

## Governing without Citizens? A Comparative Analysis of Rural Local Governments' Capacity for Participatory Governance in Kenya and Uganda

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### Abstract:

In an era where democratic participation is heralded as a cornerstone of good governance, the stark reality in many rural areas of Africa reveals a troubling disconnect between ideals and practice. This comparative study examines the capacity for participatory governance in rural local governments of Kenya and Uganda, focusing on institutional structures, regulatory environments, and practices that enable or constrain citizen engagement in local decision-making. This study is underpinned by decentralization, public participation, and governance theories; the research employs a qualitative, comparative case study approach. It reveals that despite comprehensive legal frameworks promoting public participation, implementation falls short due to barriers such as limited local authority capacity, information asymmetry, cultural obstacles, centralized governance legacies, digital divides, decentralization challenges, political interference, poverty, illiteracy, patronage networks, and weak accountability mechanisms. These factors create a substantial gap between formal mandates and on-ground realities in rural areas. The study concludes with policy and institutional change recommendations to enhance rural local governments' participatory capacity, contributing to broader discourses on decentralization and local governance in developing countries.

**Key Words:** Participatory governance, rural local governments, Decentralization, Public participation, Local decision-making, Institutional structures, Regulatory frameworks

### Introduction:

The question of citizen participation in governance has been a longstanding concern in the field of public administration, particularly in the context of developing countries. In Africa, the model of political governance has often been characterized as skewed towards a top-down, elitist approach, with limited commitment to broader political

participation (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Ribot, 2003). This study examines the capacity for participatory governance in rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda, two countries that have made significant strides in decentralizing power and resources to the local level.

The importance of effective citizen engagement in local decision-making processes cannot be overstated. Participatory governance not only enhances the legitimacy and responsiveness of local authorities but also empowers citizens to shape the policies and services that directly affect their lives (Fung & Wright, 2003; Gaventa, 2004). This aligns with the core tenets of Public Participation theory, which emphasizes the value of citizen involvement in policy-making and implementation processes (Arnstein, 1969; Rowe & Frewer, 2000).

Decentralization theory provides a crucial framework for understanding the transfer of authority, responsibility, and resources from central to local governments (Rondinelli et al., 1983; Smoke, 2003). This theory posits that bringing decision-making closer to citizens can enhance government responsiveness and accountability. However, the implementation of participatory mechanisms in practice often falls short, particularly in rural and remote areas (Devas & Grant, 2003; Olum, 2014), highlighting the gap between the theoretical promises of decentralization and its practical realities.

Governance theory, with its focus on the interactions between state and non-state actors in the exercise of power and authority (Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998), provides a valuable lens through which to examine the complex dynamics of citizen engagement in local decision-making processes. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the importance of collaborative and networked approaches to governance, which are particularly relevant in the context of rural local governments with limited resources.

This comparative study investigates the institutional structures, regulatory environments, and actual practices that enable or constrain citizen engagement in local decision-making processes in Kenya and Uganda. The research aims to identify the key factors, such as resource scarcity, lack of political will, and entrenched power dynamics, that impede the ability of rural local authorities to foster meaningful citizen involvement in governance.

The findings of this study are contextualized within the broader debates on the model of political governance in Africa, which has been criticized for its tendency to prioritize top-down approaches over more inclusive and participatory forms of decision-making (Osaghae, 2007; Whitfield, 2009). By applying the lenses of Decentralization, Public Participation, and Governance theories, this research seeks to unpack the complexities of implementing participatory governance in rural contexts.

The study concludes by discussing the implications for strengthening the capacity of rural local governments to govern in a more inclusive manner, offering recommendations for policy reforms and institutional changes to bridge the gap between formal mandates and on-the-ground realities of participatory governance. These recommendations will be grounded in the theoretical frameworks discussed, aiming to address the challenges identified in the decentralization process, enhance public participation mechanisms, and promote more collaborative governance practices.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on the challenges and opportunities of decentralization and local governance in developing countries, with a particular focus on the experiences of Kenya and Uganda. By integrating insights from Decentralization, Public Participation, and Governance theories, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing participatory governance in rural local governments. The findings have the potential to inform policy discussions and guide efforts to enhance the participatory capacity of rural local governments, thereby promoting more inclusive and responsive forms of governance.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

- i. To investigate the institutional structures, regulatory environments, and actual practices in decision-making processes in local governments in Kenya and Uganda.
- ii. To examine the extent to which legal provisions for public participation are

implemented in practice in Kenya and Uganda.

