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Article in *SSRN Electronic Journal* · January 2017

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THE ROLE OF INFORMATION IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FOR GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN COUNTIES IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the role of information in direct public participation for grassroots development in Kenya's devolved government structure of 47 counties. The author reviewed relevant laws, research and government reports, and journals focusing on forms of and information dissemination channels for citizen participation, and information as a tool for participatory grassroots development in counties in Kenya. Findings established that the public in Kenya can directly participate in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development projects, budget preparation, law and policy making. This participation is done through public hearings, petitions and memoranda submitted to county executives and legislatures. To disseminate information to citizens, county governments use print, broadcast and new media, notice boards, and public hearings. The information raises citizens' awareness, political consciousness and mobilization needed for participatory grassroots development. An informed citizenry is core to participatory development. However, the public has limited access to information and direct participatory development in counties in Kenya is low. This may be attributed to gaps in information dissemination by county governments and citizens' reluctance to seek information. This implies that county governments need to improve their information dissemination efforts; citizens should demand for access to and use of information.

Keywords: Access to information; County governance; Information dissemination; Participatory grassroots development; Public participation.

INTRODUCTION

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; Saracevic 1986). To Kugonza and Mukobi (2015, 147) “information is essential for citizens’ action”. Access to public information contributes to effective citizen participation in devolved governance (*The citizen handbook* 2012; Gitegi and Iravo 2016; Otike 2015).

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). County governments in Kenya are further divided into sub-counties, county assembly wards and villages (Onyango-Paddy 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 (United Nations Development Group 2015). Counties in Kenya are crucial in the implementation of SDGs as they are the local points in the country. As Kanyinga (2016, 163) 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 Hakamani Centre 2013).

This article uses public participation and citizen participation interchangeably. The paper adopted the definition of public participation advanced by Oduor, Wanjiru and Kisamwa (2015, 7) 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.

Public participation can be practised directly by citizens or indirectly through elected representatives (Omolo 2010). This article focuses on direct citizen participation. The public is expected to participate in identifying their community development needs, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating county development projects, budget, policy and law making (Oduor *et al.*, 2015). To enhance public participation, county governments in Kenya use various mass media and forums to disseminate information to citizens (Transparency International [TI] Kenya 2014). The information provided educates and mobilizes citizens for participatory development and helps them in their watchdog role over county governments.

In spite of the foregoing, there is limited public participation in counties in Kenya (Gitegi and Iravo, 2016; Kanyinga 2017; Mitullah 2016; Papa 2016; Society for International Development [SID] 2016; Wanjiru 2013). This may be caused by inadequacy of provision of platforms for public participation by county governments (SID 2016). Past studies have shown that shortcomings in information dissemination and access by county governments and citizens respectively have contributed to this problem (e.g. Constitution and Reform Education Consortium [CRECO] 2014; Gitegi and Iravo 2016; Oduor *et al.*, 2015; The Institute for Social Accountability [TISA] 2010; TI Kenya 2014).

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. This is critical given the low priority placed on information in development planning (Mangla 2003). Therefore, this study sought to analyze the role 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 second county governments after the August 8, 2017 general election. The mandate of the first county governments that came into effect after the March 4, 2013 general election in Kenya expires after 2017 polls. This work provides useful information for the incoming county governments on improving information dissemination, access and use for participatory development in counties in Kenya. The results presented in this paper will benefit county government policy makers, governance and information science professionals.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Public access to information and citizen participation are articulated in SDGs and Kenya's Vision 2030, Constitution and supporting legislations. Article 35 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) and Access to Information Act (2016) provide for a citizen's right to access information. In objects of devolution, Article 174 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) emphasises public participation, social and economic development.

Access to information and public participation are also anchored in various legislations in Kenya (e.g. County Government Act 2012; Public Finance Management [PFM] Act 2012; Urban and Cities Act 2011). Further, some county governments have already enacted public participation and access to information legislations. An evaluation by the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) (2015) found out that 31 (64%) counties in Kenya had public participation legislations. However, majority of them did not have access to information legislation.

