

# The Role of Research in Promoting Effective Public Participation in Kenya

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## Abstract

Public participation is a fundamental principle of our democracy and has evolved into one of the critical conditions for programs and projects implementations. Kenya has gradually shifted from centralized to decentralized system of governance over the years. Despite widespread support for devolution and participatory development, a people-centered development, Kenya has not done well in public participation. For instance, Open Budget Survey (2021), world's only independent, fact-based research instrument that assesses public access to central government budget information using internationally accepted criteria for the public to participate in the national budget process ranked Kenya 31(out of 100) on public participation. This is below the sufficient score of 61 and above. The objective of this paper was to explore the role of research in promoting effective public participation. The paper used meta-analysis technique in analysis. Researchers see decentralization as a necessary but not sufficient condition for involving a diverse range of stakeholders in law making, development and policy interventions. Research evaluation, like any other intervention, provides the opportunity to determine whether the approach is effective or to learn from previous experiences in order to improve the intervention or the way it is implemented in the future. Evaluation is critical in determining whether or not a fair process was established or whether or not the opinions of participants were accurately and fairly represented in a decision-making process. According to the study, county leaders should embrace research findings, undergo effective training, strengthen good communication, and build democratic social networks in and economic analysis, and leaders should focus on good governance through accountability in their processes and systems to foster public trust and confidence through streamlined policy issues that adequately address community problems.

**Keywords:** Effective Public Participation, Research Evaluation, Kenya

## 1. Introduction

The right to participate in public affairs is a political principle that has been acknowledged as a human right. The national values and principles of good governance in Kenya are listed in Article 10(2) of the country's constitution as (a) patriotism, national unity, power sharing and devolution, rule of law, democracy, and public participation (Republic of Kenya, 2010). Public participation is the process by which individuals respond to public concerns, express their views on matters that directly affect them, and take charge of changes in their communities. Public participation has evolved into a requirement for

attracting projects and programs as well as a necessary condition for their implementation. However, it is evident that not all Counties, government agencies and ministries use consultation processes on an equal basis. Public participation is the active involvement of the local community in the decision-making and execution of development projects (White, 1992). Citizens are the most valuable resource in development planning and implementation, because they know and understand their own needs and how those needs can be met. This definition is supported by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) which further highlights that, in public participation, people themselves are afforded an opportunity to improve their conditions of living, with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative (Davids et al., 2005).

Public participation is an enabling tool that gives the citizens the power and ownership in governance of institutions. Governments at all levels have started to recognize the value of inclusive, participatory, and consensual models of public participation, according to the World Bank Development Report 1999/2000 (World Bank, 2000). As a result, the public is consulted and engaged with, using a variety of techniques in progressive countries all over the world. Politicians, decision-makers, and practitioners have all indicated a desire to participate and expressed hope for it (Jochum et al., 2005; Cornwall, 2008). From Brazil to India to the United States, interest in participation has "exploded" over the past ten years; this is particularly true for public participation (Dunn, 2007). As part of their initiatives to promote and uphold good governance, many African nations have acknowledged public participation as a fundamental principle. For instance, the 53 member states of the African Union committed to, among other things, facilitating the conditions necessary to foster public participation and transparency when they adopted the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance in 2007 (African Union, 2007). The initiative for municipal participatory budgeting is the most frequently cited illustration of successful public participation in Brazil (Sprague, 2000). One of the innovative initiatives created by the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre is this participatory process. By involving city residents, the participatory budgeting process aims to address the stark disparities in living standards that exist there.

Participating in the budgeting process for infrastructure investments, according to Sprague (2000), exposes people to the negotiation, compromise, and prioritization of many worthwhile and essential projects. This form of participatory budgeting informs the public about the range of options and improves budget transparency. Public participation improves people's understanding of the government and its initiatives. They discover and understand why some tasks must be completed later rather than at a specific time. The community and sustainable forest management are two instances of successful public participation in India that are frequently cited. Community involvement in all aspects of forest management, including planning, intervention, and monitoring, is necessary to achieve sustainability (Kotwal et al., 2008). In this case, a bottom-up strategy is advised. In addressing the issues raised in this paper, we recognize that public participation is a highly contextualized, social, and political process (Contandriopoulos, 2004). It is debatable whether it can be built into the fabric of societies using technocratic means, and whether it can be designed, implemented, and then evaluated using technical approaches. Even by posing evaluative questions in this paper, we are making an open-ended claim that public participation has purely instrumental characteristics that can be separated from its socio-political context.

