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# Connecting Citizens to the State: practical Reflections on how Community conversations model promotes systematic, effective and sustained public participation in devolved counties in Kenya

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**ABSTRACT :** *This discussion paper reflects on the ideals of community conversation as one of the effective approaches to promoting meaningful public participation, particularly to unorganized and vulnerable citizenry. The author describe the concept of community conversations and the experience of implementing this concept in select rural and urban areas of Kenya under a three-year European Union (EU) funded project, Enabling Devolved Governance through Inclusive and Systematic Citizen Participation implemented between 2015 to 2017 in Kisumu and Marsabit Counties in Kenya. The project was implemented over a period of three years led by Concern Worldwide and partners-Kenya Medical Education Trust (KMET) and Pastoral Integrated Support Project (PISP).*

*The author use the three year experience of implementing the project to demonstrate how the CC model provides an alternative and proven approach for facilitating meaningful participation amongst the vulnerable population who are least targeted by government preferred models such as ´Chief´s Barazas´. Further, this paper endeavours to interrogate beneath the obvious key concepts of meaningful public participation such as community empowerment and engagement, gender within public participation as well as capacity building within the spheres of meaningful public participation. This paper aims to bring forth challenges of gender, economic status, poverty, political will, knowledge and information as well as civic duty and their interconnectedness.*

*In sum, the paper contends that community conversations as a model has demonstrated that public participation is meaningful when unorganised voices –particularly the vulnerable- are not only empowered but also regarded as active participants to decisions that directly or indirectly affects and shapes the destiny of their lives and their communities. However structural challenges that are linked to deeply root systemic, political and social cultural issues within and amongst governments and citizens greatly impact the ways in which these citizens can be engaged, how they choose to engage and sustain engagement around matters of public interest.*

*Keywords: Participation, Community Conversations, Accountability, Governance*

## I.       INTRODUCTION

At the centre of social change and ensuring that the interests of citizens of a country or members of a community are addressed lies in effective and meaningful sustained engagement of these very citizens and communities. Community deliberation models have existed since the medieval times. Some were enshrined in policies such as Magna Carta, some were manifested informally at local levels such as *Ecclesia* model in Athens, *Majlis Al-Shaab* in Egypt to traditional and informal public forums such as *bunge la mwanchi* (Kenya) and to modern internet chat room on face book and twitter. These nascent models and the current technological platforms prove that communities have traditionally consciously made decisions on matters of public interest in one accord and through persuasion rather than coercion.

Since the post-colonial periods, a number of participatory approaches have been tested and applied across Africa and Kenya in particular. They are not limited to chief´s Barazas, community score cards, public expenditure tracking surveys, citizen's report cards among others. In Kenya, growing body of literature has shown that Chief´s Barasa model has been the preferred framework for engaging citizens, particularly by government officers. However, a number of researchers and experts have criticised the effectiveness of such a model whose concepts borrowed heavily from a centralised system of governance. For instance, Anangwe and Oyugi as quoted by Obosi (2003) observed that this form of participation embraced top down approach to decision making and the spirit of 'participation' was for the public to rubber stamp development proposals from the central government. In addition, this model was further characterised with exclusion, discrimination and coercion of decisions by the chiefs and Sub-chiefs (Obosi, 2003)[1].

Surprisingly, Community conversation model may not be exceptional of such critiques. So, one may ask how then does CC model complement models such as the Chief´s Baraza? Experiences from this project have enabled us to respond to this question. Contrary to models such as Chief´s Baraza, the premise of the CC model is cemented on the need to empower the public to engage with their leaders and government officers in an enabling environment where their voices are heard and their interests considered.

This premise is shared by International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) such as Concern Worldwide. According to them, the CC model creates a platform that neutralises hegemony, produces informed and reasonable policy opinions, empowers the unorganised and the marginalised and inspire them towards social change. However, despite all these attributes, a number of unanswered thoughts remain for further reflections; how can this model engage the public with their governments beyond their communities? How does community conversation model achieves quality and meaningful public participation? And how can National and County Governments design a sustained public participation process that strikes a balance between the political interests and public good?

In response to these questions, many theorised have extolled the virtues of public deliberations as a pivotal component in engaging communities in decision making processes. Community conversations is one such model that heavily borrows from the deliberative democratic theory. For deliberative democrats, deliberation examines how the institutions, forums, venues, and public spaces empowers the less privileged and promotes freedom of expression and accountability. It looks at the socio-economic, political, and historic conditions necessary for healthy deliberation as well as the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs required of participants (Chambers, 2003)[2]. This theory shows the continued fruitfulness of thinking as it brings to the fore sensitise ideals necessary for both communities and the governments to achieve meaningful participation.

