Challenges Affecting Youth Participation in Governance: A Case of Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya

Lumadede Japheth, Vengi Ambrose, Nzioka John

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Tharaka University College, Marimanti, Kenya

Email address:
japheth.lumadede@tharaka.ac.ke (L. Japheth), ambrose.vengi@tharaka.ac.ke (V. Ambrose), john.nzioka@tharaka.ac.ke (N. John)

Abstract: County governance can be improved by catalyzing youth participation at the local levels. This research sought to gauge the status of governance in the counties. This study was guided by the theory of Positive Youth Development. The study adopted a case study research design. The study was carried out in Tharaka-Nithi County. The target population of the study was 393,177, the adult population of the county, and the accessible population (N) was 3,698, which was the youth population in the county that is politically active. From this, a sample of 36 was selected purposively. Among them, 28 were interviewed using focus group discussions, and 8 participants used key informant interviews to give in-depth information on youth participation in governance. The focus group discussion guide and interview schedule were the instruments of data collection. The instruments were given to colleagues for validation. Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic content analysis approach with the help of MAX. Qda software. The findings of this study are of importance to the policy practitioners and county government officials in their bid of enhancing youth participation in governance.

Keywords: Governance, Accountability, Policy, Civic Engagement

1. Introduction

Young people in Kenya (the entire population of those under the age of 35 years) constitute 75.1 percent of the country's population. On the other hand, those aged 65 years and above constitute 3.9% of the entire population in the country [11]. Despite constituting the majority of the population, Kenya's youth have remained at the periphery of the country's affairs for decades and their needs and aspirations have not been accorded due recognition. The youth have not been adequately engaged in the designing, planning, and implementation of programmes and policies that affect them and as result, their knowledge, skill, and energy are underutilized [6, 16].

Devolution was an important step toward the promotion of good governance. Unlike the national government, devolved units, in Kenya's case, counties are better placed to deliver social services to the people [15], because the challenges a county faces are specific to it, and only its local leadership with its local knowledge is able to address them effectively. Good governance requires that institutions serve all stakeholders within a reasonable and acceptable time frame. It means that institutions and processes produce results that satisfy the needs and meet the needs of society while using resources at their disposal at best [22]. Participation is at the core of governance to ensure the leadership offered is satisfactory. The governments are thus now under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their services are citizen-focused and thus citizens are engaged and own the developments.

Since Kenya adopted the new devolution framework comprehensive analysis of challenges facing youths regarding governance especially the dimension of governance on quality of public service had never been studied in any of the Kenyan counties. Yet it is important to constantly get citizens' feedback on public service in order to improve it.

2. Literature Review

United Nations Youth observes that the youth are a dynamic and creative force that is capable of making significant change and improvement in governance all over the world [21]. Despite this, they are rarely involved in any

meaningful engagement concerning governance and are often afflicted with poverty, discrimination, ignorance, and limited opportunities for employment and business [8]. In most countries, for instance, the youth are encouraged to engage in political, social, and economic pursuits while in higher institutions of learning but are often discouraged from pursuing these interests once they graduate. As a result, they do not consider themselves competent enough in a world beyond learning institutions.

The Kenyan youth continue to face discrimination, neglect, and exclusion from political, social, and economic participation. This is despite the fact that they constitute more than two-thirds of the population of the country. They have been condemned to poverty, joblessness, and little or no participation in policy making on matters that could greatly improve their lives. This section presents literature on some of the challenges the youth face, which hinder them from fully participating in leadership at various levels of government [13].

Firstly, there is lack of adequate civic education intended to sensitize the youth on their rights, freedoms and roles in governance. There have been few attempts made to educate them on the Kenyan constitution, policy making, their roles and rights during elections, and many other public processes in which they are required to participate. Lack of civic education makes majority of these youth to rely on their leaders, most of whom are older and would not wish to relinquish power to younger generations, hence being easily misled or manipulated [20].

A second challenge to youth participation is lack of empowerment that comes with employment and job security. The high number of youths is not proportional or commensurate with the employment opportunities available or created in both the public and private service. Lack of job opportunities would mean that the youth are less interested in participating in their civic duties and more engaged in finding means of survival in harsh economic times. This would be a disadvantage to them [18]. Most of the unemployed, despite having adequate training in colleges and universities, settle for small businesses and casual jobs which enable them to earn barely enough for a daily living. Some of the skilled graduates end up doing jobs they are not qualified for while others resort to a life of crime to make ends meet [9].

