

Perceptions about the Factors that Influence Public Participation in Rural Kenya

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Abstract The aim of this study was to establish the factors influencing participation of the public in development projects in Wote-Nziu ward in the context of a devolved governance system. The objectives of the study were to establish the impact of socio-economic factors, political factors and demographic characteristics on public participation in development projects. The study sample was comprised 85 respondents sampled from the general population within Wote/Nziu ward. In addition, 15 Key informants were drawn from Project Management Committees (PMC) and 9 focus group discussions were with the committee members drawn from the various projects within the ward that are initiated and implemented by the County Government of Makueni. Analysis of the data collected, that is, correlation between independent and dependent variables revealed positive values of correlation coefficients (R). The study findings revealed that demographic characteristics, socioeconomic and political factors influence the level of public participation in development activities of the residents of Wote-Nziu Ward in Makueni County. Comparatively, however, political factors have more influence on public participation. The study concludes that residents and the County Government of Makueni have embraced public participation as a tool to meaningfully engage in development initiatives in a devolved system of governance.

Keywords Public Participation, Development Projects, Socio-Economic Factors, Political Factors,

Devolution

1. Introduction

Public participation occurs where the public is directly engaged in the process of decision-making and where public interests are considered in making specific development decisions. It involves a series of activities and actions initiated by the implementing partners or agencies over the full project cycle for public information and obtaining their input for consideration [1]. Governments not only need to create effective public engagement through public participation, but also create a symbiotic relationship between the citizens and the government [2].

Public participation in some countries, for example, the USA is widely accepted but hardly practiced as it is constrained by issues like gender, education, race, and income [3]. Outcome research on the cohesion of communities in voting in the poor, minority communities show the significance of variables in social circles as critical influences on participation in voting which overrides the role of traditional, people-centric variables like gender representation and social class to which one belongs. Democracy at the local level is highly critical because it forms a basic component of American Democracy Heritage. Historically, volunteer organizations,

local governments and organizations act as a link for participation and access of citizens to social and political systems [4].

Participatory democracy is practised in South Africa and participation of the public is taken seriously and if any legislation is passed without public involvement, especially in the case of affected groups, it becomes invalid. The intrinsic value of democracy is found in Article 42(3) of South Africa's Constitution. Parties of Interest (citizens) in the formation of legislation should be granted a chance to air their views, whether it be a request to be taken seriously, or that their views are considered to suitably influence decisions. Legislations must not collide with constitutional terms whether in matters of content or manner of adoption [5].

Article 10 of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 captures public participation as an important national value and critical component of good governance. Public participation is also highlighted in Article 201(a) as pivotal in achieving prudent use of public financial resources. In addition, according to County Governments Act 2012, County governments have a responsibility to promote and facilitate the participation of citizens in service delivery, policy development and planning. It has been argued that public participation has many benefits [6]. Public participation mainly aims to encourage meaningful public input in policy formulation and decision making. As such, public participation fosters communication between the public and decision-making agencies.

This relationship can serve as a means to provide early warning in matters that concern the public, a means for timely and accurate dissemination of information and making sustainable decisions [7]. Benefits accrue because provided public participation as a process is mutually beneficial where the benefits and learning reach the public and the decision-making agency [8]. Sound public participation ensures public values are identified with regard to any development processes. In Kenya, therefore, public participation is required at all levels of government before official decisions are made [9].

The current public participation model adopted by the County Government of Makueni comprises participatory planning, participatory budgeting, participatory management, participatory evaluation, community empowerment and integration of technology. The public participation model in Makueni County is an inclusive bottom-up development approach, a system that involves the general public from the village level to the County level [10]. The public engages through elected development committee members representing villages, a number of villages, sub-wards, wards, sub-counties and then the County. Each Committee has eleven members comprising men, women, youth and people with disabilities and the marginalized groups. The lifespan of each committee is three years [10].