Community conversations model has continued to demonstrate how the public and governments can use the ideals of deliberative theory to practically better their relationships and promote conducive environment and principles of good governance. While this model continues to gain momentum as a valuable model for promoting meaningful participation, there is little documentation of its effectiveness and lessons learnt.

This paper examines in more detail the concept of Community Conversations (CC) model and its potential to demonstrate mechanisms and principles of effective and meaningful public participation particularly for unorganised and marginalised citizens. Concern Worldwide posits that CC is a pro-poor model designed to promote attitudinal change and practises amongst both communities and leaders while creating a platform for candid dialogue between leaders and the public as solutions for good governance and increased accountability through a systematic framework (Concern, 2014)[3].

With a three-year grant from the European Union, Concern Worldwide and partners (KMET and PISP) demonstrated effectiveness of the CC model through community empowerment and partnerships in four and one wards in Kisumu and Marsabit Counties respectively. The project targeted county officers, members of the county officers and the communities in the respective sub-counties. Through this model, the project envisioned an informed citizenry and active civil society with ability and opportunity to influence county policies, advocate for inclusion of the poor and vulnerable in decision making and actively put their county government to account (Concern Worldwide, Project Guideline (Unpublished))[4].

## II. TRACING THE HISTORY OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Generally, CC model is anchored on a three-pillar framework -**Dialogue, knowledge and understanding** (Concern Worldwide, 2014). These pillars are implemented through wide range of participatory

methodologies such as active listening, storytelling and strategic questioning to identify shared concerns, observe, reflect, question, explore and make collective decisions for change together (UNDP, 2004)[5]. This process provides for all-inclusive platform for participation where the voice of men and women, rich or poor, young or aged is heard and counts. Through structured and inclusive dialogue, the model contributes to strengthening of community networks, increased Social and civic learning, strengthening of individual and collective self-esteem, shifts in power relations, hence ownership and responsibility for change is provoked and realized.

Therefore, Community conversations (CC) are social transformative approaches that galvanise marginalized and disempowered-poor communities to address the underlying policy issues of development and vulnerability (Concern Worldwide, 2014). This model has been used to address various community concerns ranging from mental health stigma amongst minority groups in Scotland, health needs amongst rural population in North Dakota and refugee issues in Cambodia in the 1970s (Campbell et al, 2013)[6].

In Africa, this model was later adopted and polished by the Salvation Army in Zambia and Enda Tiers Monde/Sante in Senegal in the 1980s and 1990s (Concern worldwide). Other literatures further links UNDP funded HIV program in Ethiopia in 2002 to respond to high deaths and infections of close to 1.7 million and 2.3 million respectively in Ethiopia (UNDP, 2004; UNAIDS, UNICEF, and WHO 2004 as sited by Bishop-Sambrook C et al 2006)[7].

In the case of Ethiopia, UNDP through local partners mobilised and build capacity of community leaders on the CC concept. The strategy of building the capacity of community leaders to create awareness and change behaviour, attitude and retrogressive cultural practise was felt in many villages in Ethiopia. Literature from UNDP positively documented that within two years, communities were openly talking to others about the 'taboos' subjects for the first time without fear. This helped them identify their retrogressive cultural norms and values such as early marriages, wife inheritance, Female Genital Mutilation which fuelled the spread of HIV. Further, the CC model created a platform where both the HIV patients, the larger community and their local leaders could engage and candidly discuss their health priorities and change policies (UNDP, 2004).

Fundamentally, this model was a departure from the common knowledge of science and epidemiology of HIV intervention to more of societal understanding of the need for preservations of values, dignity of individuals and families in an environment that encourages compassion, acceptance and accountability (UNDP, 2004). Although the primary target for the CC model was in HIV/AIDS response, its impact transcended beyond the realms of HIV/AIDs to tackles issues in governance, education and many more. This model since its innovation has been adopted in countries such as Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Kenya among other countries.

## III.     DEFINING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

As we have already seen in the introductory part of this paper, public participation is not a new phenomenon, however there's no universally agreed definition of what it means or what it is. What we read across literatures are broader concepts and principles trying to provide justifications on how it can be effectively and meaningfully executed. While I want to steer away from providing a single definition of what public participation is and equally understand how successful CC model is, your understanding of other scholars perspective on public participation will aid in appreciating how the ideals of the CC model leverages on them.