- iii. To identify the key factors, that impedes the ability of rural local authorities to foster meaningful citizen involvement in governance.

### **Materials and Methodology:**

The study employed a qualitative, comparative case study approach to investigate participatory governance in rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda. The study conducted a thorough review of relevant literature and policy frameworks to establish the institutional and regulatory context (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study was anchored on decentralization theory, governance theory and public participation theory. The application of these theories in a qualitative desktop study allows for a nuanced analysis of secondary data sources, policy documents, and existing research on local governance in Kenya and Uganda. Triangulating insights from these theoretical perspectives enables the study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that enable or constrain participatory governance in rural local governments. The comparative analysis between the two countries would allow the researchers to identify both similarities and differences in the implementation of participatory governance mechanisms, as well as the contextual factors shaping these processes (Stake, 2013). The findings will be situated within the broader scholarly discourse on political governance in Africa, drawing connections between the local-level realities and the overarching models of governance (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The study's conclusions and recommendations for policy and institutional reforms are likely informed by the literature reviewed and the researchers' in-depth understanding of the contextual complexities (Patton, 2014).

### **Theoretical Conception:**

The application of decentralization theory, public participation theory, and governance theory provides a robust theoretical framework for

analyzing the capacity of rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda for participatory governance. This desktop qualitative study benefits from these theories' complementary perspectives, offering a comprehensive lens through which to examine the complex dynamics of citizen engagement in local decision-making processes.

Decentralization Theory (DT) is particularly relevant to this study as both Kenya and Uganda have implemented significant decentralization reforms over the past few decades. This theory, as articulated by scholars such as Rondinelli et al. (1983) and Smoke (2003), posits that transferring authority, responsibility, and resources from central to local governments can enhance government responsiveness and accountability. In the context of rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda, Decentralization Theory helps explain the structural changes that have occurred in governance systems, potentially creating new spaces for citizen participation. However, the theory also highlights potential pitfalls, such as elite capture and the mismatch between devolved responsibilities and available resources (Crook & Manor, 1998). This framework allows for a critical examination of whether the decentralization processes in Kenya and Uganda have genuinely brought decision-making closer to citizens or if they have merely shifted power dynamics without substantively increasing citizen involvement.

Public Participation Theory (PPT) provides a crucial foundation for understanding the mechanisms and importance of citizen engagement in governance processes. Drawing on seminal works such as Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation" and more recent contributions by scholars like Fung (2006), this theory emphasizes the various levels and forms of citizen involvement in decision-making. In the context of rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda, Public Participation Theory offers a framework for assessing the quality and depth of citizen engagement. It allows for an analysis of whether participation mechanisms are merely tokenistic or if they provide genuine opportunities for citizens to

influence decisions affecting their communities. This theoretical perspective is particularly valuable in examining the gap between the formal provisions for public participation in local governance structures and the actual practices on the ground in rural areas of both countries.

Governance theory, with its focus on the interactions between state and non-state actors in the exercise of power and authority (Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998), provides a broader context for understanding the complex web of relationships that influence local governance. This theoretical approach is especially relevant in analyzing the capacity of rural local governments for participatory governance, as it emphasizes the importance of collaborative and networked approaches to governance. In the context of resource-constrained rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda, Governance Theory helps illuminate the potential for partnerships between local authorities, civil society organizations, and community groups in fostering participatory governance. It also provides a framework for examining how power dynamics and institutional arrangements may facilitate or hinder meaningful citizen participation in local decision-making processes.