Bialostocka argues that discrimination is also another challenge the youth face when seeking opportunities for leadership in Kenya. Job opportunities are more likely to be awarded to undeserving relatives of the hiring parties without fair consideration of the applicants. Similarly, in regards to leadership, positions of governance are usually awarded to those close to the management without due process [5]. This means that some of the youth that get leadership opportunities do not have the attributes of good leaders and therefore cannot be relied upon to make good decisions on behalf of the rest of the youth.

A major challenge to youth participation in governance is the conception of the young people as chaotic, reckless and without a rational capacity. As such, it is assumed that they were always need constant monitoring. This mentality is especially held by elder members of the society who mostly argue that the youth need to be managed and not be involved in matters of governance [3]. This assumption is ill-advised and inconsiderate of the fact that most of the problems that face the society, whether economic, social or political, mostly affect the youth and they can validly propose practical solutions to them.

It is imperative that the youth be given an opportunity to participate in national and local governance processes if the vision or goals of the Kenyan society are to be achieved [15]. Sidelining them was only limit the perspectives in which problems are understood and was limit the possible interventions for them.

Opportunities for the youth in governance can be enhanced and made available through various means. Firstly, there is need to implement available policies on youth welfare and empowerment. Most of the policies have either been ignored or given little attention by the concerned authorities. For instance, the government should ensure that they provide enough resources and trainers of civic education to the youth. This has not been achieved to the desired levels. The youth need to be trained to understand their rights and freedoms as well as their role in transformation of the society they live in [17].

According to Smith, Marks, Novelli, Valiente and Scandurra, empowerment is dependent on the realization that the youth have a free will and do not necessarily need to align themselves with the demands and rules laid out by older generations. Once they achieve autonomy, they can freely choose the best course of action for their problems and become agents of change in the Kenya society [19].

There is also need to revise the traditional ways of educating and training the youth. Instead of training them how to think and what to learn, they should be trained on how to learn and the importance of committing themselves to their decisions. Paradigms of communication should also be revised so that elderly members of the society learn to treat the youth like their equals and not as problem to be taken care of [7].

This research was motivated by the observation that the youth, who constitute the majority of the population in Kenya, are rarely engaged in matters such as decision making processes and governance. It sought to investigate various challenges that affected the participation of youth in governance. The significance of this study is that it will provide information on these challenges, as experienced among the youth in Tharaka Nithi County, and seek to offer recommendations which will be applicable to the entire country.

3. Methodology

The study used a case study research design. In this design, the researcher conducts both quantitative and qualitative data collection phases simultaneously, and then analyzes the results. The study was carried out in Tharaka Nithi County

which is a typical representation of other counties in Kenya. The County has four sub counties: namely, Meru South, Maara, Tharaka South and Tharaka North. Tharaka Nithi County has a population of 393,177 (Maara 114,894, Igamba 53,210, Tharaka North 58,345, Tharaka south 75,250). The accessible population of the study is the 3,698 politically active youths in the counties. The rationale for selecting Tharaka Nithi County was that, since it's the locale where the researchers reside, it was easier for them to sample the study population because they are conversant with the area population and the native languages.

The study adopted purposive and non-proportionate sampling from the accessible population of 3,698. In each of the four sub counties thus, 39 respondents were selected. 2 of the respondents were interviewed using key informant interviews, 7 were engaged in a focus group discussion and the other 30 answered the questionnaires.

The study used interview schedules and focus group discussion guide to collect data. Interview schedule was used to collect qualitative data from key informants. The researcher made appointments with 2 key respondents in every sub county and conducted the interviews at a place of their convenience. Focus group discussion was conducted with selected number of youths. The researcher made appointments with these selected youths and conducted the discussions at an area that was convenient for them. Discussions were tape-recorded with the permission of the respondents.

To ensure internal, construct and content validity of the research instrument, the research instruments were given to colleagues for expert judgement and thereafter corrections were made as necessary. This was done by checking the instrument items against the study objectives. The analysis was done through thematic content analysis methods.