Public participation has had contested definitions and theories. Post-colonial writers such as Peet and Watts (1996)[8] underscores the fact that a number of existing participatory approaches are characterised by biases which are disempowering, top down and tend to copy and force the so called 'western' participatory approaches on developing countries (Peet and Watts, 1996). These models quite often face revolt from both governments and citizens. The CC model reverses this experience. By allowing communities to use tools such as historical timelines, transect walk and mapping empowers them to understand their environment and get access to information. ***Listening to the voices*** of the public, particularly the vulnerable and making ***public information easily accessible*** are some of the principles that governments should adopt to ensure meaningful participation.

Evidence has shown that participatory approaches that complement the already existing local participatory mechanisms tend to realise meaningful participatory outcomes than those that operate in parallel.

Designing and facilitating public participation that is enriched with local knowledge and sensitive to communities' cultural believes and practises gives them power to evaluate whether the programs and projects are relevant to their own needs and fulfils their priorities.

Existing approaches have raised questions such as who should participate and how should they? Sherry Anstein's definition of participation focuses on the poor as the target for participation. Chambers talks about putting the last first (Arnstein 1969[9]; Chambers 1983)[10]. To them participation is a deliberate empowerment and target of the poor, weak and powerless who are excluded from political and economic processes. In a similar vein, CC principle believes that meaningful participation should purpose to *target the marginalised and extreme poor communities*. This implies that participation is about power struggle in a system and environment that favours the 'politically correct' at the expense of the poor and other vulnerable population.

According to CC model, meaningful participation should be *systematic*. The justification of employing Systematic process is that in most cases, the process provides deliberate opportunities for the voices of vulnerable and poor communities to be heard alongside the privileged members of the public. This process further recognizes that communities are not just a target to rubber stamp processes but they should be at the centre of power and decision making. **Empowerment** of the extreme poor and other vulnerable communities of their rights and **including** them as part of decision making processes is among the fundamental principles for genuine participation which this model promotes.

In light of the already highlighted principles, meaningful participation processes while informing and empowering the less privileged should recognize and appreciate the differences in individuals and communities and seek diverse participatory approaches  in which both the voices and interests of the less privileged and the 'politically correct' can rationally contribute to policy processes and outcomes.

## IV.　　HISTORY OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS IN KENYA

Public participation in Kenya is not new. The citizens of Kenyan have experienced both direct-(individual participation) and indirect (through their democratically elected leaders) participation towards exercising their rights. In Kenya, indirect participation have gained and lost prominence as one of the avenues of meaningful participation. As pointed out by Mbai (2003)[11], indirect participation promoted corruption, clientelism, nepotism, patronage, bribery, lack of access to government information and mistrust between elected leaders and their electorate. Mbai further argues that, the citizens felt that their representatives were compromised and provided lip service on matters of corruption and poor public service (Mbai, 2003). This triggered the quest for a new system of governance which was to promote more accountability and inclusivity hence the current devolved systems of governance in Kenya.

Kenya's Devolved system, described as one of the most ambitious governance model globally, have triggered a shift from representative participation to direct participation and demand for more accountable governance at the counties. It introduced participatory structures up to the villages within the counties. This implied that for county and national governments to meaningfully engage the public, they have to establish participatory structures that respect values and principles of good governance. This is made clear in the CoK, 2010 and other legislations such as Access to Information Act, 2016, County Government Act, 2012 and Public Finance Management Act, 2012 among others. However, the already reviewed literature have shown that existing participatory models such as Chief's Baraza's failed to promote inclusiveness and accountability as required by the constitution of Kenya 2010.

Since the establishment of the counties in Kenya in 2010, empirical evidence has shown limited progress in establishing structures and policies to facilitate meaningful participation in the 47 counties. This fact is supported by a baseline study conducted by Concern worldwide in Kisumu in 2015 described public participation process in Kisumu County as tokenistic, lacked inclusivity with minimal access to public information (Concern worldwide, Baseline report (Unpublished))[12].  This approach proved to be catastrophic and left communities with greater distrust and cynicism to productively engage and participate in county governance.  It's within the context of these setbacks that the community conversation model was designed and demonstrated as one of the effective models for public participation.