The Cities and Urban Areas Act 2011 (Amended 2019) provides that residents of urban areas, have participation

rights in urban or city affairs - right to take part in the decision-making process of urban area/city by submission of oral or written proposals, claims or complaints to town boards or committee through the city manager or municipal manager (Urban Areas and Cities Act 2011). Residents from respective wards are encouraged to fully and actively participate in the integrated process of development planning right from project conception to its implementation. Participatory planning in development aims to address poor historical planning and sustainably develop rural areas. Each county government is, therefore, required to foster effective and adequate grass-root level participation of local residents. Thus public participation provides a platform where the citizens can influence decision-making in governance processes at the grass root level.

The decision making is a give and takes process because the opportunities are provided for by the government and it is up to citizens to utilize them. Even though public participation is thought to enhance accountability, prudent use of public resources and sustainability of development projects face many challenges that are hardly addressed. Equally important there is no agreement on the challenges faced by public participation. Some the governments are non-committal to initiating public participation due to high time consumption. Project coordinators in many cases want to maintain control of their projects and activities. Some county officials are often rigid and do not appreciate the value of views of the local citizens.

County officials regard themselves as experts in their area of specialization because they are in many cases the professionals and assume the community members to be ignorant and without knowledge with regard to the project being undertaken [13]. To some people, therefore, public participation can be costly to development initiatives due to delayed decision-making hence delaying the project start up. To others the inclusion of inexperienced groups and individuals makes participatory approaches less advantageous compared to technical/bureaucratic management because project sustainability may be affected by the eruption of conflicts or lost efficiency [11].

2. Methods and Materials

The study on which this paper is based was conducted over a ten -month period from May 2020 to February 2021 with additional field visits made in April 2021. The study focused on public participation in development projects in Wote-Nziu Ward, which is one of the governance units in Makueni County under the devolved governance system. Makueni County is located in the South Eastern part of Kenya. The study area is largely semi-arid and prone to frequent droughts. The population of Wote-Nziu Ward is 12,979 which is 13 percent of the County population. The population of males and females in the County is nearly equal although the number of females is slightly higher.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to elicit data from 100 informants 15 out of whom were key informants. The key informants were purposively selected from project management committees who had characteristics and information of interest to the study while 85 respondents were selected using a simple random sampling procedure, which allowed each potential respondent an equal chance of being selected to participate in the study. In addition, 9 focus group discussions were carried out with selected members of the various project management committees.

Quantitative data were gathered using mainly a structured questionnaire prepared with all possible responses from which respondents made their choice. The questionnaire was pre-tested using a small sample drawn from a population with similar characteristics as the study population and adjustments to the questionnaire were made accordingly. The questionnaire collected information regarding the demographic characteristics of the participants, socio-economic factors, political factors, and the relationship between these factors and public participation. Key informant interviews that targeted project management committee members (PMCs) and observations were carried out to generate qualitative data. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software and descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequencies are used to present the results. In addition, inferential statistics were used to establish the impact of socio-economic factors, political factors and demographic characteristics of the participants on public participation in development projects in Wote-Nziu Ward. Qualitative data were thematically analysed and presented as verbatim quotations.

3. Results

All the survey respondents completed and returned questionnaires with a response rate of 100 per cent. Thirty two (40%) respondents were aged between 26-35 years and 21% were between 36 and 45 years. This finding suggests that most of the respondents were young people. A majority of the respondents had a diploma level of education as shown by 40 (47%) and a good number, 23 (27.0%) had attained secondary education. A significant number of the respondents, 14 (16.5%) had a bachelor's degree. The findings indicate that the study population is literate suggesting that nearly all the respondents understood the role of public participation in the success of development projects. Forty three (50.6%) respondents had household size of below six, 29 (34%) had household of 6-10, while a few 13 (15%) had between 11-15. This indicates that majority of the households comprise less than 10 people. Majority of the respondents represented by 60 (70.6%) were earning less than Kshs. 25,000 per month and only a small number had a monthly income of more than Ksh 50,000.

