been in improving urban administration.

Despite NMS success in governing transferred functions, there is a need to firmly establish the impact they had on improving urban county capacity based on findings from field testing. Issues on the transfer of functions, institutional authority, public participation, and military involvement in civilian roles also came up in the legal challenges to NMS in 2020 (Nairobi City County Government vs Nairobi Metropolitan Services & 13 Others, 2020). Existing evidence, thus, has not been sufficient to prove that NMS has successfully bolstered several aspects of the urban county's capacity, such as service delivery, infrastructure development, crisis response, and institutional coordination. The knowledge gap hinders the evaluation of the lessons that could be transferred from organizational practices to support governance in the devolved urban system of Kenya.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To determine the influence of military-led urban governance on service delivery in Nairobi City County.
- ii. To determine the influence of military-led urban governance on infrastructure development in Nairobi City County.
- iii. To determine the influence of military-led urban governance on crisis-response capacity in Nairobi City County.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review.

2.1.1 Civil-Military Relations Theory

The foundations of Civil-Military Relations (CMR) Theory were established by Samuel Huntington (1957) and subsequently elaborated by Janowitz (1960). The theory is about the relationship between civilian political functions and the army; it stresses that the military has unique organisational capacities but must be constrained by the will of elected civilian government. Huntington (1957), states that military institutions assist in the fulfilment of national goals (principles of professionalism, discipline, hierarchy and efficiency without civilian control). Janowitz (1960), however, highlights a need for a greater interaction between military/government and civilian institutions and that there should be supported, but not replaced, military institutions in public administration.

The theory has relevance to this study especially because of the unusual governance configuration that was created in Nairobi by the establishment of Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS), giving a senior officer of the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) a governance executive responsibility over critical county functions. This was a new plan of administering civilians and meant that a governance paradox had arisen. The improvement in leadership and discipline, coordination, efficiency and quick decision-making were the expectations of military leadership on one hand. However, it also raised concerns about democratic accountability and civilian oversight, as well as respect for the constitutional principles of devolution. As a result, Civil-Military Relations Theory serves to offer an institutional insight into the Ways and Means of how the Military Contingencies can affect the governance outcomes of the governance system; it also emphasises the balance or trade-offs among governance arrangements and administrative efficiency.

2.1.2 State Capacity Theory

State Capacity Theory tries to account for the capacity of government institutions to effectively create policies, call upon the necessary resources, coordinate actors, and provide public goods and services (Fukuyama, 2013). The theory is that effective governance relies as much on political power as on administrative, technical and institutional capacities of the government to execute policies effectively. High state capacity is reflected in effective service delivery, infrastructure development, institutional coordination, crisis management, accountability, and the ability to achieve public policy objectives.

In terms of urban governance, states' capacity also covers their ability to deliver reliable public services, to keep urban infrastructure, to coordinate multiple agencies, and to enact effectively during emergency situations. The NMS experiment was intended to reinforce these factors with central administration, plus military leadership. State Capacity Theory sees enhanced urban county capacity in improved service delivery, improved infrastructure development, improved response capabilities during crises, and better inter-agency co-ordination. In contrast, if such enhancements were accomplished without augmenting the resilience of sustainable civilian institutions, the ongoing ability of county government to operate in the long-term may still be constrained.

2.1.3 Integrating Civil-Military Relations and State Capacity Theory

This study was built on the Conceptual Framework of Civil-Military Emergencies Theory and State Capacity Theory. Civil-Military Relations (CMR) Theory illustrates the governance mechanism linking the increase in civilian authority and delegation of specific county functions to military authority, while State Capacity (SC) Theory illustrates the impact of the governance mechanism on urban county capacity.

The central theoretical claim of this study is that military-led urban governance can increase urban county capacities, which in turn can be achieved through disciplined leadership, effective resource mobilisation, quick decision-making, and better institutional coordination (Janowitz, 1960). These organisational characteristics should enhance service delivery, speed up infrastructure development, ensure an efficient response to crises, and improve administrative performance. According to Civil-Military Relations Theory, the benefits experienced from these efficiencies can also generate institutional friction where there is a reduction in democratic accountability, civilian oversight and/or devolved governance principles. Hence, this study assesses the success of the NMS experiment by investigating whether military-led governance had beneficial impacts on urban counties' capacity and was carried out within a tolerable framework of civilian governance.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Military-Led Urban Governance and Service Delivery

There are a number of governance issues, but also potential administrative benefits, linked to military involvement in civilian administration. In Kenya, recent studies highlight how the developmental militaries have taken a greater part in non-combat tasks such as the management of public institutions and infrastructure (Anguche et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the research considers the prospect of military participation not to be synonymous with better performance in the public sector, and it does raise responsibility issues. The functions transferred to Nairobi, NMS, prior to its establishment covered health services, although official NMS records show that it had a mandate to enhance access to health and other critical services in the city (NMS, 2021). Military-led arrangements might be able to enhance service delivery through administrative mobilisation, but this needs to be evaluated in the empirical sense.

2.2.2 Military-Led Urban Governance and Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure development is also a key area of military-led governance that can be considered. K'Akumu (2025) notes that despite the inconclusive results in terms of effectiveness and accountability, military institutions have increasingly been participating in the provision of infrastructure in Kenya. Nyamai and Schramm (2025) specifically looked at infrastructure development within NMS, and outcomes of their findings suggest that the NMS-led temporary governance structure influenced Nairobi's mobility infrastructure, including walking and cycling facilities in the CBD. They highlight an infrastructure focus of NMS instead of an assessment of urban county capacity, and find that NMS had an effect on infrastructure priorities and implementation. This is the current study that aims to expand this evidence by empirically investigating the relationship between military-led urban governance and infrastructure development in Nairobi City County.

2.2.3 Military-Led Urban Governance and Crisis-Response Capacity

Crisis response is critical to the appraisal of administrative capacity since emergencies call for speedy coordination, mobilisation of resources and prompt implementation of decisions. In Nairobi, the evidence indicates that the NMS continued to function during the COVID-19 period and engaged in some Public Health interventions, such as delivering masks and water to non-reached communities (NMS, 2021). The latest evidence also shows that NMS organised interventions related to water during the pandemic, such as providing free water in informal settlements and scaling up borehole access (Kasper, 2026). Most of the existing studies and institutional accounts, however, report on a range of specific initiatives and do not provide empirical evidence of whether military-led governance actually improved the overall capacity of the government to respond to the crisis. This study fills the gap by analyzing how the military-led urban governance affected the military's capacity for responding to the crisis in Nairobi during the NMS.

