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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES FACING SUB-COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS IN ENGAGING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN VIHIGA COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This study was set to critically discuss challenges that are faced by administrators in engaging citizens in the County decision making (citizen participation) in devolved government. Over recent decades, many countries have gained experience with referendums, citizens' forums, citizens' juries, collaborative governance with referendums, budgeting, and other models in which citizens have a more direct say to governance. Citizen participation in decision making is usually considered a valuable element of democratic governance. Citizen involvement has a number of positive effects on democracy a part from owning the decision, it increases issue knowledge, civic skills, and public engagement, and it contributes to the support for decisions among the participants. It is clear that the contribution of participation to democracy differs according to type of democratic innovations, deliberative forums and surveys appear to be better at promoting the exchange of arguments, whereas referendums and participatory policy making projects are better at giving citizens influence on policy making and involving more people. This paper identifies some of the theoretical and contextual from the previous researchers and literature that contributes to the promotion of citizen participation in decision making of a County. From the findings it shows that there is low citizen participation due to unawareness in the County thus making it impossible for the citizen to contribute in the decision making of governance

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INTRODUCTION

The opportunity to take part in the political system is such a fundamental tenet of the democratic system of government that its very existence is rarely questioned. People must be able to have their say, to vote, to engage in political debate and to let those in power know their views on issues which concern them. This is what democracy is about (Richardson 1983:1).

Citizen participation in government has traditionally centred on measures to facilitate greater public access to information about government, enhance the rights of citizens to be 'consulted' on matters which directly affect them, and ensure that all voices can be heard equally through fair systems of representative democracy. Such measures typically include standardized rules, protocols, and enabling legislation and regulation [Bridgman and Davis \(2000\)](#). However, there is a growing appreciation that participation in governance, or participatory governance, involves different principles and methods for engagement. These might include developing transformative partnerships, establishing system-wide information exchanges and knowledge transfers, decentralizing decision making and inter-institutional dialogue; and embracing relationships based more on reciprocity and trust Reddel and

[Woolcock \(2003:93\)](#). Public participation is one means of decreasing tension and conflict over public policy decisions. A variety of techniques exist that solicit public input effectively. Planners and participants can derive a number of tangible benefits from an effective public involvement process. However, the expectations of planners and the public must be roughly equivalent for the process to be effective. Citizen involvement is intended to produce better decisions and thus more efficiency benefits to the rest of society [Beierle \(1999\)](#), [Thomas \(1995\)](#). Citizen participation promotes accountability and transparency in governance thus better economic growth of a County.

[Blair \(1998:16\)](#) argues that the signal promise of decentralizing government authority is enhancing democratic participation by encouraging more people to get involved in the politics that affect them, and making government more accountable by introducing citizen oversight and control through elections. If democracy lies in rule by the people, the promise of democratic decentralization is to make that rule more immediate, direct, and productive. This, therefore, places great demand on administrators to create ways in which citizen participation or involvement in County decision making is enhanced to enable a conducive environment for good governance.

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Constitution of Kenya – CoK (2010) Article 196(1) provides that County Assemblies conduct their businesses in an open manner and facilitate public participation and involvement in the legislative business of the assemblies and their committees. At the same time Close 89 of the County Governments Act (CGA) 2012 provides for citizen participation principles in which it include timely access to information, data, documents, and other information relevant or related to policy formulation and implementation; access to the process of approval of development proposals, projects and budgets and protection and promotion of the interest and rights of minorities, marginalized groups and communities.

Statement of the Problem

Citizen Participation in public affairs seems to hold a sacrosanct role in United State of America (U.S.A) political culture' (Day 1997, 1). The enthusiasm for incorporating a role for citizens into democratic decision-making is not limited to the U.S.A, as many other countries have extensive initiatives in place that involve citizens in the governing process. A central tenet to the enthusiasm accorded to citizen participation is the belief that citizen involvement in a Jeffersonian democracy will produce more public-preference decision-making on the part of the administrators and a better appreciation of one's larger community on the part of the public Stivers and Oldfield (1990). King and Stivers (1998) suggest that improved citizen participation could stem the deterioration in public trust evidenced by widespread hostility toward government entities.

The arguments of enhancing citizen participation frequently focus on the benefits of the process itself. Nelson and Wright (1995), for example, emphasize the participation process as a transformative tool for social change. In addition, citizen involvement is intended to produce better decisions and thus more efficiency benefits to the rest of society Beierle (1999). The Constitution of Kenya (2010) Article (196) provides for facilitation of public participation and involvement in the legislative and other business of the assembly and its committees. Making democracy work requires informed and active citizens who understand how to voice their interests, act collectively and hold public officials accountable, Wanjohi (2003). Citizens must understand the basis of citizenship, politics and government, and they need knowledge to make good policy choices and understand the proper use of authority, Burugu (2010). Citizens also need the desire to exercise their rights and the political space to do so without unreasonable resistance or harassment from authorities or others.

