

Supporting Sustainable Development through Research and Capacity Building

Promoting Public Participation for Improved Health Outcomes

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Public participation is key to improving and promoting health outcomes. Public participation can be defined as “a way of communication whereby an institution or organization consults interested or affected individuals, organizations, and government entities before making or implementing a given decision.”

In Kenya, public participation is provided for in the Constitution under different Articles. Some of these include Article 10 on National Values and Principles of Governance, Article 232 (1d) on involvement of the people in the process of policy making, Article 174 (c) on objectives of devolution and (Article 201 (1)(a) on public finance. In addition, Part VIII of the County Governments Act is dedicated to ‘Citizen Participation’, with section 30 (3)(g) providing that one function of the County Governor is to “promote and facilitate citizen participation in the development of policies and plans, and delivery of services...”. The Public Finance Management Act similarly emphasizes public participation, with section 207 providing that regulations may provide for the same.

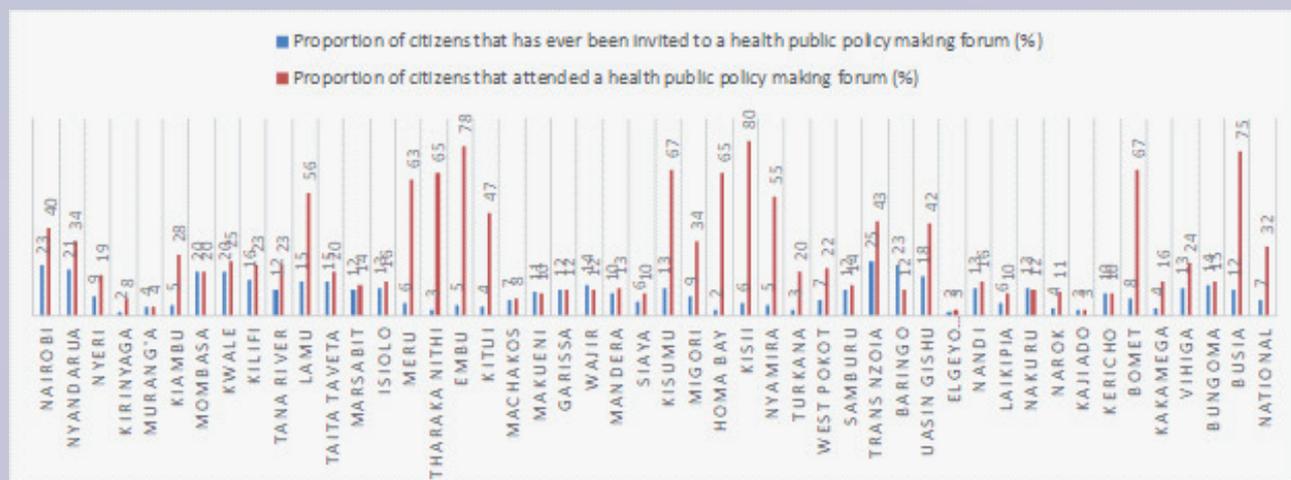
Overall evaluation of public participation across counties regarding the public policy making process during the Health Assessment Study in 2017 indicated that, in general, public participation is

relatively high. The level was estimated at over 70.0% across the counties with about 53.6% of citizens aware of the importance of active participation in the county decision making processes. Moreover, about 77.7% of citizens were aware of their health rights in the Constitution, while 73.2% were aware that primary healthcare is a devolved function. Counties had also put in place documented plans to evaluate the success of the participation process and to track citizen participation.

However, the proportion of citizens that had ever been invited to a health public policy making forum was low. Only about 7.1% reported that they had been invited to attend a health policy making forum and only 32.0% had attended such public health policy making forums (see chart below).

In addition, a comparison of rural versus urban households reveals that the level of public participation is higher among urban households compared to rural households. This can partly be attributed to differences in literacy levels and access to information. Most urban dwellers are more educated and can easily access information from various sources than their rural counterparts. This can be attributed to the fact that some of the major tools for public engagement are mainly ICT tools

Public participation in health public policy making processes (%)



such as county websites (77.1%) and social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) which may not be easily accessible to the rural populace.

Major Challenges Affecting Citizen Participation in Health Sector

The key challenge is the low levels of awareness among citizens on how they can participate in health sector issues, especially in policy making and budgeting. The low level of awareness is partly due to lack of robust civic education structures and communication avenues at county level. So far, very few counties have put in place clear guidelines on how civic education ought to be conducted. In counties where civic education has been taking place, less focus has been given to health matters.

Another factor contributing to low levels of awareness is poor access to information about county processes and activities, even though access to information is a human right. In most instances, the public is not informed or just partially informed of public participation forums. Further, when the information is passed to citizens, they are given short notices which they find difficult to work with. The most preferred mode of community engagement in the health sector at county level was through the Health Management Committees (HMC) in various health facilities.

Another challenge to public participation in the health sector is limited capacity and knowledge on health policy issues by the common citizens. Whereas the county government may make an effort to involve the public in policy making and budgeting for the health sector, most citizens are ill-equipped about their roles in the processes, given the complex nature of health issues. If this is not taken into consideration when planning for public participation forums, then the level of apathy towards public participation by citizens is likely to be compounded.

Clear guidelines on public participation are lacking at county level. Whereas there have been public participation and engagements at the county level, there is lack of a clearly spelt out framework to guide public participation. Lack of such a framework has partly contributed to poor quality of citizen

participation in most counties due to the ad hoc way public participation forums are conducted.

To enhance public participation, there is a need to invest in programmes that create awareness. One such programme is to create and strengthen civic education units within the counties. This can in turn be used to educate the public on their rights to public participation and how to participate in such forums.

County governments should also consider enhancing public communication using a variety of appropriate platforms to reach all citizens in the county. For example, while digital platforms such as social media and county websites may be appropriate for urban dwellers, such platforms should be supplemented with use of mobile phones and short message texts (SMS); local radio stations, and public noticeboards in rural areas. Counties can also consider disseminating popular versions of key documents for county planning, budgets, and bills through accessible channels.

Due to low capacities for the public to participate in health sector issues, county governments need to organize for community training on various subjects that would enhance their participation, including an understanding of the importance of public health.

County governments would also need to organize for continuous and refresher training courses for duty bearers on participatory methodologies to boost their capacities on how to effectively organize and conduct public participation. The training should facilitate attitude and behaviour change while improving the level of participation in various public participation forums.

Finally, county governments should develop a citizen participation framework and mechanism for exerting social accountability at the local levels through citizen oversight committees or surveillance committees. Further, county governments need to strengthen Health Management Committees (HMC) in planning and monitoring execution of agreed work plans at the facility levels. In addition, social accountability can be enhanced by using a community scorecard which is a tool for monitoring and assessing institutional performance.

About KIPPRA Policy Briefs

KIPPRA Policy Briefs are aimed at a wide dissemination of the Institute's policy research findings. The findings are expected to stimulate discussion and also build capacity in the public policy making process in Kenya.

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