2.3 Research Gap

Previous research explored the role of the military in civilian administration and service delivery and infrastructure development, such as the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) experiment. The study of the developmental militarism in Kenya was done by K'Akumu (2025) and Nyamai and Schramm (2025), who focused on infrastructure development under NMS. These studies, however, failed to systematically establish the impact of the military-led urban governance on service delivery, infrastructure development and crisis-response capacity in the devolved governance system of Nairobi. Furthermore, this research has largely been non-experimental and with respect to specific interventions or descriptive assessments, but not experimental testing of these dimensions simultaneously. In

this study, the gap has been met by a study on the effects of military-led urban governance on urban county capacity in Nairobi City County from 2020 to 2022.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study was of a convergence parallel mixed-methods design that involved quantitative and qualitative methods investigating the effect of managing cities by the military towards urban counties' capacity from 2020 to 2022 under NMS. The design was suitable since it allowed it to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, ensuring all data that had been gathered covered the study phenomenon. The findings were derived from quantitative data in which the respondents carried out direct observation since it provided answers regarding service delivery, infrastructure development, crisis response and institutional coordination, besides which qualitative data was collected by key informants to give explanations in the context of the respondents' observations. The two methods were combined to enrich the findings of the study in terms of depth, credibility and overall validity.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Nairobi City County, Kenya's capital and largest urban centre, located between 1°09' South and 1°28' South latitude and 36°04' East and 37°10' East longitude. Nairobi is the political, commercial and administrative centre of the country, with a total land area of 696 km² and a population of 4.4 million in the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census. The county is divided into 17 sub-counties, namely Westlands, Dagoretti North, Dagoretti South, Lang'ata, Kibra, Roysambu, Kasarani, Ruaraka, Embakasi North, Embakasi East, Embakasi Central, Embakasi West, Embakasi South, Makadara, Kamukunji, Starehe and Mathare. Nairobi was chosen as it is the sole County with NMS active in the period from 2020–2022 under the Deed of Transfer and was thus considered an appropriate case study to explore the impact of the military-led city governance on urban County capacities.

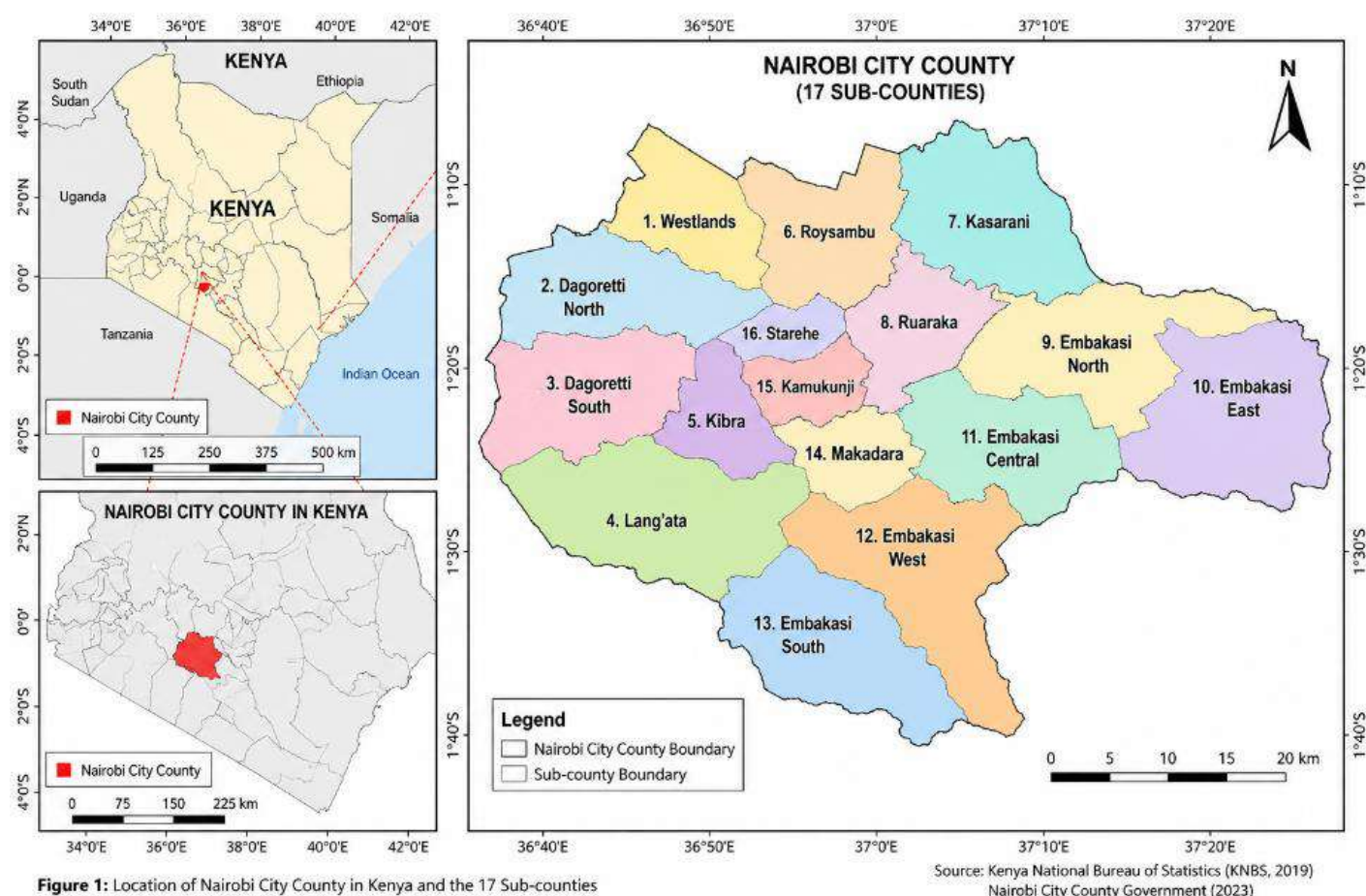


Figure 1

Location of Nairobi City County in Kenya and its administrative sub-counties

Source: Adapted from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2019) and the Nairobi City County Government (2023).