The study sought to examine the influence of socio-economic factors on public participation in development projects in Wote-Nziu Ward. The respondents were asked to give their opinion on the influence of socio-economic factors on public participation in development projects. The findings show that the respondents agreed with the statements that, the county government set clear guidelines and procedures for public participation for both the literate and the non-literate in the community (Mean=4.483, STD=0.593), the County government ensures that there is representation of the civil society in development projects (Mean=4.103, STD=0.624), the County Government of Makueni has created clear and effective visual information to assist the community in understanding the project development cycle (Mean=4.083, STD=0.593), and that the county government embraces clear and well-defined information regarding public participation (Mean=3.827, STD=0.675).

Key informant interviews and focus groups discussions were conducted on public participation. Informants stated that a number of socio-economic factors influenced the level at which the community engaged in public participation. One focus group discussion participant reported thus,

The level of public awareness, presence and activities of civil society groups and economic activities that the residents engage in contributed to the level of community members' participation in the public participation initiatives. (38-year female participant).

Similarly, another participant in a focus group discussion at Kwa Kamuya Water Project reported,

Areas with more educated residents enjoyed higher public participation levels compared to other regions with relatively smaller proportions of highly educated people. (Male participant aged 37).

Thus, even though public participation has been embraced by both the community and County Government of Makueni, there are challenges that the residents face in efforts to provide their input in the management of development projects including financial resources at their disposal. Families with stable sources of income are more likely to attend public participation forums because the County Government does not offer transport facilitation and allowances for the community members. One male key informant aptly captured this situation, "It is not easy for someone to abandon his daily work, which earns him daily wages to attend a public participation meeting which no one is paid". Public participation meetings are voluntary and call for self-sacrifice in terms of resources.

Besides challenges faced by the community in participating in public participation, the management of the projects has its fair share of difficulties. Budget allocations for projects are not always sufficient. A 48 year male key informant reported thus, "the budget allocations for most projects are inadequate to carry out any meaningful and useful projects." He further stated that,

Payment of the project management committees is usually delayed and a good number of us are not employed and rely on their agricultural produce to make a living. The project management Committees are usually paid when the contractors are paid and this forces us to use our money.

The foregoing suggests that inadequate resource allocation may contribute to failed projects even when properly conceived and executed. Adequate resource provision for the county projects would be needed to ensure that works are completed for the community to realize real development. The study revealed that the county government is keen to engage all the stakeholders from the community and focus on building relationships between policy makers and other development partners, youths, people with disabilities and the elderly. This is well captured by a key informant,

Public participation is usually open for all the residents to attend and equal opportunity is given to all to give their views regarding the county government projects. (Chairman of project management committee of Kobai/Nziu road recently constructed).

Youth is a major stakeholder in development initiatives. A female key informant aged 37 observed that the youth are always invited to attend public participation forums but they are not motivated to do so. Public participation meetings have been conducted in convenient places for the youth (eg. Secondary schools) but the attendance is usually low.

Gender roles are said to contribute to poor attendance at public participation meeting by women: "Gender roles are a major bottleneck to public participation because women are heavily burdened with family responsibilities and rarely find time to go for public participation meetings". Women have double burdens-they perform their domestic roles and are involved in other activities to generate income for their families partly because some of the men moved to towns or villages away in search of employment. Marital status was, however, not thought to not affect public participation in any way.

Project management may sometimes face challenges particularly when no adequate consultations are made. According to one female key informant,

Some projects are usually changed without the involvement of the community at the county administration level hence rendering public participation exercise irrelevant.

According to this informant, inadequate consultations are one of the major reasons young people in the area show little interest in the community projects because they feel that their views are not taken seriously by the local

administrators.

Political factors play a major role in resource allocation for development projects and this may not always be equitable. Qualitative analysis of the data collected through focus group discussions on the relationship between political factors and public participation suggested that the community's political affiliations, level of political interference and the knowledge/competence levels of the elected leaders influenced the extent to which communities got involved in public participation activities. Increased involvement in political activities like gatherings to discuss political issues created increased awareness and communities would engage in public participation more than those who did not attend those gatherings. Politics, therefore, has a strong positive impact on public participation in development projects in Wote/Nziu ward.

