

GOVERNANCE AND FUNCTIONALITY OF CHILDREN'S PUBLIC OPEN SPACES IN NAIROBI CITY

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ABSTRACT

Public open spaces (POS) are important for children's physical, social, and cognitive development. In rapidly urbanising cities such as Nairobi, access to safe and functional open spaces is uneven among neighbourhoods. This study examines how governance influences the availability, safety, and usability of public open spaces for children, using political ecology theory to explain disparities across neighbourhoods.

The study sampled three neighbourhoods in Nairobi City to represent different socioeconomic contexts: high-income (Lavington), middle-income (Buruburu), and low-income (Huruma). A mixed-methods approach included surveys, FGDs, KIIs, field observations, and spatial analysis, engaging 444 respondents (208 children, 70 parents, 166 other open space users). Purposive sampling was used to sample key institutions based on their relevance, including Nairobi City departments (Talents, Skills Development and Care; Green Nairobi; Built Environment and Urban Planning), sports subcounty officers, ward managers and local user groups.

The findings of this study show that functionality of POS depends more on

governance and financing than on the presence of physical infrastructure. In Huruma informal settlement and Buruburu neighbourhood, informal volunteer-based governance, irregular funding, lack of recurrent budgets, and absence of structured participation result in unsafe, poorly maintained, and unattractive spaces. Children reported broken play equipment, lack of supervision, and exclusion from decision-making. Parents cited safety risks as a major reason for discouraging unsupervised play. In contrast, Jaffrey Sports Club in Lavington, managed by a trained team with sustained financing and structured user engagement, provided safe, clean, and engaging environments.

The findings of this study demonstrate that unequal governance and resource allocation produce disparities in children's public open spaces. Without reforms to funding and participatory planning, these disparities will worsen, increasing the likelihood of obesity among children and limiting progress toward SDG 11.7 and equitable urban development.

Keywords: Governance, Public Open Spaces, Children, Functionality, Urban Policy, Nairobi.

INTRODUCTION

Public open spaces (POS), including parks and playgrounds are important aspects of urban life. They provide not only environmental and aesthetic value but also serve as key infrastructure for recreation, social interaction, and physical and mental well-being. For children, these spaces are particularly vital. They support imaginative play, emotional expression, peer bonding, and physical development. The importance of such

spaces is enshrined in global frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which affirms every child's right to play, and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11.7, which calls for inclusive, safe, and accessible public open spaces, especially for vulnerable populations like children.

Globally, the governance of children's public open spaces is increasingly recognised as a matter of rights, equity, and urban sustainability. Initiatives such as UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Programme and UNICEF's child-responsive urban planning frameworks emphasise participatory design, inclusive access, and intersectoral coordination. These programs advocate for child-centred governance that integrates children's voices into planning and decision-making processes. However, implementation of these programs remains uneven. In many cities, especially in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia, public spaces are underfunded, poorly maintained, or privatised, limiting access for vulnerable groups including children.

In Africa, rapid urbanisation has intensified the strain on public infrastructure. The East African Community Child Policy (2016) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child both emphasise the need for children participation and protection in urban development. Yet, across the continent, informal settlements often lack designated play areas, and existing spaces are frequently unsafe or contested. Studies from Nigeria, Angola, and South Africa reveal that children in low-income urban areas often rely on informal or multifunctional spaces such as streets, vacant lots, or stairways for play, exposing them to environmental hazards and social risks (UNICEF, 2012).

Kenya's Vision 2030 and the Constitution of Kenya (2010) affirm the right to a clean and healthy environment, including access to public amenities. Article 42 of the Constitution states that every person has the right to a clean and healthy environment, and the State is obligated to safeguard this for present and future generations (Republic of Kenya, 2010). Nairobi has historically recognised the importance of public open spaces; the 1948 Nairobi Master Plan allocated 27.5 percent of the city's land area for these uses (Obudho & Aduwo, 1992). However, this commitment has not been sustained. The city's population has grown from just over 11,000 in 1900 to an estimated 5.8 million in 2025 (World Population Review, 2025). This growth has outpaced infrastructure development, resulting in the encroachment of public open spaces and chronic underfunding of public amenities.