3.3 Target Population

Adult residents of Nairobi City County (18 years and above), government officials and Members of County Assembly (MCAs) with knowledge of the implementation of the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) for the period from 2020 to 2022 were the target population. The study population was sampled from the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census data of Nairobi City County with a population of 4,397,073 persons. The knowledge of NMS changes in governance and service delivery was embedded in the accounts of government officials directly involved in implementation and elected Leaders at the County level, and, for this reason, they were included. These were the groups that formed the study population for the study sample selection.

3.4 Sampling Procedures

The study was conducted in Nairobi City County, the operational area of the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS), between 2020 and 2022. The target groups included people living in Nairobi, government officials and County elected leaders. The sample size was calculated at 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error and a population proportion of 0.5 from Cochran's formula (1977). Representative participation was achieved using probability sampling throughout Nairobi County. Moreover, 20 government officials and 15 elected county leaders interested in NMS implementation were purposefully sampled and added to the sample, which brought the total respondents to 435.

3.5 Sample Size

Sample size for this study was calculated from Cochran (1977) formula for determining sample size for large populations at a 95% level of confidence, 0.5 population proportions (p) and a 5% margin of error. The formula yielded a minimum sample size of 385. A total of 350 adult residents of Nairobi City County were randomly recruited; 20 government officials and 15 elected county representative leaders who had direct experience or knowledge of the implementation of the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) were purposively selected. This population of respondents allowed for the collection of both expert and 'in-the-public-eye' perspectives.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Where:

n = required sample size

Z = 1.96 (95% confidence level)

p = 0.5 (estimated population proportion)

q = 1 – p = 0.5

e = 0.05 (margin of error)

$$n = \frac{1.96^2(0.5) * (0.5)}{0.05^2}$$

$$n = 384.16 \approx 385$$

Therefore, the target population of this study was 385 respondents, and the 35 interviewees were additional qualitative participants, giving a total of 420 participants.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through quantitative and qualitative approaches to fully examine the effect of military-led urban governance on urban county capacity. Quantitative data was gathered by administering structured questionnaires to sampled adult householders in Nairobi City County to collect their perception on the service delivery, infrastructure development, crisis response and coordination of institutions during the NMS period. Semi-structured interviews with purposively selected government officials and elected county leaders were held to collect qualitative information and deepen understanding of the implementation and governance of NMS. In order to improve the validity and reliability of the research instruments, the instruments were pre-tested before the main survey. Confidentiality has been ensured throughout the study, and the data collection process has been carried out following the principle of informed consent with all the participants.

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The quantitative data collected were coded and entered, cleaned and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). All the required descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation) were used to summarise the perceptions of the respondents on military-led urban governance and urban county capacity. All transcribed data (qualitative) were subsequently analysed using the method of thematic analysis as obtained from semi-structured interviews. The raw data from the interviews were coded, and related answers formed themes, which were then linked to statements made by delineation of research outcomes and the theoretical framework.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance of this study was granted by the National Defence University–Kenya, and a research permit by the National Commission on Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) before the data collection began. The study was also done with the necessary government authorities' and Nairobi City County administration's consent. This study was explained and pre-consented to before the participants took part. Full informed consent was obtained, and respondents could leave the study without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by omitting the personal information of the participants from the data, and all information gathered was used only for academic research purposes.

Triangulation: To collect data, a methodological triangulation technique was used, and results were subsequently subjected to qualitative analysis so that the results of both methods would be combined in interpreting the data. The quantitative findings generated quantitative evidence of how services were delivered, how infrastructure was built, how institutional coordination occurred, how they responded to crises and how efficiently they were managed, with the qualitative findings providing explanations, as expounded by key informants, for these patterns. The findings from both sources of evidence were then compared and integrated, which increased the credibility and validity of the findings, indicated the overlap in the findings and explained inconsistencies when they appeared. The triangulation enhanced the overall findings on the impact of urban governance by the military on urban county capacity building in the case of the Nairobi Metropolitan Services experiment.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

The study aimed at assessing the key opportunities created by KDF-led urban governance under NMS (2020–2022). To meet this objective, structured questions were asked and results presented in the following sub-sections;

4.1.1 NMS and improved Service Delivery

Effectiveness in service delivery is an important measure of governance efficacy since it shows how well public institutions can provide citizens with the essential services they rely on, optimally and on time. Before the advent of Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS), Nairobi City County had perennial problems in healthcare, waste collection and disposal, road maintenance and other public services, such as lack of institutional coordination and inefficiencies. Given that the delivery of this service was a key anticipated goal of NMS, it was important to evaluate the state of residents' perception of service delivery improvement during NMS's operation.

Respondents were asked “*In your opinion, did service delivery improve during the period NMS was in operation?*” and results were as presented below;