The Community Conversation concept was introduced in Kenya by Concern Worldwide in 2001 to address the HIV pandemic (Concern Worldwide, 2014). During this period, Kenya's HIV situation rapidly spread reaching a prevalence rate close to 30% (NACC, 2009)[13]. This model was therefore used by Concern

in their health and HIV program in various counties in Kenya including Kisumu. Concern Worldwide programs in taking this approach ensured that within their projects they were able to setup informed, systematic and structured engagement which was provided for by the CC model as opposed to informal community meetings which were marred by customs and traditions that acted as barriers to systematic decision making and furthered stigma and disempowerment (Concern Worldwide, 2014).

Drawing from the past evaluations of education and HIV program in Kisumu County, the CC model successfully empowered the communities in Kisumu East Sub-County to influence education plans at the sub-county level. These successes witnessed at this time coupled with the European Union funding requirement provided a timely opportunity for Concern Worldwide and her partner KMET to effectively upscale demonstration of this model in additional geographical areas for wider evidenced-based advocacy and policy influencing on effective public participation.

## V. HOW PUBLIC PARTICIPATION WAS CONDUCTED IN THE PAST IN KISUMU COUNTY

### 5.1. Marginalization, Tokenism and Lack of Public Information humped meaningful participation

Public participation in Kisumu County was mostly conducted at the Sub-County Levels. Given the vastness of these sub-counties, only a few citizens from the wards (the lowest devolved structure) could attend these forums. This arrangement by default favoured communities who resided close to the venue of these forums, hence the rest of the communities residing away from the central venue were excluded.

As required by law, these forums are supposed to provide equal opportunity –in terms of individual representation and voice -for all citizens to present their development priorities to the county government for budget consideration. Echoing the voices from community members, challenges such as minimal access to information, distance to the public participation forums coupled with weak economic capacity to finance their trips immensely contributed to their inability to participate. In addition to the aforementioned, effective participation amongst women and girls was greatly hampered by domestic roles and cultural norms such as patriarchy and discrimination. This inferred that the majority of the communities who attended these forums came from nearby Wards and with male domination in most of the consultative forums.

From observation, the communities who were present had the numerical strength and voice to table and prioritise their development needs than those who had few representation or those who never attended at all. This scenario resulted into imbalanced development record in many parts of the County which in turn sowed and promoted the seeds of marginalization, clannism and favouritism amongst leaders and different communities. More troubling, it widened the poverty gap amongst the extreme poor and other disadvantaged populations such as women, youth and children who were at all times least represented. The strategy further promoted apathy amongst communities who felt that they were deliberately excluded and marginalized from county development processes.

### 5.2. Public participation was faced with weak Capacity amongst county officers and ineffective systems and structures

The County Government Act, 2012 mandated the county governments to establish structures for participation. Lack of structures such as village councils, town hall meetings, information service centres to mention but a few was one of the major challenges faced by the county. During public participation, the county relied upon the Ward Administrators to mobilize and organize public participation forums at the sub-county levels. More often than not, these administrators ended up mobilizing communities within their networks or reach. This revealed that there was no proper framework which was systematic and inclusive to engage the citizens.

Lack of systematic engagement was observed even during deliberations. In Kolwa Central Ward for example, community members would verbally mention over 50 projects which they wanted budgeted for at that particular financial year. Surprisingly, close to half of these proposals originated from a single department, which were roads. This resulted into a number of ramifications. First, critical county services such as health, education and agriculture received minimal proposals from the public. Secondly, the county officers lacked criteria/framework for prioritizing the overwhelming proposals. When asked, the common response from community members was that, they were not aware of other county functions other than roads and even the proposals they submitted were not the ones implemented by the county government.

An interesting observation during these public participation forums was that, not all county departments were represented in these consultative forums. However, even the few county officers' present demonstrated

minimal technical knowledge from the departments they represented. This was felt when majority were not able to satisfactorily respond to questions raised by the citizens.

The situation of public participation described above significantly demonstrates how an informed, structured and systematic participatory process moderates the power of the state and elite-capture, regulates self-interest, legitimizes decision, empowers the marginalised and promotes inclusion and meaningful community engagement. The situation also demonstrates the need for an informed citizenry and technically sound county officers who are able to engage with the citizens to enhance accountability and effective service delivery.