Citizens in Kenyan Counties face coordination challenges in civic education and access to information that can enable them understand their rights and responsibility in decision making of the undertakings in their respective Counties. Vihiga County as one of the forty seven Counties is not unexceptional. The aim of this study was to determine challenges faced by sub-County and ward Administrators in engaging citizen participation in decision making in Vihiga County, Kenya. Realizing that devolution is only five years old hence has been various challenges facing citizen participation in decision making which this study was to establish for proper

governance. Civic education is a key factor in citizen participation and thus should have been intensively done to enable the citizen realize their role in enhancing good governance in the Country. Many theories talk about citizen participation given and an example of liberal citizenship theory which is based on the (universal) individual rights of citizen. It revolves around the calculating individual who is primarily driven by self-interest. It is the political community's primary duty to create a framework that protects citizens' individual rights as well as possible (Dekker & Hart, 2005). The state may at most empower its citizens to gain even greater freedom for example by providing education (Shuck, 2002). Liberals expect citizens to know their rights and obligations, and to be able to exercise their rights and meet their obligations. Liberal leaves it to each individual citizen to decide whether or not to actively participate in society (Shuck, 2002). A well educated citizen is able to voice out their views in regard to the governance of the County.

Civic Education as a major factor in citizen participation

Civic education is not only an intellectual, physical and moral activity, but also a process of transmitting customs, laws, traditions and standards of living. It is a process of cultivation of the mind through which a person learns the best way to live with others in a civil society. Before citizens express their opinions, and participate in the public decision making process, they need information about the subject at hand. A citizen participation process cannot be built unless those who participate have knowledge and information about the issue(s).

Public education is the first step in involving citizens in the life of their community and in creating a participative culture. Through public education, the attitudes of citizens regarding the political system and its different components can be changed. The role of civic engagement towards the quality of governance, and encouraged people's participation in local government matters (Adler and Goggin 2005; Zlatareva 2008; Sharma 2009). Governance is not just about providing and delivering some local services, but also about supporting the life and liberty of citizens, providing a democratic space for citizen participation, and facilitating outcomes that enrich the quality of life of citizens. Civic engagement creates a safe space for participation by playing the role of a mediator between citizens and local authorities, by motivating and creating suitable environment for people to participate at the local level, and by identifying the necessary changes required for local governments (Zlatareva 2008). Putnam (2000) states that the more the citizens are engaged in social activities the more likely they are to participate in local government activities. This is because, civic engagement as a main component of social capital, enables participants to work together more effectively to pursue shared objectives at the local level.

Zlatareva (2008) believe, local governance is a focal point for activating civic engagement. Based on UNICEH (2008) while there are frequent factors influencing civic engagement, a critical success factor is good governance. When governance is established, civic engagement programs often empower people

to change their societies and their own lives positively as well as civic engagement with creating new social networks influence upon local governance. Public awareness campaigns are used to inform the citizens on the happenings within the government and what it is expected of them to contribute toward the governance decision making. Good governance require collaboration between the government and the citizen so as to a common good. This enables proper participation of the citizens because they are informed and they know their rights in working together with the government as a team.

Theoretical Review

The concept of civic education to enhance citizen participation has been explained by Liberal Theory. This paper examined civic education variable of citizen participation based on this theory.

The liberal Theory

The liberal citizenship theory is based on the (universal) individual rights of citizens. This theory revolves around the calculating individual who is primarily driven by self-interest. It is the political community’s primary duty to create a framework that protects citizens’ individual rights as well as possible (Dekker & Hart, 2005). The state may at most empower its citizens to gain even greater freedom for example by providing education (Nancy C. Roberts (2015)). Liberals expect citizens to know their rights and obligations, and to be able to exercise their rights and meet their obligations. This theory promotes the need for civic education that the more educated citizens are the more they are be able to contribute in informed decision making and understanding of why they are making those decisions.

The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is the diagrammatic presentation of variables showing the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable (Mugenda and Mugenda 2003). The conceptual framework hereunder illustrates the perceived link between the independent variable (Civic Education) and the dependent variable (Citizen participation). The conceptual framework is founded on the literature review, which depicts a linkage between civic education and citizen participation. The civic education constituted of civic engagement, training and development and public awareness. Citizen participation is conceptualized as good governance, enhanced citizen’s rights and consultation on matters affecting citizens. The conceptual model in figure 5.1 shows the relationship between civic education and citizen participation.

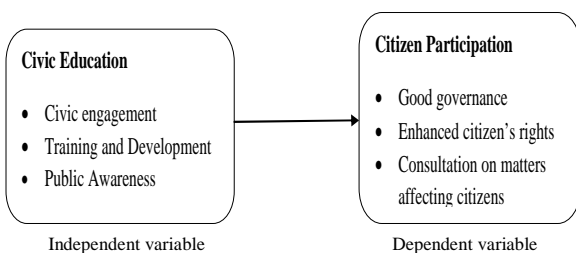


Figure 1 The conceptual Framework

Empirical review

Weeks (2000) details a successful deliberative democracy project that forced recalcitrant city council members to implement painful budget cuts with the mandate of hundreds of citizens from workshops and survey responses. In cases such as this, a participatory initiative can vastly improve social outcomes, as balanced input from citizen participants can allow factions to compromise and find solutions to previously intractable problems. This study promotes the involvement of citizen and at the same time shows that the citizens have access to information of what is happening at the government level that their responses can be heard and be used to make an informed information towards their needs thus making proper solution that are owned by the citizens as a whole through participation.