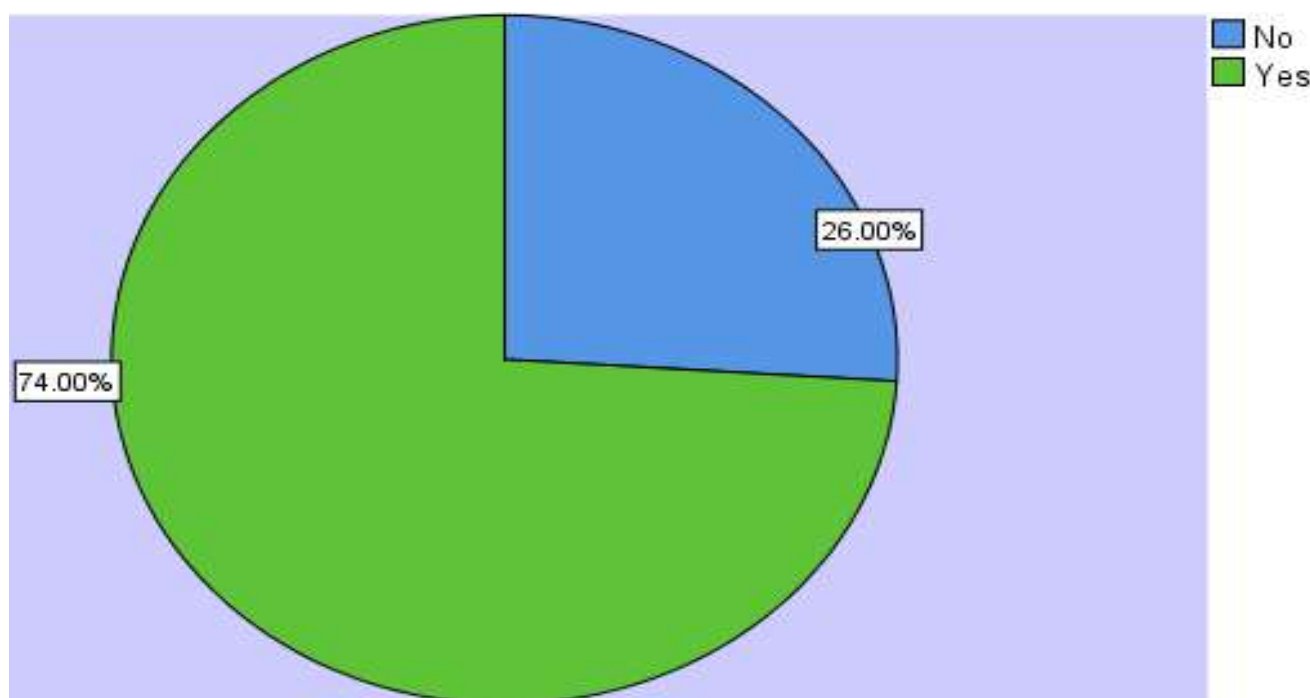


Figure 2
NMS and improved Service Delivery

As indicated in Figure 1, many respondents indicated that service delivery has improved in the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) period (with 259 respondents or 74.0%) and no improvement at all (with 91 respondents or 26.0%). These results indicate that respondents linked better service delivery to processes of governance reform enacted during the military-led administration, rather than merely representing satisfaction levels, and thereby also revealed their expectations of the reformed government. The respondents uniformly linked these improvements to the adoption of centralised decision-making, better inter-agency co-ordination, better project monitoring and more effective mobilisation of resources, all of which have mitigated bureaucratic delays that previously hindered service provision.

One government official explained:

"In the past, projects were held up due to multiple steps in need of approval and overlapping responsibilities among several departments before NMS. NMS placed greater reliance on a single-line command, agency responsibilities were well defined, and decision-making was for the most part centralised. This vastly cut down delays in service implementation" (Government official 01, Interview, May 2026).

Similarly, an elected county leader observed:

"The biggest shift was not just the number of projects undertaken, but it was the increased level of co-ordination between institutions. Previously isolated departments now shared information, resources and implementation timelines for a quicker and more predictable service delivery." (County Assembly Member 01, Interview, May 2026).

The results show that the military itself had less impact than the building blocks of governance that centre on the military, such as the existence of centralised coordination, administrative discipline, and institutional capacity. However, the 26.0% that reported no gains in governance indicated the gains were not realised throughout Nairobi, suggesting that there may be spatial or sectoral variation in outcomes of service delivery within the city. The results back State Capacity Theory, which argues for enhanced institutional coordination and implementation capacity as a precondition for individual governance development, and Civil-Military Relations Theory, which posits that civil-military relations can be institutionalised to boost administrative performance without abolishing the overall governance gap.

4.1.2 Most Improved Sector under NMS

The developmental efforts in those sectors which liked the most present useful information on the direction in which military control has had the most obvious effect upon the services being provided in urban areas. The Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) took over essential County operations such as water and sanitation, waste management, roads and infrastructure services and health services. Therefore, assessment of attitudes at the public level on the performance of the sectors was also crucial for identifying where governance interventions were seen as most effective and where the greatest improvement was seen over the NMS operational period. Respondents were asked "Which sector do you believe experienced the most improvement under NMS?" and results were as presented in the table below;

Table 1

Most Improved Sector under NMS

Sector	Frequency	Percent
Health services	56	16.0%
None of the above	18	5.1%
Roads and infrastructure	168	48.0%
Waste management	66	18.9%
Water and sanitation	42	12.0%
Total	350	100.0%

Table 1 shows the perceptions of respondents regarding the most improved sector under the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS). The results show that Roads and Infrastructure had the most noticeable improvement with 48.0%, whereas the improvement for Waste Management was at 18.9% and 16.0% for Health Services. Water and Sanitation was 12.0%, while 5.1% said that none of the sectors improved. These results suggest that the development of infrastructure was the most visible and most widely recognised accomplishment of military-led governance in the NMS period. This perception is reinforced by qualitative answers from key informants. One government official said:

"Most visible change during NMS was road construction and rehabilitation. Residents were able to physically see roads being expanded, paved and marked, and this provided confidence in the system." (Government Official 02, Interview, May 2026).

Similarly, a local elected leader noted:

“Even critics of NMS concede that road networks did improve considerably. The rate of infrastructure development was faster than before.” (County Assembly Member 02, Interview, May 2026).

These qualitative insights complement the quantitative findings by highlighting the visibility and time speed of infrastructure projects as a key factor in influencing the perception of the public. The results are consistent with other earlier works, which Oliveira et al. (2024) revealed that road construction and public works were among the most obvious outputs of NMS. They also resonate with Governance Theory, which is the theory that centralised coordination can help improve efficiency in infrastructure delivery. However, consistent with Civil-Military Relations (CMR) Theory, it is being that although operational efficiency was achieved, the vested power within military leadership structures was a concern for democratic accountability. Thus, the findings indicate that infrastructure gains under NMS were substantial but occurred in a governance model which generated institutional debate.