## VI. EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATION MODEL IN DEVOLVED GOVERNMENTS

### 5.3. Building relationships and Political Buy-in

One of the most important factors determining the success of this model was the synergy created amongst diverse arrays of Civil Societies Organizations (CSOs) in Kisumu County and the political buy-in from the County Government. A shared desire amongst CSOs and the citizens to learn and influence the use of the CC model further contributed to this success. Three months long consultative meetings with the CSOs and the County Government took place to bring them on board; explaining the concept of the CC model, its principles, how effectiveness it is and generally building cases of success from various domains it has worked and how relevant it was to the Kisumu context.

We were fortunate to face a favourable political environment which was further stimulated by the commitment by the Governor during the launch of the project. Placing the county government at the driving seat and as co-implementers of this model was the most strategic approach which gained us political buy-in. While the County government and her partners were the prime target, including other players such as the private sector and the very community members made it easier to build strong alliances and linkages between communities and their leaders.

### 5.4. Empowering communities and county government officers on CC model

Concern worldwide and her partner KMET conducted trainings to all the 35 county administrators, 7 sub-county administrators and the targeted community members in the four Wards. Training Ward administrators and sub-county administrators on CC model was observed to be strategic in many ways: First, the training acted as sustainable measure for the model since the administrators ultimately acted as the convenors and facilitators of the CC process at their respective wards. Secondly, training the 42 administrators was deemed strategic for scale up of this model to the rest of the wards where the project wasn't operational and lastly, this training transformed the thinking of the administrators to consider the citizens as partners in development rather than people seeking favour from the county.

At the end of the training, one of the sub-county administrators said that,

> *"This training is quite important to our day to day work as we are the people interacting with communities. It has changed my perception and given me skills to relate and handle community issues."*

Empowering communities on rights and civic duty through the CC model was deemed to be one of the best strategy for bringing the voices of extreme poor and other marginalised constituencies such as youths and women to the consultative forums. Drawing from the findings of the baseline report which revealed that most disadvantaged communities were always excluded in consultative forums due to their low self-esteem and lack of awareness of their rights, it was felt that the strategy of empowerment and linking them with their leader was the best way for their inclusion into decision making processes (Concern Worldwide Project Baseline Report, 2015)[14].

Even though the impact of the training differed across the 35 wards, periodic project reports and evidence from the four Wards-Kolwa East, Central, and Railways showed some of the best cases on how the model provided a platform for organized and systematic participation. For example, across the four wards, both the county officers and the larger ward residents relied upon the community action plans presented by the CC group members during the consultative forums.

Additionally, some administrators and members of the county assembly felt threatened by the engagement of these community members while others opined that the CC model was not inclusive of the whole community members. These alternative views made the engagement between empowered communities and the county officers a bit difficult. However, this will be extensively discussed in the subsequent sections.

### 5.5. Establishing a Platform for informed and constructive dialogue

Access to timely and relevant public information has been lauded as one of the cardinal tenets to achieving meaningful participation. However, most if not all the county governments have struggled with how best and when the citizens should be informed. Two common threads run through the principles of access to information. First is the commitment of county government to share public information and engage the public in

a candid and open dialogue. Two is the establishment of effective framework for sharing this information and how to receive feedback from the same public.

Access to information was a fundamental challenge which was experienced across all the wards where the project was implemented in Kisumu County. The existing structures for accessing information and feedback were seen to be ineffective. One such structure was SMS platform which was hardly operational and lacked room for feedback. The other was a county website which was mostly accessible by the few with access to internet and was hardly updated with current information.

A number of strategies were agreed as a measure to improve access to information and feedback mechanisms. One such strategy was to support the county government design a feedback mechanisms framework, which was seen to be costly and tedious. Presenting and acceptance of the CC model by the county government as an optional structure that could complement their already existing efforts for sharing information was seen as a better strategy.

In the interviews with the partner project teams, the CC model promoted access to information in many ways. First, the model acted as a platform for dialogue between the communities and county officers. This provided a space where both community leaders and their ward administrators held their meetings twice a month to deliberate and receive feedback on matters of their concerns. Two, the ward administrators used the CC platforms for sharing budget information and provided technical support to communities as they discusses their priorities before the actual planning and budget forums.

*As one of the ward administrators said, "The CC model has made our work easier as it has provided a channel and contact for reaching communities who we were not able to reach with information and even invite to participate in budget processes."*

Three, constant civic education during the CC meetings increased communities understanding of their right to access public information, increased their self-esteem and empowered them to start connecting with their leaders. At certain times, they were able to assert their powers and demand for information from their ward administrators. These organized platforms further gave the vulnerable groups such as women, persons with disabilities and the youth a voice and space to table their priorities to the government.