The distribution and quality of POS in Nairobi reflect broader patterns of socio-economic inequality. In high income neighbourhoods like Loresho, children enjoy access to clean, secure, and often privately managed open spaces. Middle-income areas such as Nairobi West have under-maintained public open spaces with limited investment. In contrast, low-income settlements like Kibera often lack formal play areas altogether. Children in such low-income areas resort to using streets or unfenced plots that are frequently unsafe, unlit, and contested by other uses such as vending or waste disposal (Makworo & Mireri, 2011). This spatial inequity is not only a planning failure,

but also a governance failure. It reflects the absence of inclusive policy frameworks, participatory planning, and equitable resource allocation. Moreover, children are rarely recognized as legitimate urban stakeholders (Gerow, *et al.*, 2024). Their voices are rarely included in planning processes, and their needs are often subordinated to commercial or political interests (Wechsler, 2024).

Despite these challenges, community-led initiatives have emerged as important counterforces. Programs like UN-Habitat's Changing Faces Competition and grassroots groups such as Friends of Open Spaces have revitalized neglected areas through participatory design and local stewardship. These efforts demonstrate the potential of civic engagement and co-governance. However, they often operate independently of formal governance structures and lack the scale, funding, and institutional support needed for long-term sustainability (Tehlova, 2019).

While existing literature highlights the challenges of POS in Nairobi, it often treats these spaces as generic urban amenities without explicitly analysing their governance or their role in children's lives. Studies by Mwaniki, *et al.*, 2011 and UN-Habitat have documented the effects of urban expansion and poor maintenance, but few have examined how governance structures such as institutional coordination, budgetary priorities, and stakeholder participation directly influence the functionality and accessibility of POS for children.

This study addresses that gap by investigating the governance and functionality of children's public open spaces in three socio-economically diverse Nairobi neighbourhoods: Huruma (low-income), Buruburu (middle-income), and Lavington (high-income). The study explores how governance models affect the design, safety, accessibility, and maintenance of spaces intended for children. It also evaluates outcomes such as usability, child satisfaction, and safety perceptions.

By aligning with Kenya's Vision 2030 and international urban development goals, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on urban governance in sub-Saharan Africa. The study advocates for models that recognise children as rights-holders and active participants in shaping their urban environments.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine how governance models influence the functionality, safety, and inclusivity of children's public open spaces in Nairobi.
2. To assess the effect of financial management practices on the maintenance, sustainability, and quality of children's public open spaces.
3. To evaluate the role of stakeholder engagement and community participation in the governance and management of children's public open spaces.

Theoretical framework

Public open spaces such as parks and playgrounds are important components of urban systems. They provide recreation, foster social interaction and promote health by reducing stress and encouraging physical activity (Woolcock, *et al.*, 2010). For children, these spaces are critical for physical, cognitive and social development. Hart (1979) links safe play environments to exploration and creativity, consistent with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises the right to play (United Nations, 1989). UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Programme (2020) identifies POS as central to SDG 11, while studies show that well-designed spaces strengthen children's health and social skills (Moore, 1990).

Urban Political ecology (UPE) provides a useful perspective for examining how POS are produced and accessed. It focuses on how governance, power and economic priorities shape access and exclusion to public open spaces. Governance models such as collaborative approaches (Ansell & Gash, 2008) and polycentric management (Ostrom, 2010) emphasise shared responsibility, yet weak institutions, political interference and resource constraints undermine them. The loss of 50 acres of City Park in Nairobi City to private development for instance illustrates how decisions shaped by unequal power compromise public resources (Makworo & Mireri, 2011). Although NIUPLAN (2014) and the Nairobi City County Public Open Spaces Bill (2021) seek to address these challenges, enforcement of these initiatives remains weak. From a political ecology perspective, achieving SDG 11.7 which calls for inclusive and accessible public spaces requires addressing structural power imbalances that shape urban land use. Decision-making and investment patterns in Nairobi favour high income, leaving informal settlements underserved.