4.1.3 Speed of Infrastructure Development Under NMS Compared to the Previous County Administration

Administrative efficiency is linked to the development of government infrastructure, as evidenced by the speed at which it develops, showing the capacity of governance institutions to plan, coordinate, and implement infrastructure projects on time. Before the formation of Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS), the slow pace of infrastructure implementation was often blamed on the slow implementation process, poor institutional coordination and limited resources. Therefore, the researcher identified it as crucial to find out the improvement in the pace of infrastructure development under the military rule as compared with the previous county government. Participants were asked, “How would you describe the speed of infrastructure development under NMS compared to the previous county administration?” and their responses were as indicated below;

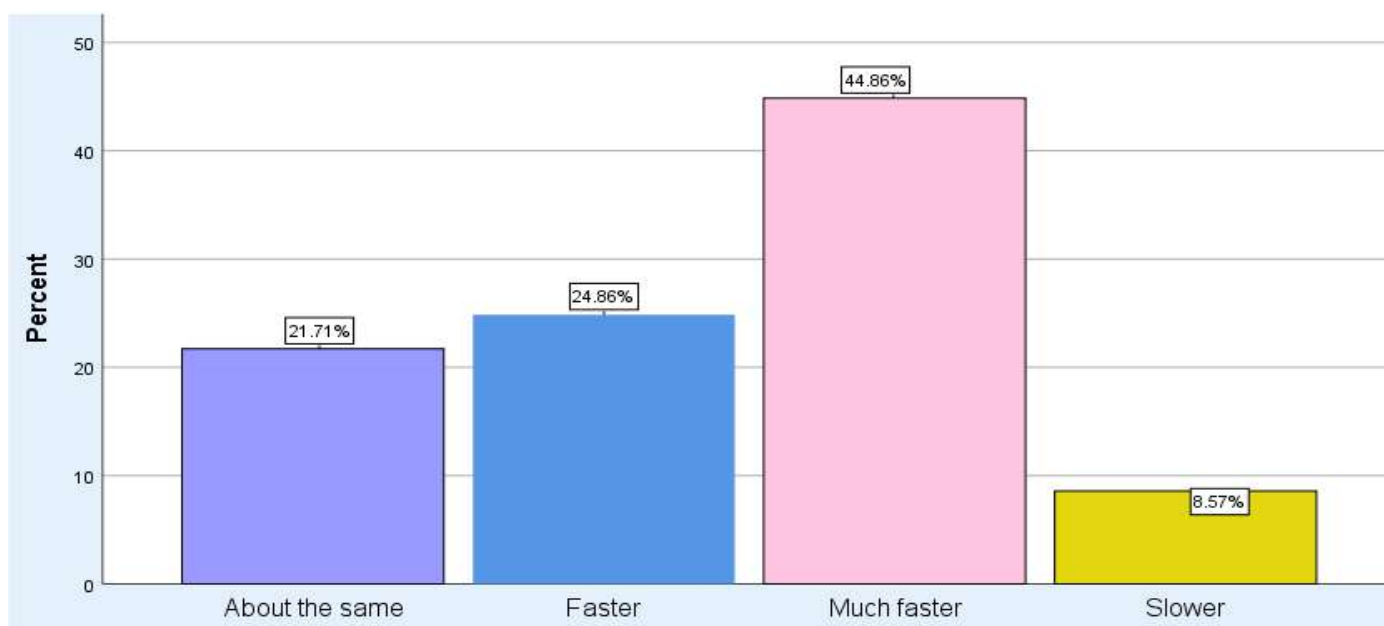


Figure 3

Speed of Infrastructure Development Under NMS Compared to the Previous County Administration

Figure 2 displays the perceived speed of infrastructure development during NMS in comparison with the old county government. The results indicate that 44.9% found that development was much faster, and 24.9% found that it was faster. In this case, 69.8% of the respondents felt that there was an increased speed of infrastructure delivery under NMS. Conversely, 21.7% responded that it was equally so, and only 8.6% felt that it was slower. This means that there was a high sense of public awareness regarding increased efficiency under military rule. Quantitative results are supported by qualitative feedback from interview participants. One of the senior officials of the government noted:

“With NMS, projects that had stalled for years were completed in months. The organisational hierarchy minimised bureaucracy.” (Ministry Official 01, Interview, March 2026).

Similarly, a county assembly member stated:

“The pace was unprecedented. The completion of roads that had been pending since 2017 was made possible through the NMS period.” (County Assembly Member 03, Interview, March 2026).

These responses demonstrate the centralised command and administrative training aspect in the quick project implementation. The research is aligned with previous research, such as Zakariya et al. (2022), that reported accelerated growth of infrastructure under the NMS government. They also agree with Governance Theory, which implies that centralised coordination can enhance the efficiency of implementation in complex urban systems. Nevertheless, as noted

by the Civil-Military Relations (CMR) Theory, more speed and efficiency can be obtained at the cost of participatory decision-making and civilian control. Thus, although NMS seems to have improved the performance of operations, the trade-offs (institutional) are a significant issue in governance.

4.1.4 NMS Enhanced Nairobi's Ability to Respond to Crises

The government's actual performance in the face of a crisis is an important indicator of governance capacity; it reflects preparedness, coordination and efficient mobilisation of resources during a crisis. Nairobi has been hit by numerous crises such as COVID-19, floods, disease breakouts and infrastructure failures that can only be addressed through timely and coordinated interventions. To evaluate gains in Nairobi's institutional coordination and response skills during the operational period of NMS, it was pertinent to understand whether Nairobi residents noticed any improvements in the city's institutional responsiveness to emergencies. Respondents were asked, "Do you believe NMS enhanced Nairobi's ability to respond to crises (e.g., COVID-19, floods, public health emergencies)? The results were as demonstrated below;