The study examines how decentralization policies in both countries have been implemented in rural areas, analyze the extent to which they have created genuine opportunities for citizen participation or merely replicated centralized power structures at the local level (Crawford & Hartmann, 2008). As such, using Public Participation Theory, the research could assess the quality and inclusiveness of participation mechanisms in rural local governments, identifying potential barriers to meaningful engagement such as lack of information, limited capacity, or entrenched power dynamics (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). Governance Theory could be applied to analyze the networks and relationships between local government officials, traditional authorities, civil society organizations, and citizens, exploring how these interactions shape the capacity for participatory

governance in rural contexts (Hyden & Court, 2002).

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study can offer a multifaceted analysis of the challenges and opportunities for participatory governance in rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda. This approach allows for a critical examination of whether these local governments are indeed "governing without citizens" or if there are emerging practices and structures that facilitate meaningful citizen engagement despite the constraints of rural contexts.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives enables the study to offer a multifaceted analysis of the challenges and opportunities for participatory governance in rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda. This approach facilitates a critical examination of whether these local governments are indeed "governing without citizens" or if emerging practices and structures facilitate meaningful citizen engagement despite the constraints of rural contexts.

### **Institutional Structures, Regulatory Environments, and Citizen Engagement in Decision-Making Processes in Rural Local Governments in Kenya and Uganda:**

Rural local governments play a crucial role in the delivery of essential services and the management of community affairs in many developing countries. The institutional structures, regulatory environments, and levels of citizen engagement in local decision-making processes can have significant impacts on the effectiveness and responsiveness of these local government systems. This paper examines the current state of these factors in the rural local governments of Kenya and Uganda, two East African nations with decentralized governance structures.

#### ***The Kenya Scenario:***

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya marked a significant shift in the country's governance landscape, establishing a two-tier system of government with the national government and 47 county governments (Wanjiru & Rampa, 2021;



Nyanjom, 2011). This devolution of power and responsibilities to the county level has been a crucial step in decentralizing decision-making and service delivery.

To facilitate citizen engagement in local decision-making processes, the Public Participation Act of 2016 mandates county governments to establish mechanisms for public participation, including public forums, consultative meetings, and online platforms (Republic of Kenya, 2016; Okello et al., 2019). This legislative framework aims to foster greater citizen involvement in shaping the policies and decisions that affect their communities.

However, the implementation of these public participation mechanisms has been uneven, with varying levels of citizen participation and influence in local decision-making (Mati, 2013). This suggests that there are challenges in ensuring meaningful and effective citizen engagement at the county level, despite the legal and regulatory framework in place.

The context of public participation and citizen engagement in rural Kenya is further shaped by the legacy of regional imbalances and ethnic inequalities in development, which can be traced back to the colonial era (Ghai, 1973; Kanyinga, 2016). These historical grievances have contributed to politically charged and ethnically polarized national politics in Kenya.

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya marked a pivotal moment in the nation's history, addressing long-standing issues of historical inequalities and regional imbalances through the process of devolution (Ghai & Cottrell, 2011; Kanyinga, 2016). This groundbreaking document introduced a comprehensive framework for decentralizing resources, political power, and public participation mechanisms, with the primary goal of rectifying past development distortions and empowering local communities (Ghai & Cottrell, 2011).

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya significantly elevated public participation as a fundamental principle of governance, explicitly articulated in articles 10(2.a) and 232(1) (Constitution of Kenya,

2010). This emphasis on public participation emerged as a crucial component of the broader devolution process, designed to address historical centralization of power and regional disparities (Kanyinga, 2016). Devolving responsibilities and resources to county governments, the constitution aimed to bring governance closer to the people and create new avenues for citizen engagement (Ghai, 2011). The mandated public involvement in key governance processes such as planning, budgeting, and policy-making was intended to promote transparency, accountability, and responsive governance. This approach sought to foster a more democratic and inclusive political culture, bridging the gap between citizens and their government, particularly at the local level, and ensuring that development initiatives aligned more closely with community needs and aspirations (Kanyinga, 2016). Through these measures, public participation became a cornerstone of Kenya's new governance structure, aiming to create a more inclusive and responsive system that actively involves citizens in decision-making at both national and county levels (Constitution of Kenya, 2010).