Child-centred urban planning frameworks, such as UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (2004), highlight the value of involving children in designing safe and accessible spaces. Evidence links such spaces to reduced obesity and stronger social skills (CABE Space, 2004; Moore, 1990). In Nairobi, initiatives like UN-Habitat's Changing Faces Competition have created child-focused spaces in Mathare, but these remain isolated community efforts rather than part of systemic planning. Rapid population growth and informal settlement expansion have intensified pressure on the limited POS available in the city (Mwaniki *et al.*, 2011; World Population Review, 2025).

Previous research in Nairobi City has focused on open spaces as general amenities, with little attention to how governance failures and political decisions shape their availability, safety and usability for children. Guided by political ecology theory, this study examines how governance structures and power relations influence the distribution and functionality of POS in three Nairobi neighbourhoods. It highlights the implications for children's access and supports urban policy aligned with SDG 11.7 and Kenya's Vision 2030.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods survey design to assess disparities in governance of public open spaces in Nairobi City County. Three neighbourhoods were sampled to reflect socioeconomic diversity: Lavington (high-income), Buruburu (middle-income), and Huruma (low-income). Huruma, a low-income informal settlement, features publicly managed POS with limited resources, complemented by private sector funding. Buruburu, a middle-income neighbourhood, relies on publicly managed POS but faces challenges related to maintenance. Lavington, a high-income neighbourhood, is characterized by privately managed spaces which provide superior amenities but restrict access to certain amenities. This sampling enabled a comparative analysis of how governance influences POS accessibility, quality, and usability across diverse urban contexts.

Both primary and secondary data sources were used. Primary data was gathered from surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and field observations. Secondary data was obtained from Nairobi City County's open space inventory (UN-Habitat, 2020), policy documents, and planning reports, which provided baseline information on the spatial distribution and characteristics of public open spaces.

The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula to ensure statistical representativeness across the three neighbourhoods. Stratified random sampling was used, with strata based on neighbourhood income category. Data collection took place between April 11 and April 17, 2023, coinciding with the school holidays to maximise children participation. Surveys and observations were conducted between 9:00 and 17:00 on both weekdays and weekends to capture variations in use. The sample comprised 444 participants, including children aged 9–12 years, their parents, and other open space users. At the open space level, participants included children, parents, and other users present during the survey. At the county and institutional level, participants included space managers, urban planners, sports officers, and ward administrators involved in open space management.

Table 1: Distribution of Questionnaire Respondents

Category	Huruma	Buruburu	Lavington
Children (aged 6–14)	73	71	64
Parents	23	25	22
Other POS users sampled within the sampled space	35	38	32
Other POS users sampled outside the sampled space	21	21	19
Total	152	155	137

Structured questionnaires, adapted from the Neighbourhood Environment Walkability Scale (NEWS), were used to collect quantitative data on space availability, perceived safety, and usage patterns from children and parents. The NEWS tool has been widely applied in urban studies to assess neighbourhood-built environments and their influence

on physical activity, including in African contexts (Oyeyemi, *et al.*, 2013). Each questionnaire contained 20 Likert-scale items and achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, indicating high internal consistency.

Qualitative data were obtained through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). The KIIs, conducted with three ward administrators, urban planners, and public open space (POS) managers, gathered insights on governance mechanisms, including budgeting processes, maintenance schedules, and enforcement of land-use regulations. FGDs were held in each neighbourhood with 8–10 participants drawn from parents and other POS users. Discussions explored perceptions of functionality, safety, access barriers, and community-driven suggestions for improvement. An observation checklist was used to assess the physical condition of open spaces, focusing on cleanliness, surface condition, and available amenities. Scores provided a basis for comparing conditions across neighbourhoods. GIS tools were used to conduct spatial analysis, drawing on Nairobi City County's open space inventory. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS v.26 to produce descriptive statistics (means, percentages) comparing availability, safety, and usability across income categories. Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs underwent content analysis, with manual coding into categories such as "safety concerns" and "infrastructure deficits." Observational scores were aggregated to create comparative profiles for each neighbourhood.