Global and local agreements, for instance, are putting pressure on national governments to increase transparency, participation, and accountability. Environmental activists and other activists must take the majority of the credit for popularizing the notion that people should have a say in decisions that affect their lives and well-being. Questioning governments' and corporations' rights to pursue interests that impoverish, degrade, or harm the environment, groups like Green Peace and others have brought issues into the public eye since the 1960s and 1970s. Communities, public interest legal teams, and other organizations joined the fight for the environment, building a resource of knowledge that governments eventually came to rely on. Recognizing that civil society holds a large portion of the specialized knowledge needed to develop and implement environmental policy contributed to the development of new, more participatory forms of governance at the national, regional, and global levels (World Bank, 2004).

Over the past ten years, there have been a number of significant regional and global environmental agreements. For instance, in 1992, nations from all over the world ratified Rio Declaration Principle 10, which acknowledged the crucial part that civil society plays in preserving and managing the environment. The importance of public access to information, participation in decision-making processes, and access to judicial procedures are emphasized in Principle 10, which states that "environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens at the relevant level." In Agenda 21, the plan of action that accompanied the Rio Declaration, governments pledged to pursue greater public participation in decision-making processes and policy formulation for sustainable development - defined as development that meets current needs without jeopardizing future generations' ability to meet their own (Webler, Tuler & Krueger, 2001).

Improvements in environmental monitoring and public reporting, participation in policy-making, and increased government accountability and responsibility for the environment Germany's laws are based on a number of different sources (government programmes, the administration, court rulings, associations of trade and industry and interest groups, local authorities and as a result of public discussion in the mass media). Ministry specialist divisions receive and keep track of potential legislative issues, and they invite interested parties to discussions so as to share information and ideas. These groups represent the interests of larger social groups rather than acting arbitrarily on behalf of a select few African nations and regional organizations which are thinking about how to incorporate environmental governance principles into national legislation and regional initiatives in line with global trends. Locals frequently know how to find and use plants with special properties, how to keep animals out of their crops, and the best ways to solve issues like deforestation and soil erosion. These skills, resources, and knowledge can all be used with the help of the public to increase the efficacy of government initiatives. Similar to this, when people are given the opportunity to assess issues, resources, and opportunities, they learn more and become more aware of factors that affect their lives.

Therefore, participation in public affairs encourages citizens to take greater responsibility for their actions and puts pressure on government to deal with them. Even though public involvement in decision-making is rising in Africa, women's and youths' access to these processes urgently needs to be encouraged. Public participation in the process of reporting on the state of the environment in nations like Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe serves as an example of how all stakeholders can be involved in the decision-making process. The African Charter for Popular Participation in Development

and Transformation is another illustration of the trend toward public participation (Legal Resources Foundation Trust, 2009).

Over the years, Kenya has gradually shifted from centralized to decentralized government. The flaws in highly centralized systems, which are common, were the driving force behind this paradigm shift. Shortcomings include ineffective administrative procedures, the misuse of public funds, and the exclusion of local communities from the development process. As a result, the government started devolving some specific funds and decision-making power to districts, local governments, and constituencies in the late 1990s (Legal Resources Foundation Trust, 2009). Through devolved structures, participatory governance can be strengthened at the county level through the adoption of the New Constitution in August 2010.

## 1.1 Problem Statement

World Bank (2007) stated that although the numbers vary by nation, governments will always be the biggest spenders globally. The foundation of local development in any developing nation is projects. The goal of development programs is to raise the standard of living in the neighborhood. Appropriate project selection, project design, project implementation, monitoring, and evaluation are essential components of effective development project management. Additionally, local people's values, norms, social beliefs, and opinions that are either directly or indirectly impacted by development interventions should be taken into account. Otherwise, the long-term viability of development projects may be questioned. A democratic and inclusive society is built on active citizen participation. A healthy liberal democracy relies on citizen involvement in decision-making and project development. The lack of participation represents a lost chance for Kenyans to hold their leaders responsible and have an impact on the results. Since the promulgation of the constitution, 2010, Kenyans have become more involved in public discourse and project development. This is not true for all county governments, where there is still very little public participation. Planning and delivering social services, especially in developing nations, face numerous challenges related to sustained public participation and project implementation.