Decreased levels of community satisfaction in lawmakers discourage community engagement in development projects. Political class may sometimes take advantage of their position in society to the disadvantage of sections of those they claim to represent. They may also interfere with projects' initiation/selection, for example, during tender rendering the whole process dysfunctional. A focus group participant observed,

Some projects are usually pushed by the politicians themselves in order to reward their electorates and sometimes even their relatives. In other cases the budget of a given project is changed without the involvement of the community. (Male FGD participant aged 52).

Regression analysis was done to establish the relationship between public participation and independent variables, which were the demographic, political and socio-economic factors. The results are displayed in table 1.

Table 1. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.809	0.655	0.632	0.160

Table 1 is a model fit, which establishes how fit the model equation is fitting the data. The adjusted value of R square (R^2) was used to show the predictive power of the study model and it was found to be 0.632 implying that 63.2% of the variations in public participation on development projects in Wote-Nziu Ward are to a great extent explained by demographic factors, socio-economic factors, and political factors. The findings suggest that there are other factors not captured in this research that impact public participation on development projects in Wote-Nziu Ward. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) showed results depicted in table 2.

Table 2. ANOVA Results

	Model	Sum of squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Significance
1	Regression	3.041	4	0.760	31.282	0.000
	Residual	1.604	66	0.024		
	Total	4.645	70			

Table 3. Regression Coefficients

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	Constant	1.672	0.516		3.240	0.002
	Demographic factors	0.643	0.191	0.126	3.366	0.001
	Socio-economic factors	0.503	0.123	0.146	3.276	0.002
	Political factors	0.847	0.274	0.045	3.091	0.003

From the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistics in table 2, the probability value of 0.000 is less than 0.05 level of significance. This suggests that the regression model was significant in predicting how demographic factors, socio-economic factors, and political factors impacted public participation on development projects in Wote-Nziu Ward. It suggests that there is a significant relationship between public participation in development projects and the independent variables, that is, demographic factors, socio-economic factors, and political factors.

The established model for the study was:

$$Y = 1.672 + 0.643 X_1 + 0.503X_2 + 0.847X_3$$

In this formula, Y is the dependent variable, which is public participation while X_1 , X_2 , and X_3 are the independent variables, that is, demographic factors, socio-economic factors and political factors respectively. The equation of regression above has shown that by incorporating all factors namely demographic, socio-economic, and political factors constant at zero public participation at Wote-Nziu Ward was 1.672. The study findings also show that taking all other independent variables at zero, there was a positive correlation at $r = 0.403$ between demographic factors and public participation in development projects by residents of Wote-Nziu Ward. This suggests that better demographic factors were associated with increased public participation in development initiatives by residents in the area of study.

The study further revealed that there was a positive correlation between socio-economic factors and public participation in development projects in Wote-Nziu Ward with a value of $r=0.503$. Further, the findings also showed that there was a positive correlation; at $r = 0.847$; between political factors and public participation in development initiatives by residents of Wote-Nziu Ward. This suggests that increased involvement in political activities by the residents in the area of study would lead to their increased

public participation in development related initiatives.

Overall, political factors had the greatest influence on the public participation in Wote-Nziu Ward, followed by demographic factors while socio-economic factors had the least influence on public participation in the study area. However, all the variables were significant ($p<0.05$) implying that the positive influence of the independent variables on dependent variable is not by chance.

4. Discussion

Wote-Nziu residents participate in development projects through public forums conducted by political leaders, development agencies, and community leaders who form part of project stakeholders. Public participation is key to the success of development projects at the grass roots level. However, citizen participation is only possible when their capacity to participate is developed [14]. In this context capacity includes a set of skills and knowledge that enable individuals and/or groups to execute a certain duty or activity. A similar observation is made by [15] who argues that in order to ensure meaningful civic involvement in government activities, people need more than understanding of their positions and duties and, more specifically, need information and expertise about how to carry out their obligations.