### **Mechanisms and Platforms for Citizen Participation in Kenya:**

Citizen participation in Kenya has undergone significant evolution since the country's independence, with the 2010 Constitution marking a pivotal moment by enshrining public participation as a fundamental principle of governance (Kanyinga, 2016). The devolved system of government, which created 47 county governments, brought decision-making closer to the people and established new frameworks for citizen engagement (Omweri, 2024a). This decentralization has led to the implementation of various mechanisms for public participation at the county level, including public forums, town hall meetings, and participatory budgeting processes (Wampler & McNulty, 2018).

Technology has played a crucial role in expanding citizen participation platforms in Kenya. E-government initiatives, such as the eCitizen portal,

allow citizens to access government services online and provide feedback on service delivery. Social media platforms have also become influential channels for citizens to voice their opinions and engage with public officials (Omweri, 2024b). Participatory budgeting, particularly at the county level, has gained traction as a mechanism that allows citizens to directly influence budget allocations for local development projects (Touchton, McNulty & Wampler, 2023), with Makeni County serving as a notable example. The county implemented a comprehensive participatory budgeting process that begins at the village level and progresses through ward, sub-county, and county-wide forums. Citizens are actively involved in identifying, prioritizing, and selecting development projects for funding. The county government allocated a significant portion of its development budget (approximately 30%) to be decided through this participatory process. To ensure inclusivity, Makeni County utilized both traditional community meetings and modern technology, including SMS-based platforms and social media, to gather citizen input. The county also established a robust monitoring and evaluation system that allows citizens to track the implementation of selected projects (Rwigi, 2018).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in facilitating citizen participation in Kenya, often acting as intermediaries between citizens and government. They organize public forums, conduct civic education, and advocate for increased transparency and accountability (Ahadi, 2020). Additionally, public participation in environmental decision-making has been strengthened through mechanisms such as Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs), which require public consultation on development projects that may affect the environment (Okello et al., 2009).

The Kenyan government has adopted various mechanisms to promote public participation in the devolution process, as mandated by law. These include public forums where citizens can

contribute to county plans, budgets, and policies, as well as the acceptance of written memorandums and petitions during planning and budgeting processes. However, these mechanisms have faced criticism for being too formal, infrequent, or potentially exclusionary to less-informed citizens (Ngunjiri, 2023).

Non-state actors, including CSOs and development organizations, have undertaken initiatives to enhance public participation in Kenya's devolution process. These efforts include simplifying government documents to improve access to information, implementing citizen oversight mechanisms for public expenditure, and conducting targeted civic education to increase citizens' awareness and agency in county governance (Ahadi, 2020).

Non-state actors, including CSOs and development organizations, have undertaken initiatives to enhance public participation in Kenya's devolution process. These efforts include simplifying government documents to improve access to information, implementing citizen oversight mechanisms for public expenditure, and conducting targeted civic education to increase citizens' awareness and agency in county governance (Ahadi, 2020). These organizations have also developed innovative approaches to reach marginalized groups, such as using local languages and culturally appropriate communication methods. They have leveraged technology by creating mobile apps and SMS-based platforms to facilitate real-time citizen feedback on local services. Additionally, these actors have been instrumental in establishing and supporting citizen-led accountability groups that monitor the implementation of county development projects. They have also facilitated partnerships between county governments and local communities, creating spaces for dialogue and collaborative decision-making. Furthermore, these organizations have conducted capacity-building workshops for both government officials and community leaders, fostering a shared understanding of participatory governance

principles. Their efforts have contributed to increased budget transparency, improved service delivery, and a more engaged citizenry in many Kenyan counties, though challenges in sustaining these initiatives and scaling them across all regions persist (Barasa, 2019).

Despite these advancements, challenges remain in ensuring effective citizen participation in Kenya. Issues such as inadequate civic education, limited resources for public participation activities, political interference, and barriers faced by marginalized groups can hinder meaningful engagement (Nyabola, 2018a). While Kenya has made significant strides in promoting citizen participation through various mechanisms and platforms, there is still room for improvement in terms of inclusivity, effectiveness, and genuine engagement in the governance process. As the country continues to develop its participatory democracy, addressing these challenges will be crucial for fostering a more engaged and empowered citizenry.