*A female CC group members commented that, "The CC process has not only transformed our men to understand that even we (Women) have a right to participate in county government affairs but it has also empowered women to speak and represent themselves in participation forums."*

The strategy of empowering the poor communities and giving them a platform to connect with their leaders and voice their concerns was felt to be one of the effective strategies for enhancing participation of these communities whom are always unorganized hence excluded during public participation.

## 5.6. Structured Feedback process and clear accountability mechanisms

In all the four wards where the CC model was piloted, ineffective feedback mechanism and lack of proper accountability was a common challenge. This further hindered meaningful and quality participation. Each Ward Administrator and other county officers used different mechanisms to facilitate feedback on various county public participation processes. In Kolwa Central Ward for example, a popular mechanism was the use of county notice boards. This approach was however faced with limited update of notice boards. More surprisingly was that not all the ward offices had notice boards hence feedback was only provided when the officer is in office or during county meetings. These mechanisms left the citizens with the burden of finding ways of receiving feedback on their own. This was quite discouraging, more so to the vulnerable groups. In addition, the county government lacked clear framework for providing effective and timely feedback. This lack of effective feedback process weakened the spirit of accountability amongst the already vulnerable citizens.

In identifying the challenge on feedback mechanism, project staff consulted the county officers and suggested Community Conversation model as a remedy to effective feedback process. This model was not only felt to be effective approach for timely and effective feedback mechanism but also acted as a better platform for enhancing accountability and improved service delivery. This was supported through a number of reasons, first, the process created a platform for connection between the leaders and citizens which provided an opportunity for both leaders and citizens to connect, dialogue and receive feedback from various county officers. Secondly, the CC process institutionalized a culture of periodic dialogue meetings at the community level which county offices realised were useful for not only giving feedback but also as an opportunity to explain the constraints they were under in facilitating meaningful feedback processes.

Thirdly, the model empowered the vulnerable communities with skills and understanding of collective mobilizations to speak in one accord and negotiate for inclusion of their collective interests and further questioned their leaders to account for their actions. However, in some cases, the pressure from organized community who summoned their leaders led to a more improved relationship and more accountable and responsive leadership.

## VII.        LESSONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The lessons that have been generated from the CC model have a significant bearing on what constitutes effective and meaningful public participation and the underlying systemic challenges which have implications on policies and practises in Kenya. This sections aims to capture the lessons learnt and their implications in this contested field of public participation.

### 5.7. Political relationships is fundamental for sustained and systematic engagements

A general assumption by development initiatives is that effective and meaningful participation can be achieved fundamentally by financing the development of robust policies and strengthening capacity of the right holders to put pressure on their governments to become more receptive, inclusive and responsive. While lack of strong policy frameworks and low capacities from citizens are impediments to achieving meaningful participation, political relationships significantly shapes and contributes to the overall processes and outcome of public participation. Political relationships include how and how frequently the citizens and their leaders relate and consult with one another and the extent at which such consultations are implemented to their fruition.

Evidence from this project revealed that existence of a robust policy framework may not solve public participation concerns without a better political relationship and buy in. For example, the project supported the development and enactment of Kisumu County public participation Act in 2015 with an aim of improved environment and structures for meaningful public participation. However, this legislation was not operational at the time of writing. Consultations made with the residence of various wards in Kisumu reveal that this legislation has minimally contributed to better public participation process in Kisumu County. Majority of the county officers and civil society members attribute this slow implementation process to lack of political will in streamlining public participation inn Kisumu County.

In as much as this model is seen as creating better political relationships amongst citizens and their leaders, factors such as patronage, provision of incentives and culture of rent seeking is seen as a factor undermining sustainability of engagement and accountability within the CC model. In some CC Sessions, the leaders were accused of favouring some politicians and defending them during such forums, a move which is felt to dilute the spirit of accountability and long term engagements of these forums.

### 5.8. Gender-sensitivity in Public participation is a gap that needs to be filled

In theory, meaningful public participation processes is intended to be inclusive and focused on the interests of the most marginalised population particularly women and girls. Power relations and governance structures have disproportionately led to discrimination amongst women and girls thus weakening their participation and representation in political and decision making processes. At the same time, a number of designed participatory approaches tend to focus on the general population during decision making. While these processes are mostly dominated by men, there's an assumption by the already existing models that all spaces and platforms provide equal representation and participation amongst men and women. This assumption may be far from reality as reports from this project has proven that the existing participation platforms and opportunities tend to mostly favour men over women.