Participatory rural community development projects have grown in popularity over the past few years, despite the fact that the practice has not yet been properly ingrained in the people. These initiatives could increase democratization, sustainability, and efficiency. However, because they frequently involve a variety of distinct sectors and a wide range of actors who must successfully collaborate and coordinate efforts for a successful outcome, they are challenging to implement. Additionally, a significant barrier to more widespread development has been the absence of efficient structures for people's participation. The acceptable levels that imply full participation have not yet been attained by people's involvement in their own projects

According to a report by the Society for International Development (2016), most County Governments failed to create platforms for active citizen participation. Decisions made by a few without active public participation in project development frequently deny the majority their rights to influence project development. From this context, some questions may arise in the minds of development practitioners, such as whether the existing decision-making process of many devolved governments and partners promotes people's participation in the project development process. Thus, the research was determined to investigate the role of research in promoting effective public participation in Kenya.

## 2. Empirical Literature Review

Access to information and public participation in Kenya's 2010 Constitution are core to attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the country's Vision 2030 and development in counties. Information is an important resource in participatory development (Mangla 2003). According to Kugonza and Mukobi (2015) information is essential for citizens' action. Access to public information contributes to effective citizen participation in devolved governance (Gitegi and Iravo 2016). County Government Act (2012) provides for timely access to information as a principle of public participation in the devolved government structure in Kenya. The country has two levels of government, namely: national government and 47 county governments (Constitution of Kenya 2010; International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) Kenya, 2013). Each county government in Kenya has a county executive and county assembly. The executive forms the county executive committee headed by a governor and his or her executives vetted by the county assembly. The county assembly (legislature) consists of elected and nominated members of the county assembly (ICJ Kenya 2013). Citizens are expected to directly engage county executives and County Assemblies in Kenya. It is expected that SDGs are mainstreamed and integrated into budget allocations, and public awareness about them made at both the national and local levels.

Counties in Kenya are crucial in the implementation of SDGs as they are the local points in the country. As Kanyinga (2016) says "devolution is thus expected to promote development in all regions of the country, address the challenges of exclusion, and limit the powers of the centre". This is important given that majority of Kenyans associate devolution with economic development in their counties (Jesuit Hakimani Centre 2013). This article uses public participation and citizen participation interchangeably. The paper adopted the definition of public participation advanced by Ibrahim Okinda (2017) as "a democratic process of engaging people in deciding, planning and playing an active role in the development and operation of services that impact on their lives". Thus, participatory grassroots development implies that ordinary citizens play an active role in development efforts, budget and policy making, and legislative processes that impact on their lives within their counties. In spite of the foregoing, there is limited public participation in counties in Kenya (Gitegi and Iravo, 2016; Papa 2016 and Wanjiru 2013). This may be caused by inadequacy of provision of platforms for public participation by county governments. Past studies have shown that shortcomings in information dissemination and access by county governments and citizens respectively have contributed to this problem (Gitegi and Iravo, 2016 and Oduor, 2015).

Several studies have been conducted on public participation in counties in Kenya by development and governance scholars. Nevertheless, a review of the role of information in promoting participatory grassroots development in counties in the country has not been sufficiently addressed. Therefore, this study sought to analyze the role of research as a source of information in public participation for grassroots development in counties in Kenya with a view to proposing appropriate information dissemination approaches. This article is considered timely as Kenya seeks to usher in the fourth county governments after the devolved form of governance. The mandate of the first county governments that came into effect after the March 4, 2013 general election in Kenya expired after 2017 polls. This work provides useful information for the new governments (both county and national) on improving information dissemination, access and use for participatory development in Kenya. The results presented in this paper will benefit county and national government policy makers, governance and information

science professionals. Access to information enables citizens to be educated and this raises their political knowledge, interest and efficacy, and senses of civic duty (Okinda 2016). These political attitudes are crucial in participatory democracy. Despite efforts by County governments in Kenya, access to research information and public participation still remains low even after the implementation of devolution in Kenya in 2013 (KHRC 2015). Overall, Mitullah (2016) notes that citizens are not satisfied with the extent of public participation in the operation of County Governments in Kenya. Deficiencies in information dissemination and access in counties in Kenya may be perpetuated by a low prioritization of information in development planning. County information may be packaged in languages, formats and media not suitable to the local population in counties. Some of the information dissemination channels used by county governments in Kenya such as social media don't reach a majority of the citizens (KHRC 2015).