Ngunjiri (2023) summarizes key mechanisms and platforms established by law to enhance public participation in governance matters. These include widely publicized public forums, oral submissions on draft plans and legislation, and the submission of written memorandums and petitions during planning and budgeting processes. Civil society organizations play a crucial role by providing civic education, building capacity, and ensuring access to simplified information for public consumption. To address citizen concerns directly, complaint and grievance mechanisms have been implemented,

allowing for feedback from local authorities. Furthermore, county budget and economic forums serve as legal structures to foster stakeholder engagement in planning, budgeting, and policy development. Collectively, these platforms aim to create a more inclusive and participatory governance framework, enabling citizens to actively contribute to decision-making processes that affect their communities.

**Legal Frameworks for Citizen Engagement in Local Decision-Making in Kenya:**

Kenya has made substantial efforts to enshrine public participation in its governance structures, particularly at the local level, since the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution. This commitment to participatory governance reflects a broader shift towards decentralization and citizen engagement in decision-making processes. The legal provisions outlined in various national legislations serve as the backbone for implementing public participation mechanisms across different sectors of local governance. These laws not only mandate public involvement but also provide guidelines on how such participation should be structured and executed. They represent a crucial step in Kenya's journey towards more transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance, aiming to bridge the gap between citizens and their local government institutions. The following table summarizes key national legislations that have specific provisions for public participation in local governance, highlighting Kenya's legislative commitment to fostering a more engaged citizenry.

**Table 1: Key national legislations for public participation in local governance in Kenya**

Legislation	Year	Key Provisions for Public Participation
Constitution of Kenya	2010	Article 174(c): Objects of devolution include enhancing people's participation.  Article 184(1): National legislation to provide for governance and management of urban areas and

		<p>cities, including mechanisms for participation by residents.</p> <p>Article 10: National values and principles of governance include participation of the people.</p>
County Governments Act	2012	<p>Section 87: Citizen participation in county governments</p> <p>Section 91: County government to facilitate establishment of structures for citizen participation</p> <p>Section 94: County government to establish mechanisms to facilitate public communication and access to information</p>
Public Finance Management Act	2012	<p>Section 137: County Treasury to publish and publicize the County Fiscal Strategy Paper</p> <p>Section 175: County government entities and urban areas to establish structures for citizen participation</p>
Urban Areas and Cities Act	2011	<p>Section 22: Residents to participate in the governance of urban areas and cities</p> <p>Section 48: Citizen Fora to be established in every urban area and city</p>
Environmental Management and Coordination Act	1999 (Amended 2015)	<p>Section 58: Public participation in Environmental Impact Assessment studies</p>
Public Procurement and Asset Disposal Act	2015	<p>Section 68: Accounting officer to ensure public participation in procurement process</p> <p>Section 125: Public participation in disposal to public sector entities</p>
Access to Information Act	2016	<p>Section 5: Right to access information held by public entities</p> <p>Section 11: Public entities to facilitate access to information</p>



Intergovernmental Relations Act	2012	Section 12: Public participation in intergovernmental structures and processes
Natural Resources (Classes of Transactions Subject to Ratification) Act	2016	Section 9: Public participation in the ratification process of transactions involving natural resources

*Source: Researcher, 2024*

**The Uganda Scenario:**

Uganda's institutional framework for citizen engagement in rural local governments is primarily based on the decentralization policy implemented in the 1990s. This policy, enshrined in the 1995 Constitution and the Local Governments Act of 1997, established a multi-tiered system of local councils (LCs) from village to district levels (Steiner, 2006). These structures were designed to bring governance closer to the people and enhance public participation in decision-making processes. The Local Governments Act stipulates that citizens should be involved in planning, budgeting, and monitoring of local government activities (Ojambo, 2012).

At the village level, the lowest administrative unit, all adults are members of the village council and can participate directly in decision-making through village meetings. This provides a platform for grassroots participation in local governance. The parish and sub-county levels have elected councils that are mandated to hold regular meetings open to the public, providing opportunities for citizens to voice their concerns and influence local policies (Namara, Karyeija & Mubangizi 2015). However, studies have shown that the effectiveness of these lower-level councils in facilitating meaningful citizen engagement varies significantly across different regions of Uganda (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014).