Gitegi and Iravo (2016, 1304) affirm that "devolved governance is a system that is well known for enhancing effective governance through public participation". Success of devolution is enhanced if there is public participation and if citizens hold their leaders accountable (Kanyinga 2016). The benefits of public participation are summed up as "citizen empowerment; the generation of new, diverse and innovative ideas and actions; enhancement of citizen government relations; appropriate prioritization of projects; improved delivery of public services and; governments responsiveness" (Oduor *et al.*, 2015).

Kugonza and Mukobi (2015) view public participation as a means to improving service delivery and ensuring civic consciousness in local governance. The benefits of public participation contribute to the fulfilment of the functions and powers of county governments contained in the Fourth Schedule of the Constitution of Kenya (ICJ 2013).

Functions of county governments that fit into SDGs include *interalia*: agriculture; county health services; control of air pollution, noise pollution and other public nuisances, and cultural activities including the development of libraries. County governments are also in charge of county transport; animal control and welfare; trade development and regulations; county planning and development; implementation of specific national government policies on natural resources and environmental conservation, county public works and services;

disaster management, and ensuring citizen participation at local levels (Constitution of Kenya, 2010).

Importance of information in devolved governance is emphasised in County Government Act (2012) which recognizes the principle of timely access to information related to policy formulation and implementation. The Institute for Social Accountability (TISA) (2010) argues that citizens are likely to be alienated from local development and corruption is bound to thrive in situations in which there is poor information management and dissemination. Information accessed by citizens contributes to their political consciousness essential to their participation in devolved governance (Omolo 2010).

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. An informed citizenry provides useful feedback for policy and legislation making, and development planning (Ministry of Devolution and Planning, and Council of Governors 2016).

Despite efforts by County governments in Kenya, access to information and public participation still remains low even after the implementation of devolution in Kenya in 2013 (KHRC 2015). Overall, Mitullah (2016, 7) 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 prioritisation of information and the information sector in development planning (Mangla 2003).

County information may be packaged in languages, formats and media not suitable to the local population in counties. Information packaging enhances information accessibility and use (Saracevic, 1986). 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). Further, there is a reluctance of “majority of Kenyans to seek public information” (Jesuit Hakimani Centre 2013, 10).

Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS] (cited in Tilvawala, Myers and Andrade 2009) acknowledge the significance of IL in national development. Media and information illiteracy

among Kenyans may also be affecting access and use of county information. Media literacy in the country is low and majority of Kenyans believe all what the media say to be true (Mbeke, 2010). Media literacy skills enable people to access and evaluate mass media, and their contents. Information Literacy (IL) facilitates information searching, retrieval, evaluation and use.

OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to analyze the role of information in public participation for grassroots development in counties in Kenya with a view to proposing appropriate information dissemination approaches.

The specific objectives of this research were to:

1. Establish forms of direct citizen participation in county governments in Kenya.
2. Identify information dissemination channels and forums used to enhance direct public participation for development in devolved governments in Kenya.
3. Analyze information as a tool for participatory grassroots development in counties in Kenya.
4. Propose information dissemination approaches for effective public participation for grassroots development in counties in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The author through external desk research reviewed and analyzed literature on information access and dissemination, and participatory development in counties in Kenya from relevant laws, research and government reports, and journals. The analysis of literature focused on: (1) forms of direct citizen participation in county governments in Kenya; (2) information dissemination channels and forums used to enhance direct public participation for development in devolved governments in Kenya, and (3) information as a tool for participatory grassroots development in counties in Kenya.

FINDINGS

Forms of Direct Citizen Participation in County Governments in Kenya

Clause 91 of County Government Act (2012) identifies the structures for citizen participation as: ICT platforms, town hall meetings, budget preparation and validation forums, notice boards, development project sites and citizen forums at county and decentralized units.