Ethical approval was obtained from Kenyatta University's Ethics Review Committee. Informed consent was obtained from parents, and assent was secured from children. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality maintained through anonymisation. Limitations included potential recall bias in self-reported data and seasonal variations in space conditions, which were mitigated by triangulating survey responses with observation and GIS data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Governance Model

Across the three study areas, the management of public open spaces showed a clear gap between formal policy structures and practice. Management of children's public open spaces in Nairobi lies with the County Government through the Department of Talents, Skills Development, and Care, specifically the Youth, Talent and Sports sub-sector. However, findings from all respondent groups including children, parents, other users, and county officials, showed that this formal structure does not translate into effective management on the ground. In low- and middle-income neighbourhoods, public spaces were managed by interim committees or volunteers rather than trained staff.

In Huruma and Buruburu, governance was informal, fragmented and lacked accountability. County officers confirmed that these areas relied on ad hoc groups, with no legal mandate, and very limited resources. Local coaches and volunteers mainly handled scheduling and litter collection but lacked the skills and funds to repair

equipment or organise structured activities. As a result, equipment was left broken for long periods and there was no supervision for children. In contrast, Jaffrey Sports Club in Lavington provided a structured model. A trained 15-member management team oversaw the facilities, which were clean, safe, and well-organised. This model was supported by strict operational guidelines.

Children's views reflected these differences. In Huruma and Buruburu, 81 percent reported broken equipment, 74 percent felt unsafe due to lack of supervision, and many described being pushed out by older youth. In Lavington, 92 percent of children expressed satisfaction with cleanliness, supervision, and the variety of activities at the open space. Parents confirmed these concerns with 85 percent in Huruma and 93 percent in Buruburu citing safety risks and poor management as the main reasons they discouraged unsupervised play. Other POS users in Huruma and Buruburu areas highlighted frequent conflicts over space, poor coordination, and lack of County Government presence in low-income areas, while those in Lavington valued the predictability and safety that formal governance provided.

The County Director of Sports acknowledged the lack of operational budgets, limited staff, and poor enforcement of maintenance responsibilities. They pointed to the absence of a dedicated unit to manage open spaces at the sub-county level as a key barrier. These accounts from officials and users confirm that limited government investment and reliance on informal volunteer models have created conditions where public spaces deteriorate quickly.

Viewed through an urban political ecology lens, these findings show that the uneven functionality of children's public open spaces is not just the result of weak capacity, but of how resources and authority are distributed across the city. Political priorities and institutional decisions concentrate funding, trained staff and enforcement capacity in high-income areas such as Lavington, while leaving Huruma and Buruburu dependent on informal groups. This imbalance in governance leads to spatial exclusion and makes public open spaces in low-income areas unsafe for children. These findings confirm that governance strongly influences the functionality of public open spaces. Similar studies in African cities have shown that informal and poorly resourced governance structures produce unsafe and low-quality spaces (Cilliers et al., 2013; Muhoro et al., 2018). In contrast to research from high-income contexts, where volunteer-led initiatives often enhance outcomes (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2010), this study shows that in Nairobi, reliance on untrained, informal groups without legal authority results in inconsistent management and unsafe conditions for children.

Financial Management and Sustainability

Findings of this study show that public open spaces in low- and middle-income areas of Nairobi are constrained by weak and inconsistent funding. Funding is focused on one-off capital projects rather than sustainable operational budgets.

In Huruma, county government officers reported that KSh 60 million was allocated in 2023/24 for upgrades and KSh 15 million in 2024/25. County officials reported that these funds were entirely used for construction and new equipment. None was set aside for recurrent maintenance. In Huruma, the sports ground received a basketball court and Wi-Fi connection through support from *World Friends*, a non-governmental organisation. The Wi-Fi subscription was covered for one year, after which the County Government was expected to assume maintenance responsibilities for both the court and the internet service. Members of the interim management committee expressed doubt that the County would sustain these services, citing past instances where newly introduced facilities quickly fell into disrepair due to lack of follow-up funding and technical support. Among children using the space, 68 percent reported that the new play equipment broke down within months. 72 percent of parents and 65 percent of other POS users sampled within the space said that dusty, unsafe grounds re-emerged soon after upgrades. 59 percent of other POS users sampled outside the space described a recurring pattern where facilities receive attention only during short-term projects, then deteriorate until the next capital injection.