Literature reviewed has identified the most commonly used mass media for disseminating information by county governments in Kenya to be: newspapers, radio, television, mass mailing, mobile telephones, notice boards, county websites and social media. Information is also communicated to citizens through public forums such as county open days, citizen's advisory boards, FGDs, public hearings public watchdog groups, visitation forums and CIDPs (Jesuit Hakimani Centre 2013; KHRC 2015; Oduor et al. 2015; Wanjiru, 2013). Public hearings are noted as a major avenue for information dissemination in counties in Kenya (Jesuit Hakimani Centre 2013). Gitegi and Iravo (2016) studied factors affecting public participation in Uasin Gishu County in Kenya based on 105 respondents. It was established that this county government provides information to citizens regarding public participation, county budgets and development projects. The information is disseminated via a county website, social media, radio, television, newspapers and public announcements. The research by Gitegi and Iravo (2016) found out that majority of the respondents were obtaining information from the Uasin Gishu County Government website and social media platforms. Respondents also indicated obtaining information from radio, public announcements, television and newspapers. However, the researchers established low awareness levels on public participation among respondents. Majority of study participants reported not being aware of constitutional provisions and other laws passed to facilitate public participation.

### 3. Research Methodology

This research was primarily done in 2025 and 2026. Secondary data was the main source of information. The technique used is meta-analysis. The first step in meta-analysis is defining the research question. What is the role of research in promoting effective public participation in Kenya? The second step is the empirical literature reviews. A meta-search analysis's procedure should be methodical, repeatable, and transparent, producing a data set that contains all relevant and important studies (Fisch and Block 2018; Gusenbauer and Haddaway 2020). First, lists of included studies from previous meta-analyses on the same or a related subject may be available. This is a good place to start when trying to find and become familiar with the relevant studies. This method is also applicable to topic-related literature reviews, which frequently present the key conclusions of the articles reviewed.

Another step is choice of the analytical method used. In modern leadership research, there are four main meta-analytical techniques (Combs et al. 2019; Geyer-Klingeberg et al. 2020), which permit the examination of these various types of research questions: traditional uni-variate meta-analysis, meta-

regression, meta-analytic structural equation modeling, and qualitative meta-analysis (Hoon 2013). While the first three are quantitative, the latter summarizes qualitative findings. This study employed qualitative meta-analysis. This is because qualitative meta-analysis aims to synthesize qualitative findings. Finally, reporting the findings of a meta-analysis is the last step in the process. Most importantly, the reader should be able to understand all actions and methodological choices.

#### **4. Findings of the Research**

The finding of this research is purely based on meta-analysis technique. Meta-analysis uses and combines data from numerous individual studies to reach one or more conclusions. From the results, the public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect its members' lives. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision. By acknowledging and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including the decision-making agencies, research provides information that promotes sustainable decisions through public participation. Additionally, research solicits feedback from participants to help design their participation and equips them with the knowledge necessary to engage in meaningful participation. Participant feedback is communicated to them through public participation. It is impossible to overstate the value of public involvement. Because it guarantees inclusivity and transparency in the governance process, with citizens and government agencies sharing power among them, it makes a significant contribution to the anchoring of democracy. It guarantees that the government is responsive to citizen needs and enhances the authority of the government's institutions in making well informed decisions. Public participation also boosts a person's sense of patriotism, ownership and trust in government institutions on a personal level.

In order for public participation to have an impact on the process of making policies, it must not only take place but also be meaningful. Research can enhance public participation by providing citizen with reliable information, educate them and also expose some of the corrupt-intentions by the leaders. Research is pivotal in information dissemination. For instance, it has been found that 83% of Kenyans do not know the resources assigned to their County, with only 7% aware of their County's Fiscal Strategy Paper, 16% aware of the County Integrated Development Plan, and 41% aware of the County's budget. This dismal performance is related to the finding that only 38% are aware of County meetings and only 15% attend those meetings (Transparency International, 2016).

The right level of public participation can be evaluated through research. For instance, not all forms of public participation are the same; depending on the level of government/agency, project, the stakeholders, and the decisions to be made, there are a variety of levels at which you may want to involve the public. To determine the right level of public involvement for your project, you must first respond to the following query: How much potential public influence over the choice or course of action are you willing to give? Your public participation program's design and ultimate success depend on how you respond to this question. Agencies frequently promise the public much greater potential influence than is actually possible or likely. Typically, this is not done on purpose. There are several levels of public participation are described on the Spectrum ranging from no influence (Inform) to total influence (Empower).