The County Government of Makueni is working with various stakeholders such as civil societies to create awareness and to do capacity building to empower the people to participate in public forums whose agenda is mainly development. This is done through various innovative ways including social media to send short messages. Makueni County Government thus embraces public participation in development projects and has developed skills of the area residents and imparted them with the necessary knowledge to meaningfully engage in

initiation of development projects and their execution. Through meaningful participation by citizens, local governments have a good understanding of the needs of the community [16].

Lack of education/illiteracy impedes participating in development forums particularly in urban areas where the participants are not necessarily from one community and may in forums, therefore, not speak in their cultural languages [17]. The Makueni County Government recognized this and empowered the non-literate people at the grassroots level with knowledge and skills, which bridges the gap of the literate and illiterate individuals during public participation. The current study is in agreement with [18] who posits that citizens must be personally engaged and have access to information in order to effectively engage in matters of public policy. This ensures that they must not only be aware of their rights and obligations, but also know the channels by which they can air their views on their own development concerns.

Regarding public participation by the upper-class residents [19] argues that the higher the income levels the higher the chances of participation in community projects. Hence, a household with low-income levels is strongly believed to have low participation in terms of monetary contribution. On the contrary, the wealthy elite of society also form relationships with political officials and manipulate their positions to ensure reciprocal gains [20]. The dynamics of public participation in Makueni County are in consonance with the observations of other authors [20]. Politics is a factor in nearly all aspects of development including the extent to which communities are involved in decision making processes on matters that collectively and individually affect them.

Politics has a strong positive influence on public participation in development projects. Party affiliation and political inclination play a big role in public participation in county development projects. Decreased levels of community satisfaction with the performance of lawmakers also discourage community engagement in development activities in Wote-Nziu Ward. Political interference and malpractices such as unequal distribution of resources or misallocation of resources for development projects render some of the programmes and activities initiated by county authorities dysfunctional.

Party affiliations notwithstanding, transparency by the County Government in conducting its affairs and political inclination greatly influence public participation in planning, initiation, and implementation of development projects. These findings corroborate the assertion by [21] that elected leaders tend to discriminate against those who did not vote for them or those who have different ideologies with regard to development such that only those who agree with the political leaders are the ones whose views are likely to be acted upon. Similar sentiments are held by [22] that some politicians transport and even hire their supporters to the public forums so that they can force their wishes to the people who are considered the minority

or the weak.

The findings of the current study reveal that the county government is keen to engage stakeholders from the community and focus on building relationships between policy makers and other development partners, youth, people with disabilities and the elderly. Regardless of their demographics and socioeconomic status people in the study area are given equal opportunity to give their views in public meetings. Public participation is open to all residents of Wote-Nziu Ward irrespective of their marital status or other social considerations. Indeed, the study found that social problems facing the community are solved through collective action and people are sensitive to gender issues. Gender equity is fostered in public participation thus creating social space for people to engage. The implication of these findings is that Wote/Nziu Ward and by extension Makueni County does not discriminate against the residents based on their socioeconomic background. The findings resonate with [22] argument that gender mainstreaming and participatory processes are a crucial factor in all development agenda.

5. Conclusions

The level of community awareness, skills and knowledge about development issues influence the level of public participation in development projects. To promote community awareness and participation in development projects, the use of social media such as short messages service is an innovative and powerful tool of encouraging public participation. Adopting and/or enhancing the use of new technologies and social media to reach, inform and interact with young and techno savvy members of the community ensures that those unable to physically attend development meetings have an alternative channel to give their views online or electronically thereby broadening and enhancing public participation.

This is, in addition, to other initiatives by the county government such as partnering with local churches and mosques, and civil society to create public awareness on development initiatives all of which contribute to the sustainability of development projects. Politics is an integral part of the development process of any society. Politics influence how people engage with projects in particular and generally the quality of public participation in development initiatives.

Poor governance can result in disinterest by the public to meaningfully participate in the cycle of development projects right from conception, execution to monitoring and evaluation. It is concluded that more civic education, effective and relevant training of people at the grass roots would not only enhance community participation in development projects, but would also enable people to influence development agenda, which will, in turn, contribute to transparency and accountability in the arena of development in rural Kenya.

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