The entire research process was conducted with due respect to ethical considerations of research. The researchers obtained informed consent from the respondents to participate in the study. The researchers were careful to avoid causing physical or psychological harm to respondents by asking embarrassing or irrelevant questions, using threatening language or making respondents nervous. The researchers also treated the respondents' views with respect and utmost confidentiality.

4. Results and Discussions

The findings of the survey revealed that the sample of citizens for this study consisted of 62% male youths and 38% females. This means that the majority of male youths tend to engage more in governance issues compared to their female counterparts. The average age of youths engaging in governance was also found to be 26 years. This means that those who engage in governance are middle-aged youths. In focus group discussions and key informant interviews, the participants were asked about challenges that youths face to access, participate, and be significantly involved in governance. Most of the participants in the focus group discussion and key informant interviews held in Igamba, Maara, Tharaka South, and Tharaka North sub-counties said

that they experience challenges such as Lack of involvement in development initiatives, Insufficient exposure to opportunities, Inadequate awareness as well as education, being looked down upon, lack of representation in the various leadership opportunities, and corruption. The following statements are in support:

The government has been working alone and government initiatives do not truly reflect the priorities of the youth, we are not engaged in deciding what we want and how we want it. The government should know that enabling and incorporating the youth in decisions allows us to evaluate the projects and bring insights that are so important for development (Discussant F; Male, Tharaka South).

The views of the respondent above agree with the findings of other studies [12, 14] which place the youth among parties that have been marginalized, both in the past and at present, in important governance processes. Policies are formulated and implemented without the input of this group, resulting in ineffectiveness of these policies.

I think inadequate education among some youths limits their ability to understand governance and what is expected of them to do. Some of these notices and engagements are available to youths through forums such as WhatsApp groups and social media but they are ignored. (Discussant A; Male, Maara).

In agreement with the above assertion, various studies have demonstrated that ignorance is one of the greatest challenges to youth knowledge of good governance and their participation in ensuring it [1, 2]. Ignorance of their civic rights and duties, lack of knowledge on how to monitor and demand for proper governance, and the illusion that they are marginalized, therefore, discriminated against is a challenge that needs to be addressed urgently [4, 10].

In my opinion, I think the government whether at the county level or at the national level should be at the forefront in planning, organizing, and holding governance training for the youths rather than just relying on the civil societies and mass media for the role (Key Informant 2; Female, Tharaka North).

Engaging the youths in political or leadership positions is likely to bring the perception that the youths in those positions will articulate their needs and opinions at the decision-making table, hence the need to actually foster more youths in such critical positions. This is however not the case as there are many youths who are qualified, brilliant, and can demonstrate exceptional skills but are not given a chance to do the same. The youths feel marginalized, and thus exhibit a lack of zeal or passion for governance issues unless pushed to the wall (Discussant E; Female, Meru South).

In most cases, however, the youths are looked down upon such that they cannot access certain information in their quest to ensure good governance. They end up giving up and hence become discouraged from engaging in governance matters (Key Informant 1; Female, Meru South).

Since many youths think they have been limited to issues

pertaining to governance, some tend to self-exclude on the basis that the discrimination against the youth in terms of representation in leadership and political positions, decision making as well as the fact that they are not heard makes them exclude themselves (Discussant D; Male, Tharaka North).

In A survey conducted by the UN IANYD in 2012, a majority of 13000 respondents voicing their plights from over 186 countries highlighted that the main challenges for the youths were limited opportunities in terms of effective participation in the decision-making process. With such limited opportunities and exposure to meaningfully participate in inclusive decision-making processes, young men and women feel excluded and marginalized in their societies i.e., the personal exclusion that they cannot be heard [23].

5. Conclusions

It is noteworthy to conclude that youths not being involved in designing, planning, and implementing policies that are affecting them directly was the most mentioned challenge and inadequate education was the least mentioned challenge in Tharaka Nithi County. The youths also lacked opportunities to participate in governance in the county. It can also be concluded that a majority of the youths wish to be trained by the government and be included in political and leadership opportunities and roles.

6. Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations from this study include:

i.   The youths should be engaged right from the onset in planning, designing, and implementing policies that directly affect them as such was make the acquainted with what is expected and hence participate in governance matters.

ii. The county and the national government should endeavor to encourage and foster the participation of the youths at all levels of governance as that was boost their confidence and subsequent gaining of experience in matters of governance.

iii. The youths should be accorded a chance to hold both leadership and political positions since a good bunch of the youths are well-educated, brilliant, and academic luminaries. This was also ensured that they have their own representatives that can articulate matters on their behalf at decision-making levels.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The first limitation is that the study was conducted in one county; therefore the reliability of the results restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized across the Kenyan counties. Future research work especially on how remote engagement via social media can be achieved will help improve governance significantly.

References

[1]   Amambia, S. C., Bivens, F., Hamisi, M., Lancaster, I., Ogada, O., Okumu, G. O.,... & Zaid, R. (2018). *Participatory Action Research for Advancing Youth-led Peacebuilding in Kenya*. United States Institute of Peace.

[2]   Awiti, A., & Scott, B. (2016). The Kenya youth survey report.

[3]   Ayele, S., Khan, S., & Sumberg, J. (2017). Introduction: new perspectives on Africa's youth employment challenge.

[4]   Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. F., & Sesma Jr, A. (2007). Positive youth development: Theory, research, and applications. Handbook of child psychology, 1.

[5]   Bialostocka, O. L. G. A. (2019). A culture-sensitive youth policy for Kenya.

[6]   European Youth Forum. (2020). Youth Participation. Retrieved 18 October 2020, from https://www.youthforum.org/participation

[7]   Grasso, M. T., & Bessant, J. (2018). Governing youth politics in the age of surveillance. Routledge.

[8]   Hall, S. (2017). Youth Employment in Kenya: A Literature Review. Retrieved 18 October 2020, from https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source =web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwj9ks6EsMDsA hUcQEEAHdWVD_YQFjACegQIChAC&url=https%3A%2F %2Fwww.britishcouncil.co.ke%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles% 2Fng_kenya_youth_employment_in_kenya.pdf&usg=AOvVa w38zF21mcv-Eq2HJ3wW3jKh

[9]   Hammett, D. (2018). Engaging citizens, depoliticizing society? Training citizens as agents for good governance. Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, 100 (2), 64-80.

[10] Hope Sr, K. R. (2012). Engaging the youth in Kenya: empowerment, education, and employment. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *17* (4), 221-236.

[11] Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, (2020). 2019 Kenya Population And Housing Census Results - Kenya National Bureau Of Statistics. [online] Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. Available at: https://www.knbs.or.ke/?p=5621 [Accessed 10 March 2020].

[12] King, E. (2018). What Kenyan youth want and why it matters for peace. *African Studies Review*, *61* (1), 134-157.

[13] Mutua, E., Bukachi, S., Bett, B., Estambale, B., & Nyamongo, I. (2017). Africa's Youth Employment Challenge: New Perspectives.

[14] Mutuku, C. M. (2011). Youth perspectives on their empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa: The case of Kenya (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nairobi.).

[15] Ngigi, S., & Busolo, D. N. (2019). Devolution in Kenya: the good, the bad and the ugly. *Public Policy and Administration Research*, *9* (6), 9-21.

[16] Ogbonnaya, T. V. Role of Youths in National Development in Ikwo Local Government Council, 2015-2020.

[17] Oosterom, M. (2018). Youth Engagement in the Realm of Local Governance: Opportunities for Peace?

[18] Sambo, W. (2016). Factors affecting youth entrepreneurship development within Kibera, Kenya: the perspective of entrepreneurship education. Problems and Perspectives in Management, 14 (2-2), 2-2.

[19] Smith, A., Marks, C., Novelli, M., Valiente, O., & Scandurra, R. (2016). The links between equity, governance, education and peacebuilding in Kenya.

[20] Thuo, J., (2020). Challenges Facing Kenyan Youth | Study In Kenya. [online] Studyinkenya.co.ke. Available at: https://studyinkenya.co.ke/blog/challenges-facing-kenyan-you th [Accessed 10 March 2020].

[21] United Nations Youth. (2020). YOUTH, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING. Retrieved 18 October 2020, from https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/y outh-political-participation.pdf

[22] Wälde, T. W. (2010). International Energy Agency. In *Handbook of Transnational Economic Governance Regimes* (pp. 923-942). Brill Nijhoff.

[23] World Youth Report (2012). Young People Transition to Adulthood: Progress and Challenges. UN IANYD.