These mechanisms for citizen participation by county governments are corroborated in a study by (KHRC 2015).

Mechanisms identified for public participation by KHRC (2015) include: public hearings, websites, newspapers, social media, visitation forums, public watchdog groups, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), citizen's advisory boards, notice boards, and county open days. Through these structures, county governments provide information to citizens who in turn provide feedback to the governments.

According to Oduor *et al.* (2015), public participation can be done through local referenda, town hall meetings and visiting development project sites. PFM Act (2012) provides for citizen participation in public financial management in devolved governments in such areas as the formulation of the County Financial Strategy Papers (CFSPs), County Budget Estimates and County Integrated Development Plans [CIDPs]. Section 137 of PFM Act (2012) further provides for public participation through the county budget economic forum which has representatives nominated by various organisations.

A research by Oduor *et al.* (2015) involving Isiolo, Kisumu, Makueni and Turkana Counties in Kenya established that decentralised structures for devolution were set up to sub-county and county ward levels with administrators appointed for each. Through these structures, citizens are able to attend public forums on development projects. The study further revealed that citizen participation in the budgeting process was done mainly through public hearings in sub-counties.

In Wanjiru's (2013) survey in Laikipia, Kitui and Kwale Counties, it was revealed that only 3 (2.3 %) of the 131 study respondents were aware of and participated in CIDP forums. Majority of the respondents were made aware of CIDP forums through interpersonal sources of friends and colleagues. This indicates inadequacies in county government public communication efforts.

Article 196 (1) (b) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) requires county assemblies to facilitate citizen participation in legislation and other business they are engaged in. County Government Act (2012) grants any person the power to petition a county assembly on matters within its authority including enacting, amending or repealing any of its legislation. Oduor *et*

al. (2015) acknowledge that the public participate in legislative processes in counties in Kenya by contributing to county assembly bills.

The preceding shows that the public in Kenya can directly participate in development programmes, budget preparation, law and policy making. However, citizens report low levels of awareness on important county functions and documents, legal mechanisms and need for their public participation. Thus, there is limited direct public participation in county governments in Kenya (Kanyinga 2017; Papa 2016; Oduor *et al.* 2015; Wanjiru 2013).

Information Dissemination Channels and Forums Used to Enhance Direct Public Participation in for Development in Devolved Governments in Kenya

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; Ministry of Devolution and Planning, and Council of Governors 2016; Oduor *et al.* 2015; TI Kenya 2014; 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.

In Kenya, radio is a main source of information as approximately 70 percent of the rural folk are neither served by newspapers nor television (Mbeke 2010). The 2009 Kenya population census revealed that almost 75 percent of households in the country owned a radio (KNBS 2010). Vernacular radio is an important source of information in rural areas in Kenya as it focuses on local issues and broadcast in local languages (Mbeke 2010; Okinda 2016). This explains why Makueni County Government has been involved in sponsoring various radio talk shows on the local *Musyi* FM and *Mbaitu* FM radio stations. Kisumu County has been using Radio *Ramogi* (Oduor *et al.* 2015).

Television is also important for citizens' access to information due to its audiovisual advantages. Approximately 2.5 million (28 %) Kenyans own television sets (KNBS, 2010). With such low television ownership in Kenya, its impact on participatory development becomes limited.

In their study, Oduor *et al.* (2015) identified use of local newspapers and magazines in communicating county information. For example, Turkana County used *Turkana Mirror* and *Turkana Times*. Makueni County uses a quarterly newsletter. However, the use of newspapers and magazines for disseminating information in Kenya is limited by their low readership (Mbeke 2010; Okinda 2016). Newspapers are expensive, and serve only literate persons. Further, there is poor newspaper distribution especially in rural areas in Kenya (Okinda 2016).