In Buruburu, the Director of Sports confirmed that no budget allocation was made in both fiscal years of 2023/2024 and 2024/2025. 78 percent of parents and 66 percent of children reported that the grounds had unsafe surfaces and non-functioning play structures. Among other POS users sampled within the space, 71 percent said the absence of investment left the facilities degraded, while 64 percent of other POS users sampled outside the space noted that volunteer committees lacked resources to maintain the area without county government support.

By contrast, Jaffrey Sports Club in Lavington operated on a self-sustaining model supported by membership fees, rentals, and sponsorships. The club management noted that this model covered all operational costs and allocated about 27 percent of annual revenue to maintenance. Among children using the space, 88 percent reported that equipment was in good condition, while 92 percent of parents expressed confidence in safety and standards. However, 61 percent of other POS users observed that user fees for facilities such as the gym restricted access to families who could afford to pay, limiting inclusivity.

These findings align with earlier research showing the importance of recurrent funding and lifecycle budgeting for public spaces (UN-Habitat, 2016) and contrast with evidence from high-income contexts where decentralised funding and community trusts sustain neighbourhood parks (Rigolon, 2017). In Nairobi City, the absence of planned recurrent budgets combined with donor-driven or capital-intensive projects results in a cycle of rapid deterioration after investment.

These results highlight how financial decision-making reflects wider patterns of power and inequality. Budget priorities concentrate resources in a few capital projects, while maintenance that is essential for sustained usability remains unfunded. This governance

structure benefits well-organised, fee-based clubs in high-income areas while leaving low- and middle-income neighbourhoods dependent on irregular interventions. The result is a form of structural exclusion where investment decisions shape not only the physical condition of spaces but also who can access safe, functional facilities over time.

Stakeholder Engagement and Community Ownership

The study found that stakeholder engagement in the management of public open spaces is minimal in low- and middle-income areas and largely limited to informal arrangements. Across Huruma informal settlement and Buruburu neighbourhood, community involvement in planning and decision-making was weak, and there were no formal mechanisms for consultation between management groups and the County Government. Parents and other users reported that decisions on upgrades, repairs, and programming were made without their input. Volunteer committees in the two public open spaces confirmed that they had no influence on budgeting, land use decisions, or the timing of improvements.

In Huruma informal settlement and Buruburu neighbourhood, the subcounty sports officers acknowledged that there were no formal mechanisms for consultation between management groups and the County Government. Among parents, 74 percent reported that decisions on upgrades, repairs, and programming were made without their input, while 69 percent of other POS users sampled within the spaces confirmed that they were not consulted on any management decisions. Among other POS users sampled outside the spaces, 63 percent reported no knowledge of any structured engagement processes. Volunteer committees' members consulted for this study stated that they had no influence over budgeting, land use decisions, or the timing of improvements.

Children, the primary users of these open spaces were also consistently excluded from decision-making. 76 percent of children in Huruma informal settlement and 72 percent in Buruburu neighbourhood said they had never been consulted on design, maintenance, or activities of the spaces they use. When asked about their priorities, children highlighted secure fencing, adequate lighting, designated pitches, waste bins, and organised activities. However, 81 percent of the children expressed no confidence that their suggestions would be acted upon by the County Government. Parents also expressed this frustration, with 78 percent in both neighbourhoods noting that facilities were delivered without community consultation and then quickly deteriorated due to a lack of follow-up. 67 percent of other open space users described the spaces as unplanned and unsafe, reinforcing a perception of neglect.