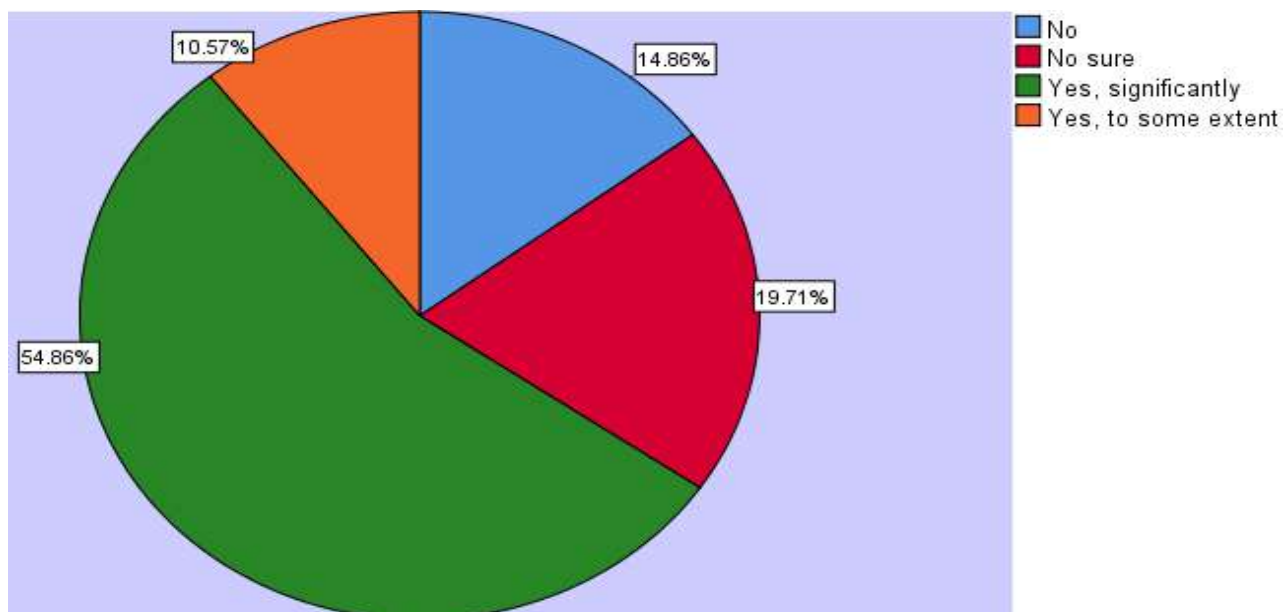


Figure 4
NMS Enhanced Nairobi's Ability to Respond to Crises

Figure 3 shows the perspectives of the respondents regarding whether NMS gave Nairobi a better response capability to a crisis. The majority (54.9%) affirmed that NMS played a significant role in better crisis response, and only 10.6% stated that it played a somewhat significant role. Collectively, 65.5% had a positive opinion. Nevertheless, only 22.6% said yes, and 12.0% said no. These results indicate that many of the residents noted the enhancement of the emergency coordination, prompt decision making, and responsiveness of functioning during the NMS period. Interviews uphold this perception. One senior government official noted:

"In times of crisis, the decision-making process became centralized and quicker. The bureaucratic back and forth was decreased, and this enhanced the response time." (Government Official 03, Interview, March 2026).

Similarly, a local leader observed:

"The COVID-19 organization and emergency road repair were arranged faster than the former system." (Elected Leader 01, Interview, March 2026).

Findings can be related to previous empirical investigations related to military involvement in city governance during a crisis. As an example, Omweri and Siambe (2024) discovered that the effect of military deployment in times of urban disturbance was most effective at addressing the events with promptness and effectiveness and facilitating increased coordination between response bodies. On the same note, Pérez-Houis (2026) noted that disaster interventions that were spearheaded by the military within India enhanced logistical efficiency and faster execution of emergency services. These literature reviews indicate that centralised structures of operations are likely to result in increased crisis responsiveness in the short term. The different responses (22.6%) and the unsure (12.0%) responses in this study also indicate that perceived improvement was not even felt in the diverse communities of Nairobi which are diverse.

4.1.5 Ratings of Public Perception of NMS During its Operational Period

This subsection sought to determine the extent to which participants agreed with the following statements regarding the opportunities created by KDF-led governance under NMS (2020–2022)? Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement using the Likert scale, 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree. Results were as presented in the Table;

Table 2

Perceptions on Opportunities Created by NMS (n = 350)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	SD
NMS improved efficiency of service delivery	6.3% (22)	10.6% (37)	10.3% (36)	26.6% (93)	46.3% (162)	3.96	1.248
Infrastructure development accelerated	6.9% (24)	8.3% (29)	14.3% (50)	23.1% (81)	47.4% (166)	3.96	1.252
Strengthened crisis response capacity	5.2% (18)	8.9% (31)	14.1% (49)	26.5% (92)	45.2% (157)	3.98	1.192
Improved coordination in service delivery	5.2% (18)	10.6% (37)	12.3% (43)	29.5% (103)	42.4% (148)	3.93	1.198
Increased public confidence	6.0% (21)	8.6% (30)	12.0% (42)	33.8% (118)	39.5% (138)	3.92	1.183
Enabled rapid project execution	6.6% (23)	8.9% (31)	10.3% (36)	33.3% (116)	40.8% (142)	3.93	1.209
Overall Average						3.95	1.214

The perceptions of the respondents on the opportunities NMS had established within the urban governance of Nairobi are captured in Table 2. The results show that the measure of agreement was high most of the time, where the mean of all six indicators lies in a range of between 3.92 and 3.98, and the average of the six indicators is 3.95 (SD = 1.214). Notably, 72.9% (Agree + Strongly Agree) said that NMS increased efficiency in service delivery, and 70.5% said that infrastructure development sped up. Correspondingly, 71.7% admitted that they had stronger crisis response capacity, and 73.7% indicated that they could implement projects faster when it was under military leadership. These findings indicate an overall positive measurement of operational performance during the NMS period.

This trend is supported by qualitative results. According to one government official:

“The NMS command structure minimised delays. Projects consumed in approval-to-implementation time reduced significantly.” (Government Official 04, Interview, March 2026).

A county assembly member similarly observed:

“Coordination could be seen. The structures of the departments, which used to be working independently, now report in the same structure.” (Elected Leader 02, Interview, March 2026)

These findings suggested that, in the eyes of the participating communities, governance in the urban areas under the command of the military service was perceived as enhancing the capacity of the urban counties in coordination, administrative discipline and speed of project implementation. This is a typical governance resulting in other situations of military aid to civilian governance. For De Ridder and Wotela (2023), military participation was found to enhance inter-agency coordination and delivery of the emergency response in an urban crisis in South Africa. Similarly, in India, the military command system improved the coordination of logistics and prompt deployment of disaster-response programmes, as noted and observed by Hanspal and Behera (2025). The outcome of military-backed infrastructure projects was that Binns et al. (2023) found such projects were completed in a shorter period of time as a result of their centralised planning and efficient resource mobilisations in East Africa.

However, the Nairobi Metropolitan Services experiment goes beyond these experiences in one aspect – management of devolved urban functions like transport, health, public works, and urban planning under military leadership has been beyond temporary relief. The overarching governance mandate also attests to the potential role those military institutions can play in supporting urban administrative capacity, in addition to their role in supporting crisis response. However, history in other countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, and beyond warns that military-led government might provide operational effectiveness, but maintaining democratic accountability, civilian oversight, and institutional sustainability are still necessary for longer-term government effectiveness. Therefore, the NMS experience should not be viewed as a best practice for governance more generally, but as a situation in which opportunities and governance trade-offs arising from military involvement in civilian governance can be learned.