The regulatory environment for citizen engagement is further strengthened by the Access to Information Act of 2005, which gives citizens the right to access information held by public bodies. This act is crucial for promoting transparency and

enabling informed participation in local governance (Muyomba-Tamale & Cunningham, 2017). Additionally, the Budget Act of 2001 requires local governments to conduct public hearings during the budget preparation process, providing another avenue for citizen input in decision-making (Tumushabe et al., 2013).

**Mechanisms and Platforms for Citizen Participation in Uganda:**

Uganda has implemented various mechanisms and platforms to foster citizen participation in governance and decision-making processes. These initiatives aim to enhance transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in public affairs. The government, in collaboration with civil society organizations, has established several avenues for citizens to engage in public discourse and influence policy outcomes (Tumushabe et al., 2010).

One prominent mechanism is the Barazas program, which facilitates community dialogues between citizens and government officials. These open forums allow residents to voice concerns, provide feedback on public services, and engage directly with local authorities. Barazas serve as a platform for information sharing, problem-solving, and collaborative decision-making at the grassroots level. The Office of the Prime Minister coordinates these sessions, which have been instrumental in improving service delivery and accountability (Government of Uganda, 2013).

The introduction of participatory budgeting processes empowers citizens to influence resource allocation in their communities. Through consultative meetings and priority-setting exercises, residents can contribute to budget

formulation and monitor expenditure. This approach promotes ownership of development projects and ensures that public funds are directed towards addressing community-identified needs. The Ministry of Local Government has been at the forefront of implementing these participatory mechanisms (Kasozi-Mulindwa, 2013).

Digital platforms have emerged as valuable tools for citizen engagement in Uganda. The Government Citizen Interaction Centre (GCIC) operates as a centralized hub for information dissemination and feedback collection. Citizens can access government services, submit inquiries, and report issues through various channels including social media, SMS, and a dedicated website. This platform bridges the gap between the government and the public, facilitating real-time communication and responsive governance (Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, 2018).

Community score cards represent another mechanism for citizen participation in Uganda. This participatory tool enables communities to assess the quality of public services, such as healthcare and education. Through structured evaluations and dialogue sessions, citizens provide feedback on service delivery, identify gaps, and collaboratively develop action plans with service providers. This process fosters accountability and drives improvements in public service provision. The Uganda Debt Network has been instrumental in promoting the use of community score cards across the country (Reinikka & Svensson, 2005).

Uganda has also established platforms for youth participation in governance. The National Youth

Council serves as a representative body for young people, advocating for their interests and facilitating their involvement in policy-making processes. Additionally, youth parliaments at various levels provide forums for young citizens to debate issues, develop leadership skills, and contribute to national discourse. These platforms ensure that the voices of Uganda's youth are heard and considered in decision-making processes (Uganda Youth Network, 2016).

**Legal Frameworks for Citizen Engagement in Local Decision-Making in Uganda:**

Uganda has established several legal frameworks to facilitate citizen engagement in local decision-making processes. These frameworks aim to promote participatory governance, transparency, and accountability at the grassroots level. The Constitution of Uganda (1995) lays the foundation for citizen participation, emphasizing the importance of involving people in governance. Subsequent laws and policies have further elaborated on this constitutional mandate, creating specific mechanisms for citizen engagement in local affairs. These legal instruments cover various aspects of local governance, including planning, budgeting, and service delivery. They define the rights and responsibilities of citizens, local governments, and other stakeholders in the decision-making process. The frameworks also establish structures and procedures for citizen participation, such as local councils, town hall meetings, and participatory budgeting initiatives. Together, these legal provisions create a comprehensive ecosystem for citizen engagement in Uganda's local governance

**. Table 2: Legal provisions for Citizen Engagement in Uganda's Local Governance**

Legal Framework	Year	Key Provisions for Citizen Engagement
Constitution of Uganda	1995	Establishes the principle of decentralization. This guarantees the right to participate in government affairs
Local Governments Act	1997	Creates local council structures. This mandates citizen participation in local planning and budgeting