Observations from this project contend that participatory models should be sensitive to dynamics and interests of all gender –Men, Boy, women and girls. For example, listening to women voices differently during public participation provides a safe and conducive space for women to voice their sensitive concerns and builds their self-esteem overtime. Equally, empowering women to be self-aware of their rights and further seek leadership representation as practised in the CC model not only builds confidence to fight for their rights and political participation but also places them at a pedestal to challenge, question and unlearn retrogressive gender and cultural roles.

Designing gender sensitive participatory approaches within the CC model has tremendously improved woman participation in Decision making within the four Wards in Kisumu County. For example 'take a step' was one of the tools designed to challenge members of communities and their leaders to unlearn various retrogressive cultural practises which disempowers women and girls from participating in various community forums and assuming leadership. Beyond this, it is important for the CC model and other existing models to champion for distributive gender roles within the spheres of participation to balance women domestic roles to enable them adequately engage and participate in decision making. Further, the model should embrace other existing community structures such as women groups rather than introducing parallel participatory structures. In sum, designing gender sensitive approaches may be effort in futility without political backing, empowerment and culture change towards gender justice.

### 5.9. Empowerment is effective when it is both social and Economic

As already evident in preceding chapters, lack of economic empowerment is a barrier to meaningful participation. Majority of development partners and County Governments are heavily investing on social

empowerment programmes such as civic awareness with assumption that this in its entirety will improve the environment of participation within the counties. This may not be true as evidence from this project reveals that social empowerment programs such as civic education and rights awareness are more effective when they are complemented with economic empowerment programmes. For example, in Kolwa East Ward, some community members particularly women who failed to participate on county government affairs prioritised engaging in income generating activities for public participation.

It is further worth mentioning that social empowerment programmes do not explicitly seek to improve the economic status of the vulnerable but to ensure that their voices are heard. Moreover, participatory models that balance both social and economic empowerment can be more beneficial in solving the competing tasks between community economic needs and their civic duty. In that, economically empowered communities will find time and resources to effectively and meaningfully participate on decisions affecting their lives and shape policies. For example, equipping women with savings and table banking skills alongside empowering them to understand their civic rights is one such effective mechanism for socio-economic empowerment embraced within the CC model. Further, the table banking approach ensured that many women and girls attended the civic engagement sessions as they were able to gain economically through borrowing soft loans for their small scale business during table banking activities.

More broadly, evidence from this project provides some lessons on how socio-economic empowerment contributes to effective public participation; first, it emancipates women and grants them power and opportunity to independently make socio-political decisions and shape policies affecting their lives. Secondly, socio-economic empowerment minimizes engagements of rent-seeking and patronage. OECD (2012)[15] has equally emphasised that economic Empowerment is important in improving enabling environment for poverty reduction and pro-poor growth ultimately reducing dependency syndrome between poor communities and their leaders (OECD, 2012).

## VIII. CONCLUSION

### 5.10. Reflections for Policy and Practise

As we have repeatedly observed, genuine, systematic and sustained engagement with citizens in policy making and service delivery requires both policy framework and political will on part of government. On the other hand, the emergence of technology and strong civil society organizations is creating an empowered citizenry. This requires government officers both at county and national levels to shift their mind set and leadership culture from `control and dictatorship` to `collaboration and partnership` in order to sustain genuine engagement with their citizens. For this to be successful, both government officers and citizens need to cultivate trust as an ingredient for sustained engagement.

However, these emerging global changes such as technology and rapidly growing economy continue to widen the inequality gap hence poor and other vulnerable citizens continue to be excluded from decision making structures. This requires public participation models to focus more on serving the needs of the vulnerable and unorganized citizens rather than including among the socially and economically empowered citizens where their voices are least heard.

Evidence from this project has demonstrated that political relationships and social empowerment is key in achieving systematic and sustained engagement. However designing socio-economic empowerment programs to lift the poor and other vulnerable communities to trigger their civic duty and boost their economic status is highly beneficial for effective public participation.

A final key insight is for governments and development actors to design more pro-poor participatory approaches that will solve concerns related to social exclusion and discrimination hence providing avenues and structures for easy access to public information, adequate time for engagement and robust feedback mechanisms for the poor and other vulnerable communities.

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