4.2 Inferential Analysis of the Relationship between Military-Led Urban Governance and Urban County Capacity

The descriptive statistics provided in the foregoing sections of the report only laid the scene of the respondents' perception on the theme of city governance by the military under the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) without determining if there is any statistically significant relationship between the study's variables. Inferential statistical methods were used to get some idea of the degree to which urban governance operations by the military could condition the capacity of the urban counties. Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation was used for relationship analysis, and multiple linear regression analysis was used to identify the contribution of the dimensions of urban governance, which were commanded by soldiers, to the urban county capacity.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation Matrix between Military-Led Urban Governance and Urban County Capacity (Illustrative)

Variables	1	2
1. Military-led Urban Governance	1	
2. Urban County Capacity	0.742**	1

Note: $r = 0.742$, $p < .001$ (2-tailed), $N = 384$. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation analysis was performed to see if there was a statistically significant relationship between military-led urban governance and urban county capacity. The results show a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between the variables military-led urban governance and urban county capacity ($r = .742$, $p < .001$). This suggests that there was a positive relationship between the enhanced military's governance in cities and the enhancement of urban county capacity. The stronger the relationship, the greater the respondents' perception of more effective military-led governance is, and they perceived the institution's capacity to deliver services, to be able to implement infrastructure, to be efficient and to coordinate inter-agency relations was stronger.

The results are consistent with the hypotheses of the State Capacity Theory, which suggests that better institutional coordination and administration lead to better governance and public service delivery (Fukuyama, 2013). Similarly, Civil-Military Relations (CMR) theory also posits that important features of the military, such as discipline, uniformity, coordination and a rigid hierarchical command chain, can enhance administrative performance by being embedded in civilian governance (Huntington, 1957).

The results are also consistent with previous empirical studies. In South Africa, King (2022) showed that by engaging in urban crisis management, military involvement facilitated the coordination of institutions, while Katumanga (2023) noted that military support to infrastructure programmes in East Africa facilitated resource mobilisation and promoted project implementation. The present study, however, shows that the positive correlation between military-led governance was found with regard to wider elements of urban county capacities in the devolved governance system in Kenya, unlike in these earlier studies.

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 4

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Urban County Capacity

Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig.
Constant	0.913	0.284	—	3.216	.001
Military-led Urban Governance	0.781	0.041	0.742	18.953	<.001

As shown in Table 4, military-led urban governance was found to be positively and significantly related to urban county capacity ($\beta = 0.742$, $t = 18.953$, $p < .001$), with betterment of military-led urban governance associated with greater urban county capacity. The overall fitness of this regression model is illustrated in Table 5, which shows the per cent of variance explained and the overall significance of the model.

Table 5

Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	Sig.
.742	.551	.550	359.13	<.001

The regression model always generated a strong positive correlation ($R = .742$) and had R^2 and Adjusted R^2 of .551 and .550, respectively, explaining 55.1% of the variation in urban county capacity, as indicated in Table 5. The model was found to be statistically significant ($F = 359.13$, $p < .001$), which means that military-led urban governance

has statistical significance in predicting urban county capacity, and the regression model has a relatively good fit to the data.

To explore if the military's urban governance had a significant impact on the urban county capacity, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. A regression model was statistically significant ($F(1,382) = 359.13, p < .001$), meaning that the political context of military-led urban governance accounted for a significant amount of the variance in urban county capacity. The resulting R^2 was .551, suggesting that roughly 55.1% of the variation in the capacity of the counties could be explained by military-led urban governance and the other 44.9% by other factors not represented in the model. The regression coefficient for Military-led urban governance was positive and statistically significant ($B = .781, \beta = .742, t = 18.953, p < .001$). This suggests that for each unit of improvement in military influence on urban governance, the capability of urban counties increased by 0.781 units. The standardised beta coefficient ($\beta = .742$) reiterates that military-led urban governance was a strong positive influence on urban county capacity.

The results also confirm the State Capacity Theory that posits that stronger institutional coordination and administrative ability boost governance effectiveness and public services. Similarly, the Civil-Military Relations Theory implies that military organisational features, such as discipline, centralisation of authority, accountability and effective mobilisation of resources, foster the capacity to implement within civilian governance. The results also support empirical evidence found by Sriram et al. (2022) about the strengthening of disaster governance in India as evident through the military command organisations, which improved the coordination and use of logistics. Similarly, K'Akumu (2025) suggests that Kenya demonstrates that military institutions have the capacity to temporarily bolster public institutions where civilian public institutions are not operating effectively. However, the quantitative results in this research ought to be considered in conjunction with the qualitative findings, which concluded that the military's leadership did improve in operational efficiency, but had some limitations in terms of democratic accountability, civilian control, and in terms of sustainability of the military dictatorship beyond the Nairobi Metropolitan Services mandate.

4.3.1 Interrelationship between the Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The inferential finding is used to supplement the qualitative evidence collected from key informant interviews. There is a statistically significant positive relationship and predictive influence between military-led urban governance and urban county capacity, as evidenced by narratives from the interviews, which indicated that the Nairobi Metropolitan Services period brought about improved institutional coordination, centralized decision-making, disciplined project supervision, rapid acceleration in mobilizing financial and technical resources and better inter-agency collaborations. These types of governance mechanisms account for statistical relationships in a legitimate manner. The study is therefore enhanced not just by the quantitative results, which showed that military-led urban governance was a key driver of urban county capacity, but also by the qualitative results, where the authors revealed how the capacity of urban counties was improved through the mechanism of military-led urban governance. This is balanced by negative qualitative results that raise questions about how much democratic accountability and civilian involvement are reflected in governance arrangements, and suggest that military-based governance is not sustainable after the transition from the Nairobi Metropolitan Services.

4.4 Discussion

The results show that the military governance-led service under Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) contributed significantly to strengthening capacities at the urban county level in areas of service delivery, infrastructure development, crisis response, and institutions coordination. Participants strongly affirmed that a centralised decision-making process, administrative clarity and effective resource mobilisation facilitated project implementation and enhanced public service delivery. This finding is consistent with what State Capacity Theory states: States must be able to coordinate institutions, mobilise resources, execute policies efficiently and provide public goods effectively (Fukuyama, 2013). Military leadership improved these aspects of state capacity through the introduction of disciplined administrative systems and organised institutional processes into the NMS experience.