National Development Plan	2010/11-2014/15	Emphasizes community-driven development. This promotes participatory approaches in local development
Public Finance Management Act	2015	Requires public consultations in budget formulation. This mandates publication of local government budgets
Access to Information Act	2005	Grants citizens the right to access public information. This facilitates informed participation in decision-making
National Local Government Capacity Building Policy	2005	Promotes capacity building for effective citizen engagement. This encourages participatory planning and monitoring
Uganda Vision 2040	2013	Emphasizes citizen participation as a key development strategy. This promotes e-governance for enhanced citizen engagement

*Source: Research, 2024*

**Barriers to Citizen Engagement in Rural Governance in Kenya and Uganda:**

Rural governance and citizen participation are critical components of democratic development in East Africa. Kenya and Uganda, two neighboring countries with significant rural populations, face various challenges in fostering meaningful citizen engagement in local governance processes. While both nations have made strides in decentralization and establishing local government structures, numerous barriers continue to hinder full and effective citizen participation, particularly in rural areas. These obstacles range from socio-economic factors and cultural norms to institutional weaknesses and resource constraints.

**Kenya**

In Kenya, several factors hinder meaningful citizen participation in rural local governance:

*Limited capacity of local authorities*

Local authorities in rural Kenya often lack the necessary resources and training to effectively engage citizens in governance processes. This

includes financial constraints, inadequate staffing, and insufficient expertise in participatory methods. Kameri-Mbote and Kabira (2023) notes that many local officials are not well-versed in the constitutional provisions for public participation, leading to poorly executed engagement efforts. Moreover, Khaunya et al. (2015) highlight that the devolution process, while intended to bring governance closer to the people, has not been accompanied by adequate capacity building for local authorities, especially in rural areas.

*Information asymmetry*

Rural citizens in Kenya frequently face challenges in accessing crucial information about governance processes and their rights to participate. Nyabola (2018) argues that this information gap is particularly pronounced in remote areas where communication infrastructure is limited. Mitullah (2016) further emphasizes that even when information is available; it is often not in formats or languages that are easily understood by rural populations. This lack of accessible information

significantly hampers citizens' ability to engage meaningfully in local governance processes.

#### *Cultural barriers*

Traditional hierarchies and gender inequalities play a significant role in limiting participation, particularly for women and marginalized groups in rural Kenya. Kanyinga (2016) observes that deeply entrenched patriarchal norms often exclude women from decision-making processes at the local level. Additionally, Ochieng and Jaenicke (2018) point out that certain ethnic customs and beliefs can discourage youth participation in governance, viewing it as the domain of elders. These cultural barriers create an environment where not all voices are equally heard or valued in local governance.

#### *Legacy of centralized governance*

The historical context of centralized governance in Kenya has fostered a lack of trust between citizens and local authorities, which continues to discourage engagement. Cheeseman et al. (2021) argue that decades of top-down governance have created a culture of apathy and skepticism towards local participation initiatives. Kimenyi (2013) adds that this legacy has also resulted in a tendency for local authorities to be more accountable to central government than to their constituents, further eroding trust and deterring citizen involvement.

#### *Digital divide*

The digital divide in rural areas of Kenya exacerbates the challenges of citizen participation by limiting access to online platforms and digital tools for engagement. Wamoto (2015) highlight that while e-governance initiatives have the potential to enhance participation; they often fail to reach rural populations due to limited internet access and low digital literacy. Omweri (2024c) opine that the digital divide between urban and rural populations presents a formidable challenge in numerous developing countries, significantly impacting the implementation and adoption of e-government services such as citizen engagement in crucial stages of decision making. Further, Waema and Mitullah (2018) further note that this digital exclusion not only limits access to information but

also prevents rural citizens from participating in increasingly popular online consultation processes and digital feedback mechanisms.

#### *Uganda*

In Uganda, rural local authorities face similar challenges in fostering citizen involvement. The decentralization process, while aimed at increasing local participation, has been hampered by inadequate funding and limited autonomy of local governments (Golooba-Mutebi, 2020). This bottlenecks include:

#### *Challenges in the decentralization process*

Uganda's decentralization efforts intended to enhance local participation, have been significantly hampered by inadequate funding and limited autonomy of local governments. Golooba-Mutebi (2020) argues that while the policy framework for decentralization is in place, the practical implementation has been constrained by insufficient financial resources allocated to local authorities. This financial shortfall limits their ability to implement participatory programs effectively. Ojambo (2012) further notes that the central government's reluctance to fully devolve power has resulted in local governments with limited decision-making authority, undermining their capacity to respond to citizens' needs and preferences.