In contrast, Jaffrey Sports Club in Lavington adopted a structured participatory model. The club management noted that the club conducted regular surveys, held open forums, and used feedback from children and parents to guide programming and maintenance priorities. Among parents, 91 percent said these practices created a sense of shared responsibility and stronger ownership, and a further 88 percent of other POS users

sampled within the space agreed to this finding. Among children, 84 percent reported that they could request changes to games, equipment, and schedules, and 79 percent said their suggestions had led to actual improvements. However, 61 percent of other POS users observed that while the participatory model was effective for members, the club's private status meant its benefits were limited to those who could afford membership fees, particularly for amenities such as the gym.

These findings align with global research showing that participatory planning improves user satisfaction and functionality (Rigolon, 2017) and with African studies linking the lack of community engagement to poorly designed and maintained spaces that fail to serve children effectively (Mwau, *et al.*, 2020). This study extends the evidence by showing that, in Nairobi City's low- and middle-income areas, exclusion of children occurs not only at the planning stage but throughout the entire lifecycle of the space spanning from budgeting to daily management.

These results illustrate how power relations, as understood through an urban political ecology lens, shape the distribution, control, and quality of urban environmental resources. In Nairobi, decision-making authority is concentrated within County Government structures that are often disconnected from the everyday realities and voices of communities, particularly children. This centralised control, coupled with limited participatory mechanisms in low-income areas, increases spatial inequalities and privileges neighbourhoods with stronger political and economic influence. For children, the presence of a public space alone does not guarantee benefit; its value depends on sustained management, predictable financing, and governance processes that recognise them as legitimate stakeholders. Without these elements, public open spaces in low- and middle-income areas remain unsafe, poorly maintained, and underused, promoting cycles of exclusion.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the functionality, safety, and inclusivity of children's public open spaces in Nairobi are determined primarily by how these spaces are governed and financed. In Huruma and Buruburu, informal management, irregular and short-term funding, poor maintenance, and the absence of user participation have produced spaces that are unsafe and unattractive to children. In contrast, the structured management model at Jaffrey Sports Club in Lavington that is supported by sustained financing and active engagement with children and parents has created a safe, clean, and engaging environment.

If current governance patterns continue as Nairobi's population grows, gaps between publicly managed spaces and private facilities will widen. Open spaces in low- and middle-income areas will become increasingly unsafe, overcrowded, and neglected, leaving children with few safe places to play. This will reduce opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and learning, deepen health inequalities, and exclude children from low-income households from spaces that are essential for their

development. Over time, these conditions are likely to contribute to rising rates of childhood obesity and other lifestyle-related health problems. Such trends threaten the achievement of SDG 11.7 and the goal of equitable urban development.

Recommendations

Provision of Basic Facilities: It is recommended that Nairobi City County prioritize the installation of essential facilities such as fencing, public toilets, and street lighting in underdeveloped public spaces like Buruburu and Nairobi West. Fencing will enhance security and prevent encroachments, while public toilets will improve hygiene and convenience, particularly in high-traffic areas. These improvements, along with basic amenities like benches, trash bins, and signage, will increase the functionality, safety, and attractiveness of public spaces.

Preventing Vendor Encroachments and Enhancing Functionality: The provision of clear signage, street furniture, and periodic enforcement can help maintain order, while engaging vendors in planning and offering rewards for cleanliness and organization can foster cooperation. These measures balance vendor livelihoods with pedestrian safety and the functionality of public spaces.

Strengthening Open Space Governance: To streamline governance, it is recommended to decentralize management by creating smaller, localized teams for each public space (through open space management committees). This will improve decision-making efficiency and responsiveness, ensuring that the unique needs of each space are addressed. Additionally, investing in training and professional development for existing staff will enhance their capacity to manage these spaces effectively.

Fostering Public-Private Partnerships: Local partnerships with government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector are crucial for funding and improving public spaces. Encouraging Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), where private property owners enhance pedestrian access and integrate public infrastructure, can be further incentivized by offering tax breaks for companies adopting public spaces for maintenance. This fosters collaboration, improves space quality, ensures sustainability, and alleviates the financial burden on the City Authority.

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