

The power of participation

Uniting residents and government officials in Kisumu County



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PROTECT (Protecting Rights, Openness and Transparency Enhancing Civic Transformation) is a coalition of organisations that, since 2019, has joined forces to pursue our common vision: a free, open, and inclusive Kenya.

To achieve this vision, PROTECT empowers civil society organisations, human rights defenders, and journalists to hold the government accountable and build an independent democratic society.

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Introduction

In 2010, Kenyans voted for a new Constitution that guaranteed basic rights for all citizens and devolved power to Kenya's 47 county governments. This new era of devolution created opportunities to improve transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in governance and public service provision.

The Constitution also enshrines the right to public participation, meaning that citizens have a constitutional right to contribute to decisions that affect their lives. Laws including The County Governments Act (2012) and The Public Finance Management Act (2012) similarly require county governments to ensure citizens can access and participate in governance.

In Kisumu County, the [Kisumu Public Participation Act](#) was passed in 2015. However, the policy measures required to effectively implement the Act were lacking. PROTECT coalition members¹ therefore brought local communities, civil society, and county government officials together in a tailored, holistic, multi-pronged programme to improve public participation for residents.

And the results have been impressive: from improvements to county government reporting and service delivery to the co-creation of a draft public participation policy for Kisumu County.



*PROTECT
partners
meeting
Kisumu
County
Government
officials,
March 2022*

¹ PROTECT members involved in the project were Community Initiative Action Group–Kenya, Internews, Kenya Female Advisory Organization, Mzalendo, and Transform Empowerment for Action Initiative.

What did we do?

Training on access to information for government officials and residents

Access to information is essential to public participation: People need to know about their government's plans, priorities, and performance so they can make informed decisions and hold their government accountable.

To deliver lasting success, we need solutions that reinforce each other.

PROTECT took a three-pronged approach to improving access to information in Kisumu County:

- We trained **county government officials** in how to present information relevant to the local community – specifically, the county budget cycle and information about planned community projects – in an accessible and understandable way;
- We trained **community residents** in how to use this data to meaningfully engage in the county government processes and projects that affect them; and
- We trained **civil society organisations** in Kisumu County – including local women's and youth groups, whose focus was advocating for greater participation of women and young people in local governance – in how to understand county government data and communicate it to the communities they represent.

This holistic, multifaceted approach is intrinsic to PROTECT – because to deliver lasting success, we need solutions that reinforce each other.



A PROTECT forum with women in Kisumu County

Facilitating the co-creation of a public participation policy

PROTECT facilitated the creation of a Civil Society Working Group through which civil society and county government officials could work together to co-create, draft, and validate a county-wide public participation policy, the lack of which had resulted in ineffective implementation of the Kisumu Public Participation Act 2015.

Empowering residents to define and advocate for their own needs

PROTECT partners worked with the community to empower them to define and advocate for their own needs.

Collective action strengthens not only public participation but democracy itself.

For example, we facilitated participatory workshops with 10 women-led community groups, which identified the improvement of Lela Market – a commonly used but underperforming local market – as a collective priority.

At the workshops, residents identified and prioritised a list of issues that required improvement at the market, including improper solid-waste management, feeble infrastructure, and poor management. This participatory approach empowered residents to work together to hold the county government accountable – and collective action strengthens not only public participation but democracy itself.

What impact did we make?

Improvements to county government reporting

Following our training, the Directorate of Public Participation of Kisumu County directed other government departments to establish an accessible annual reporting framework to monitor and evaluate their work. As a result, residents can now easily access the information they need to track the county government’s progress and hold them accountable for their commitments.

Improvements to service delivery at Lela Market

Following the participatory workshops that led to residents identifying Lela Market as a priority for improvement, PROTECT facilitated meetings between community groups, Lela Market Management Committee, and Kisumu County Government to help residents convey their needs to those with the power to improve the market. As a result, the market management committee and local county representatives committed to a joint work plan to address residents' concerns.

PROTECT then worked with residents to create a Community Scorecard: a tool enabling them to plan, track, and assess the county government's progress on their work plan.

As a result, significant improvements were made to Lela Market:



*Lela Market
before
PROTECT's
intervention*



*Lela Market
after
PROTECT's
intervention*

- The management committee installed four additional toilets with running water, created gutters to harvest rainwater, installed water tanks, and hired cleaners and security guards;
- The environment department allocated an additional skip for food waste; and
- The construction of the market is finally nearing completion.

As such, PROTECT’s interventions enabled the community to successfully work together, advocate for their own needs, and hold the government accountable for local service delivery, resulting in significant improvements to vital infrastructure.

Creation of draft Kisumu County Public Participation Policy

At the time of writing (March 2023), Members of Kisumu County Assembly are due to schedule a debate on – and, hopefully, the adoption of – the draft Kisumu County Public Participation Policy that resulted from collaborative engagement between local civil society, county government officials, and local residents.

At a meeting that PROTECT facilitated, the Kisumu Governor publicly endorsed the draft policy and pledged to cooperate in its enactment.

The draft policy includes obligations for the county government to:

- **Facilitate forums** through which the public can contribute to and feed back on public affairs (such as planning processes, the county budget, and service provision);
- **Budget for and fund** the Directorate of Public Participation; and
- Ensure this Directorate has a **concrete plan** in place to engage with the public.

As such, the policy provides a basis for meaningful public consultation, which was sorely lacking before PROTECT’s intervention.

'I feel strengthened by the support and plan to work with Kisumu-based CSOs [civil society organisations] to deliver on the plans.

I am also looking forward to working with ICNL [International Center for Not-for-Profit Law] and other partners in PROTECT to realise mutual objectives.'

– Wilson Nindo,
Kisumu County Director of Public Participation

Conclusion

As this case study shows, PROTECT has delivered impressive improvements to public participation in Kisumu County.

From improvements to county government reporting and service delivery to the co-creation of a draft public participation policy, we made significant inroads to ensuring local residents fully enjoy their constitutional right to public participation – a right that is central to self-governance, government accountability, community empowerment, and democracy itself.

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