Ray et al (2008) in their study of representativeness argued that the relative value of informed or ‘grass roots’ participants depended on the objective of the engagement: if the point is to gather knowledge then the views of authentic or grass roots community members are of value, but if the point is to ‘get things done’ then better informed participants are required. The study reveals out that for better decision making then the citizens needs to have adverse knowledge and this can only be achieved through civic education to the citizens. Civic education allows government and citizen engagement and this can be done through public awareness campaigns where citizens comes to know how to contribute in governance decision making.

Critical Review of Existing Literature

According to Innes and Booher (2004), the available modes of participation (e.g. public hearings, citizen panels, and citizen advisory committees) may contribute to further aggravating the situation instead of remedying it. Innes and Booher (2004) argue that public hearings present “distorted communicative action” given the absence of multi-way dialogue and inequalities in the treatment of speakers. However, citizen participation is perceived as time consuming, costly, and burdensome (Timney 1998). There is inherent conflict between the values of citizen participation and the structure of government, which creates obstacles in allowing for meaningful citizen participation (Callahan 2006). Although some believe in the virtue of popular sovereignty, they remain skeptical of participation. For instance, it has been argued that a more open process can engender poor decisions given that citizens are, by and large, out of touch with political and economic realities (Innes and Booher 2004).

Traditional means of representation seemingly marginalize citizen participation. Even though town hall meetings and public hearings allow individuals to voice their opinions regarding specific issues, these participatory mechanisms are flawed insofar as they preclude a meaningful exchange among citizens and decision-makers (Uchimura 2002). According to Lukensmeyer and Brigham (2002, 351), in their Public Sector Innovation Journal, 11(2), 2006, article 6; “public hearings and typical town hall meetings are not a meaningful way for citizens to engage in governance and to have an impact on

decision making. They are speaker focused, with experts simply delivering information or responding to questions.”

Findings

From the findings, most the respondents clarified that there is low involvement of citizen participation because of lack of awareness. The gap between the members of the public and the elected leaders cannot enhance good governance in the County. There is no civic awareness to empower people in the County and thus making citizen participation a failure.

The County needs to initiate more public awareness campaigns on citizen participation which should not be politicized but rather be made to promote the understanding of the role of the citizen in governance. Corruption has played a big role in making the citizens believe that whenever they are called for public forums they should be paid and politicians have used these to their advantage for their own political campaigns. With proper civic education on citizen participation, the citizens will not attend public forums for payment but to add value to the decisions made in the County. The County needs to come up with proper strategies or forms of civic engagement where citizens are educated on issues to do with citizen participation.

The findings also show that there is need for the County to promote training and development that can empower citizen participation. Through the projects done in the County, they could be the basis for training and development of the citizens on citizen participation. Since projects are society initiated, they can be used to communicate to the citizen the need for them to participate in contributing towards the decision making of the County. As a tool to citizen participation, civic education should be budgeted for in every County to enable its citizen be educated and be able to understand better their rights and their role in contributing in enhancing proper governance.

These findings indicate that a majority of the respondents (90%) strongly felt that training and development can empower citizens for participation in decision making on matters of governance in county government. Even the 10% difference of the respondents who strongly agreed, the 10% agreed that training and development can empower citizens in matters of governance of county governments. This finding serves to demonstrate the faith County administrators have in training in preparing citizens to participate in county governance. This indicates that a County that has an enabling environment for training and development can enhance citizen participation in matters of governance.

The findings show that the ineffectiveness of public awareness campaigns has contributed to low citizen participation in the County. This is indicated with the majority of the respondents 67% who strongly agree that there is no public awareness done in the County, 20% agree that there is minimal public awareness among the citizen and 3% agree that there is high public awareness in the County about citizen participation in decision making in governance.

CONCLUSION

Citizen engagement has always played part in public services, but it's usually been ignored, under-managed, and at worst seen as a distraction. The past decade has seen substantial growth not just in the scholarship surrounding participatory governance but also in the practice itself. Increasing citizen participation is sometimes seen as a way to increase the efficacy of regulation, improve the provision of public goods and services, and bolster outcomes in areas such as decision making in governance. If citizens continue to demand greater engagement with the institutions that affect them, we can expect both the demand for avenues of coproduction and the potential of its contributions to increase. Constitution 2010 Article (196) provides for facilitation of public participation and involvement in the legislative and other business of the assembly and its committees. Making democracy work requires informed and active citizens who understand how to voice their interests, act collectively and hold public officials accountable.

There is need for the County to promote training and development that can empower citizen participation. Through the projects done in the County, they could be the basis for training and development of the citizens on citizen participation. Since projects are society initiated, they can be used to communicate to the citizen the need for them to participate in contributing towards the decision making of the County. As a tool to citizen participation, public awareness funds should be budgeted for in every County to enable its citizen be educated and be able to understand better their rights and their role in contributing in enhancing proper governance. The findings show that the ineffectiveness of public awareness campaigns has contributed to low citizen participation in the County.

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