#### *Political interference from the central government*

The autonomy of local decision-making processes in Uganda is often compromised by political interference from the central government, which discourages citizen engagement. Tumushabe et al. (2013) highlight instances where central government directives override local priorities, leading to a sense of futility in local participation efforts. Awortwi (2011) adds that this interference extends to the appointment of key local officials, which can prioritize political loyalty over competence and local representation, further alienating citizens from the governance process.

#### *Impact of poverty and illiteracy*

High levels of poverty and illiteracy in rural Uganda significantly contribute to low



participation rates in local governance. Kontinen and Ndidde (2023) argue that for many rural citizens, daily survival takes precedence over civic engagement. They note that the time and resources required for participation are often viewed as luxuries that many cannot afford. Additionally, Namara & Tukundane (2014) point out that low literacy levels make it challenging for many rural residents to understand and engage with complex governance processes, effectively excluding them from meaningful participation.

#### *Persistence of patronage networks*

The entrenchment of patronage networks in Uganda's local politics distorts meaningful participation by prioritizing personal connections over collective interests. Green (2018) observes that these networks often result in the allocation of resources and opportunities based on political loyalty rather than community needs. Titeca & Onyango (2012) further argue that this system discourages broad-based participation, as citizens who are not part of these networks may feel their input is irrelevant to decision-making processes.

#### *Lack of effective accountability mechanisms*

The absence of robust accountability mechanisms at the local level in Uganda reduces citizens' motivation to participate in governance. Manyak & Katono (2011) highlight that without effective means to hold local officials accountable, citizens often perceive their involvement as having limited impact. This perception is reinforced by instances of corruption and mismanagement that go unchecked. Mugisha (2015) adds that weak oversight institutions and limited transparency in local government operations further contribute to citizen apathy and disengagement from participatory processes.

#### **Conclusion**

This comparative study of participatory governance in rural local governments in Kenya and Uganda reveals a complex landscape of progress and persistent challenges. While both countries have established comprehensive legal frameworks and mechanisms to promote public

participation, the reality often falls short of these aspirations. Decentralization efforts have brought governance closer to citizens, but their effectiveness is hampered by various factors including limited local authority capacity, information asymmetry, cultural barriers, historical distrust, the digital divide, challenges in decentralization processes, political interference, poverty and illiteracy, patronage networks, and inadequate accountability mechanisms. These barriers collectively impede the realization of meaningful participatory governance in rural areas, creating a substantial gap between formal mandates for public participation and on-the-ground realities. Despite the legal provisions and established mechanisms, both countries continue to struggle with fostering genuine and inclusive citizen engagement in local governance processes.

#### **Recommendations:**

This study proposes the following recommendations:

- i. National and county/district governments should invest in comprehensive capacity building programs for local officials. These programs should focus on enhancing skills in facilitating public participation, understanding legal requirements, and effectively engaging citizens in governance processes.
- ii. Local governments, in collaboration with civil society organizations, should develop and implement strategies to improve information dissemination in rural areas. This should include using local languages and culturally appropriate communication methods to ensure that citizens have access to crucial information about governance processes and opportunities for participation.
- iii. National governments, in partnership with local authorities and women's rights organizations, should implement targeted initiatives to address cultural barriers and promote the inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups in local

- governance processes. This may involve quota systems, leadership training programs, and awareness campaigns.
- iv. Central governments of both Kenya and Uganda should review and reform their decentralization processes to enhance local government autonomy. This should include ensuring that local governments have sufficient authority and resources to respond effectively to citizens' needs and implement participatory initiatives.
  - v. National legislatures, in consultation with local government associations and civil society, should establish and empower local oversight institutions. These institutions should be tasked with enhancing transparency and accountability in local government operations, thereby building trust and encouraging citizen participation.

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