

Sauti Mtaani: Promoting Youth Participation in Governance

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The potential of Africa's growing youth population fuels the narrative of a continent on the rise. In Kenya, however, young people have been largely marginalised in governance as well as in development. Unless this is addressed, they are likely to be a threat to peace, a hindrance to development and an obstacle to building a strong democracy.

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya explicitly provides for the inclusion of all population groups in all decision-making and governance processes. It also introduced a devolved system to decentralise the government and promote citizen participation. Other laws that give effect to the constitutional provisions for participation include the County Government Act, which mandates county governments to facilitate the establishment of structures for citizen participation. In theory, government has moved closer to the people – but the reality on the ground tells a different story.

Interactions with young people reveal that they lack knowledge, information, skills and platforms for engagement. This is where Sauti Mtaani comes in. Sauti Mtaani, a Swahili phrase that loosely translates as “Voice in the Hood”, is a web-based platform developed by the Community Education and Empowerment Centre (CEEC) with the support of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung. With a website (<http://sautimtaani.co.ke>) and a short code (21393), the platform aims to facilitate civic engagement between youth and the members of county assembly (MCAs), their local elected representatives. The devolved system of governance established 47 county assemblies, and each MCA represents a ward, which is the lowest electoral unit within Kenya's electoral system.

How does the platform work? Using the short code, the youth send free text messages from their phones to their respective MCA. It is important that the platform is free of charge because the participating wards are in low-income areas of Nairobi. The MCA gets an alert on his or her phone and responds to the messages from any web-enabled device. This response is received on the sender's phone and simultaneously posted on the Sauti Mtaani website. The MCAs are thus able to communicate with the youth even when they are away from their wards. To enhance interactions and to encourage healthy competition between the wards, the platform is complemented by a Facebook page and group. In a departure from traditional methods of engagement, Sauti Mtaani facilitates youth participation where young people are most at home – in the field of information and communication technology (ICT). Indeed, the idea came from the evident popularity of mobile phones and social media among urban youth. A platform that combines the use of a short message service and Facebook seemed ideal for this target group.

Many MCAs and youth in the participating wards appreciate the platform for bridging the gap between them. The MCAs like the ease with which they can reach a huge segment of their constituency and the youth are pleased that many of the issues they raise are being addressed. In one ward, they expressed concern about the county government's plans to renovate a traders' market without consulting them. The MCA drafted a petition



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calling for consultations with the traders, including the youth, and filed it at the county assembly. Consequently, the views of the youth are being incorporated in the rebuilding plan. In another ward, the youth raised the alarm over a grabbed piece of land that was meant for a playground, and the MCA is working with relevant authorities to ensure it is returned to the public. In all the participating wards, MCAs are addressing such issues as street lighting, road networks, lack of or contaminated water, burst sewers, and student bursaries. The MCAs also use the platform to provide information to the youth on resources that are earmarked for them as well as linking them with employment opportunities in industries within their wards. Obviously, the MCAs do not have solutions for all the issues raised, but at least the platform ensures that the youth are listened to.

However, the implementation of Sauti Mtaani has not been entirely smooth sailing. A 2014 study by iHub³, an innovation hub for the technology community in Nairobi, points out a number of demotivating factors in the use of ICTs to improve governance. These include limited penetration, lack of strategies, high costs, poor ICT skills, citizens' ignorance of their rights, fear of retaliation, tools not suited to users, mistrust of leaders, and lack of action once an issue is raised. CEEC, which is not an organisation that specialises in ICT, had to go through a steep learning curve and encountered a number of these challenges during its journey. To start with, getting the design of the platform right was not easy. The MCAs and the youth were happy with the concept in principle, but the first platform that was set up proved to be cumbersome, difficult to use and costly. Thanks to feedback from the different stakeholders, a more user-friendly and cost-effective platform was designed.

Sauti Mtaani is a new concept and its adoption will inevitably face challenges. For the youth, these include apathy, lack of understanding of MCAs' mandate, mistrust of

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politicians, a belief that the MCAs will not respond to issues raised, and ignorance of their own rights and duties. Some youth fear that the platform, being a purely ICT tool, will put a physical distance between them and the MCAs. This calls for complementary online and offline engagement. For the MCAs, challenges include fears that the platform will be used to incite youth against them, reluctance to be held accountable, and poor understanding of governance issues. The platform can only work if both the youth and the MCAs buy into it. Strategies to mitigate the challenges include training the two key groups in leadership and governance, involving them in the design and improvement of the platform, familiarising them with its use, and popularising it in the wards, as well as being flexible enough to change what does not work.

The platform is appropriate for urban youth, most of whom own phones, are ICT literate and spend much of their time online. This raises the question of whether Sauti Mtaani is creating an urban/rural, literate/illiterate and young/old divide. The fact that about 70 percent of the users are male also leads to the question of whether the platform perpetuates the gender divide. The answer to these questions is that Sauti Mtaani is not a “one size fits all” panacea for governance problems. Just like any other tool or intervention, the platform functions alongside other efforts.

Yet Sauti Mtaani is starting to demystify political leadership, and many participating MCAs now understand that they are accountable to their constituents. Politicians in Kenya have long been treated like small gods. Once they get into positions of leadership, they acquire gatekeepers who make it difficult for their constituents to reach them. The platform is slowly bringing down these walls by ensuring that the youth have easy access to the MCAs. The volume of messages and responses is testimony that it serves a useful purpose.

Sauti Mtaani is a good example of how ICT is redefining governance in Kenya. Starting from the ward level, it can be replicated at other levels of governance all the way up to the presidency. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it does not define the content but simply strives to empower individual agency. For the participating youth, citizen participation is now becoming a reality and governance has indeed moved closer to them as envisaged by the Constitution. The platform is ensuring that the youth are no longer relegated to the periphery but become actors in their own development. ■■■

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1 Sika, Varyanne, Nanjira Sambuli, Albert Orwa and Anne Selim, 2014, *ICT Governance in East Africa: A Landscape Analysis in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania*, Nairobi: iHub Research. Available at http://www.ihub.co.ke/downloads/ict_4_gov_report.pdf.