The Internet and social media have become useful sources of information and platforms for public debate and participation (Kirigha, Mukhongo & Masinde 2016). Therefore, county governments in Kenya have websites and social media platforms (Oduor *et al.* 2015). A survey by TI Kenya (2014) established that 15 (93.8%) of the 16 counties sampled had websites. Mobile phones are also useful for enhancing political participation (Okinda 2016), and by extension participatory development in Kenya. For example, Kisumu County uses a toll free telephone number to enhance public participation and development (Oduor *et al.* 2015).

TI Kenya (2014) determined that the media for information dissemination adopted by counties in Kenya were not very effective. KHRC (2015) adds that citizens' access to county information in Kenya is limited. Supporting this, majority of respondents in the study of

Uasin Gishu County felt that information on public forums for citizen participation and development projects in particular was not communicated on time (Gitegi and Iravo 2016).

Information as a Tool for Participatory Grassroots Development in Counties in Kenya

Importance of information in devolved governance is emphasised in County Government Act (2012) which recognizes the principle of timely access to information related to policy formulation and implementation. TISA (2010) argues that citizens are likely to be alienated from local development and corruption is bound to thrive in situations in which there is poor information management and dissemination. Access to information creates awareness and political efficacy needed for citizen participation in county governments in Kenya (Gitegi and Iravo 2016).

A national opinion survey by TI Kenya (2014) involving 1,993 respondents established that 83 % of the study participants were unaware of the funds allocated to their county by the national government. This is despite such information being published in CFSPs and county budgets. It was revealed that 41% of the respondents were aware of their county budgets, while 16% and 7% knew about their CIDP and CFSP respectively. The research revealed that only 38% of the respondents knew about public participation meetings organised by their respective counties.

Preceding findings show that that county governments in Kenya use a wide range of information dissemination channels. However, they are considered ineffective as there is low citizen participation in counties in Kenya. According to KHRC (2015), about 80 percent of Kenyans have difficulties in participating in county activities and accessing information on county budgets, legislation, and project plans.

DISCUSSION

Forms of Direct Citizen Participation in County Governments in Kenya

Citizens in Kenya directly participate in various aspects of county development, budget preparation, law and policy making. This is facilitated through various administrative structures, mass media and public forums. However, overall, there is limited direct public participation in county governance in Kenya. This can be attributed to citizens' low levels of awareness of county government functions, legal mechanisms and need for their public

participation. Compounding this challenge is low accessibility of appropriate county information and inadequacies in political attitudes needed for public participation among county citizens. Further, some counties have not put in place public participation and access to information laws that are essential to grassroots participatory development.

Information Dissemination Channels and Forums Used to Enhance Direct Public Participation for Development in Devolved Governments in Kenya

The main information dissemination channels used by county governments in Kenya to reach citizens are print, broadcast and new media, notice boards and public hearings. Nonetheless, these communication channels have not yet translated into effective information levels and public participation among majority of Kenyans. County governments may not be providing appropriate information which is relevant, complete, timely, packaged in the right language, format and media for the target audience. Low media literacy and IL, and citizens' reluctance to demand for and use public information also limit information accessibility and use in Kenya. Additionally, due to inadequate marketing of information services, targeted citizens may not be aware that county development information provided.

Information as a Tool for Participatory Grassroots Development in Counties in Kenya

Information is a key resource for participatory grassroots development as it educates citizens. This raises their political knowledge, interest and efficacy, and sense of civic duty necessary for performing their roles in participatory development in county governance. Information provided to citizens helps them provide useful feedback for policy and legislation making, and development planning in counties. Despite county governments' information dissemination efforts, majority of Kenyans have low information levels pertaining to public participation and development, county functions and documents (CRECO 2014; Jesuit Hakimani Centre 2013; Oduor *et al.* 2015; TI Kenya 2014).