## 5. Conclusions

To promote public participation, it is clear to outline the purpose and goals of project, policy proposals ensuring they are relevant and beneficial to the public. These include involving key stakeholders, including community members, advocacy groups, and relevant organizations, in the research planning stage to ensure their input and concerns are considered. Use plain language and accessible formats when communicating about the research, including summaries, info graphics, and videos to make the information easy to understand.

Government need to share the research plan, including methodologies, timelines, and expected outcomes, with the public to build transparency and trust. Consider involving the public in designing the research questions and methods to ensure they align with community needs and interests. Consider community-based research approaches where the community actively participates in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This can empower the community and ensure research reflects their experiences. Organize workshops, focus groups, town hall meetings, or online forums where the public can provide input on research design, share their perspectives, and ask questions.

It is good to ensure that there is a robust legal framework in place to support public participation. In Kenya, this includes observing the Constitution of Kenya 2010, which explicitly emphasizes public participation in governance processes. Conduct civic education and awareness campaigns to inform citizens about their rights, opportunities for participation, and the importance of their involvement in decision-making processes. Emphasize on inclusivity by actively involving marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, youth, differently able, and ethnic minorities, to ensure that their voices are listened to. Leverage technology to enhance public participation, including the use of online platforms, mobile apps, and social media to collect input and engage with a wider audience.

Ensure that citizens have access to relevant information, documents, and data related to government activities, budgets, and policies to enable informed participation. Encourage citizen-led monitoring and evaluation of public projects and services to hold government accountable for service delivery and infrastructure development. Implement participatory budgeting processes at the local level, allowing citizens to have a say in how public funds are allocated and spent in their communities. Establish clear feedback mechanisms where citizens can report grievances, provide feedback, and seek redress for issues related to government services and projects. Finally, regularly assess the effectiveness of public participation initiatives and policies to identify areas for improvement and adaptation.

## 6. Recommendations

The development and implementation of the policy involve research and development strategically. One crucial step in creating a new idea is research. This article's goal is to demonstrate the existence of the disparity between the academic and practitioner points of view when formulating and implementing policy. Many times, the study's subjects were successful in identifying barriers to academic involvement as well as in-depth analyses of those roles and their advantages. A practitioner may not always be able to directly apply a novel idea developed by academics. There are many reasons for any discrepancy or gap between study results and the application of policy. The distinctions that emerge among others include

variations in time, conception, audience, motivation, and outcomes. There are three (three) ways for academics to have an impact on policy: through policy, research and development policy, and education and training policy. Promoting public participation through research often involves the development and implementation of policy guidelines that guide how research projects engage with and involve the public. These guidelines can vary depending on the specific context and objectives of the research, but here are some key principles and components to consider when creating such policies

Therefore, as per the findings:

- i. All leaders should embrace research findings, undergo effective training, strengthen good communication, and build democratic social networks in and economic analysis.
- ii. Leaders should focus on good governance through accountability in their processes and systems to foster public trust and confidence through streamlined policy issues that adequately address community problems.
- iii. In addition, counties should use media with a large audience to disseminate information in order to comply with sections of the County Government Act. Civic education should be provided for those citizens who lack the knowledge necessary to comprehend the complexity of such information to ensure that their constitutional right to access information that affects their livelihood is not violated.
- iv. Any government initiative for community development should embrace research findings through participatory monitoring and evaluation (PME), which fosters a sense of ownership while also encouraging substantive development at the local level. The study suggests research is essential for ensuring institutional accountability and transparency, which in turn fosters regional development that is equitable. An efficient PME system provides decision makers with an additional tool for managing the public sector while also enhancing the capacities of the beneficiaries.
- v. Stress the need for transparency in research processes, including data collection, analysis, and reporting. Encourage researchers to be accountable for their actions and decisions.
- vi. Establish mechanisms for gathering and responding to feedback from the public, including complaints, concerns, and suggestions related to the research process.

These policy guidelines should be tailored to the specific context and objectives of the organization or institution promoting public participation in research. They serve as a roadmap for researchers and project teams to ensure that public engagement is systematic, ethical, and effective in achieving research goals while benefiting the community. Regular reviews and updates of these guidelines are essential to keep them aligned with best practices and evolving community needs.

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