The results are in line with those of previous investigations regarding military participation in government. Banerjee and Webeck (2024) noted that military structures improve administrative efficiency and service output through well-defined hierarchical structures and quick decision-making processes. In a similar way, Khan and Jaffari (2023) determined that, during an emergency, military organisations facilitate a faster response from the institutions by establishing coordination at a central level and providing sufficient logistical support. The current study builds on this finding by showing that, in the context of devolved governance arrangements in Kenya, military-led governance brought not only operational efficiency, but it also facilitated institutional coordination among county departments, which increased county operational capacity generally at the urban level.

This study also helps to validate the theory of Civil-Military Relations, which posits that when military institutions are set within constitutional and institutional norms and frameworks, they can make positive contributions to civilian government. Huntington (1957) sees military professionalism as being based on discipline, a hierarchy, and

an organisation that works efficiently, and Janowitz (1960) stresses co-operation between civilians and soldiers rather than the supremacy of the armed forces. These are both views that are represented in the NMS experience. The Kenya Defence Forces did not set up civilian institutions but rather adopted practices that would enhance coordination, accountability, and implementation, which would operate within a legal framework created by the Deed of Transfer.

A significant institutional dynamic in improving the capacity of urban counties was found to be institutional coordination. The constant consensus from the interview respondents was that NMS eliminated unnecessary delays in bureaucracy, improved institutional coordination, and clarified the institutional responsibilities. The findings align with those of Kirichu et al. (2024), which showed that the coordination between these public institutions can improve the level of service provision and governance under devolved government systems. In a similar fashion, Mamokhere (2022) postulates that institutional capabilities get heightened when governance mechanisms encourage participation, accountability, and resource efficiency. This current research builds on this work by elucidating another way to improve coordination within urban governance systems, namely through military organisational practices.

The results for infrastructure development also complement past empirical studies. The NMS period revealed a positive impact on road building and public works as well as improved implementation speed. This finding was also reported by Czuba (2024) and Melete (2024), who reported to speed up infrastructure delivery and improved administrative efficiency during the NMS experiment. In contrast, whereas the previous research focused mainly on attainment, this one provides empirical evidence that better institutional coordination and implementation mechanisms led to urban county capacity improvement in the process of achieving the operational objectives.

In terms of emergency response, it was found that an integrated approach with command structures helped to speed up emergency actions and increase coordination, especially in promoting the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The results align with what Khan and Jaffari (2023) found: In times of emergency, military organisations are highly functional due to the well-defined command structure, logistics infrastructure, and swift deployment of personnel and resources. The current study provides further evidence from Kenya demonstrating that these organisational capacities not only improved emergency responses but also everyday governance functions in an urban context.

The study also revealed serious governance issues; however, despite these positive developments. Participants in the interviews expressed that democratic accountability, civilian control and institutional sustainability following the end of the NMS mandate must be ensured. These are in agreement with Janowitz (1960) recommendation for perpetual civilian control of military institutions, which is in force if the relations are to be effective. They also uphold current literature on governance, which focuses on strengthening governance capacity through the military, as a shotgun exercisable in the short term only and not for long-term urban governance. Therefore, it is important to consider the effectiveness of military-led governance as complementary and not alternative to civilian governance.

The research findings of this study can provide contributions to the theory of Civil-Military Relations and the theory of State Capacity in terms of indirect contribution to strengthening the outcomes of good governance, because military institutions can contribute to strengthening the state in the form of strengthening Civil-Military Relations by improving institutional coordination, administrative discipline, implementation, and mobilisation of resources. This research empirically shows how military-led governance affects urban county capacity under a devolved governance system, in contrast to previous works which analysed military governance or urban governance alone. The results thus offer new evidence from which it can be deduced that organisational measures implemented in military institutions may result in better urban governance and foster the strengthening of state capacity if they are being done in a constitutional environment which maintains accountability and civilian supervision of government.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored how military-led urban governance (MLUG) under Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) impacts urban county capacity in Nairobi City County from 2020 until 2022. The results confirmed that military administration, to a significant degree, bolstered capacity, specifically providing more effective institutional coordination, efficiency and improvement of infrastructure, services, and crisis response in urban counties. The study also revealed that these improvements were attributable primarily to inter-agency coordination, mobilising resources efficiently, disciplined project management, and centralised decision-making. The quantitative and qualitative results consistently showed that, indeed, the efficiency of the organisations, but not military leadership itself, was the key determinant of better governance results during the NMS period.

The findings of the study indicate that strong institutional capacity is the most important aspect of effective urban governance, not the institution that is carrying out administrative power. The NMS experience showed that governance results can be enhanced by the development of effective implementation systems, efficient coordination systems among public institutions, and simplified administrative procedures. The results thus validate the tenets of State Capacity Theory and Civil-Military Relations Theory, providing evidence that the organisational functions of the

military can contribute to enhancing civilian governance if these are carried out in a constitutional and legal framework. The study also finds that the sustainability of urban governance depends on the presence of robust civilian institutions that will ensure the sustainability of those governance practices without losing democratic accountability, constitutionalism and devolution.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study calls upon GOK to create clear legal and institutional systems that will outline the protocols that govern the role of the military in municipal governance in times of emergencies and/or when county governments face high levels of institutional capacity gaps. The involvement must be temporary and have a clear, specific, and defined mandate, and should only be used for task areas where the Kenya Defence Forces have comparative institutional strengths such as infrastructure implementation, project coordination, logistics and emergency response. Military involvement must be under civil control and should be realised under constitutional and legal provisions supervised by Parliament and under public scrutiny; frequent accountability and review should be maintained so as to ensure the safeguarding of democratic governance and the principles of devolution.

The study also recommends that the county governments adopt those elements of governance, such as inter-agency co-ordination, results-oriented project management, efficient resource mobilisation and streamlined administrative decision-making, which were noted as contributing to the success of the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS). These practices should be planned into wider public sector reforms, leadership development programmes, and institutional capacity building initiatives to build solid public sector civilian governance and make it more effective. Future studies should explore the sustainability of the governance reform introduced in the NMS and explore other Nairobi-type governance options that can result in good governance and service delivery in other counties in Kenya and similar developing-countries contexts.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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