Some counties have not enacted access to information laws and failed to incorporate information access strategies in their policy, legislative and development agendas as required in County Government Act (2012). Failure to have national Access to Information Act in place earlier may have contributed to majority of county governments not enacting their respective such laws. Citizen participation and access to public information are new constitutional requirements in Kenya and as such county governments and citizens are still learning how to implement and enjoy them respectively.

The author sought to analyze the role of information as a vital tool for participatory grassroots development in counties in Kenya. It is possible that, just as Mangla (2003) notes, information may not be given priority in development planning. Hence, county governments in Kenya may be not fully prioritising information in their development agenda.

Majority of citizens don't demand for public information in Kenya. This may be due inadequate knowledge on their right to access such information and the failure of county governments to make this information easily and timely accessible. Low levels of citizens' media literacy and IL, and poor reading culture may also be contributing to this problem.

CONCLUSION

An informed citizenry is important for citizen participation for sustainable grassroots development in Kenya. Therefore, there is need for county governments to provide appropriate information as it creates awareness, educates and mobilizes citizens for public participation. Information provision also raises citizens' political attitudes necessary for public participation. County governments in Kenya have adopted various mass media and forums to disseminate information to the public and facilitate citizen participation. However, access to information and public participation still remains low even after the implementation of devolution in Kenya in 2013. Hence, county governments should endeavour to adopt multi-prolonged approaches to public participation and information dissemination. Equally, citizens should demand for access to public information and utilize the available information in the public domain.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper has implications for county government executives and policy makers, information professionals, citizens and governance experts. The researcher recommends that county governments should:

1. In line with their legally assigned mandate, set up and maintain information resource centres so as to enhance the collection and dissemination of timely county information.
2. Enact and revise public participation, information management, access to information, and public communication laws, policies and strategies.

3. Package, repackage and disseminate appropriate county information using print, electronic, new and community media, and other public forums suitable to their target audience.
4. Use information provided as feedback by citizens involved in public participation in counties. This is because citizens become reluctant to engage in public participation if they feel their input will not be considered in the final development plans, policies and laws. Therefore, as the Ministry of Devolution and Planning, and Council of Governors (2016) propose, county governments should put in place mechanisms for collecting, collating and analyzing information emanating as feedback from the public.

Libraries and information professionals should:

1. Conduct user surveys so as to determine information needs of county officials, legislators and citizens.
2. Offer media literacy and IL programmes to library users and citizens in general.
3. Engage in civic education on county governments and SDGs. Libraries can organise public forums in which citizens can come to discuss public participation and developmental matters in their counties.
4. Publicize relevant and timely information on upcoming public participation meetings.
5. Build a library collection that covers SDGs, county development, county's vital documents such CFSPs, county budgets, county budget review and outlook papers and CIDP, bills to be considered and legislations passed by Kenya's Parliament and county assemblies.
6. Repackage and disseminate appropriate development information using a wide range of mass media and public forums.
7. Lobby for the inclusion of information professionals and information dissemination components in county development plans.
8. Market their library services and the library profession as advocated for by Otiye (2016). Through this, both county governments and citizens can appreciate the role of information in development. This can lead to increased library usage and improved funding for libraries.

For citizens the study results imply that they should:

1. Demand for public information.
2. Express to county governments their information needs and preferred communication channels for effective public participation in development.
3. Equip themselves with IL and media literacy skills.

For governance experts, the author is of the view that they should:

1. Appreciate the role of information in participatory sustainable grassroots development in counties in Kenya.
2. Endeavour to advise county governments to incorporate information and communication strategies within their public participation and development plans.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper provides the framework for future research. Therefore, governance and information science researchers should:

1. Use the review and analysis of literature in this article to conduct user surveys so as to determine information needs of citizens.
2. Pursue further studies on the role of information in public participation for development using both primary data from stakeholders in counties in Kenya and secondary data from published documents.
3. Based on the literature reviewed in this article and further studies, build theoretical or conceptual frameworks or best practices on the role of information in participatory development in counties in Kenya.

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